



WOMANIST RECOUNTING OF TRAUMA: AFFECT OF LOVE AND HATE IN DANTICAT'S *THE FARMING OF BONES*

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Abstract

This paper explores the recounting experience of emotional trauma and the affects, the novel, *The Farming of Bones* evokes in the readers. Edwidge Danticats, in her trauma narrative, historicizes the brutal incident which kills almost 35000 Haitians migrant workers ruthlessly in the Dominican Republic by the cruel Dictator Generalissimo Rafael Trujillo in 1937. The massacre causes many Haitian victim women surviving only with their lost emotional romance in the absence of their men at present. So, Danticats unsilences emotional trauma of the victim women through her fictional character Amabelle and her ever haunting trauma of Sebastien's lose. The paper draws on Daniel F. Seiff's *Understanding and healing Emotional Trauma* (2015) for linking our past romantic experiences with the traumatic emotion at present and Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) in figuring out the politics of the emotion of love and hate for the healing process. The paper purposes to evoke the aforesaid affects for the redemption of victim's trauma. Therefore, the paper is significant for the affective perception which unlocks the ethical task of trauma healing.

Key words: 1937 Haitian massacre, Ambelle and Sebastien, victim women, emotional trauma, love and hate

Introduction

Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1998) recounts the collective memory of emotional trauma of the victim women through its protagonist, Amabelle Desir, who remains alone from her lover Sebastien and lives her complex and meaningless young life, following the eruption of the 1937 massacre. The novel is about the same violent and traumatized incident which kills almost 35000 Hitians migrant workers hardheartedly in the Dominican Republic by the demonic Dictator Generalissimo Rafael Trujillo. The massacre causes many Hatian women victim slaughtering their men.

This is what Danticats, in *The Farming of Bones*, has tried to open the issue of emotional trauma– a shared trauma of the Hitian victim women– through her fictional character Ambelle and her ever haunting trauma of Sebastien's lose. In this Sense, Danticats has chronologically depicted the traumatic memory of victim women placing a spotlight on the Amabelle-Sebastien case of romance sharing of their childhood, youth and its repeatedly occurring trauma in her mind after the death of Sebastien. Situating *The Farming of Bones* within the frame of witness, as April Shemak, raises such "central questions as the possibility of representation in the aftermath of trauma and the relationship of

individual memory" to shared history (83). The aftermath of the massacre remains so agonizing, poignant and torturous to the victim women who lost their men in the terrified incident.

In general, emotional trauma refers such trauma which causes effect in our brain, and on our body connecting our past traumatic experience at the present. Similarly, the recounting of emotional traumas is so bitter and painful which haunts in the memory of victims and translates on their body when they remain separated from their dearest persons. Basically, emotional trauma views the romantic experience of the victim which remains no more at the present but is more pathetic and memorable to the meaningless body in the absence of her/his sex- partner. Likewise, love- in common sense- refers to the feeling of "unification with or without having the passion for sexual relation whereas hate is the feeling of againstness" (Ahmed 28). The affect of hate and love humanizes the perpetrator and repair the wound of victim that is what I concern to study applying both trauma theory and affect theory.

The assumption for the study is that the narrativization of trauma in Danticat's *The Farming Bones* reveals the importance of listening to the recounting experiences of emotional trauma for both individual and collective healing as well as an evocation of the affect of love and hate at the undoing of victim women's body. In this sense, the paper purposes to evoke the affect of love and hate to discharge the emotional trauma of the victim women foregrounding the representative role of the protagonist and the narrator, Amabelle. The paper is noteworthy for an affective perception of the politics to unwrap the ethical responsibility of trauma healing of the victims.

Literature review

Edwidge Danticat's magnum opus *The Farming of Bones* has attracted a voluminous amount of criticism, analysis and studies in English. Such criticism, analysis and study which have utilized experience of trauma theory as a theoretical framework of analysis show three trends—one, the recounting of emotional trauma, the problem of which, as Ellert Nijenhuis has pointed out, "lies in the

mental sequel" (60) and two, the repetitively occurring melancholic experience or memories of the past which painfully affects the victims at the present and third, body pain becoming the shared and unspeakable trauma of the victims which makes them quite mute. Carl Rollyson and Christina Rohrleitner show the first kind of trend, Donette A. Francis, Hether Hewett and Martin Munro show the second kind of trend whereas Harford Vargas shows the third kind of trend.

"The traumatic experience of the slaughter abruptly severs Amabelle's personal ties and forever transforms her identity" (Francis 171). The slaughter separates Amabelle from her both lover Sebastian and her adopted Dominican family. What Donette and Francis focus, here, are on two things: one is recounting of traumatic experience of her Parents and Lover's slaughter and the other is her identity crisis after the trauma. The issue of traumatic experience in their study, somehow, touches the area of my interest—womanist recounting of trauma. But the infliction of the affects in the mind of readers towards the victim women and the perpetrator is absent. "In the novel, *The Farming of Bones* the Sanctuary of waterfall takes on additional significance in Amabelle's memory as the protective barrier that hides the cave where she and Sebastian meet" (Hewett 128). Hewett's study with this reference, to some extent, befits the issue of recounting emotional trauma of the representative woman victim Amabelle but more becomes like the memory of general collective Trauma.

Martin Munro in his "Trauma, Memory, and History in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*" states that "Massacre River serves as an archetype of collective memory" that recounts Amabelle with her past (11). Martin stresses more on recounting experiences of the bloody massacre 1937 grounded in the sugarcane field near the river. As him, Amabelle becomes the witnessing character to recount the massacre river where her own parents, lover Sebastien Onius and many other Haitian migrant sugarcane workers were chopped. The way Martin states the 'Massacre River' as an archetype of collective memory foregrounds more on the perspective of cultural trauma because Amabelle recounting her traumatic past becomes revival of

the shared traumatic experiences of the victim women. So, the matters of emotional trauma and affects remain close in his study. In her *Critical Survey of Long Fiction*, Carl Rollyson opines that "the rest of the novel deals with Amabelle Desir's endurance as she lives a hollow post-traumatic life. Witnessing, remembering and naming" (153) are the themes of the novel. With this extract from Rollyson's writing, it becomes clear that the trio proposition of witnessing, remembering and naming via the victimized woman protagonist Amabelle echoes the blending perspective of cultural and emotional trauma which slightly comprises the issue what I observe in the study. "Many would like to suppress these memories, but Amabelle still remembers" (ibid). This statement in his study, somehow, includes the issue of recounting emotional trauma.

Similarly, Marion Christina Rohrleitner opines that "*The Farming of Bones* breaks the silence about the massacre and its aftermath by recounting the complex lives and loving relationship between victims and the survivor of the massacre" (75). As Rohrleitner, the novel relieves the victims by unsilencing, undoing, and placing their multiple traumas in the public forum. Rohrleitner's analysis emphasis on recurring traumatic memory of Amabelle whose lifelong dedication to keep Sebastien alive becomes obvious. Here, Amabelle feels the scarcity of Sebastien in her body. In this sense, Rohrleitner's study strongly addresses one of the issues of my paper i.e. feeling of emotional trauma but I get no depiction of affects in his research article. Jennifer Harford Vargas in her article "Novel Testimony: Alternative Archives in Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*" writes that there is "a vehicle for expression, the body "talks" in Danticat's novel" (26) for which the protagonist Amabelle becomes the representative testimony of body pain. Vargas's study concentrates on victim's somatic trauma and its unspeakable impact.

Research gap

As the review shows, there has been discussion on Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* highlighting the animalistic 1937 Hitian Massacre

and its after effects with the inclusion of the victim women through the protagonist Amabelle Desir, from the perspective of experiencing cultural, emotional and somatic trauma. The presence of emotional trauma with the affect of love and hate is missing upon the critical discussions without yielding into a streamlined, critical curve—a gap this study proposes to plug.

Theoretical framework

The working framework for the research article comes from trauma theory in general. The Paper first draws on Daniela F. Seiff's *Understanding and healing Emotional Trauma* (2015) wherein she asserts that the effects of emotional trauma on us link our past romantic experience at the present if there is nobody to whom we can turn for emotional support. Then it also applies Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) in figuring out the politics of the effects of love and hate—the two contrasting affects evoked by the victim's emotional trauma on their mind and body. Such an affective mapping paves the way for the healing process. By utilizing a mélange of emotional trauma and affect theory, this study builds the theoretical framework for textual analysis.

Study design, tools and data analysis

As this paper is research in the field of literature, it calls for a close analysis of the primary data in the light of the theoretical tools of trauma theory and affect theory. The analysis of the primary data has further validated with evidences from the secondary data—the critical works on the primary text.

Discussion

The novel *The Farming of Bones* places a spotlight on the protagonist Amabelle Desir who has been living her young and beautiful life in the sensual memories of intimacy with her dearest man Sebastien Onius and becomes the representative for sharing the collective emotional trauma of all victim women of 1937 Hitian Massacre. Amabelle Desir, the narrator and the protagonist, is the surviving witness of the massacre inflicted by the ruthless dictator Generalissimo Rafeal Trujillo. She recounts the experiences of trauma that entails the

tragic loss of her parents drowning into the Massacre River and mysterious death of her boy friend Sebastien Onius. So, Amabelle breaks the silence of the massacre 1937 by remembering the loving relationship with Sebastien and compares the complexities of her present life in his loss.

The 1937 Hitaian Massacre separates Amabelle from her both lover Sebastien and her adopted Dominican family. Then she ever remained as a survivor and the narrator for witnessing a traumatic journey. So, the opening line of *The Farming of Bones* "his name is Sebastien Onius" (Danticats 1), unfolds the ever haunting image of Sebastien Onius from her memory. Amabelle confirms that his fate remains unknown, but he becomes an epitome for her prolonged nostalgia. According to Daniel F. Sief, such happens "if there is nobody to whom we can turn for emotional support" and a damaging "imprint is left on our mind, brain and body", sending our lives onto a "different path" In this sense, the impact these unspeakable traumatic experiences has on Amabelle, as Sief, cause "their long-term effects" on her life (1). Amabelle's victimized and empty body becomes more victimized lack of sexual relation—the prerequisite of love—as Ahmed writes in her *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* —"the sexual relation becomes a love relation in which the woman becomes the object of her love and the man's love" (126). Amabelle becomes completely a vacuum and empty after the death of Sebastien Onius and suffers from his recurring memory. In such situation, the feeling of hate towards the perpetrator and love towards Amabelle and other victim women arise in our mind because as Ahmed, hate creates "a series of displacements" and "negativity" in our mind. Similarly, Ahamad further says that "hate works to stick or to bind" the victims and "feel shame" to the perpetrators (ibid).

The young body of a woman becomes disfigured when her body remains in passionate thirst. When Amabelle remembers Sebastian suggesting as "take off your night dress" and "be a naked for true", her confined emotional desire re-appears in her mind and body but in the absence of her passionate supporter Sebastian, her naked body at the present cannot become for "true" but for

"false" else suspends on the experience of melancholic past. This can be supplemented to the view of Daniel F. Sief as "the erotic experiences which remained no more at the present are more pathetic and painful and memorable to the meaningless body of a young woman" (71-72). And she laments on both her past and present body. Her body used to be appreciable, valuable and so lovely then. She memorizes as, "then he slips across to other side of the room and watches every moments of flesh as I shed my clothes" (1). One can easily imagine that what would be more traumatic experience than it to a matured young woman like Amabelle who survives with a poignant memory of her slaughtered boyfriend with such young age? Such nostalgic memory of Amabelle becomes the shared emotional passion for the victims. In such situation, the feeling of hate which according to Sara Ahmed as, "a feeling of againstness" (49) towards perpetrators and love as "a feeling of unification and sympathy" towards the victims can be theorized (123).

Amabelle is an orphan Haitian girl whose fate and youth remained in the cloud of uncertainty. By reminding the traumatic story of her life to the various surviving listeners, she becomes an image empowered by her own speech. She has nothing more than the memory of her lover Sebastian. She feels light if she narrates her traumatic love story among many others. When Amabelle remembers and shares her romantic moment, her mourning lessens from her body:

He is lavishly handsome by the dim light of my castor oil lamp, even though the can stalks have ripped apart most of the skin on his shiny black face, leaving him with crisscrossed trails of furrowed scars. His arms are as wide as one of my bare thighs. They are stilled hardened by four years of sugarcane harvest. (Danticats 1)

When Amabelle recounts the erotic memory with Sebastian, she forgets pain in her and gets comfort at present. Regarding such emotional trauma of Amabelle, I want to quote Daniel F. Sief, as, "the emotional traumas become dense in the absence of victim's dearest person" with whom she shares her emotional drive. She Further states that

"emotional trauma gets released with emotional support" (2). In the absence of Sebastian, Amabelle's beautiful and young body becomes meaningless. The trauma of Amabelle becomes a collective feeling for love to all the victim women which is "the love for love and bound up the making of community"(Ahmed 135). Similarly, the visceral pain of victim women makes readers feel hate towards the atrocious Trujillo and his men because the gravity of trauma narratives as Ahmed becomes to expose the "lived experiences of pain" which "can be understood as part of the work of hate" (Ahmed 58).

Amabelle's childhood memory implies an innocent and fair human memory. All the children in their childhood have a same belief, feeling and same perception as she once had. It is childhood memory which "we cannot pick up the subtle feelings that react our bodies' emotional states and which could act as a compass during life" (Sief 46). Amabelle, reminds her innocent childhood as:

When I was a child, I used to spend hours playing with my shadow, something that my father warned could give me nightmares, nightmare like seeing voices twirl in a hurricane of rainbow colors and hearing the odd shapes of things rise up and speak to define themselves. Playing with my shadow made me, an only child, feel less alone. I had play mates, they were never quite real or present for me. I considered them only replacement for my shadow. There were many shadows, too, in the life I had beyond childhood. At one times Onius guarded me from the shadows. At other times he was one of them. (Danticats 2)

Pains revive with our maturation. Childhood memory is like a shadow changing into different forms. It becomes false in one's maturity. Amabelle always remembers her boyfriend, Sebastian whom the perpetrators unknowingly kill. The massacre removes him from Amabelle forever as if a shadow eliminates in the light of daybreak. But he always appears in her memory. Amabelle's childhood memory and its traumatic interpretation in her void maturity becomes additive to the feeling of reader's love and sympathy as in the word of Sara Ahmed that "love is narrated as an emotion that energizes"

the work of "love groups" (122) who are working on behalf of victims to repair their wounds.

The tragic memory of Amabelle becomes an inspiring source for undoing psychological and emotional trauma of all the victimized women. These lines share their common traumatic memory:

Sebastian's father was killed in the great hurricane that struck the whole island—Both Haiti and Dominican Republic—in 1930. He lost his father almost everything else. This is why he left Haiti. This is why I have him. A sweep of winds that destroyed so many houses and killed many people brought him to me (Danticats 10).

The transition of their love is their parental loss and their similar socio-cultural identity. Both, Amabelle's father and mother drowning in the Massacre River and Sebastian's father killing in hurricane in Haiti form their traumatic transit point which makes them one. According to Danael F, Sief "we mistakenly see our bodies as the source of our wounding and consequently despise them" (47). Sief notes that when the victim knows her body as the source of trauma and compares it between past and present and, thereby, hates her own body. But whenever, we feel of other's pain and grief as our own, the emotion of love and compassion emerges in us. Ahmed affirms that "through our compassion and love, the suffering of others can be repaired" (193). The shattering and painful memory of the slaughter of husband of young Haitian victim women as fronted in the novel through Amabelle, we emotionalize to love the victims and hate the Trujilian perpetrators.

Danticats delves out emotional trauma eroticizing the sensational and beautiful past memory of the young victim women. Their body and mind distract due to agony of the loss of their sex-partner which can be inferred in the word of Sief as, "sensations and emotions arise in the body and then make their way up through the recent part of the brain to the oldest part of the right hemisphere" (47). Overshadowing Amabelle, the lines of same thirst can be contextualized as:

I close the door and tame out the night breeze that barely reaches my bare body, naked because Sebastian has made belief

that it is like a prayer to lie unclothed alone the way one came out of the womb, but mostly because I am hoping to feel the sweat gather between the cement floor and the hollow in my back, so that when I rise up, there will be a flood of perspiration to roll down over my buttocks, down the front and back and between my thighs, down to my knees, shins, ankles and toes, so that there will not be a drop of liquid left in me which to cry. (Danticats 38)

The erotic language as Amabelle uses in her memorial monologue evokes a sexual liminality of any matured women. Amabelle's body is of no meaning in the absence of Sebastien. His suggestion of becoming completely nude while sleeping connotes sexual essence to all matured couple. Her young body is always growing in the melancholy of Sebastien. Hasn't the harrowing massacre made the young body of the victim women alone? Can one stay without compassionating and loving the woman and hating the demonic perpetrator? Surely, the emotion of hate collectively makes us feel against the perpetrators and "it produces a differentiation between 'us' and 'them', whereby 'they' are constituted as the cause of 'our' feeling of hate" (Ahmed 48).

According to Daniel F Sief, the "memory of romantic and emotional past—the romantic and emotional moment fulfill the drive of young body—becomes so pathetic in the loss of a heterogeneous partner" (49). Sief's quote gets a hunch of justification that young body of a woman withers when she loses her male partner in war or other homicidal incidents. The past romantic experience recurs by making her present traumatic, making her attractive body ugly and making her emotional passion killed. The way Amabelle recounts her romantic past and feels in Sebastien's absence at the present, the way she becomes desperate with her young body. The extract as:

His name is Sebastian Oniuos. Sometimes this is all I know. My Back aches now in all those places that he claimed for himself, arches of bare skin that belonged to him, pockets where the flesh remains, fragile, seared like unhealed burns where each fallen scab uncovers a wound. (Danticats 281)

Amabelle's flesh feels pure and fragile in the absence of her Sebastien. She is sensitizing her emotional wounds which are intensely become obvious in her physical consciousness as untreated burns and fallen skin. Her memory is blocking her with that touching moment at present. She is still living with her young body for Sebastien. Thus, Amabelle's memory for Sebastien clues up a sharp pain on her body. She gets herself dispossessed of the obsession of sexuality and beauty in her commemorative revisions to a childlike situation. For example, the phrases, "back aches", "bare skin" and "fallen scab" which Danticat uses in the novel relate her bitter feelings for her naked body, curing of her wounds and other's different insight towards her beauty. Amabelle's such bitter feelings are the result of the massacre instigated by pitiless dictator Trujillo—the creator for the "feeling of otherness beyond love and compassion i.e. hate" (Ahmed 51).

Expected finding

The expected finding from the aforementioned discussion is that Danticats *The Farming of Bones* encourages an affective opening for their white readers into modes of relation with the black Haitian women, most often in highly uncomfortable ways that force them to acknowledge their own capacity for not only inflicting emotional pain and hurt but also exhort them to take on this kind of ethnical responsibility precisely because they, in the act of reading, get deeply, psychically, affectively attached to the visible signs of emotional trauma both in the mind and on the body of the victim women.

Conclusion

Edwidge Danticat, in her, *The Farming of Bones*, presents women subjectivity through the fictional protagonist Amabelle Desir and her ever haunting sensual and emotional feeling of the loss of her boy friend Sebastien. The paper sums up with the narrativization of the trauma of 1937 massacre by highlighting more to the experience of victims' traumatic past than to the historical event of Dominican Republic. The harrowing massacre kills almost all the Haitian migrant worker and their surviving women pass their sorrowful and meaningless life still hopping of their arrival. The

surviving victims' romantic past causes both in their mind and body and they hate the perpetrators and hate their empty body too. Danticats foregrounds this sort of sight through the subjectivity of Amabelle by craving pathos for the reunion with her dearest lover Sebastian Onius. Her aging and beautiful woman body limits only in the page of her traumatic memory. Danticats's philosophy of presenting trauma of atrocity upon women in *The Farming of Bones* creates the possibility for compassionating identification of victim women and humanize atrocious male. So, the paper is significant for stressing on such emotional trauma to unfold its awful impact from the brain and body of the victim women for the delivery of trauma so as to evocate the sentiments of love towards the victim and hate towards the perpetrator. The paper is also significant for an affective understanding of the politics which opens up to ethical responsibility of trauma healing of the victims.

Therefore, *The Farming of Bones* is a great trauma narrative for it incorporates the horrendous massacre of Trujillo year, issuing out the ethnic genocide of Haitian migrant workers—almost male—and its sorrowful aftermath which victimizes the surviving women with the image of their romantic past. One has to think how to confer a narrative account of the ethnic genocides that have overwhelmed our generation. Will one, like Danticats, in the novel, find ways to unlock the emotional trauma of victims whose dearest and nearest become "nameless and faceless" vanishing "like smoke into the early morning air?" (Danticats 262)

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