

Scope for Resilience in the Grip of Trauma in Aminatta Forna's Happiness

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Abstract

Documenting the horrendous nature of trauma in human beings and their victimization has become much more regular after the two world wars among writers. Apart from exposing the occurrences to the world, it seems that they are striving to find an outlet and escape by depicting the experience which they have witnessed as first person or from the experience of others. While considering the consequences of trauma in human beings there is a question arises naturally that "is there no scope for resilience?" The present paper is focusing on the work of one such African writer Aminatta Forna from Sierra Leon who has documented the scars of wars of her period and has ignited the way to erase the violence of trauma by indicating "whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger". And also she writes that the emotional vulnerability of trauma is oftentimes transformed into emotional strength and it does not annihilate the lives. So this research paper attempts to trace the justifications of Aminatta Forna about the scope for resilience among the traumatized lives which have been exhibited in her novel Happiness.

Keywords: Victimization, Trauma, Emotional Strength, Resilience, Happiness.

Introduction

"Happiness" written by Aminatta Forna a Scottish born Sierra Leone writer opens with the tale of a wolf hunter in the US called in to track a wolf that is believed to have been killing sheep. He observes the surroundings, lies in wait, makes the kill, collects his bounty and then returns to lie in wait for the she-wolf he knows will come out after three days. Jean

Attila has just been to the theatre, he has arrived a few days early to indulge his passion for theatre and to look up his niece Ama, whom the family hasn't heard from recently, he will also see an old friend and former colleague Rosie, who has premature Alzheimers. While we follow Attila on his rounds of visiting his friends and family, all of whom are in need of his aide, we witness flashbacks into his working life, his brief encounters in numerous war zones, where he was sent on missions to negotiate with hardline individuals often operating outside the law. He remembers his wife Maryse, there is deep sense of remorse.

His niece Ama and her 10 year old son Tano have been forcibly evicted from their apartment in an immigration crackdown, she is unable to resolve the matter, hospitalised due to an unstable diabetic condition. Attila responds with the help of the doorman of his hotel,

who alerts other hotel doormen, to be on the lookout for Tano who has disappeared amidst all the confusion.

And there is Jean, in London to study the behaviour of the urban fox, she has funding for a period of time to observe them, their numbers, how they have come to be living in the city and whether they expose a risk to the humans they live alongside. She recruited a local street-cleaner and through him others, to be her field study fox spotters, the few people likely to regularly see them. Meanwhile a consulting case causes Attila to question the impact of his own ideas on trauma, the values of the society he finds himself in, and a grief of his own. In this delicate tale of love and loss, of cruelty and kindness, Forna asks us to consider the interconnectedness of lives, our co-existence with one another and all living creatures, and the true nature of happiness.

These networks of connected men, the doormen, the streetcleaners and others, come together to help Jean and Attila in their search for Tano. They've texted his picture to each other, they know who to look for. They demonstrate something important, in their resilience and ability to adapt to this new environment, creating new support circles, many having been through traumatic experiences before finding a semblance of new life in London.

The fox lives beside the human but inhabits a different time zone, most humans are little aware of their presence as their nocturnal meanderings cease the minute humanity awakens and begins to disturb a territory that belongs more to them in the small hours of the night. Jean too remembers what she has left, in America, where she tried to do a similar study on the coyote, an animal that due to the human impact on the environment had left the prairie and moved towards more urban environment. Finding herself in conflict with locals, who campaigned against the coyote, believing it to be a danger to humans, her voice silenced by those who preferred to extend hunting licences, despite her warnings that culling the coyote would result in their population multiplying not decreasing.

Ultimately the novel is about how we all adapt, humans and wild animals alike, to changing circumstances, to trauma, to the environment; that we can overcome the trauma, however we need to be aware of those who have adapted long before us, who will resist the newcomer, the propaganda within a political message.

And to the possibility that the experience of trauma doesn't have to equate to continual suffering, that our narrative does not have to be that which happened in the past, it is possible to change, to move on, to find community in another place, to rebuild, to have hope. And that is perhaps what happiness really is, a space where hope can grow, might exist, not the fulfillment of, but the idea, the expression.

Scope for Resilience

Considering the characters of Forna everybody has experienced with some traumatic past events which could not be removed from their life. But it is visible and natural that the characters are more unique and strong in the process of becoming flexible and resilient to the past and the trauma. The life of Jean is the best example to the above idea. Jean the wild life starts her life with Ray and having a son, life goes smoothly. When she encounters the confession of Ray that he has developed another relationship with girl, She winds up the relationship without expressing anything towards Ray. It has created a wound in the mind of Jean but still she is finding happiness by changing her track and traveling on path which really satisfies her. She writes

“I seem to remember you used to say to me, whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. That made me so pissed sometimes.”

The above thought from Jean expresses the possibilities of a positive change which could be occurred even after experiencing an unexpected conflict. Further she writes the emotional

vulnerability of trauma is oftentimes transformed into emotional strength and that's what Jean has attained and so become stronger in meeting with people and in dealing with the life events which are always vulnerable in front of her. Analyzing the life of Attila who is a psychiatrist who has worked in wars and has witnessed pains of the traumatized victims of war is also a character who has lost his wife Marise and looking after his lover Rosie who is suffering from early onset Alzheimer's. But still he is continuing his work with great confidence and travel everywhere to the places where he is supposed to go and deliver speech. From the words of Forna Attila has the Cuban stoic realism and ability to take pleasure where it might be found. Forna writes

“He had told the woman at the conference that suffering did not necessarily produce damage. Change ,yes. And change was not always a bad thing.”

By exhibiting the life occurrences of all the characters Forna has indicated the possibility for change rather than damage after experiencing a vulnerable situation.

Tano is the niece of Attila who has escaped from her mother who is dealing with immigrant issues and struggling to find a stable space. In search of freedom the ten year old Tano starts wandering London as Jean's foxes are wandering. Attila is the only human who is supposed to find out him among the turbulence of all his commitments. Amidst all Attila really engages himself in the processes of searching Tano in that vast metropolitan atmosphere. When Tano is found and rescued he is handed over to Jean who has become closer to Attila within a short span of time as they meet recurrently in Waterloo Bridge. When Forna writes about Tano from the observations of Jean, she says,

“Tano's brain was an ecosystem, it would reconfigure itself to survive”

Again she strongly pinpoints the natural ability of human nature which is being resilient to every harm and unfavourable experience. Not only the above discussed three key characters but also all the supportive characters have undergone different types of traumas and have been victimized to the horrors of life. But throughout the novel it is clearly visible that the sufferings which they are experiencing have not made any damage rather they start experiencing favourable change everywhere through the people they meet and the places which they visit and the incidents which they involve in. In this delicate tale of love and loss, of cruelty and kindness, Forna asks us to consider the interconnectedness of lives, our co-existence with one another and all living creatures, and the true nature of happiness.

Literature Review

Considering the researches done on Forna's Happiness Ernest Dominic Cole argues that Happiness focuses on interspecies relations by decentering man from position of superiority over animals to interdependence between humans and animals. He contends that Happiness provides a basis for exploration of the theme of interspecies relations, while it articulates Forna's concerns for the environment and its connections to eco critical theory and post-colonial studies. Analyzing the research of Swati Patil she has examined the intertextuality in her three narratives by centralizing trauma, its aftermath, and recovery, amalgamating the personal, social, cultural, historical and political instances contributing to the traumatic environment with pertinent theoretical insights.

Another researcher Merve Sarikaya-Sen has explored on the indispensable coexistence between humans and animals in the novel, which provides the characters with the possibility for achieving the ecological self. In doing so, this article will demonstrate that Happiness succeeds in representing the need for an interdependent world and the impossibility of a sovereign self in order to achieve happiness in the contemporary age.

Conclusion

In the end of the novel Attila concludes his speech in the conference where he has to deliver a speech he writes to the audience “Resilience: Ability to maintain a state of equilibrium in face of adversity.”

He wrote the words: Hope. Humour. Survival. Adaptability. Expecttions. Impermanence (acceptance of).’ These he wrote on one side of the paper. After a moment he drew an arrow across the page from ‘Expectations’ and repeated the word in the second list. Trauma=suffering=damage.’ This he wrote in the middle of the paper and underneath: ‘Trauma=suffering#damage’. And then: “Trauma=suffering=change.

The is the formula Amintta Forna explains throughout the novel by applying the life occurrences of her characters and she strongly believes that trauma cannot create damage rather there are scopes for changes and resilience and that is the hypothetical statement justified here through this reearch.

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