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Trauma in the movie *Ordinary People* (1980): An Investigation of Psychological trauma and recovery from a Traumatic Experience.

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Abstract:

Trauma theory is an emerging field that is interdisciplinary and incorporates both psychological and physiological studies related to trauma. The main focus of trauma theory is the exploration of the workings and effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Embedded in the trauma theory, this research aims at carrying out a qualitative analysis in order to explore the workings of trauma and recovery from traumatic experience. The study shall deal with analyzing Conrad's character in the movie Ordinary People (1980) by evaluating different behavioral patterns exhibited by him in the movie. In order to explore the working of trauma, the study shall utilize the diagnostic criteria provided by the American Psychiatric Association (2013) that lists the symptoms related to traumatic disorder. In order to explore the process of recovery, Herman's three stage model (1992) of recovery from trauma is utilized. The research findings conclude that Conrad's character suffers from trauma exhibiting most of the symptoms listed in the diagnostic manual. These symptoms include nightmares, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, isolation, irritability etc. The findings also show that Conrad's character successfully undergoes all three stages of recovery. He transforms into an emotionally stable individual after the recovery process occurs. The study has made use of the film medium in order to create awareness about the trauma related issues focusing on the role of professional and social help for traumatic individuals.

Keywords:

individual trauma; psychological trauma; PTSD; recovery from trauma; Trauma theory.

1. Introduction:

Trauma theory in the field of academics incorporates theorizations based on different psychological and physiological studies that focus on understanding and dealing effectively with

the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (High, 2015, p. 374). PTSD got widely known as a psychiatric disorder after it was included for the first time in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III) (Bisson, 2009, p. 281). According to Bisson (2009), the symptoms of PTSD include significant mental disturbance in the individual that inhibits him from performing his “social, educational and occupational” commitments effectively. PTSD should be diagnosed and treated on time (p. 281). The reason for this could be that with the passage of time the condition worsens and requires more time to become normal again.

Visser (2011) notes that, over the past few years, trauma studies have emerged as a rapidly growing field of study. According to Hartman (1995), trauma theory deals with the relationship between words and trauma. This helps to explore the mental wound inflicted by trauma through the lens of literature. Trauma within literary texts (both fictional and non-fictional) is utilized to shed light on the wound/ mental scar that needs to be known to the readers. Thus, it helps in mirroring the wounds of the people around us who suffer in the same way as these literary characters. Beall (2011) notices that apart from depiction of PTSD in literature, the growing recognition achieved by it among the general masses has brought forth the movie stakeholders to depict this theme in their movies. This shows that movies related to PTSD are not only a source of entertainment, but they can also help in creating awareness about the subject.

The present study shall be based on exploring the theme of trauma in the movie *Ordinary People* (1980). It is a movie that is directed by Robert Redford. The screenplay is written by Alvin Sargent and the movie is adapted from Judith Guest’s novel *Ordinary People*, published in 1976. The movie depicts the lives of the Jarrett family where the elder son Buck Jarrett lost his life in a boating accident. Within trauma theory, the present research shall focus on exploring the workings of trauma by highlighting the trauma- related symptoms and the measures that can be taken in order to cope up with the traumatic experiences that lead to individual’s road to recovery from trauma.

1.1 Statement of the Problem:

In most parts of the world, people suffering from mental health issues face a lot of discrimination and stigmatization. Similarly in Pakistan, such individuals fail to seek proper professional help due to the social stigma attached with mental illnesses which further deteriorates

their worsening psychological condition (Khalily, 2011). This research aims to create awareness among the masses about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the different coping mechanisms that can be utilized in order to recover from a traumatic experience.

1.2 Research Objectives:

The research aims to deal with the following objectives:

- To investigate the workings of trauma through Conrad's depiction in the movie *Ordinary People* (1980) and the extent to which this trauma is affecting him.
- To investigate the recovery process undergone by Conrad's character in the movie *Ordinary People* (1980) and the extent to which the recovery process has successfully occurred.

1.3 Research Questions:

The research aims to answer the following questions:

- How does Conrad's depiction in the movie satisfy the workings of trauma? To what extent is the character traumatized?
- How does Conrad's character in the movie undergo the recovery process? To what extent has the recovery process successfully occurred?

1.4 Significance of the Study

Movies are not only a source of entertainment but can readily be utilized to impart knowledge to the public. Thus, this research based on the movie *Ordinary People* (1980) aims to help the readers to understand in a better way the trauma related symptoms and the healing/recovery mechanisms of traumatic individuals. Moreover, it aims to bridge the gap between the fields of psychology and literature. The study encourages future researchers to analyze Pakistani fictional works in the light of trauma theory in order to depict the psychological sufferings of traumatic individuals in our society.

1.5 Delimitation of the Study:

The present study focuses on the diagnostic categories and recovery process associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

2. Literature Review:

It is worth noticing that trauma is interdisciplinary in nature (Lackhurst, 2013). According to Visser (2011), the basic framework for the symptoms, recovery, therapy and other issues related to trauma are based on PTSD which was formulated by American Psychiatric Association in 1980,

and led to the emergence of trauma theory in early 1990s. The recovery process of a traumatic individual involves full support from both formal sources such as psychotherapists, social and legal institutions as well as from informal sources such as family, society and friends (Goodkind, Gillum, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2003; Goodman, Dutton, Weinfurt, & Cook, 2003). Different theorists have highlighted different factors affecting the recovery process of a traumatic individual. These factors include cultural setup, availability of resources, social and institutional support (Bui, 2003; Harvey, 1996; Liang, Goodman, Tummala-Narra, & Weintraub, 2005).

The works of two theorists i.e., Herman (1992) and Harvey (1996) have been recognized greatly that discuss recovery from psychological trauma. Herman (1992) worked on the three stages involving the trauma recovery process. The stages include establishment of safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection (Tummala-Narra, 2015, p. 207). Harvey (1996) presented eight stages of trauma recovery. The stages include authority over the remembering process, integration of memory and affect, affect tolerance, symptom mastery, self-esteem, self-cohesion, self-attachment, and meaning making.

The growing popularity of PTSD has resulted in the production of a large stock of information in the form of science, literature and movies (Beall, 2011, p. 1). Different researches have been conducted that highlight the ability of movies to simultaneously entertain and communicate with the viewers (Boggs, 1996; Dermer & Hutchings, 2000; Heston & Kottman, 1997). According to these theorists, in order to achieve this purpose, movies readily make use of devices like imagery, metaphors and symbols. This shows that all these devices appeal to the viewers who also unconsciously absorb the messages that the movie tries to communicate to the viewers.

According to Schulenberg (2003), personality theorists fully understand the significance of movies and their role in psychiatry (p. 718). He further highlights the therapeutic function that movies based on psychology readily perform for the viewers. They have a great positive influence on viewer's lives (p. 718). Heston and Kottman (1997) successfully conducted a case study using two movies to bring about a behavioral change in their clients. High (2015) conducted a study on the movie *Taxi Driver* (1976), in order to explore the psychological trauma that was prevalent among the Vietnam War veterans at the time war and also after it ended (p. 374). This shows that movies can be utilized in the researches to create awareness about prevalent issues in society and also about medical and psychiatric disorders.

The movie *Ordinary people* (1980) has been researched from the perspective of Psychodynamic Psychotherapy (Miller, 1999). However, it has not yet been researched primarily from the perspective of trauma dealing particularly with the traumatic symptoms and the recovery process of the traumatic individual that is the focus of the present study. In order to achieve this goal, the theoretical framework of the study shall incorporate the diagnostic criteria provided by the fifth edition of American Psychiatric Association (2013) i.e., *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* and Judith Lewis Herman's (1992) model known as "A Stage-Specific Model".

3. Research Methodology:

The research is qualitative in nature that is utilizing content analysis technique by analyzing the content of the movie *Ordinary People* (1980). The content/data includes dialogues, physical reactions, gestures, bodily movements and facial expressions of the character under analysis i.e., Conrad. The present study shall interpret the data to the best of researcher's knowledge and also make it fully available for other interpretations from readers of the research.

3.1 Theoretical Framework for the Study:

The present study has its groundings in trauma theory. Within trauma theory, the study aims to interpret the data collected through the movie based on the diagnostic criteria for trauma related symptoms published in 2013 in the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association named as *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* in order to analyze Conrad's character in the movie. The diagnostic criterion is divided into eight different criteria (Category A-H) that are further divided into different sub-categories.

The criterion A involves the person who has been exposed to a traumatic event in the form of threatened death, threatened or actual serious injury, threatened or actual sexual abuse. The exposure to such a traumatic event can be direct, or secondary in the form witnessing such a traumatic event as a bystander.

The criterion B involves the persistent re-experience of the traumatic event in the form of intrusive thoughts and distressing recollections of the event, nightmares related to the incident, flashback episodes. It also includes emotional distress after exposure to stimuli in the surroundings that remind the traumatic individual about the incident that is then followed by physical reactivity. The criterion C involves traumatic individual's avoidance of trauma-related stimuli by trying to stay away from thoughts, feelings, conversations, activities, people and places that remind him of

the traumatic incident. Furthermore, the criterion D involves individual's experiencing of negative thoughts after the traumatic event has occurred. This includes highly negative assumptions about oneself, people around him or the world in general. Furthermore, the traumatic individual is unable to recall key features of trauma. The criterion E involves arousal and reactivity related to trauma. This also includes exaggerated startled responses to situations, difficulty in concentrating and hyper vigilance. The traumatic individual also suffers from insomnia.

The criterion F requires symptoms related to trauma to last for more than 1 month in order to be diagnosed as trauma. The criterion G demands the above-mentioned symptoms to create distress or functional impairment (social, academic, occupational) in the individual in order to be diagnosed as trauma. The criterion H demands that the above-mentioned symptoms should not be a result of medication, drugs or illness. According to American Psychiatric Association (2013) in order to categorize someone as traumatic, all the above-mentioned diagnostic criteria (Category A-H) must be satisfied

The study shall incorporate Herman's (1992) model termed as "A Stage-Specific Model" in order to investigate the process of recovery from psychological trauma undergone by the character Conrad Jarrett in the movie *Ordinary People* (1980) According to Herman (1992), the recovery process starts with the "establishment of safety" that is achieved through empowerment and connection. This happens by developing control over one's body and also over the outside factors related to one's environment. It is worth noticing that the first stage of recovery does not deal with talking about traumatic memories or recovering such memories. In the first stage of recovery, the individual only begins to feel secure in his surroundings (Herman, 1992).

According to Herman (1992), the second stage in the recovery process involves "remembrance and mourning". It focuses on talking about the traumatic memory within a safe therapeutic environment. The traumatic memory is fully recalled, transformed from a snapshot and episodic flashbacks to a full picture (Herman, 1992). Working through the traumatic memory should not be attempted until patient's basic safety and reliability has been established. Herman (1992) terms the third stage of trauma recovery as "reconnection" in which the individual starts exploring his own self, develops reconciliation with the past particularly with the traumatic memory and starts reconnecting with people. The individual does not absolutely recover from his trauma but starts accepting the traumatic event as part of his past life (1992) and learns to focus on future endeavors.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The first part of analysis deals with the investigation of Conrad's character in the light of diagnostic criteria issued by American Psychiatric Association in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*. This is done by looking at different behavioral patterns exhibited by Conrad in the movie *Ordinary People* (1980) as the aftermath of the tragic boating incident

Conrad's character fulfills the criterion A of the diagnostic manual in the following ways. He suffered from "direct exposure to threatened death" (American Psychiatric Association, 1980), in a boating accident where he lost his elder brother Buck Jarrett but managed to save his own life. Trauma involves both a direct or secondary exposure to the traumatic event. In this case Conrad is both a direct victim of the accident as well as a secondary victim in the form of the only witness to his brother's drowning (Redford, 1980).

Conrad's character fulfills the criterion B of the diagnostic manual in the following ways. Conrad is seen struggling with intrusive thoughts at many instances in the movie. While at home during meals, he is seen having deep reflections. He also struggles to concentrate during lectures in school (Redford, 1980).

In the movie, it can be seen that Conrad persistently suffers from nightmares of the boating accident. He is seen waking up from these dreams in the middle of the night where he finds himself panting and trying to compose himself. Conrad can be seen shivering, shaking and twisting in his bed during these nightmares followed by sleeplessness for the rest of the night (Redford, 1980). Conrad is seen having flashbacks when towards the end of the movie the whole boating accident comes before the viewers through Conrad's flashbacks. This happens when he is told about Karen's death, who committed suicide. She was in the psychiatric hospital with Conrad where he was admitted after he tried to kill himself. In the movie it can be seen that it is all dark and stormy, and the boys are holding each other's hands over the overturned boat's hull. The heavy current made Buck got loose of Conrad's hands. Conrad is seen shouting "Stay with me! Stay with me! Stay with me! Bucky! Where are you?" (Redford, 1980) but Buck disappears into the water. In between a series of flashbacks that come to Conrad it can be seen in the movie that Conrad is in a terrible state of mind. He starts running outside the house on the roads. He is unable to compose himself. It can be seen that the news of Karen's death because of suicide worked as a trigger for Conrad that brought the memory of the tragic boating incident before him. Conrad is seen in an

emotionally unstable state as a result of this traumatic reminder.

The criterion of physical reactivity as stated in American Psychiatric Association (2013) is also fulfilled in the movie. It can be seen that he never talked about the boating incident with anyone. When in his first meeting with Dr. Berger, the psychiatrist wanted him to tell about the incident but he did not. It can be seen that Conrad suddenly went into a deep thought and did not say a word about it. This numbness can also be seen at other instances related to traumatic reminders. Towards the end, when he gets to know about Karen's death his physical reactivity changed its course as he started hitting things in the Doctor's office when talking about the boating incident for the first time (Redford, 1980).

Conrad's character fulfills the criterion C of the diagnostic manual in the following ways. He is seen struggling to have a control over his thoughts. He tells the Doctor Berger in his first sitting that "I'd like to be more in control" (Redford, 1980). This shows that he feels disturbed by the trauma related feelings and thoughts. The biggest trauma related reminder for Conrad is swimming. He lost his brother in a boating accident. His brother Buck and he were really good at swimming. In the movie it can be seen that whenever he goes for swimming practice, he comes out of the pool panting, shaking and out of breath. He is seen telling the doctor that "Maybe... Maybe I don't want to swim anymore" (Redford, 1980). Another trauma-related reminder for Conrad is Conrad and Buck's mutual best friend Lazenby. Conrad is seen ignoring him all the time. Conrad says to him, "... I can't help it; it hurts too much to be around you" (Redford, 1980).

Conrad's character fulfills the criterion D of the diagnostic manual in the following ways. Conrad avoids talking about trauma and is unable to recall the details of the boating accident. Conrad is seen thinking negatively about himself as he blames himself for the death of his brother. This shows his guilt for not trying to save his drowning brother as he was a good swimmer. His negative thoughts about the world include his belief that he is not accepted by the society as he stayed for 4 months in the psychiatric hospital. He also feels that his mother hates him. He says to his father after having a fight with his mother "she hates me! Can't you see that" (Redford, 1980). As a result of all this, his trauma worsened.

Conrad's character fulfills the criterion E of the diagnostic manual in the following ways. In the movie, Conrad exhibits sudden display of irritability and aggression (but only occasionally). He is seen having a fight with his former swimming teammate where he beats him badly. He is seen displaying anger in front of his mother and blaming her for not caring for him. His destructive

behavior also includes suicide attempt by him. His heightened startled reactions include his reactions towards loud sounds. He seems to startle whenever he hears loud sounds around him. He admits in front of Dr. Berger that he feels “jumpy” (Redford, 1980). He is seen shaking his legs and shifting his body uneasily when talking with Dr. Berger during his sessions. He faces great difficulty in sleeping.

Conrad’s character fulfills the criteria F, G, and H listed in the diagnostic manual as well. In the movie, Conrad suffers from all the above-mentioned symptoms for more than five months. As a result, Conrad faces issues in socializing with his previous friends. He is seen spending his time alone and avoiding friends in school. At home, he is seen having issues in connecting with parents particularly his mother. Conrad reveals to Dr. Berger that “My mother and I don’t connect”. Conrad’s functional impairment also involves lack of concentration on studies and quitting swimming team. Conrad’s symptoms are not due to any kind of medication, drugs or physical illness as he is completely fit physically.

The above discussion shows that Conrad’s character shows all the symptoms listed in the Diagnostic criteria (Category A-H) provided by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* that was issued by the American Psychiatric Association in 2013. Thus, Conrad’s abnormal behavioral patterns are a result of trauma that he is going through in the movie. Furthermore, the second part of the analysis deals with the investigation of the recovery process undergone by Conrad’s character in the movie *Ordinary People* (1980) using three-stage model about recovery from trauma (Herman, 1992).

Herman gives importance to role of therapy in his three-stage model. It can be seen in the movie that Conrad starts visiting a psychiatrist Dr. Berger on his father’s insistence. He tells Dr. Berger that “this is his idea” (Redford, 1980). In the beginning he kept on saying to the Doctor that “I’ll be straight with you, I don’t like this already” (Redford, 1980). It can be seen that in the first sitting with Dr. Berger, Conrad is not ready to reveal anything. He keeps on saying that everything is okay at school and at home when actually it was not. He does not talk about the traumatic accident when Dr. Berger asks about it. This shows that until this point the healing process didn’t begin.

Conrad’s character undergoes the first stage of recovery from trauma i.e., “Establishment of safety” (Herman, 1992) in the following ways. His journey of recovery from trauma begins in the succeeding sessions with Dr. Berger when he begins “sharing about his psychological state”

(Herman 1992) with the therapist. In the second session he reveals that he is having nightmares and asks for a tranquilizer. He reveals that he “feels so jumpy” (Redford, 1980). He reveals that he is no more interested in swimming as it works as a traumatic reminder for him.

The healing process begins when the patient starts talking about trauma related things (Herman, 1992). In the third sitting he reveals his relationship with his mother that we “don’t connect” (Redford, 1992). Therapy helps him to restore Conrad’s “trust in others” (Herman, 1992) beginning from his trust on psychiatrist. This session helps Conrad to “create a personal roadmap” (Herman 1992) for him as he decides to quit swimming for his betterment.

The first stage of recovery emphasized on building new relationships (Herman, 1992). In the movie it can be seen that Conrad tries to build new relationship with a girl in his school named Jeanine. The dinner date between them goes well in the start but Conrad seems offended by Jeanine’s jolly attitude that was indeed quite normal as she was just enjoying herself. This shows that Conrad at this stage is still struggling with trauma related issues that keep bothering him during social interactions.

The first stage of recovery does not deal with recovering or even talking about traumatic experiences (Herman 1992). It can be seen that Conrad is yet not ready to talk about the boating accident with the doctor. He talks about other trauma related issues like “he feels jumpy” or he wants to be “more in control” but he avoids talking about the accident. He does talk about the suicide attempt with Jeanine which shows his restoration of trust on people around him.

Conrad’s character undergoes the second stage of recovery from trauma “Remembrance and mourning” (Herman, 1992) in the following ways. It can be seen in the movie that Conrad talks about the whole boating incident for the first time after he gets to know about Karen’s committed suicide. This news works as a trigger as he loses control over his thoughts and body. The whole traumatic event is re-experienced by him in the form of a series of flashbacks. He then calls Dr. Berger in the middle of night in this emotionally unstable state “seeking therapeutic-help” (Herman, 1992). He “narrates the whole traumatic incident” (Herman, 1992) to the doctor. He is seen hitting furniture in Dr. Berger’s office while talking about his guilt for the first time. He confesses that he did a wrong this “You just do one wrong thing... and (Redford, 1980). He reveals that “I hung on. I stayed with the boat” (Redford, 1980), which shows his “guilt” (Herman, 1992) of not trying to recover his brother from the water as he was a good swimmer and could have saved his brother’s life. He “mourns the loss” (Herman, 1992) of his brother openly for the first time.

This remembrance, mourning and talking about his guilt for the first time are crucial to his recovery in the second stage.

Conrad's character undergoes the third stage of recovery from trauma "Reconnection" (Herman, 1992) in the following ways. After Conrad "explicitly talks about the traumatic event" (Herman, 1992) in the second stage of recovery from trauma, it can be seen that he visits Jeanine to apologize for his inappropriate attitude. Thus, he starts focuses on "building and maintaining relationships" (Herman, 1992). He is seen trying to re-establish his relationship with his mom whom he otherwise avoids. He is seen more in "control of his actions and thoughts" (Herman, 1992). He is seen enjoying different activities around him. This shows that his "confidence in his own self is restored" (Herman, 1992). Conrad also acknowledges his dad's contributions and support for him.

Application of Herman's (1992) three stage model of trauma recovery i.e. "A Stage-Specific Model" on Conrad's character shows that the character undergoes all the three stages of recovery from his traumatic experience.

5. Conclusion

The present study sought to answer the two basic research questions that have been postulated in the beginning of the study. Grounded in the trauma theory, the study explored the diagnostic and recovery processes of trauma that were analyzed through the behavioral patterns exhibited by the character Conrad Jarrett in the movie *Ordinary People* (1980). Based on the theoretical framework of the study, Conrad's character fulfills the diagnostic criteria for individuals suffering from trauma that was issued by the American Psychiatric Association in 2013. In the movie, the prominent traumatic symptoms experienced by Conrad include nightmares, flashbacks, and intrusive thoughts about traumatic events. The study also explored the recovery process of traumatic individuals within trauma theory through Conrad's character. Application of Herman's model (1992) showed the recovery process undergone by Conrad's character from a distressed emotionally unstable state to the state of physical and emotional stability. Conrad's road to recovery primarily involved restoration of emotional control, establishing a personal road-map, building new relationships and restoring previous ties. The study has a practical significance as it aims at creating awareness among the masses about the workings of trauma and measures that can be taken related to the recovery process. The study has incorporated the film medium that is quite popular among the masses and readily contributes in creating awareness. The study aims at

bringing forth the importance of providing professional, institutional, therapeutic and social help to traumatic individuals in their traumatic outbursts. This will then eventually contribute to the successful recovery of the traumatic individuals.

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