

Narrativizing Trauma: A Reading Of Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail*

Dr. Z.D. Lalmangaihza^{1*}, Dr. Sarangadhar Baral²

^{1*} Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govt Saiha College

² Professor, Department of English and Culture Studies, Mizoram University (Corresponding Author)

Abstract:

Narrativizing trauma is a complex and problematic issue because the very essence of trauma lies in its defiance of narration. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma “simultaneously defies and demands our witness” and needs to be approached with “language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (5). Based upon this theoretical position, this paper attempts to locate trauma in the selected text and examine Abani's narrativization of trauma. Even as trauma defies linear narration, the paper explores the multiple ways in which the narrative in *Becoming Abigail* represents traumatic experiences through a careful analysis of the mode of narration.

Keywords: narrativize, trauma, violence, disjunction, repetition, ambivalence

Introduction

Becoming Abigail is a novella by Chris Abani which was published in 2006. It tells the story of a girl who is a victim of sexual trafficking. It is a very tragic tale that details horrific accounts of human trafficking and sexual violence, and the ensuing trauma of sexual abuse. The novella is also a complex delineation of the protagonist Abigail's “becoming”, her quest for a sense of identity that involves rituals and the narrative balances Abigail's physical victimhood and her struggle for inner transformation.

Trauma is originally a Greek word which stands for ‘wound’ and was originally used to refer to injury inflicted on the body. In the present context, the term trauma both in the medical and psychiatric literature refers to a wound inflicted upon the mind that refuses to heal and constantly re-enacts itself. In his clinical study of neurosis, Freud observed that “undesired happenings and painful affective situations are repeated...and re-animated with much ingenuity” (15). The wound of the mind created a breach in the mind's experience of time and reality, and trauma has a repetitive compulsion because the impact of a traumatic incident cannot be fully comprehended and known by the subject at a time. According to Cathy Caruth, (...) trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature- the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance- returns to haunt the survivor later on. (4)

Chris Abani and Violence

Two years after the publication of his first novel *Masters of the Board* (1985), Abani was arrested and imprisoned for six months on the allegation that his novel was a blueprint for the foiled coup carried out by General Mamman Vatsa against Ibrahim Babangida. Soon after he was released, he was arrested for a second time due to his involvement in an anti-government guerrilla theatre while he was a university student. He was imprisoned at Kirikiri Maximum Security Prison and was detained for one year. He was imprisoned for the third time in 1990 for writing a play *Song of a Broken Flute* for his university convocation that year. After eighteen months of imprisonment, out of which six months were spent in solitary confinement, Abani was able to escape with the help of bribes paid to prison officials by his friends. The writer immediately went into exile and settled in England for several years. His collection of poems *Kalakuta Republic* is devoted entirely to his experiences of violence and trauma in prison, and the larger chunk of his creative output addresses the issue of violence and trauma in one way or another.

In an interview with Yogita Goyal, Abani expresses that his works attempt to revisit the people's traumatic experiences and lend voice to their stories.

A lot of the driving force of my work is the recovery of the narrative that might be forgotten or erased by history for many complex reasons- shame, class, nationalism, etc. So for me there is no moving forward without the complex and difficult revisitation of the past. I grew in an immediately post-civil war Nigeria as a former Biafran, with all the profound loss and PTSD that was inflicted on an entire people. The silence around

that war continues to reverberate in Nigeria's history until today, much like the American Civil War, fought in the 19th century, is still at the heart of much of America's political divides. The middle classes in Africa don't want these painful histories excavated and explored because it doesn't mesh with the way they want to be seen by their Western contemporaries, despite protestations to the contrary. My experience of living, and my understanding of things, is that the past not only haunts the present, but also is, in many ways, in control of the present, until the trauma of said past is given its due attention. (Abani, "A Deep Humanness" 232)

Trauma in *Becoming Abigail*

In the novella, Abigail, an only child raised by her father lives and grows up with stories and memories of her mother who died while giving birth to her. She was named after her mother Abigail by her grieving father, probably as an attempt to keep the memory of his late wife alive. Abigail's father attempts to quench his pain and grief by drinking as the narrative chronicles how Abigail is suffocated and troubled by her father's grief that led to a certain kind of obsession in which her father perpetually expects her to grow up to be like her late mother. Abigail is prevented from becoming her own woman not just by her father, but by the patriarchal society with its socially constructed notion of who a woman is supposed to be. The narrative centres on this complex attempt to live life in her own terms in a world where her whole life has been dictated by men. Not only did Abigail feel the pinch of societal normative on gender that assigns her specific roles and limits her as a girl, she understood sexual violence from men at a young age when she was raped by her cousin at the age of ten. Her father made arrangement for her to go to London with her cousin Peter who promises them to find a good job for her in London, after which her father committed suicide. Left with no immediate relative, Abigail follows Peter to London but found out that Peter actually took girls from her hometown for prostitution. Peter tortured her and chained her like a dog after she refused to sleep with a customer and fought back. She escaped and was found by the police, but she has no identity in London as she was smuggled into the country by Peter illegally. The traumatised Abigail found comfort and love in the hands of a social worker named Derek who was put in-charge of handling her case. Abigail's final break down came when Derek's wife discovered the two making love and Derek was fired from his job and charged for abusing a minor.

As a victim and witness to various forms of violence and trauma during the civil war in Nigeria, a number of Abani's works explore traumatic experiences. In his attempt to narrate traumatic experiences, Abani's mode of narration is characterised by temporal disjunction, repetition and communicative ambivalence, echoing trauma as theorised by trauma theorists that traumatic experiences defy linear narration. The narrative in Abani's other novel *Song for Night* is chaotic and unreliable, and the lines between reality and the protagonist My Luck's hallucination is often blur. The narrator constantly comes back to attempt to narrate the horrific instance in which he witnessed the murder of his mother. But he is unable to narrate it, and the narrative resorts to focussing on other things that evokes the sense of that traumatic incident. Words fail to convey the traumatic intensity of the situation, as the narrative resorts to repetition and ambivalence.

Coupled with her unhealthy upbringing is the rape she encountered as a child which traumatizes her and makes her capable of neither trusting men nor having healthy relations with men. After his fifteen year old cousin Edwin raped her when she was ten and threatened to kill her if she told anyone, Abigail understood what men are like.

None of the men who had taken her in her short lifetime had seen her...But then neither had she really seen them. She tried to. Staring. Watching from the corner of her eye. Trying to piece them together. But they gave nothing, these men. (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 26)

Abigail's identity crisis due to the absence of her mother is heightened by the ghostly presence of her mother, haunting her and her father with memories. The pain of losing her mother was not really felt by Abigail at the immediate time of her death, probably because she was a child and unable to comprehend the full measure of the pain and loss. She instead relives the pain which unravels itself slowly with the passage of time. As she grows up, Abigail lives with the trauma of her mother's death and perform it like a ritual, which his father found disturbing.

He was good. Not interfering when she decapitated all her dolls and recreated a funeral for each one. He grew uncomfortable yet still remained silent when she shot six birds from the sky with her rubber catapult and stones collected almost as a meditation from the loose gravel bordering Abigail's grave. He was silent even when she dressed them in lace torn from the trim of her mother's wedding dress. Collecting sticks into bundles that she

arranged in geometric patterns, she placed the lace-wrapped birds on these funeral pyres, deliberately holding each one over a candle that stood like a sentinel, until they filled everything with the scent of roasting meat and the revulsion of burning feathers. She took seven photographs of her mother from the family album, tore the faces out and turned them upside down with seven candles on them while she muttered an incantation over the torn faces. Collecting with the deliberateness reserved for communion wafers, she then took the candles off the photo fragments, picked up the fragments, and held the severed photos of her mother's face up to the light before cramming them into her mouth. (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 36)

This enactment of trauma takes a slightly different turn when she grows up. The pressure to become like her mother on the one hand and her personal need to become her own individual on the other hand adds to her confliction. This pain and emotional scar, which is perhaps beyond being contained or expressed in words gets represented in a ritual on the body.

This burning wasn't immolation. Not combustion. But an exorcism. Cauterization. Permanence even. Before she began burning herself she collected anecdotes about her which she stuck on her skin, wearing them under her clothes; all day. Chafing. Becoming. Becoming and chafing, as though the friction from the paper would abrade any difference, smooth over any signs of the joining, until she became her mother and her mother her. (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 34)

The only time in her life that she becomes her own self, without the need to conform or consider other people's expectation is when she is with Derek-her social worker after she escaped and ran away from Peter's sexual slavery. It is the first time in her life that Abigail is free and feels the possibility of becoming her own self as the narrative states, "And Abigail was giving, for the first time she wasn't taken...Abigail, this Abigail, only this Abigail, always this Abigail, felt herself becoming, even in this moment of taking" (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 52). After this love making with Derek, Abigail repeats the ritual of branding her body with burning needle. But the mapping on her body is no longer about Abigail her mother, but her own sense of becoming.

"This one," she said, touching the ones on each breast, first one, then the other. "This one is you, this, me. In the middle is Greenwich. Here," and she was down on her stomach, "is my hunger, my need, mine, not my mother's. And here, and here and here and here, here, here, here, me, me, me. Don't you see?" and she showed him the words branded in her skin. (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 53)

According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is a painful event that is "Experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (4). Abigail's enactment of her mother's funeral and the maps she branded on her skin could be a result of trauma that resurfaces in her memory. This interpretation is further complicated by the fact that Abigail's mother died while giving birth, and it is impossible for Abigail to remember the death of her mother. This echoes Dominick LaCapra's statement that "there is no fully immediate access to the experience itself even for the original witness, meaning trauma" and that "trauma can only be "reconstructed from its effects and traces" (21). Memories become distorted, incoherent and unreliable.

And this.

Even this. This memory like all the others was a lie. Like the sound of someone ascending wooden stairs, which she couldn't know because she had never heard it. Still it was as real as this one. A coffin sinking reluctantly into the open mouth of a grave, earth in clods collected around it in a pile like froth from the mouth of a mad dog. And women. Gathered in a cluster of black, like angry crows. Weeping. The sound was something she had heard only in her dreams and in these moments of memory- a keening, loud and sharp, but not brittle like the screeching of glass or the imagined sound of women crying. This was something entirely different. A deep lowing, a presence, dark and palpable, like a shadow emanating from the women, becoming a thing that circled the grave and the mourners in a predatory manner before rising up to the brightness of the sky and the sun, to be replaced by another momentarily. (Abani, *Becoming Abigail* 17)The pain of a particular event cannot be fully comprehended at the moment of its occurrence, but realized by the 'not knowing' subject at a subsequent stage, relived and re-enacted. Abani's narrative explores traumatic experiences of the characters as a result of personal as well as structural violence enacted upon them. Trauma in Abani's narrative is situated in the discursive intersection of race, gender and neo-colonialism, besides political violence and war.

Conclusion

Though trauma defies linear narration, Abani's mode of narration and representation brings out the traumatic experiences of the protagonist Abigail in the novella. Similar to this novella, Abani employs this mode of narration in other works that deal with traumatic experiences wherein the narratives lack linear progression, and are often characterised by temporal disjunction and communicative ambivalence. This very "impossibility" of narrating trauma testifies the traumatic nature of the experience which is at best represented in a chaotic and often ambivalent manner that invokes and suggests the traumatic intensity.

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