

UNANSWERED PRAYERS: READING EIMEAR MCBRIDE'S A GIRL IS A HALF FORMED THING IN THE LIGHT OF 'TRAUMA' AND 'CHAOS' THEORY

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Abstract

The paper throws light onto the deep and inner psyche of the unnamed protagonist of McBride's debut novel. Through the theory of Trauma and Chaos which is closely knitted as both, when applied to the study of human behavior, delves into the socio-cultural and psycho-cultural construct, the researcher has tried to find out the traumatic and chaotic behavioral construct.

Key Words: *Inner psyche, Trauma, Chaos, Socio-cultural, Psycho-cultural, Behavioral construct.*

I

Trauma theory as a subject of study traces back to Freudian Psychoanalysis. *Beyond the Pleasure Principles* and *Moses and Monotheism* are considered to be significant books on trauma theory written by Freud. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principles*, he focuses on the augmentation of psychical trauma that generates not only from the memory of trauma but also trauma of memory while in *Moses and Monotheism* he considers the Jewish history as the history of trauma because trauma in that sense is the return of what is 'repressed'. Trauma is often times taken as a state of intense emotional pain, triggered by the experience of shame and anxiety. Freud focuses on philosophical, psychological and ethical aspects for the nature and representation of trauma. Though trauma is primarily applied to clinical measures, but when applied to literature, can bring out the complexity between knowing and not knowing. "It is at this specific point of knowing and not knowing that the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience and the language of literature meet." (Binda Sah, 150). Henceforth, stepping out of the pathological circumference, trauma theory is viable in the study of literature. The trio, Geoffrey Hartman, Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman are considered to be the principle proponents of Trauma theory.

Chaos theory, also known as 'Science of complexity' is actually a mathematical sub-discipline to study complex systems. This discipline, proved highly beneficial in understanding different aspects of nature like weather changes, migratory pattern of birds, nature and difference of vegetation across the world, so on and so forth. The theory assumes that the small differences in initial conditions yield widely diverging outcomes for such dynamical systems, rendering long term prediction impossible in general. Actually, in the general sense, 'chaos' is something that is related to 'disorder'. Patrick Brady is of the opinion, that "Chaos theory is about (dis-)order, a mode or degree of (dis-)organization: it is about *how* or *how much* things are, or not organized." (Brady, 65). Over the last three decades, this mathematical structure is highly applicable to literature to study the dynamics of human behavior. Many chaos theorists point to the example of the "butterfly effect" as an illustration of a chaotic system.

The theory of Trauma and Chaos is closely knitted as both, when applied to the study of human behavior, delves into the socio-cultural and psycho-cultural construct. In other way round 'trauma' is the seed while 'chaos' is the fruit. The former is the content, the latter is the enactment. The theory of Trauma ponders over the powerful effects in organizing the 'self system' of the mind while Chaos theory questions on one's ability to comprehend the operation behind the reality of a situation and not the reality itself. Both have tremendous impact in the study of human identity and behavior.

Human identity, much like the weather, is an incredibly complex concept that is influenced by innumerable forces which are both random and determined at once. Chaos theory calls into question the true measure of control human beings have in terms of their own lives and suggests the countless and immeasurable forces which serve to shape a human being's identity. (Chaos Theory as Literary Theory)

Applying the theory of trauma in shaping up a personality leads back to numerous factors. Most importantly it can be viewed as a crisis of experience. Trauma is always associated with some kind of expectation and the loss of it; either in the conscious or unconscious level. In his *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud's notion of "object loss" can also become a reason for the development of trauma. This realization of 'loss' disturbs the cohesiveness and stability or sanity of the consciousness, thereby, creating 'dissociation' or 'chaos'. Hence trauma and chaos exist in every personality. Here at this point the 'enactment' comes to play which is an unconscious means of discharging the energy of the trauma, if it does not find expression in conscious awareness. The final stage is called 'attractors'. The idea of the attractor is very important to chaos theory. Attractors have come to be seen as the states to which the system eventually settles. Attractors help to bring order out of chaos. There is also an awful situation is also some kind of equilibrium, but a dynamic one. A dynamic kind-of-equilibrium is called a 'Strange Attractor'. The difference between an 'Attractor' and a 'Strange Attractor' is that an Attractor represents a state to which a system finally settles, while a Strange Attractor represents some kind of trajectory upon which a system runs from situation to situation without ever settling down.

Thus we all know that all kinds of mental illness and disability- be it personality disorders, depression, paranoia, neuroticism or bitchiness, all have their roots deeply embedded in trauma and chaos theory.

The present paper intends to study Irish writer Eimear McBride's debut novel *A Girl is a Half Formed Thing* through the lens of Trauma and Chaos theory. Semi- autobiographical in nature, the novel presents a stark and horrid picture of insipid and morbid atmosphere. Trauma and chaos which constantly permeates through the claustrophobic circumstances offered through the novel are incorporated as a thematic element. The series of incidents happening with and around the protagonist represents the abominable mental condition vividly and extensively.

II

Eimear McBride's debut novel *A Girl is a Half Formed Thing*, arrived at the literary scenario with an enormous buzz. Born in Northern Irish parentage in 1976, in Liverpool, McBride had spent her childhood in the western part of Republic of Ireland as her family moved when she was just three. Then at the age of seventeen,

she again moved to London to study acting at the Drama Centre. After six months of her course, she had been informed of her elder brother Donagh, who became terminally ill and she had to travel back and forth to Ireland the following year. She spent the final four months with him till he breathed his last. In an interview with David Collard she confesses:

My brother Donagh lived a very quiet and unassuming life. He survived his initial brain-tumour at the age of 5 but my parents were warned he would only receive a clean bill of health after twenty years had passed. Twenty did and two after that, it returned. He was quite an easy-going person, struggled at school, trained briefly for the priesthood and in the last few years of his life took great pleasure in his job as a care worker. He died aged 28 and the loss of him is the single most devastating experience of my life. So while *GIRL* may not say much about Donagh's own life – and the brother is a fictional character – it does try to say something about the awful unfairness of his death and at least leave some track of how much he was loved behind. (The White Review)

This incident of perennial loss has found its expression in the portrayal of the narrator's brother. Thus the novel is partly autobiographical and is dedicated to her brother Donagh. "I come down to see you again. So now I'm come down every weekend" (McBride, 135)

Written in just six months, and rejected by many publishers, the book finally got published after nine years by a small independent publisher called Galley Beggar Press, Norwich in 2013, "a company specifically set-up to act as a sponsor to writers who have struggled to either find or retain a publisher." (Ron Charles). The US edition of the book was published by another small independent publisher, Coffee House Press that appeared in September, 2014. McBride herself opines:

"About a third of the way in, I was discussing this book with my husband, who asked: "So is the author a genius or is she just very good?" "Well, she is definitely a genius," I said. "But I don't know how good she is, yet." (The guardian)

Well, Anne Enright confesses " Eimear McBride is that old fashioned thing, a genius..." (The Guardian). The book received accolades and soared to bag numerous prestigious awards like Goldsmith Prize (2013), Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize (2013), Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction (2014), for which she competed against several highly-lauded novels, including Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, and Donna Tartt's *The Goldfinch*, Kerry Group Irish Fiction Award (2014) and Desmond Elliott Prize.(2014) The book was also shortlisted for Folio Prize (2014).

The narrator of the story is a young woman whose anonymity is maintained throughout the novel. She is born in a family totally devoid of love, care, sympathy and bond. The atmosphere of the house is completely diseased- literally and metaphorically. At the very onset of the novel, the readers come to know that the narrator's father has abandoned the family, "He left her with a fifty pound note. [...] Where's daddy? Gone. Why's that? Just is." (McBride, 5). Her mother is a fanatical Roman Catholic who vacillates between begging the Virgin Mary for blessings on one hand and shrieking at her for being a slut on the other. Her uncle in law is a pervert. He indulges and abuses her sexually since she is just thirteen. The narrator finds no affection and attachment for anyone in the family including her mother; and thus totally alienates herself. The only person on earth she finds an affinity to is her elder brother who she refers to as 'you' in the novel. She is deeply attached to him, loves him dearly and gets responded equally at the same time. But to her misfortune, her brother is diagnosed with a brain tumour "It's all through his brain like the roots of trees." before her birth, when she was in her mother's womb, and had been operated.

For you. You'll soon. You'll give her name. In the stitches of her skin she'll wear your say. Mammy me? Yes you. Bounce the bed, I'd say. I'd say that's what you did. Then lay you down. Then cut you around. Wait and hour and day. (McBride, 1)

And the illness has befallen her older brother:

I know. The thing wrong. It's a. It is called. Nosebleeds, headaches. Where you can't hold. Fall mugs and dinner plates she says clear up. Ah young he says give the child a break. Fall off swings. Can't or. Grip well. Slipping in the muck. Bang your. Poor head wrapped up white and the blood come through. She feels the sick of that. Little boy head. Shush. (McBride, 1)

The narrator's seduction by her uncle, which may seem an odd one to describe what it is, the rape of a minor- seems important as it captures the unsettling description of the protagonist's sexual initiation. She finds this heinous act as a mode of solution to her otherwise traumatic existence. As we know that 'biological', 'cultural' and 'psychological' are the three necessary attributes to human sexuality, so it is for a human being, to what extent one manifests sexuality and sexual participation. The narrator's participation in the sex act with other men portrays her bruised psyche. Sexuality provides her with a therapeutic purgation rather than a social stigma. Thereby, she brings down the chaos in her mind. She concurrently loathes and desires her uncle. She is both ashamed and wallowed by sex. The act makes her weak as well as bold. Her mind gets liberated but her psyche is irreparably damaged. Eventually she intoxicates her life, maintains a lifelong affair with her uncle and almost distances herself from her brother.

The novel has rural Ireland to its setting and chronicles the life of a young girl marked with persistent domestic trauma. This picture of rural poverty, oppressive Catholicism, discontentment in the family along with stark element of incest is the very trope of modern Irish literature. Moreover the title itself is suggestive of

fragmented existence of a human being. The narrator undergoes extreme trauma and fear of immoral sexual practice at home sans love and affection even from her mother. She becomes the denizen of a claustrophobic domestic atmosphere with an ailing brother. Her persona could never metamorphose into a normal state. Though her needs and responses are primal and urgent, yet the whole scenario "... is merciless and unrelenting in its exposure of this adolescent's unmitigated interiority as she engages in increasingly violent and debased sexual acts." (Reynolds). The later part of the novel unfolds the bitter truth of the narrator's wilful involvement into sexual engagements with other men. They beat her up, but she accepts it as a weapon of liberation and a protest against her brother's disrespect by his schoolmates.

III

The narrator as a character demands deep sympathy but at times it gets complicated by her intensely self-destructive behaviour. She is hell-bent on suffering, rejects friendship, tenderness, comfort and laughter. But to the reader's relief, she does not reject love. But the problem lies in the fact that she is so rarely offered it. In the wake of her brother's illness, her parents have nothing in reserved for her. Her deep sense of affection towards her brother is the only alleviative factor in this whole chapter of gritty and tempestuous domestic environment. Though she tries to flee away from home by taking admission in a distant college yet she cannot distance herself from her brother." I've missed you. Think about you all the time. Fill me over with. Stuff. In my ear. In my head. How's your brother?"(136). She constantly mourns his imminent death. To quote Freud, "Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person,..." (1984:251-252). She commutes every weekend to see him. Her love for her brother is genuine and unconditional and this is the only relationship she confides in. The effect of chemotherapy turns her brother almost to a vegetable, and she rears and nurses him with motherly gesture.

I held your head oh help me over it. Across the toilet kneeling stroke your head go on go on I thought of him. [...] I put you to bed after that. Rinse your mouth and spit. Tuck. Lie there. Getting your breath. Sorry. It's fine. There now there there. Calm. But. Again. Again. You. Can't be. Must not. Not again. What's left? You're falling off the bed...You are you are. So bad. Just retching retching on my hands my clothes skirt it come out more than I think I would believe. The much of it stench coming back out more and more. Sorry I'm sorry sorry you said. I say it's fine it's fine don't hurt yourself. Try not to. You can't. thinking oh my God what have I done? Not a little thing. Think of that. Not a thing. For the chemo's working so you must be sick. Good. It makes sense it makes sense of course it does. But. God oh god oh god oh god. You are you are. He is he is. Going to be fine. I wipe

your face off. I want. The sick off your face your hands. Change the bed
sheets empty that bowl. There now. Lie down. (McBride, 139)

It is this bond of love that saves the novel from becoming an intense tale of misery.

McBride employs the stream of consciousness technique to further stride down the dark alleys of the narrator's fragmented and damaged psyche. In first person narrative, the sentences are broken; sometimes violate the syntactical norm only to convey confusion and terror. This bizarre language displays McBride's purpose to propagate the scrambled strains of shame, the breathless trauma, and intoxicating chaos. The opacity and confusion of Interior monologue reminds us of Joycean technique of Bildungsroman in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*; but unlike Joyce, McBride's narrator never grows up. She is all the same at the age of five and eighteen. The tortured style, crippled phrases and handicapped sentences reflect eloquent rage and despair of a girl who undergoes traumatic experience of incest. Her garbled sentences capture the lacuna of intoxication. Her phrases, constantly glancing, retreating and returning, enact the experience of hearing and ignoring, staring at and looking away from the person you love the most dying.

And all your. Sudden body. Where's the. It. Comes for you. Come blistered
breath. You. Strain. I see. Your heart I see your chest is move is moving is
time to. You are. Struggle. Where the air in. Let the air come in it won't it
soughing out. Gushing like water. Where's the your face that eyes are open
wide. See the land and all, above mine. Your eyes are where are. They look.
When and a tinge purple on your cheeks choke the purple blue. Across your
mouth. Across your lips. I see your suffocated eye. Please don't go no. Not.
Go, I. Please don't leave. There's the. Air flying out. Eyes on me. They. You
are.SilentBreath.Lungs go out. See the world out.

You finish that breath. Song breath.

You are gone out tide. And you close. Drift. Silent eyes.

Goodbye.

My. Iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii. Love my. Brother no.

Silent.

He's gone. He's gone. Goodbye.

No. Oh please. My

Done. And. Quiet.

And

Gone. (McBride, 188)

These jumbled words explicate the intensity of this horrifying moment.

IV

Mcbride's unusual novel has already stormed the literary market with an élan. The unforgettable content necessarily caters to Dickensian eccentricity of characters, the impressionistic voice of the narrator, Joycean and Faulknerean style of language and the interplay of trauma and chaos in this whole godforsaken world creates a stir in the hearts of the readers. Within the debris of oppressed Catholicism, a perennially ranting, discombobulated, catholic mother, who knows no expression of motherhood except for some bootless prayers which are never answered. She circumvents her daughter for not praying for her brother. "She said you should go to mass. Pray for...You take away the sins of the world. Have mercy on us..."(180). Though the mother throws herself and her family to the clemency of the almighty, yet God never lays his merciful hands on them. The familial milieu dooms down to darkness forever. Yet to the extent of a little reservation, the narrator's endurance to the whole situation and taking pride in it seems a bit weird and does not conform to the exact or sufficient reward for completing the novel. But to this Mcbride answers to David Collard stating:

Whether or not the reader finds redemption in *GIRL* depends on what they understand by redemption. For him it seemed to mean a happy or at least hopeful resolution, which the reader will certainly not find. As the novel itself states, 'There is no God here', so redemption in any Christian sense is automatically precluded. For me, though, redemption is about transcendence, of the past, of the situation and of the self, consciously achieved through the will of the individual, all of which does occur by the end, in my opinion. And while I am not as good an atheist as I would like to be, this idea is significant to me. In the year after my brother died I remember reading all of George Eliot and finding a great deal of comfort in her ideas about the individual's capacity for transformation. Now the reader may not find that the girl has become – and I shudder to say it – 'a better person' by the end of the book but she has, undeniably, become herself. (The white Review)

But, despite all our reservations and objections, Eimear Mcbride has been successful in drawing the readers' sympathy for her debut work. She has found an answer for her narrator and whatever it may be, her narrator strives to remain a happy prisoner of her own world of pandemonium.

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National Conference Cum Workshop on Recent Trends in Technical Language & Communication: Emerging Requirements

Rajkiya Engineering College, Chandpur, Bijnor
21st-22nd April 2017, www.conferenceworld.in

(NCCW-17)

ISBN: 978-93-86171-41-2

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