



Research Paper

Trauma To Redemption: Transgenerational Trauma And Healing In Thane Rosenbaum's *Second Hand Smoke*

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ABSTRACT: The paper attempts to study the text *Second Hand Smoke* by Thane Rosenbaum based on the theories of trauma. The theories and studies of Freud, Cathy Caruth and other theorists form the base for the study. The protagonist of the text Duncan is a child of Holocaust survivors and therefore this pushes him into the traumatic real. Traumatized state disintegrates his life and later he is able to find the path of redemption. The theories of trauma help in deconstructing the narratives, thereby providing an in-depth study of the scenario.

KEYWORDS: Trauma theory, Transgenerational trauma, Holocaust, Second generation trauma.

“The worst prisons are ones without bars” (*Second Hand Smoke* 263)

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I. INTRODUCTION

Thane Rosenbaum, a second-generation Jewish-American writer who discussed the life of the offspring of the Jews who had experienced the *Shoah* (the slaughter of the Jewish people under the Nazi regime). The memory and madness of the first generation survivors did not die with the end of the demolition of the Nazi death camps. People who survived travelled across borders taking along with them the traumas of the past. It is this pain and suffering that they communicate to their offspring. The problems faced by the second generation are that they never have a first-hand experience of the tortures of the *Shoah*, but even then they face the after-effects, unable to find an absolute solution for this. “Offspring of survivors bear second-generation witness to the psycho-social dynamics of inheriting traumatic memory. This memory is doubly paradoxical; it is not the memory of one’s own experience, yet it provides images and metaphors that shape second-generation identity. It is as if the legacy were almost genetically encoded” (Berger 6).

Rosenbaum, born in Washington in 1960, practised law for several years until he switched to writing and educating others about the Holocaust and its effects. His literary writings also stick to the same theme. In his work *Second Hand Smoke* (1999), Rosenbaum speaks of the transmission of trauma that traverses across generations. The transmission of trauma from one generation to another has always been a subject of concern for the theorists dealing with the matter of trauma studies and it is this literary enactment that Rosenbaum engages in through his work. James Herzog, a theorist, has mentioned “One is unconscious transmission, through the genes, which now hold the traumatized material. The other is indirect transmission through other means” (Yudkin 172). Rosenbaum always felt the need to address the significance of *Shoah* carried across generations. In his work *Elijah Visible* (1996), it is the transmission of trauma through genes, that is mentioned by the protagonist. “The survivor in me was passed on through the genes. Who knows how many generations will it take to cancel this virus from our blood?” (63). Whereas such a hereditary transmission of trauma is not identifiable in his work *Second Hand Smoke*.

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, laid down the theories for trauma studies. For Freud, trauma or hysteria, as he called it, was “a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective ‘shield against stimuli’” (Strachey 25). Though his teachings were purely based on clinical methods, his writings, findings and theories became the foundation for the emergence of trauma studies and its association with literature. Theorists like Cathy Caruth, Shoshanna Felmann, Dominick LaCapra traced the similarity shared between trauma and literature and considered it a fertile ground for further development. LaCapra states, “One might argue that narratives in fiction may also involve truth claims on a structural or general level by providing insight into phenomenon such as slavery or the Holocaust, by offering reading of a process or period, or by giving at least —plausible feel for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive at through restrictive

documentary methods” (*Writing History, Writing Trauma* 13). Thus literature and literary creations were considered an excellent source to study the traumatic presence.

This paper will examine the significance of external stimuli in the transmission of trauma by quoting instances from Thane Rosenbaum’s novel *Second Hand Smoke*. In this text, the mother character plays a key role in instigating the traumatic effects on her child Duncan. But her first child, Isaac can redeem from the sufferings of the past as he was left behind by his mother. The mother, Mila, is wounded by the past memories of the camps and therefore carries the *shoah* throughout her lifetime. It is this pain and suffering that pressurises her to leave her son Isaac in Poland and move to America. The paper will focus on the characters of Duncan and Isaac and how these characters have accepted or moved away from the traumatic real.

II. MILA KATZ- THE JEWISH MOTHER

Though Mila Katz lived in America, her memories were still from times spent at Auschwitz. She was fifteen when she was taken to the camps, along with her family. It was either the gas chambers or starvation that ended their lives. Thus she was left alone. She had a strong urge to stay alive and therefore she was persistent to pass through all the tests in the camps. “She made the right allies in the camps, avoided the harshes work detail, got hold of essential provisions, made her cheeks appear more robust with contraband rouge, enabling her to pass through selections and live another day” (*Second Hand Smoke* 148). After she left the camps, she spent most of her time in Polish night clubs. It is during this time that she met Keller Borowski, a jeweller in Poland. Later she left him and their child. “Mila had a son, in Warsaw, right after the war, and she left the baby behind. She went to Germany. There she met Herschel, before he became Yankee. They got married and they came here” (*Second Hand Smoke* 133).

Migrating to Miami, Mila and Yankee had hoped to leave the memories of torture behind, but they kept haunting them through repeated dreams and nightmares. Mila always said, “You never leave the camp. I survived, but I am still there” (*Second Hand Smoke* 151). This is what trauma theorists define as trauma. The experiences of the past that break through the protective layer of the mind and ruptures the psyche re-enacts itself through repeated nightmares and dreams. Cathy Caruth, a theorist of trauma, “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 11).

Mila’s parenting skills had gone wrong when she failed to love her second son Duncan. She feared the world where the Nazis existed and this fear made her the iron lady. This made her want a secure life for her son as well. In the process of creating a strong human being, she lost her son somewhere in this journey. Mila always tried to control Duncan; the games he played, the classes he attended- all were decided by his mother. Mila even wanted him to learn karate, so that even if he had to resort to violence, Duncan must never lose. “The painted history of Jewish suffering and exile had been answered with just one accidental, regrettable birth. A reluctant savior had been born to two Holocaust survivors in south Florida. Mila’s investment in this project was not merely familial” (*Second Hand Smoke* 36-37). She never loved the child as she feared her affections could weaken him. Her quest for perfection even made her take harsh decisions for her son. She would leave her son on street corners where the thugs assembled. This is how she tested her son’s strength. Duncan would return wounded but she never cared. According to her, he must be the last man standing.

If she wasn’t about to love her son, then no one else should either, nor could he ever learn to love himself. His experiences had taught her not to rely on the kindness or good will of others. The chance of deceit was always too great. Groups were bad- the propaganda of mobs and Marxists. Safety in numbers was an illusion. Just ask the crowded gassed and burned ones who never survived the camps. Or those tens of thousands who fell into the grave pits of BabiYar, all piled on top of one another. Mobs cause riots and programs; they break glass and burn books. They lose their individual selves inside the savage logic of rising sounds and stomping feet, swept away by simple seduction of madman’s thinking. (*Second Hand Smoke* 37)

Mila and her actions made him hate her as well as the Nazis. Mila’s purpose was achieved. She had created the Frankenstein of destruction.

III. DUNCAN KATZ- THE CHILD OF TRAUMA

Duncan was born to Mila and Yankee when they had come to Miami. For Duncan, the experiences of Auschwitz was never first-hand. The child of survivors was a burden that he had to carry throughout his young age. If even for once he moved away from it, his mother ensured that he remains engulfed in their trauma. In the prologue, Rosenbaum mentions,

Duncan had not been a witness to the Holocaust, only to its aftermath. His testimony was merely secondhand. Yet the staggering reality of the cattle cars, the gas chambers, and the crematoria did not feel remote to him, either, even though a half century of years and an ocean of water separated him from the actual crime. But crimes don’t just end with the immediate injuries. The mind, alas, does not allow for that. And this

was a special crime. The dreams of his parents- actually, their nightmares- kept it all alive. (*Second Hand Smoke* 1-2)

The stimuli that lead to the wreckage of Duncan's psyche is the dreams and nightmares experienced by his parents. Duncan never received any love or affection from his mother. She always wanted him to fight and be a saviour for the people who still live in the history of subjugation. Therefore he hated the times he spent with his mother in Miami. The street fights she wanted him to engage in, the martial art lessons she forced him to take and the secret life they had live, all affected Duncan's childhood; "Capeless and without a cowl, or even a phone booth, Duncan knew that what his mother really wanted was not a son, but a comic book superhero" (*Second Hand Smoke* 32). He awaited an opportunity to leave his house and went away for higher education and only returned for Mila's funeral. For her funeral, people who worshipped and admired her had gathered. They all shared a common dislike towards Duncan for having left their "sole survivor" alone in Miami. Duncan didn't hesitate to speak his mind at the funeral,

"So she's dead. And you all feel loss, but let me tell you something: I feel freedom. I am newly liberated. For me, today is not about mourning, but about celebration. No sitting *shivah*- at least not by me. I don't want to remember her; all I want is a fresh start."

A collective hush overtook the room.

"Shame!" someone yelled from the right side of the sanctuary.

But Duncan continued. "I am what I am because of my mother. And let me tell you something: I don't like myself very much. I'm her creation. A creature. A machine. In those days they didn't call anything child abuse but Mila gave the term a new meaning". (*Second Hand Smoke* 55)

Though Duncan thought that Mila's death will bring a fresh start in his life, he was wrong; the demon was already unleashed. He had worked with the Office of Special Investigations but later lost his job because of the extreme Nazi hatred he exhibited. Even his family life was chaotic. His life wanted to help him and expected to resolve this traumatic situation after the birth of their daughter, but nothing changed. She had once told him,

It's like a vacuum. It sucks up Nazi war criminals, but it doesn't stop there. It saves some of its best work for the people who love you the most. It's an eating machine with an enormous appetite. Only you can turn it off, but you don't have any idea where the switch is. What's more, I don't think you want it to shut down. That's what really scares me: I think you like what it has done to you. And it's not finished yet; it never will be. Believe me, this is what's going to kill you, nothing else. And nobody will be able to figure out the actual cause of death. (*Second Hand Smoke* 84)

Duncan lived with the sole purpose of annihilating the Nazis who were responsible for the torturous childhood he had experienced. He always blamed the camps for his mother's actions.

Cathy Caruth had mentioned that trauma has the capability to traverse across generations and certain historical events leave behind their marks traumatizing a whole community in the coming generations as well; "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (Caruth 24). In the case of Duncan, his mother's memories and nightmares were targeted towards him and this became the external stimuli for his traumas.

ISAAC – THE CHILD LEFT BEHIND

Isaac, Duncan's half-brother, was left behind in Poland when he was an infant. Mila could not cope up with the harsh life in Poland and therefore decided to leave the child. But before leaving she made sure to leave behind a parting gift with the child. Keller Borowski (Isaac's father) was a tattoo artist. Mila stole Keller's rotary machine and used it on the child;

The digits came slowly. Even though Isaac was by now totally drunk, no amount of anesthesia could freeze his pudgy, baby-soft forearm from the siting of Mila's brand. The needles jettied back and forth like pistons, digging inside his skin, releasing the blue ink below the surface, seeping through like blood. He wailed with his mouth wide open and his eyes clenched tightly, the little tears collecting on his cheeks. Mila kept her own wrist steady, even while the rest of her shook like a rattle. (*Second Hand Smoke* 239)

The digits "101682" were now shared by both Mila and Isaac. Duncan had travelled to Poland to find his brother. He recognised the numbers engraved on Isaac as he had seen them on Mila. "He finally understood. There had been child abuse on two continents. Permanent scarring. With Duncan it had been rammed down his throat; with Isaac, it had been sandblasted onto his arm" (*Second Hand Smoke* 244). Even though Isaac was scared physically, it never left a traumatic memory in him. He works as a caretaker at the Warsaw Jewish cemetery. Though he lives close to a traumatic environment that constantly reminds him of the forgotten history, he is never affected by it. Unlike Duncan, he is able to find peace even in this such scenario, "he was an expert in breathing through the pain, and through the surroundings and the silence of all the slaughtered and absent voices" (*Second Hand Smoke* 200).

Isaac had suffered in similar ways to that of Duncan. He had lost his father at a young age and his mother had left him when he was an infant. But he chose not to suffer like Duncan. He took the path of yoga and

spirituality and even taught the same path to the children like him. He wanted these children to also feel liberated and not trapped in the Jewish past. There was no Mila in Isaac's life and that was the advantage he had. He was never pushed to suffer like Duncan and therefore he healed rapidly;

"I'm not going to lash out and fight back. I could do that. I have reasons to, just like you- actually, I have more reasons than you. But if I do that, I will expending all my life energy for nothing other than fight back and cry out, and it will go into the void like everything else. But instead, I will surrender my rage and anger, and let it open up into a higher energy, something more deeply spiritual and life-affirming." (*Second Hand Smoke* 213-214) Though Isaac could have developed the same extend of traumatic impact as that of Duncan, he never let the past guide him to annihilation. He is free from the past because of the spiritual awakening. Isaac points out to Duncan that though he is surrounded by the past memories, he never feels them to control him and that is his enlightenment: "Yes, I work at a cemetery, but I want to reach up out of the grave. I can feel the ghosts around me every day, but they don't call out my name; they don't wish me the same fate. I am not in exile, and I won't live in darkness" (*Second Hand Smoke* 214). He is completely redeemed of the past.

IV. CONCLUSION

The theories of trauma have always emphasised the requirement for external stimuli to ensure a breach in the psyche. This breach further intensifies the original event thereby repeating the event in memories and dreams. The repetition of the torturing events is what leads to trauma; "Stimuli can be either internally induced or externally inflicted, such as with a natural disaster or man-made traumatic events such as torture, war, rape, domestic violence, and so on"(Alayarian 61). In Rosenbaum's novel *Second Hand Smoke*, the protagonist is the second-generation recipient of trauma. His parents who had survived the Nazi camps never escaped from the past and their sufferings found their way into Duncan's life. "He was haunted by the memories that had travelled with him the entire time he had been away. The ghosts of a robbed childhood. The clock that sprinted without regard to actual time. Duncan had skipped many steps from birth to manhood, his family life having much in common with basic training during time of war" (*Second Hand Smoke* 19). The stimuli for Duncan were the unhealed wounds of his parents and the actions of his mother.

Isaac, the first child of Mila, kept searching for his mother and hoped that she will return one day. With the death of his father, he lost hope. He felt dejected in the life he was living. But he chose a different path. When Duncan meets Isaac, he is also influenced by the life Isaac lives. He wishes to change but the past is too strong for him to let go. But finally, Isaac is able to break through and bring peace to Duncan's life.

"Why don't you have this problem?" Duncan asked. "How were you spared?"

You've been branded, and yet you're fine."

"Yes, branded, but I can touch these numbers on my arm. I am not afraid of them. You have no numbers, and yet they terrify you. You are hiding from yourself. You are a stranger to yourself." (*Second Hand Smoke* 262)

Thane Rosenbaum's work *Second Hand Smoke* provides one with the true representation of second-generation trauma and how trauma is transferred across generations. Though the protagonist suffers from the past memories that are not his own, he is able to find redemption because of the character Isaac. Thus a hope of redemption is ensured for a person whose life is twisted with rage and sufferings.

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