

“The Collector of Treasure”: Exploring Selective Violence of Gandhi as a Narrative of Trauma

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Abstract: This paper would focus on problematizing Dikeledi's climactic violent action of Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasure* into a discursive framework merging Gandhian philosophy of non-violence with feminist and trauma theoretical paradigm. It would posit her act within the ethical dialectic between non-violence and necessary resistance interrogating the extent to which violence becomes an instrument of moral agency. Though Gandhi upholds the philosophy of non-violence still there are some specified circumstances where he posited violent means for women as a necessitated step than cowardice subjugation to oppression as a means to reclaiming selfhood when passive suffering is rendered ineffectual. This paper problematizes Dikeledi's action not merely as a retributive violence but as an articulation against the normalized invisible suffering of the patriarchal structure as both a refusal of domination and a testimony of self-assertion. Gerasago Mokopi's returning shows re-establishing his assertion of ownership showcasing the systematic oppression which precipitates Dikeledi into the ultimate crime challenging the notion of “grievability” of Judith Butler through reclaiming agency, exposing moral hypocrisy and by turning the violent act as a testimony of her perpetual suffering. This paper would take Cathy Caruth's concept of unassimilated trauma and Dori Laub's idea of “testimony” to contextualize the “acting out” of her unassimilated trauma. It would also highlight post-independent socio-political Africa to examine the socio-political landscape of post-independent Africa projecting colonial and patriarchal residues coalesce to perpetuate gendered violence. The prison space works as what Homi Bhabha terms as a “third space” - a liminal zone where women collectively “work through” trauma by reclaiming their agencies into cultural practices

Keywords: Gandhian violence, systematic oppression, unassimilated trauma, gendered violence

1. Introduction

Simon de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* states “one is not born a woman rather becomes one” (De Beauvoir, 39). And this “becoming” can be in both ways – one can become submissive and also one can learn to keep their autonomy, reclaiming the agency from the oppressive system which tends to maintain the gender status quo through controlling, gaslighting and manipulating women simply to perpetuate the hegemonic power structure. If feminist literature can be discerned acutely, it is about the pertinent journey of the women and their continuous endeavor of undertaking their agency back and mostly these feminist literatures conclude with the consequences of death imprisonment or madness of the women as the result of breaching the power dynamics established by the patriarchal society. But notwithstanding the efforts they garner in the face of adversities, overshadows the patriarchal societal monopoly. And Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasures* is no exception. Though her way of retaining the agency by her conscious decision not submitting herself to the lived prolonged domestic trauma is vented out through her violent action. The researcher would try to problematize Dikeledi's actions: Can Dikeledi's violence be called as a necessitated stand of Gandhian specificities of violence? Can her action be seen as a reaction to the systematic roots of oppression? To reclaim her agency was the violent action of Dikeledi the last resort to let her voice be heard as the only available form of self-assertion? Can the subaltern really “speak,” (Spivak) or even if they do, does the society hear it? Was the action not only of Dikeledi but also of the community of women in *The Collector of Treasure* the only means to avoid the overwhelming oppression of the inescapable system? Moreover, this research would shed light on a deeper examination of the structural forces that actually

led these women to take these actions rather than judging them on the morality of it alone!

2. Methodology

The methodology of this article is based on the qualitative interpretative analysis of the text, it would also include a historical apartheid reading. The framework consists of Gandhian specificities of selective violence in regard to women facing oppression, Dominick LaCapra's ideas of “acting out” and “working through” as well as the key aspects of the trauma theory and its association with Derridean “hauntology”. The method is as follows: the text manifesting the spectres of the past traumas of the Botswanan women; reclaiming the agency underlying the unassimilated trauma and the hauntology and lastly how the women “work through” their trauma engaging themselves in cultural practices, developing a sense of belongingness through their shared pain.

3. Discussion

Bessie Head's *The Collector of Treasure* is set in an independent Botswanan rural village marked by African postcolonial struggles negotiating between traditional patriarchal practices and the psychic shadow of the South African Apartheid background of male trauma, oppression and marginalization causing the brutal treatment of women. The protagonist Dikeledi Makopi lives in a state of economic and emotional abandonment at the hands of her husband Garesego, a representative of colonial and Apartheid legacy of public powerlessness under white domination and unleashing those upon the women by normalizing neglect, sexual assault and abandonment. This paper situates Dikeledi's murder of Garesego within Gandhian philosophy of violence and

nonviolence in regard to women facing extreme situations of perpetual oppression complicating the violent act as an ethical discourse around trauma, memory and justice. This study also associates Dominick LaCapra's trauma theory, the concepts of "acting out" and "working through" by pointing at how Dikeledi's violent action functions both as a compulsive response to the impending domestic trauma and the conscious act of reclaiming agency. The argument this paper encapsulates here is Dikeledi's act of killing her husband as a form of selective violence under extreme condition of systematic oppression, not as a rejection of non-violence, rather as an assertion of agency and thereafter participating in healing through cultural practices in jail.

Gandhian specificities on selective violence for women:

Though he is an upholder of the principles of nonviolence as the most pertinent means of social and political change, very significantly he made some nuanced statements on women's use of violence and non-violence against oppression based on its nature. Gandhi emphasized oppression should be resisted through non-violent means, and he believed that women naturally are more nonviolent than men. However, he also suggested that women, when faced with extreme situations, are not bound by the principles of violence or non-violence. He stated, "If a woman is assaulted, she may not stop to think in terms of *himsa* or *ahimsa*. Her primary duty is self-protection. She is at liberty to employ every method or means that come to her mind, in order to defend her honour. God has given her nails and teeth. She must use them with all her strength, if need be, die in the effort" ("Crime against Women | Mind of Mahatma Gandhi | Philosophy"). Even though he considers nonviolence as a higher form of courage but sees violent resistance as better than mere subjugation. He addresses women should not endure tyranny and oppression and if violated, they have every right to resist rather than resorting to violence. He states, 'I want women to learn the primary right of resistance [even to her husband]. She thinks now that she has not got it'. He seems to say that in the immediacy of a personal attack it is better for women to violently defend themselves than to acquiesce" (Du Toit). Gandhiji in his discussions on non-violence emphatically stressed, "I do believe that where there is only a choice between cowardice and violence, I would advise violence" ("The Sacred Warrior | Articles on and by Mahatma Gandhi"). This paper would acknowledge and analyze this argument with Dikeledi's action by pointing out it not a mere gratuitous violence but a compelling assertion of her dignity against the systematic violence of the post-independent African society. Dikeledi's life is marked by Garesego's cruelty; his abandonment, neglect of his children, treating women as disposable which eventually prompted Dikeledi becoming a self-reliant woman but Garesego's returning re-establishes his dominance and sexual assaults anticipating a future of her subjugation at his commands. Therefore, her violent act is framed not as driven by utter rage but as a deliberate action compelled to resist the tyranny by castrating the phallus which is symbolic of unmasking the root of male authority. Sigmund Freud in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* elaborates castration as a psychosexual fear from the father's threat to renounce the desire of the mother and consequently internalizing the authority of the father and framing the superego. Jacques Lacan reformulated Freud's castration theory by associating it with language, desire and

as the symbolic order (Lacan) marking the phallus as the signifier of power and the castration implies the powerlessness for men. Her castration transforms the male organ that symbolizes dominance and power becomes the site of defeat; she defies the patriarchal order and through castration she seizes the power as a site of justice and reclaiming her agency back.

Dikeledi and other prison inmates who committed the same crime show moral courage. Even when she endured perpetual abuse, she prioritized her children's well-being, maintaining her dignity and agency: "I am the woman whose thatch does not leak. Whenever my friends wanted to thatch their huts, I was there. They would never do it without me... My husband left me after four years of marriage but I managed well enough to feed those mouths. If people did not pay me in money for my work, they paid me with gifts of food" (page number- 32) Dikeledi projects a life of transparency and integrity, embodying Gandhian principles, her ethical living gains her respect and a reputation in society. One of Gandhiji's aspects of passive resistance is community welfare, and Dikeledi portrays this by becoming a nurturing figure, providing support and wisdom to other women. Even when Garesego Mokopi leaves Dikeledi and the children to fend for themselves while he indulges in promiscuity, Dikeledi could not seek help from the law as well as other women for example when Kebonye's husband impregnated a schoolgirl, the parents of the girl complain to Kebonye and, significantly, not to the administration. These women and other inmates who committed similar castration as stated have to resort to these consequence implying to a social administrative setup where the authority does not protect women. Thereby transforming the connotations of "violence" emphatically. The reasons and contexts of these heinous acts are more important than the actions themselves. The colonial period intensified gender dynamics in African society, and the newly empowered men unleashed their oppression on women. The new societal setup reinforced the power dominance at the expense of women. Postcolonial African society intensified violence due to continuous civil wars, militarization, and political conflicts, which perpetuated domestic violence all the more. At the beginning of the story, Dikeledi showed extreme resilience in her non-violent resistance by maintaining moral righteousness and refusing to engage in vindictiveness by not protesting outrightly and being contented with her children hoping Garesego would be changing positively. This attitude of Dikeledi shows Gandhian non-violent resistance to oppression. But as the story unfolds, Garesego remains unchanged, forcing the old sexual violence on Dikeledi. Dikeledi's final recourse to violence also aligns with Gandhian insistence on truth as a tool for social justice. Therefore, this text projects extreme circumstances where Gandhi suggested violence could be justified, as being passive here implies submission to abusive power. This action reflects her response to years of trauma, as she finally refuses to devalue herself as a human being any longer. She wants to break the cycle of oppression and regain her autonomy, even in jail. This story can be seen as a quest for emancipation from a system of plight, and the necessity arose to break the law to achieve that. Gandhian principles also involve accepting the consequences of one's actions with dignity and moral courage. Here, Dikeledi's decision to take action, confessing to it, and feeling no remorse proves to be a rebellion in itself.

When the law proves unjust in safeguarding human dignity, breaking the law for self-defense becomes more justified to her.

Trauma: “Acting Out” and “Working Through”

Dominick LaCapra views traumatic events heavily charged with emotions as transference: “acting out” and “working through”. “Acting out” includes compulsive repetitions, very often victims of trauma relive the past traumatic occurrences intruding on their present existence. Acting out seems inevitable and tends to take place in an unchecked manner. LaCapra describes “working through” as the countervailing force in a more ethical and political directions, a process where the victim tries to have distance from a problem and distinguishes between past, present and future, i.e. Via this “working through” the subject acquires the possibilities of being an ethical and political agent. It does not mean avoidance or simply forgetting the past, rather it means coming to terms with trauma engaging in a process of acting out the past. The abandonment Dikeledi faces and her prolonged neglect, humiliation and deprivation accumulates her trauma, her castration is an outcome of the violence she endured throughout. Her trauma resurfaces in violent repetitions which is compulsive, therefore her action is an acting out of the accumulated trauma amplifying her past injury. Cathy Caruth describes trauma as “a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (p. 4). Caruth (1996) asserts that the truth of trauma has a “delayed appearance” and a “belated address” that “cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language” (Caruth, 1996, p.4). Her notion of trauma remains relevant today and is particularly apt in describing the spectral lineaments of trauma in Bond’s works. This distillation of the notion of trauma remains pertinent in Dikeledi’s context and her encounter with the spectre of the past trauma becomes a catalyst in the reconciliation of the present. LaCapra views past is not simply a history as over rather it possesses the self experientially which needs to be worked through with a conscious control and a critical perspective to enable survival (LaCapra, p-56). LaCapra asserts trauma causing disorientation and disempowerment fixating on a traumatic past event through flashbacks, startled reactions or any kind of intrusive behavior, attaching hauntological component to trauma (LaCapra, 45). And he emphasizes on the act of working through as a futuristic vision keeping a safe distance from the past experiences and recontextualizing the life through reengagement (p-45).

Jacques Derrida in his *Spectre of Marx* (1993) conceptualized “hauntology” to theorize memory, subjectivity and temporality, he defines spectres having an ambivalent and hauntological presence and it resists assimilation into a fixed epistemological presence rather it persists on the absence (p-5). Therefore it foregrounds how the ghostly is assimilated to the present with its association with traumas and suppressed histories. Colin Davis in his *Hauntology, spectres and phantoms* contends hauntology’s privileging force on dismantling ontological stable self which is inhabited by the past underlying the fact that literature manifests the silences of the characters and narratives of the unspoken self/histories (p-373). Therefore this hauntological approach uncovers the temporal and ontological aporias, it questions

the unsaid bringing an ethical responsibility from the part of the readers to deconstruct a text beyond its superficiality. Here Dikeledi’s murder is not only a personal act of vengeance rather this emerges as an attempt to confront the spectrality of patriarchal violence. In Dikeledi’s life the spectres of male dominance operates through her uncle and then her husband leaving her to the haunting poverty and cultural stigma proving Derridean insistence on spectre as a paradoxically incorporated existence which is neither fully present nor entirely absent. Head writes Dikeledi’s deliberate violence suggests a confrontation what has long haunted her existence (Head, p-110). When Garesego Makopi returns, he shows an absolute indifference towards his children, his demeanour shows his claim upon Dikeledi only to disapprove her friendship with the Theobolos which was a determining factor for Dikeledi. The castration symbolizes the traumas of abandonment, exploitation and disrespect since childhood and when she finally learned to be an autonomous self, the return of Garesego dismantles her presence. Here Dikeledi’s murder is not only a personal act of vengeance rather this emerges as an attempt to confront the spectrality of patriarchal violence. In Dikeledi’s life the spectres of male dominance operates through her uncle and then her husband leaving her to the haunting poverty and cultural stigma proving Derridean insistence on spectre as a paradoxically incorporated existence which is neither fully present nor entirely absent.

Cultural Practices: Cultural studies emerged as the interdisciplinary field in the mid twentieth century as a site of power, daily practices and resistance. Raymond Williams democratized “culture” into everyday life (Williams). Victor Turner introduced the concepts of “liminality” and “communitas” to showcase how ritual practices transform participants with symbolic healing through reconfiguration (Victor Witter Turner). Aleida Assmann posits the role of memory to bridge the gap of past violence and future reconciliation (A. Assmann).

Therefore, this study would showcase how a society formulates its own meaning culturally; how culture acts as an effective tool of social transmission relying on legitimating performances within a shared system of meaning. In the prison the women shared their life stories which helped them process through their pain and a sense of belonging together by transforming memory into narratives along with their communal practices like weaving, crafting and knitting rebuilding solidarity among women by acknowledging the agonies of the outside world as Keybone said “we must help each other...This is a terrible world. There is only misery here.” (Head, p-91) Here the cultural practices serve as a resilient force through which the women reconnect in framing their renewed identity, community and meaning to their existence by building solidarity, trust and acknowledging each other rather than becoming a mere object of their husband’s desire. Through these cultural practices the externalize their traumas, they work through transforming suffering into strength; the prison becomes a microcosm of the collective healing, a cultural continuity where Dikeledi links herself with the community itself. All the women become testimonies themselves bearing the onslaught of their husbands.

4. Conclusion

This research article deals with the prolonged trauma of Dikeledi and her journey towards reconciliation by deploying the hauntological effects of the past trauma and showcasing how human psyche works through trauma. This article shows also the specific conditions where Gandhi necessitated violence than mere cowardice subjugation in regard to oppression. Head also emphasized the cultural practices as a reconciliatory process which can subside the intensity of trauma through communal belongingness, trust and acknowledging each other's existence. The limitation of this paper is that it shows a response to the enduring systematic trauma dikeledi went through rather than providing any solution to it. Still there are other areas that could be worked on - the intersectionality of gender and postcolonial Africa. Also additional research could be done on the failure of the legal system to protect African women in the broad global patterns of gendered violence.

Author's Declaration

I am Sathi Sarkar, want to certify that this is an original research work and I have not submitted it to any other journal for consideration. Thank you.

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