

## HIDE AND SEEK WITH PAST: FLASHBACK AS A TRAUMA SYMPTOM IN SAPPHIRE'S PUSH

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**Received: 19 Jan 2019**

**Accepted: 25 Jan 2019**

**Published: 30 Jan 2019**

### **ABSTRACT**

*The paper intends to study in detail, one of the major symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder found in the trauma victims, the intrusion of past into the present applying its major features to Sapphire's novel Push. The past is reenacted in the present giving the impression that the event is happening in the present itself. The traumatic moment is engraved in the memory, permanently in most cases, in the form of flashbacks during the conscious state of the victim and as horrible nightmares during their sleep. Here this intrusive nature of trauma into the present is focused.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Flashback, Intrusion, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Long after the danger is past, traumatized people relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present. They cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts. It is as if time stops at the moment of trauma (Judith Herman, Trauma and Recovery)

Flashback, one of the re-experiencing symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder often makes an appearance in the lives of trauma victims, especially when confronted with an act or event which serve as a trigger. Sometimes, people may not even identify this trigger and they will endlessly suffer failing to manage these unexpected occurrences. Flashbacks give the impression that the traumatic event is happening in the present, over and over again confusing the victim.

#### **Flashback is Defined As**

A type of memory that you experience as markedly different from those memories of the event that you can retrieve at will. The difference might be a marked sense of a reliving of the traumatic experience (s). Some report complete reliving, whereas others report more momentary or partial reliving of perhaps just one aspect of the original experience. For some, flashback memories take them by surprise or swamp their mind. Finally, some report a sense of time-distortion and, for example, react to the flashback memory as though it was an event that was happening in the present." (qtd. in Brewin 3)

In 1980 the term 'post-traumatic stress disorder' was first introduced into the DSM 111 in connection with the afflictions and hardships of soldiers who returned from war. It is reported that on returning home from the Vietnam War,

soldiers reported acute distress. The images of death and destruction haunted them in nightmares. In their waken state, apprehension, despair, and rage disturbed their peace. Then one of the identified symptoms was flashbacks i.e. intense traumatic recollection of things already happened and feeling its presence in the present. One of the major critics to study on the impact of trauma, Pierre Janet explained that the memories of traumatic experiences are distanced and kept apart from the normal consciousness, which leads to the commanding and unmanageable reliving of the events of the past in the present.

The psychological experience of an individual where he has an unexpected yet commanding re-experiencing of the events from past is known as involuntary repetitive memory or flashback. As Brewin explains that in the case of flashbacks, the experience is so intensely relived that, the traumatized person is rendered unable to comprehend fully it as a mere memory or not something that is happening in the present. Ball and Little define flashback as the “personal experiences that pop into your awareness, without any conscious, premeditated attempt to search and retrieve this memory” (1167). Conscious and unconscious memories are two separate entities functioning independently. The obscure and indescribable feature of these repetitive memories owes to the manner in which memories of some special events are stored in memory, the method or manner in which it is inscribed and also in the way the individual later remember the event.

Theorists approach the phenomenon of flashbacks in two ways- the special mechanism view and the basic mechanism view. Special mechanism view attributes these involuntary memories to traumatic events while the basic mechanism view holds that traumatic memories are recognizable by the same standards as all another day to day memories. Both streams agreed to the fact that involuntary recurrent memories ensue from exceptional and extraordinary events which draw out strong poignant reactions from the individual as it disrupts ordinary expectations. But according to the special mechanism’s concept, the event is not as such encoded into the memory but in fragmented form, which makes the conscious retrieval of the memory much more complicated and hard. At the same time, unintentional and unpremeditated memories were more frequent as the external factors could set off it. In contradiction, the basic mechanism view that traumatic event is encoded in the memory and any part of the event is available for later recall either voluntarily or involuntarily.

Memory researchers have identified two parts of memory affected by trauma i.e. the amygdale and the hippocampus. The amygdale dealing with emotional memory and controlling the fear-related memories encode the memories of past threats and menaces that the individual can recognize the returns of such risks in life. The hippocampus plays a much more serious role as it serves the role of historian to memory, recording all the details of the event. But the onset of traumatic event disrupts the functioning of both amygdale and hippocampus, the first one is over activated while the second one is censored. At the occurrence of a traumatic event, the memory becomes muddled and disorderly as the prior attention goes to the avoidance of immediate danger at the expense of building a consistent memory. Even after the event of trauma is passed, a negative emotional memory of the experience lingers, though the event is not recollected exactly. The victim may fail to remember the sequence of the traumatic affair vividly, but some stimulus may exist there to evoke the memories of danger like sights, smells, sounds etc. So once, the victim is faced with events that remind her of the traumatic event, her amygdale will act in response strongly, thus activating the fight or flight system of the victim. Due to the repression of the hippocampus at the time of trauma, the victim may fail to identify whether the event happened previously or not. Similarly, as the memory is retrieved separating it from its context, the victim may not understand it is the flashback but may feel that the experience is fresh.

Written in 1996, Sapphire's *Push* describes the sexual, physical and emotional trauma undergone by a little girl, Precious. The novel largely uses flashbacks to tell the story. The story is told through the viewpoint of Precious and as she is a sufferer of child abuse in its extreme, both by his father and mother that her memories come in fragmented form. Past and present is a mix up for her and she is driven back to her past even at the interference of minute stimuli into the present which reminds her of her past.

This interplay of memories is the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder in Precious. Precious tries to suppress the bitter memories from childhood by pursuing education passionately but now and then they make a belated entry into her normal memory. Her present life often reminds her of past and its trauma. Even at a simple instance, she recalls her abusive father. The fragmentary nature of her memories reminds of a jigsaw puzzle game.

She talks, of the brutal behavior of her mother during her first pregnancy, at the time of second pregnancy and she realizes that her memories are not ordered but comes in the disjointed and rambling form:

I'm twelve no I was twelve, when that shit happens. I'm sixteen now. For past couple of weeks or so, ever since white bitch Lichenstein kick me outta school shit, 1983 and 1987, twelve years old and sixteen years old, first baby and this one coming, all been getting mixed up in my head. Mama jus' hit me wif fryin' pan? Baby, brand new and wrapped in white blankets, or fat and dead-eyed lying in crib at my grandmother's house. Everything seems like clothes in washing machine at laundry mat- round' n round, up' n down. One minute Mama's foot smashing into the side of my head, next I'm jumping overdesk on Mrs. Lichenstein's ass.

But now, right now, I'm standing at the sink finishing the dishes. Mama sleeps on the couch. It's Friday, October sixteen, 1987. I got to get through Saturday and Sunday 'fore I get to Monday- the alternative ( 21- 22).

Trauma in her childhood robs Precious' sense of time. Every good and bad experience in her life is caught up in the same snare. The fleeting nature of her memories and dreams are visible throughout the novel. She thinks of her father but within seconds she starts speaking in her school. Her lack of attention and concentration is the byproduct of trauma, which makes her a butt of ridicule in her school:

Carl comes over fuck us'es. Go from room to room, slap me on my ass when he through, holler WHEEEE WHEEEE! Call me name Butter Ball Big Mama Two Ton of Fun. I hate hear him talk more than I hate fuck. Sometimes fuck feelgood. That confuses me, everything get swimming for me, floating like for days sometimes. I just sit in back classroom, somebody say something I shout on'em, hit 'em; rest of the time I mine my bizness. I was on my way to graduate from I.S 146 'n then fuckface Miz Lichenstein mess shit up. ( 35).

Secon' thas when the "I' mma joke" start. When I go sit down boyz make fart sounds wif they mouf like it's me fartin.' When I git up they snort hog grunt sounds. So I jus'stop getting up. What for? Thas when I start to pee on myself. I just sit there, it's like I paralyze or some shit. I don't move. I can't move (36).

She continues to think how her teacher got irritated at her and always made complaints against her to her principal, "teacher ack all care at first, then scream, then get principal. Principal call Mama and who else I don't remember. Finally principal says, let it be"but the very next moment she starts thinking on her father, "Seven, he on me almost every night. First, it's just in my mouth. Then it's more. He is intercourse me. Say I can take it. Look you don't even bleed, virgin girls bleed.

You, not a virgin. I'm seven" ( 39).

Precious occasionally fails to stand the burden of trauma alone and this affects her thinking process too. But once she starts overcoming trauma with the help of her teacher Ms. Rain and her other friends there, the attacks of flashbacks become less frequent.

As Judith Herman puts it reliving trauma might have given the victim a mastery over the event. But the victims will not accept the opportunity wholeheartedly. Instead, they fear the attack of the flashbacks because even the reliving of the traumatic event in the form of dreams carries the emotional intensity of the original event with it.

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