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**WHEN TRAUMA WRITES: A READING OF
 TERESE MARIE MAILHOT'S *HEART BERRIES***

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Abstract:

The Native Indian situation has always attracted the attention of theorists and literary aspirants, especially with the emergence of immense indigenous literature. All the available works narrate the unique life of the Indians, thereby, marking them as the marginalized. Their traumas are often misunderstood as visions or hallucinations and are more often regarded as the act of phantoms by their culture. The reason and result of their traumas are never understood and solutions are never put forth. They live and die with them. Terese Marie Mailhot's Memoir stands apart from other works from indigenous writers not only in its style and language but also by being a narrative that explores the intergenerational trauma, the collective trauma that eclipses the life of Indians by mirroring her own life, tormented by various behavioral disorders. Mailhot, a victim of intergenerational trauma, has experienced severe emotional breakdown and this led to the birth of her Memoir, Heart Berries. This paper tries to explore how Heart Berries represent the intergenerational trauma and how Mailhot becomes the representative of a community that lives in obscurity. It is also an attempt to identify how the varied structure, style and language of the narrative make the work unique and contribute to the better understanding of the collective trauma and how therapy and writing could complement each other and give birth to unique art forms. These explorations would prove how Mailhot's work would open up new vistas in trauma studies.

Keywords: *Collective trauma, intergenerational trauma, Heart Berries, trauma studies.*

That's when my nightmares came. A spinning wheel, a white porcelain tooth, a snarling mouth, and lightning haunted me. My mother told me they were visions (Mailhot 4).

Visions, possessions, hallucinations, ghosts and spirits often accommodated various narratives and thereby triggered discussions and psychological definitions in the historical as well as contemporary literary circles. Pondering deep into these concepts the psychoanalytical way opens up new arenas which take us away from exorcisms and healing procedures; which usually appear as solutions to ghosts and spirits and leave us questioning their existence. Recalling the Freudian concepts in this area, which further contributed to studies on such supernatural elements, questions their very existence but contributes to the emergence of new theories in the area of trauma studies. The research on human trauma can often be linked to Freudian understandings of metapsychology as it helps us in understanding the post-traumatic stress disorder and intergenerational trauma and thereby helps us widen the scope to understanding the conditions of those who belong to the First Nations. The present paper is not an attempt to understand the truth of spirits or ghosts but is an investigation into the latent trauma which often contributes to post traumatic stress disorder and other stress disorders that First Nation inhabitants experience but are often misunderstood as possessions. The paper looks at how such trauma that transmits over generations contributes to the construction of art in a varied form, basing the research on Terese Marie Mailhot's *Heart Berries*.

Exploring the trauma in *Heart Berries* is a huge challenge as Mailhot, in this Memoir tries to define her Indian identity through the narration of her traumatic experiences and thus distinguishes herself from

her predecessors who “seemed to do the work of looking at being Indigenous so we could look through it” (Mailhot 126). Thus Mailhot's Memoir stands apart from other indigenous writers in its theme and content. It is a coming of age writing which deeply explores the tiniest grains of traumatic experiences that has been transmitted to her over generations and then recollects them from the depth of her memories in bits and pieces, giving life to a new form of art. *Heart Berries* is unique in its experiments with the language and structure uncovering herself to “feel freer” (Mailhot 126).

Mailhot was brought up on the Seabird Island Indian Reservation in British Columbia and her earliest memories belong to the time she spent with her grandmother. Her grandmother is a representative of the atrocious residential school system of Canada, where children of Indian origin were separated from their families and were often physically and sexually abused or even killed by the nuns who ran such schools. She writes, “...residential school where parasites and nuns and priests contaminated generations of our people. Indians froze trying to run away, and many starved. Nuns and priests ran out of places to put bones, so they built us into the walls of new boarding schools” (7). If not for residential schools, children were sent to foster care, where they either survived or ran away to find a better life. Mailhot's life was also invaded by poverty, abuse and addiction. Her days were filled with poverty though she lived in a house that overlooked forty acres of corn and this contributed to her eating disorder in later years. She lived with her mother, who was a social worker, an alcoholic and a healer, but a person who was often made cynical by an abusive and alcoholic husband. Mailhot was taken into foster care when she was 17 years old to escape the hunger and abuse but was soon let out as she crossed the age. To find a safe home she got married at 19 and soon divorced after mothering two children. The first, whom she gave birth at the age of 20, was sent under her husband's custody while she was pregnant with her second child. Mailhot's relation with Casey, a writer cum her teacher, was troublesome but she could never overcome her affection for him and he is often presented as beloved and often a tormentor. All these phantoms from her past and present resulted in her traumas and behavioral disorders. She was diagnosed with Post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder and eating disorder and ended her up at a Mental Health centre from where she started writing *Heart Berries* as a part of the treatment.

In the article “Notes on Phantom: A Complement to Freud's Metapsychology”, Nicholas Abraham writes,

It is a fact that “phantom”, whatever its form, is nothing but an invention of the living. Yes, an invention in the sense that the phantom is meant to objectify, even if under the guise of individual or collective hallucinations, the gap that the concealment of some part of a loved one's life produced in us. The phantom is therefore, also a meta-psychological fact. Consequently, what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left in us by the secret of others.

Thus the hallucinations or visions that Mailhot experiences are not ghostly presences for which healing is a prerequisite but are phantoms of her past and of many generations before her. The Indian identity and sufferings lie deep in her conscious which often revisits her as hallucinations and visions. In the words of Cathy Caruth, the author of *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, “The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all” (Caruth 19). Freud in *Beyond Pleasure Principle* talks of traumatic experiences acquiring latency, where it remains in the unconscious for long but reappears in various forms, in disguise or otherwise, in certain instances either knowingly or unknowingly. The trauma is a story that waits in order to “tell us a reality or truth that is otherwise unavailable” (Caruth 4). The truth that is revealed quite late refers not just to what is known but points out to what remains hidden in our expressions and language.

Though the traumatic past of her predecessors remain in the subconscious of Mailhot, it is the life of her mother that gets reflected through her. *Heart Berries* could be treated as an elegy dedicated to her mother, who is frequently referred to in the narrative. Mailhot has “fond and bitter” (30) memories of her

mother; which guide Mailhot forward in life and this obscure bond, to the therapists is a tool to Mailhot's betterment. The marital relation of her parents, where the alcoholic and abusive father created cynical behavior in her mother, lies deep in the corners of her unconscious. Her father never loved them; rather abused them and created brutal memories. These experiences never assured a peaceful childhood to Mailhot. All these memories remain repressed and later began to show up in her behavior and thoughts, thus producing a repetition of repressed memories in her life. Mailhot's relation with Casey is a perfect example of the revival of the repressed past. Even though she reconciles with Casey, the memories of a repressed traumatic past haunts her like a Phantom, degrading her mind but establishing a way to identify herself with her mother. The revival of her repressed childhood becomes evident when she kills lady bugs. She writes,

I killed a lady bug when we were walking, and you looked at me like I was wild...I don't think you know how poor I used to be that the house was infested with lady bugs for so long. My brother and I went mad when they wouldn't stop biting. We tried to swat them with brooms and towels. We tried to corner them. Their death smelled like a puddle and wouldn't leave our home. My mother didn't come when the bugs overtook the living room (88).

Though Mailhot recollects the collective traumas, she can never identify herself with another individual, thus enhancing the traumatic experience and failing to find solace. She tries to be the representative of a community whom David Treuer mentions as the ones who are chained to their own deaths, "not really alive and active and engaged." While accomplishing this task she never loses sight of the personal and never fails to assert her choices and thoughts thereby achieving a political touch to the personal.

The question of being a native Indian pervades although the narrative and often acts as a subverted recognition buried deep in the subconscious but often re-appears bringing back traumatic emotions associated with it. The Indian condition torments her every hour she meets a white man, often her husband Casey, bringing back to her a plethora of emotions carried forth across generations; an intergenerational trauma. Mailhot mentions right at the beginning of the narrative that she is often silenced, like many Indians, by the charity of white men. She often mentions her relation with Casey as problematic as he is white and always fails to identify with her traumas and struggles. She writes, "I feel like a squaw. The type white people imagine: a feral thing with greasy hair and nimble fingers wanting... You have made me feel sick of myself" (88). She feels "Indian sick". It is indeed the truth when she speaks out that "the past is my fault" (63). She asserts that no white men, representative being Casey, doesn't understand what hunger is, for, like every Indian she has experienced it although her childhood. It becomes quite evident that Casey represents the white community when she reasserts that he never knows how she (an Indian woman) feels. Mailhot owns, like every Indian woman, the hunger, the trauma and abuse, subdued in her subconscious and torments her often through reappearances. Her memories are linked to her predecessors, her, mother and her father and this is why the therapist found her conversation with her mother and father a solution to her traumatic upheavals.

The persistent death drive is another major aspect that Mailhot examines throughout the narrative. The masochism that arises from shame and fear is persistent in the life of the narrator. Mailhot talks of instances where she feels like pressing the knife against her hand but fails to do so out of fear. She overcomes the suicidal instincts when she comes across "life instincts" (in Freudian terms). This opposing condition is a result of her inability to create a space for her. Being an Indian woman, she is prevented from "inhabiting a dominant space" (Mailhot 129) and thus she fails to identify a space for herself, which she is trying to achieve through this narrative. The ethnicity, culture, history and the narratives that she inherited from her ancestors help her to come out of the shame and repression, the reasons for the death drive or masochism inherent in her. She tries to revisit, recollect and relive the repressed memories through *Heart Berries*.

Though Terese Marie Mailhot tries to weave out a narrative from the depths of her memory, it is not

something that she owns. It is the collective memory of generations, an intergenerational trauma that transfers on to Mailhot and struggling to attain a voice and recognition. The narrative exposes not just the hunger and struggles of native Indians but also the death drives that they combated. Indian women were always objects of abuse and voyeurism, incurring neglect and never understood by their true being. According to Mailhot, they lead an obscure existence as

Nobody wants to know why Indian women leave or where they go. Our bodies walk across the highway from the dances of our youth into missing narratives without strobe lights or sweet drinks in our small purses, or the talk of leaving. The truth of our leaving or coming into the world is never told (Mailhot 101).

Thus they lead a silent life, silently fighting their traumas and then achieve an irreverent silent death without being recognized or remembered leaving ghosts of their memories in the unconscious of their fellow beings. It is this silence that Mailhot subverts by achieving education.

Mailhot considers her education as a renaissance as it is the revival of an unrecognized community rather than a matter of personal merit. Here again what is personal becomes the political. She is to be considered as a champion as she fought all the behavioral disorders that her community contributed and secured M.F.A in fiction from the Institute of American Indian Arts. *Heart Berries*, a result of Mailhot's struggle with her past, is not just a Memoir that talks on intergenerational trauma and personal emotions. The title "Heart Berries" has much significance as it is the name of a healer whom Mailhot's mother called to treat her phantom but it doesn't limit its scope by being a narrative that talks on "Indian sick" and healers. Rather, it achieves a greater significance by historicizing and representing the shame, pain and perspective of generations of Native Indians, who inhabited the land without being recognised or remembered by the dominant community. Their pain and trauma were treated as a phantom that requires a healer and thus the term "Indian sick". But Mailhot explains to us how important those disregarded traumatic pasts were as it is the history of art unique and untouched.

The birth of *Heart Berries* is under unique circumstances, when Mailhot's therapists asked her to write out her memories in a notebook. Later those journal entries filled up into a narrative that represents a community. The therapeutic initiative brings forth an art which explores human emotions to its core and becomes a history unique in language and content. Mailhot was under medication when she put down her memories and thus the text is a bundle of emotions scattered around in bits and pieces and the reader is assigned with the task to collect those leaves and put them together. One would be reminded of Kubla Khan and its creator ST Coleridge at this juncture. This is not merely a coincidence but these parallelisms help us prove that great works of art happen when your disorders are treated. Writing and therapy compliments each other and Mailhot herself solicits this when she says

Writing is hard therapy. You write, and then read it, revise your work to be cleaner, sharper, better...the way being healed is never real unless every moment of every day you remind yourself of your progress and remind yourself not to go back, or hurt someone, or do the wrong thing it's not healing unless you keep moving you're never done (132).

Heart Berries prove that it is no more a shame to have a disorder and that the very fear and trauma in life can bring forth brilliant literature unique in style and language. We might have come across many women autobiographies or Memoirs but Mailhot's work stands apart as it is the story of a community, who lives and dies in obscurity. The lack of representation itself gives the style of narrative a wilderness that has to be considered in detail as it gives a fresh style to Native Indian narratives.

While considering the style, it is important to dwell deep into the truthfulness of the narrative as Mailhot herself calls the work, an art of fiction as she has mingled imagination with truth. This questions the credibility of *Heart Berries* as a memoir but it is important to note that any work created is a fiction as it speaks and validates only a single perspective. No one questions the reliability of a single perspective and if we move in that direction we can call every work of art a farce. But, in the case of *Heart Berries* it is quite

illogical to think of its truth as Mailhot states that every Native Indian she came across pointed out the work as their story. Thus this Memoir is not Mailhot's but of a community that demanded voice amidst violence, abuse, behavioral disorders and death drives. The initiative doesn't demark them as marginalized, rather, brings them to the forefront; one with the so called "dominant" community. It is the multiple voices that make the narrative non-linear. Here we find the rebirth of a community through a renaissance in writing. Their visions and hallucinations are no more the phantoms that degrade them through misrepresentation, but they are they are lifelines in moulding their unique identity.

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