

## Traumatic Experiences in Selected Contemporary Poems by Patricia Smith

الخبرات الصادمة في قصائد معاصرة مختارة للشاعرة باتريشيا سميث

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الرسالة تبحث الخبرات والتجارب الصادمة في مجموعة قصائد مختارة للشاعرة باتريشيا سميث. الدراسة تتبع رؤية الباحثة جوديث هيرمن. خلال دراستها لنظرية الصدمة، قامت الباحثة جوديث هيرمن بوضع إطار حددت من خلاله المسار الذي يتبعه الشخص الذي يتعرض لتجربة صادمة. تقول هيرمن انه بعد مرور الشخص بتجربة صادمة فإنه يتعرض لمجموعة من الأعراض تسمى اضطرابات ما بعد الصدمة وهي فرط التيقظ و تداخل ذكريات الحادث ثم حالة من الإنقباض النفسي. بعد فترة طويلة و شاقة من معاناة الشخص من هذه الأعراض، يبدأ الشخص رحلة طويلة للتعافي. خلال هذه الفترة يمر الشخص بالعديد من المراحل يقوم أثناءها بإعادة بناء شخصيته التي تم تشويهها خلال مروره بالصدمة. لا يوجد فترة محددة لنهاية الأعراض ولكن الفترة تختلف من شخص لآخر. خلال هذه الفترة يمر الشخص بالعديد من الصراعات النفسية والأوقات العصبية. بعد كل هذا العمل و الجهد والإصرار ، يبدأ الشخص في إعادة النظر لما مر به ويحتقره. وينظر لحياته الجديدة ويجدها افضل بكثير من حياته القديمة. لم يعد الشخص المصدوم الآن يهتم بذكرى التجربة الصادمة بل أصبح يجدها مملّة. عندما يصل الشخص لهذه المرحلة يكون قد وصل لنقطة انحلال الصدمة. هذه المرحلة في شعر سميث مرت بالعديد من التضحيات و الألم والإصرار أهمها عالقتها بالمرور باتريشيا سميث بالعديد من الخبرات الصادمة وذلك لأسباب عنصرية واخرى عائلية. هذه الخبرات إنعكست على شعرها حيث اتسمت قصائدها بالواقعية والتعبير عن الواقع الصادم الذي تمر به سميث مع غيرها ممن يعانون تجارب مماثلة.

Abstract:

The thesis depicts the traumatic experiences in selected poems by the American contemporary poet Patricia Smith. It investigates the psychological impacts that affect Smith's poetry. It examines how the language used in Smith's poems reflects the traumatic experiences that she has been through. The thesis follows Judith Herman's encounter with trauma. According to Herman, after passing a traumatic experience, the traumatized person suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder or PTSD. PTSD folds in three main symptoms hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. According to Herman, the survivor starts his recovery journey after a struggling time with traumatic disorders. The recovery process consists of three main stages; establishment of safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. The study demonstrates how the hyperarousal's symptoms are noticeably mirrored in the language of Smith's poems. Furthermore, it traces the disturbing intruders that overwhelm Smith's mind during waking and sleeping time. The thesis determines the state of constriction that controls Smith's soul as a result of the many racial and traumatic experiences that she passes through. The second part of the study investigates Smith's journey in getting over her pains and restoring power over herself. The study concludes that Patricia Smith suffers from many traumatic symptoms in most of her poems. She takes deep steps in her recovery journey, but she is still surrounded by the foreshadows of the previous experiences. The study affirms the rule of literature in healing traumatic pain. Therefore, Smith uses her literary tools for retelling her traumatic experiences.

Literary Trauma Theory is one of the most important contemporary studies in modern criticism. The variety of studies, concerning trauma, allows literary scholars to use different definitions of trauma. This research is mainly concerned with trauma theory due to the close textual reading of Judith Herman's book *Trauma and Recovery*. Furthermore, the research works on reviewing Sigmund Freud's book *Beyond the Pleasure Principles*, Cathy Caruth books *Unclaimed Experience*, *Trauma*, *Explorations in Memory*, and *Empirical Truth*. The study also traces Briere and Scott book *Principles of Trauma Therapy: A Guide to Symptoms, Evaluation, Treatment*, which is based on the latest statistics of the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* by the American Psychiatric Association.

Literature is an essential collaborator with psychology in solving the intricate psychosomatic problems of those who suffer isolation and disconnection with society after passing traumatic experiences that exceed their comprehension. The power of words represents the magical key for recovering throughout the different stages of suffering. This chapter traces trauma theory from its early beginning till contemporary history; a period which is not so long since its first appearance on papers was during the late nineteenth century by the French physician Jean-Martin Charcot. Charcot works with traumatized women who suffer hysterical symptoms like convulsions, amnesia, sensory loss, and sudden paralysis. Through his inspection, he figures out that, occasionally, the traumatic incidents stimulate hypnotic states in his patients. Furthermore, he is the first to depict

problems of suggestibility in his patients by one side, and the fact that hysterical attacks are dissociative problems, by the other side:

Similar problems arose when the first systematic explorations of the relationship between trauma and psychiatric illness were conducted in Salpêtrière. The great neurologist Jean Martin Charcot (1887) described how traumatically induced “*choc nerveux*” could put patient into a mental state similar to that induced by hypnosis. The so-called “*hypnoid state*” was believed to be a necessary condition of what Charcot called “*hystero-traumatic autosuggestion*”. Thus Charcot became the first to describe both the problems of suggestibility in these patients, and the fact that hysterical attacks are dissociative problems—the results of having endured unbearable experiences. (Kolk et al., p. 50)

### ***Herman***

Herman describes the traumatic events as extraordinary, not like the way Dr. Morrow uses to describe the traumatic experience as it is so rare to happen and , “this sort of violence is so rare that the ‘file cabinet’ is hard to find or may not exist and has to be created.” (Marrow 2). Furthermore, she claims that the traumatic experience is extraordinary as it disturbs the ordinary human adaptation to life and it mostly involves threats to life :

Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life. Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and

death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe. (Herman 33 )

Herman elucidates that the harshness of the traumatic events varies according to the situation. Traumatic events that occurred by sudden accidents cannot be compared with those that include physical violation or witnessing grotesque death. But moreover , the main characteristic of all the traumatic incidents and events is the power of the traumatic event to evoke horror and inspire the feeling of vulnerability and helplessness , she elucidates :

The severity of traumatic events cannot be measured on any single dimension; simplistic efforts to quantify trauma ultimately lead to meaningless comparisons of horror. Nevertheless, certain identifiable experiences increase the likelihood of harm. These include being taken by surprise, trapped, or exposed to the point of exhaustion. The likelihood of harm is also increased when the traumatic events include physical violation or injury, exposure to extreme violence, or witnessing grotesque death. In each instance, the salient characteristic of the traumatic event is its power to inspire helplessness and terror. (34)

Disagreeing with the definition of PTSD , when it was first included in the Diagnostic Manual by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 , which describes traumatic events as, “outside the range of usual human experience”, Herman works on her own findings. She argues that this definition ,“ has proved to be inaccurate” , firstly because, unfortunately , forms of sexual and domestic violence became a common part of the life of women as ,“ Rap ,

battery , and other forms of sexual and domestic violence are so common a part of women's lives that they can hardly be described as outside the range of ordinary experience" (35). Moreover , she adds that by taking a look at the number of people killed in the war over the past century , " military trauma , too , must be considered a common part of human experiences". She wanders that, "only the fortunate find it unusual". Therefore , she describes the traumatic events as extraordinary because they "overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life". They also evoke life risk , vulnerability, and terror. She states:

Unlike commonplace misfortunes , traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity , or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror , and evoke the responses of catastrophe ...Certain identifiable experiences increase the likelihood of harm. These include being taken by surprise , trapped , or exposed to the point of exhaustion. The likelihood also increased when the traumatic events include physical violation or injury , exposure to extreme violence , or witnessing grotesque death. In each instance , the salient characteristic of the traumatic event is its power to inspire helplessness and horror(33).

Herman explains that the ordinary human response to danger is , "complex, integrated system of reactions, encompassing both body and mind" , threat primarily stimulates the "sympathetic nervous system" , causing the person to go into "a state of alert". It also stirs up powerful feelings of terror and rage. These alterations in perception,

stimulation, and sensation are normal responses. They “mobilize the threatened person for strenuous action, either in battle or in flight”. Herman distinguishes the normal reaction from the traumatic reaction, as she elucidates that the former takes place when “action is of no veil, when neither resistance nor escape is possible”(33). She clarifies that the human system of self-defense, “became overwhelmed and disorganized” :

Each component of the ordinary response to danger, having lost its utility, tends to persist in an altered and exaggerated state long after the actual danger is over. Traumatic events produce profound and lasting changes in physiological arousal, emotion, cognition, and memory. Moreover, traumatic events may sever these normally integrated functions from one another. The traumatized person may experience intense emotion but without clear memory of the event, or may remember everything in detail but without emotion. She may find herself in a constant state of vigilance and irritability without knowing why. Traumatic symptoms have a tendency to become disconnected from their source and to take on a life of their own. (33).

Herman explains that the traumatized person may be overwhelmed with deep emotion, but without ‘clear memory’, or he may remember all the details of the event, but without ‘emotion’. She gives an explanation to this kind of fragmentation, which she describes as, “whereby trauma tears apart a complex system of self-protection that normally functions in an integrated fashion” , built upon the historical observation on post-traumatic stress disorder by Janet encounter about hysteria , and his views about dissociation

and traumatic memory which are previously discussed in the former chapter. She concludes, “traumatized people feel and act as though their nervous system has been disconnected from the present”(34).

Herman explains that the many symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder fall into three main categories. These are called ‘hyperarousal’, ‘intrusion’, and ‘constriction’. Hyperarousal is a state of watchfulness and vigilance that reflects the ‘persistent expectation’ of threat and danger. Intrusion reveals the permanent influence and the ‘indelible imprint’ of the traumatic moments on the person. Constriction reflects the ‘numbing response’ of submission and surrender.

The trauma symptoms start after the person undergoes a state of denial of the real experience, then he goes through a period of Hyperarousal, preparedness, and awareness that devastates the life of the person, in which he lives in continuous vigilance aroused as a new premonition of the previous experience as if the danger could come back anytime. Subsequently, he is infringed by vast images of flashbacks that overflow his mind and thoughts in awakening time , and nightmares during sleeping , a state that is called ‘intrusion’. Then, “the system of self-esteem shuts down completely” , and he succumbs to a state of surrender.

In the second half of the book, Herman demonstrates how important is the stage of recovery. The hard experience that shatters the identity of the self and deprives it of control, causing disempowerment , isolation, and disconnection with others , must be shrewdly treated. Herman elucidates that recovery unfolds into three main stages”; establishment of

safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life.

To conclude all these debates and thoughts about the trauma, there is a metaphor created by Dr. Kelly Morrow-Baez in her article *What you might not know*, as she gives a hypothetical explanation of what goes inside the mind when it passes a traumatic accident; the explanation is closer to Janet perception of the memory process and how the memories are categorized under specific classifications. She concludes that the mind looks like a room that is full of file cabinets , and the mind is unremittingly working on saving the memories under the appropriate category. For her , the trauma happens when the upcoming memory has no file to save it , as the traumatic event is so sporadic and rare. The problem takes place during the undefined period in which the brain works on finding the appropriate category for the event , or tries to create a new category that could contain the new event , she writes :

You can think of the mind as a room full of file cabinets. When we have any experience, the mind files it away in the appropriate file cabinet. The reason we have physical and psychological responses to trauma is because the brain is working incredibly hard to file it away. The problem (or blessing, really) is that for most people, this sort of violence is so rare that the “file cabinet” is hard to find or may not exist and has to be created. This is what is going on for people who say they are “trying to make sense” of what happened. People develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) when they have an experience so extreme there is no file cabinet and

developing one to hold such a memory is a tremendous task (2).

Literary Trauma Theory is one of the most significant contemporary studies in modern criticism. Throughout the variable studies that concern trauma , the thesis is principally working on applying the theory on the poetry of the American poet Patricia Smith. The thesis, for the most part, follows Judith Herman's encounter with trauma through a predetermined examination of her book *Trauma and Recovery*. The combination of Literature and psychology is very effective in solving the complex psychosomatic problems , especially for those who suffer traumatic experiences , in which its effect can exceed their normal perception , their mental comprehension and goes beyond their imagination. Its effects can cause isolation and disconnection with society long after passing the traumatic experiences. The power of words represents the magical key for recovering throughout the different stages of the suffering.

This chapter traces the trauma theory , from its early beginning to contemporary history. Beginning with the French physician Jean-Martin Charcot, who figured out that, sometimes, the traumatic incidents stimulate hypnotic state in his patients , furthermore he was the first to depict problems of suggestibility in his patients by one side , and the fact that hysterical attacks are dissociative problems by the other side. While Freud gives the name 'traumatic neurosis' to a " condition that has long been known and described which occurs after several mechanical concussions, railway disasters and other accidents involving a risk to life " (Freud

4). During Freud's encounter about trauma , Caruth recommends that trauma “describes an overwhelming experience of a sudden or catastrophic event in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena”(Herman 11).

According to Janet, the narrative memory is, "the automatic integration of new information without much conscious attention to what is happening” ( Kolk 160), a memory which he distinguishes from that of trauma, which is to be, "remembered with particular vividness or resist integration” (160). Briere and Scott figure out their own conclusion that “an event is traumatic if it is extremely upsetting , at least temporarily overwhelms the individual’s internal resources , and produces lasting psychological symptoms ”(10). This thesis is principally applying Judith Herman's encounter with trauma on the poetry of Patricia Smith. According to Herman , the traumatized person should undergo three stages of post-traumatic stress disorders or PTSD ; Hyperarousal , intrusion, and constriction , before starting the recovery process. Herman's encounter with trauma will be discussed in detail in the following chapters.

This research is mainly concerned with scrutinizing and inspecting the traumatic experiences in several chosen poems written by the American contemporary poet Patricia Smith. The study follows the framework of Judith Herman's theoretical perception of trauma theory depending on the close textual reading of her book *Trauma and Recovery*. The study examines several poems like ‘The Undertaker,’ ‘

Shoulda been Jimi Savannah ,’ ‘ Sweet Daddy,’ ‘ Elegy,’ ‘Always in the Head,’ ‘Skinhead,’ ‘The Five Stages of Drowning,’ ‘When Black men Drown their Daughters,’ ‘ All Purpose Product,’ ‘Thief of Tongue,’ ‘ Sagas of the accidental Saint,’ ‘A Street in Lawndale,’ ‘34 ,’ ‘Up on the Roof,’ ‘Katrina,’ ‘The President Flies Over,’ ‘When the Burning Begins,’ ‘Choose Your Own Adventure,’ 'That Chile Emmett in Tat Casket,’ ‘See What Happens When You Don’t Be Careful,’ ‘The body, Life according to Motown,’ and ‘Rebuilding Nicole’s Mama’. The study also analyzes those experiences according to Herman's encounter with trauma. Furthermore , the study gets closer to the created characters and personas in the poems by analyzing a lot of written and visual interviews with the poet herself.

Motivated by the movement of the women’s liberation in the 1970s, and as involved in the movement through her own profession and “ testify” to what she had witnessed , Judith Herman writes her brilliant book “*Trauma and Recovery*”. The book, as she explains, “ represents the fruits of two decades of research and clinical work with victims of sexual and domestic violence”( Herman 2). The book also includes ‘ a growing body’ of many traumatized people experiences, “ particularly combat veterans and the victims of political terror”. Herman describes psychological trauma as :

An affliction of the powerless, at the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is that of nature , we speak of disasters. When the force is that of other human beings , we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care

that give people a sense of control , connection , and meaning.(30)

### **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders**

After passing a traumatic experience, the traumatized person is expected to undergo some psychological symptoms and emotional changes. According to Herman, These symptoms are divided into three main symptoms and are called PTSD or post-traumatic stress disorders. The first symptom is hyperarousal in which the traumatized person is overwhelmed by states of vigilance and alertness that control his mind and his thoughts. These states result from the traumatized person's deep belief that by keeping vigilant, he could avoid repeating or reliving the experience. The first part of this chapter is principally concerned with tracing these moments in the poetry of Patricia Smith when such feelings were highly captured. The second part of the chapter is to be focusing on the second symptom of PTSD which is intrusion, in which the traumatic person is chased by a vast number of unwelcome memories , and surrounded by fragments of images, dreams, flashbacks, and nightmares. These kinds of unwelcome trespassers obviously appear through Smith's poetry. The third part of the chapter concerns the third symptom of PTSD which is constriction. This symptom occurs when the traumatized person starts to take a defensive position thinking that this may help him. The defensive reaction here, and from the victim's perspective , is to stay away from people to keep himself safe.

The poetry of Patricia Smith is splendidly enriched with a lot of poems that support thesis inquiries. Moreover, the themes they cover are considered as imperative motives

that consequently could be produced out of traumatic experiences. One supportive point that strongly confirms this point of view is the language Smith uses in her writing , which powerfully reveals how trauma is reflected in her works. This chapter works on applying trauma theory on the poetry of Smith through a close reading and analysis of chosen poems and relating these poems to their surrounding circumstances.

### **Hyperarousal**

Actions are followed by reactions. When the human body is attacked by any event , it must take a reaction , or even wait till this reaction is taken. This explains the state of alertness that the body undergoes after a traumatic incident. What happens after someone is slammed in his face is that his mind stays alert for a while , and ‘small provocation’ becomes real intimidation. The physical offensive action is followed by an automatic reaction from the body , in an attempt to stay safe and secure. When the person passes a traumatic accident , his mind stays alert for a while. A period in which he tries to absorb the shock , simultaneously he cannot predict whence the danger comes. Therefore , his mind stays alerted all the time to protect himself from any probable threat. This state of vigilance and preparedness is called ‘hyperarousal’, and it is the first stage of the traumatic symptoms. In her book, *Trauma and Recovery* , Herman explains that after passing a traumatic experience the human system of self-preservation stays alerted , and this state of alertness occurs as a responsive reaction of trying to avoid upcoming possible threats. Therefore , the person shows

overreacting movements with small provocation , moreover, it tends to escape sleeping.

### **Intrusion**

Traumatic accidents do not merely occur then disappear leaving the person in tranquility. Once they occur , a new beginning takes place. After a while, the person finds himself surrounded , not only by flashbacks during waking time , also nightmares and dreams during sleeping as well. This silent attack is called intrusion ; the second symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. The memories of the traumatic experience chase the person's mind and control his nervous system. The person's consciousness is occupied by the traumatic intrusive attack , and he cannot carry on his regular comings and goings. His nervous system stands by at the particular moment of trauma. A sturdy wave of emotional memories invades the person's life pushing him to fiercely relive the traumatic moment , then the wave overwhelms his thoughts and awareness. Therefore , although the danger is ostensibly ended , Its devastating authority on the mind is extended , and whenever the person stays , there is no safe area to protect him. The reason is that the internal silent attack is domestic , and its power is extensively unmitigated.

### **Constriction**

Through danger , some animals tend to freeze in their places , thinking that this may help them avoid any dangerous attacks. When the prey faces a predator threat , it leads into a state of conscientious immobility trying to avoid the existing attack. The only movement it performs is breathing. The human body also has its own tricks , when it undergoes a perilous situation that it cannot handle. It may

shut down in an attempt to avoid the threat during the incident , or the person may tend to stay alone after a period of the traumatic event trying to forget what has happened. However , through the attempt to avoid reliving the traumatic painful experience , The attempt may result in a withdrawal from engagement with others , a narrowing of consciousness, and an ‘impoverished life’. This condition leads him to the third symptom of post-traumatic stress disorders ; constriction.

### **RECOVERY**

While the post-traumatic stress disorders’ symptoms go through three stages: hyperarousal, intrusion , and constriction , according to Herman , the recovery process is divided into three stages : the establishment of safety , remembrance, and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life. Unlike Herman , some observers prefer to divide the recovery process into five stages , whereas others prefer to divide it into eight stages. Consequently , in the eighth chapter of her book *Trauma and Recovery* , Herman illustrates that ‘ in the course of a successful recovery, it should be possible to recognize a gradual shift from unpredictable danger to reliable safety, from dissociated trauma to acknowledged memory, and from stigmatized isolation to restored social connection’(109). In this context , this chapter is concerned with thrashing out the three stages of recovery according to Herman’s perception. The three stages are composed to organize the recovery process; “Like any abstract concept, these stages of recovery are a convenient fiction, not to be taken too literally. They are an attempt to impose simplicity and order upon a process that is inherently turbulent and complex (110). The traumatic

experience deeply overwhelms the human both socially and in the flesh ; therefore the treatment should be multifarious, efficient , and complex. Since the recovery process unfolds in stages, The treatment should occur in phase. Recovery is a very complex process that requires a full awareness of not only the patient , or his family , but also friends and society. It is a challenging task that reflects the collaborative work of soul and mind. Herman explains that it is like a marathon that requires persistence , preparation , and nonstop work.

Smith is a contemporary American poet who was born in 1955 in Chicago. She is the author of seven volumes of poetry. She is also a creative writing teacher, a playwright, a spoken-word performer, and a former journalist. Smith is a four-time individual National Poetry Slam champion. Her book, *Shoulda Been Jimi Savannah* is the recipient of the awarded the Phillis Wheatley Book Award in Poetry, the Rebekah Bobbitt National Prize for Poetry, and the Lenore Marshall Prize, presented by the *Academy of American Poets* in recognition of the most outstanding book of poetry published in America the previous year. Smith is also a winner of a 2008 National Book Award finalist, the Carl Sandburg Literary Award), the Hurston-Wright Legacy Award in Poetry, the National Poetry Series Award, the Patterson Poetry Award, two Pushcart Prizes, and the Rattle Poetry Prize. She is also a winner of the Robert L. Fish Memorial Award for short story writing, and she has works selected to appear in both Best American Poetry and Best American Essays. Furthermore, she is the 2016 recipient of both the McDowell and Yadoo fellowships 2016, and she has

been inducted into the International Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent.

In her first book of poetry, *Life According to Motown*, published in 1991, Smith expresses her experiences growing up in Chicago, during the race-torn '60s. Smith introduces the miserable state of African American immigrants, whom she describes as the dreamers, those who leave their hometowns, dreaming of a new life, only to traumatically face a bitter and hard reality. Moreover, Smith introduces her family's real experience as African American immigrants in many of her poems. For example, through writing *Life according to Motown*, Smith reveals having felt triggered by descriptions of her grown-up stage of life, because of her inability to recognize her original roots. Smith explains that her mother never talks about or even mentions their past life in Alabama, thinking that, by ignoring their history, she is helping her daughter in her new life. Smith states in her interview with Leslie Mcilroy :

Whenever I have the time to really sit down and listen to music, I'm obsessed with the same era — '60s, some '70s — of rhythm and blues. I still listen to Motown, I listen to Aretha, Chaka Khan, Wilson Pickett, Otis Redding, Tyrone Davis. That music, that time, is where I'm rooted, where I feel most at home. I still believe in the better world their voices crafted for me. I can hear hope in those voices, and it was the last time music spoke directly to me as if it know what I needed. At the risk of making a sweeping statement that will enrage just about everyone, music since then has been vapid and self-centered. (Mcilroy 3)

In her second book, *Big Towns, Big Talk* published in 1992, Smith describes life after a childhood in Chicago. She introduces themes like family, love, and feminism. In 1993, Smith published her third book, *Close to Death*, which considers the life of the black male and his eagerness. The book gives a loud voice to black men, who have no chances and who risk their lives at every moment in their lives. Smith endeavors to express her folk's fear of becoming victims of violent crimes. This underlying desire permeating her work can be seen in a self-reflection on the experience of losing her father, who was murdered by a bullet fired into the back of his head. She writes in the introductory lines of the book:

This book is because nearly half a million black men are behind bars in the United States. *Because I have seen my son with shackles at his ankles and wrists.* This book is because black men represent only 3.5 percent of a national college enrollment of almost 13 million. *Because I know a 51-year-old man who cannot read.* This book is because 45 percent of black males are likely to become victims of violent crime three or four times in their lifetime. *Because my father was killed by a bullet fired into the back of his head.* This book is because a black male infant born in 1993 has a 1 in 27 chance of losing his life in a homicide. *Because a gangbanger in Chicago used a 2-year-old boy as a shield.* This book is because young black men in New York City are wearing clothing emblazoned with the logo C2D--Close To Death. *Because so many of them are.* (Smith 4)

In 2006, Smith published her fourth collection, *Teahouse of the Almighty*, which deals with religion, feminism, love, family, and the role of poetry. Later in 2008,

Smith writes her fifth collection of poetry, *Blood Dazzler*, which gives a detailed, minute-by-minute description of Hurricane Katrina. Smith's poems evoke the horror experienced by the people in New Orleans, as the rest of America watched on television. The poems provide stupefying and extensive coverage of the hurricane: accounts on dying people, accounts on survivors, politicians' assumptions at the time, and descriptions of the hurricane itself. Smith herself, who is a witness to the catastrophe, documents in detail her view during the crisis.

In her book, *Blood Dazzler*, Smith illustrates how the disaster affects society, in its entirety. Through her recitation, Smith allows readers to have a deeper understanding of the full, human impact of the tragedy. Readers negotiate Smith's recountal of different and astonishing feelings about dying people, survivors, and fake politicians, as well as the attributes of the hurricane itself. Poems like, 'Katrina,' '34,' 'The President Flies Over,' and 'Up on the roof', vigorously illustrate these feelings. In her interview with Jon Riccio, Smith explains her motives behind writing the book:

Many people have asked me why I took on the storm, especially since I'm not from New Orleans and have no ties whatsoever to the Gulf region. It's because I didn't see Katrina as purely a regional event, but a human one. I think the disaster made it all too clear just what our country is capable of—the blatant dismissal of poor, mostly brown, people in a time of crisis. And there it was, blaring from our TV screens for everyone, finally, to see. The truth, and the horror, of those five words lie in the fact that the people considered disposable in our society are those forced to be

most reliant upon what that society deems as “just.” (Smith 4)

Smith’s sixth collection is *Shoulda Been Jimi Savannah*, published in 2012. It includes her most marvelous poems. Through the collection, Smith investigates identity with a spirit of self-acceptance. Smith explores and describes her relationships with her father and her passionate-about-change mother. The collection also deals with the dreams and expectations of African American immigrants, who leave their hometowns seeking freedom and welfare. However, they soon discover that it is not their location, but being black is their main problem, which ensues in a pang of unforgettable guilt. Smith clarifies that the stories that her immigrant father used to tell in her childhood reflect on her poetry, as she points out to Mcilroy:

I think my education began with my father, Otis Douglas Smith. When he moved from Arkansas to Chicago during the Great Migration, he brought with him something I like to call the “tradition of the back porch.” At the end of every day, he’d hold court in the living room, spinning this addictive serial narrative in which everyone in the neighborhood, everyone at the candy factory where he worked, everyone in our family, was a character. And the stories kept going. And going. It wasn't long before I learned to look at the world through the stories it could tell, instead of through whatever I was or wasn't learning in school. Words were magic, because words could form sentences, and sentences could make stories, and stories could spark a craving in you for more stories, Magic.(Mcilroy 4)

In 2016, Smith published her latest collection, *Incendiary Art*, which stands as a reminder of the murder of the African American Emmett Till. Throughout these poems, Smith courageously faces the issue of brutality practiced against the black male. Smith depicts for readers, the feelings of mourning mothers who lose their kids to racism. The collection also insists on the theme that being black makes you a walking target. The poems express black people's constant fear of being killed, possibly even by a member of their folk, as illustrated in an interview with Tavel:

Patricia Smith's *Incendiary Art* inhabits the messiness and necessity of racial discourse in contemporary America. What makes Smith's singular achievement so compelling, however, is that she is able to weave together three distinct narrative threads—the vast injustice of our previous century, the unending calamity of police shootings, and her own stark experience with racially-motivated violence—in an unified portrait of a crisis-riddled nation. Rhapsodic as her language is, Smith paints our country's portrait in blood. *Incendiary Art* will surely be one of this year's award contenders. These stirring poems will make any reader shudder, weep, and strive for an America that finally regards all of its citizens, to borrow Malcolm X's phrase, as righteous human beings. (Tavel 3)

Smith's poetry functions as a mirror, or testimony to her whole life. While reading, one experiences the sensation that they could walk through Smith's life, feel what she feels, and understand well the pain she goes through. Smith ingeniously portrays all the stages she passes through in her life, like childhood, adolescence, and womanhood.

Moreover, she sketches all the inner feelings that she endures as a woman during these stages, like love, failure in love, motherhood, and the emotions associated with her relationship with her parents. Poems, like '13 Ways of looking at 13,' 'Asking for a Heart Attack,' 'Building Nicole's Mam,' and 'Medusa' efficiently depict this point. Her poems discuss how grief possesses most of Smith's written life. It seems as though Smith is stuck between two worlds; one which belongs to the dead people whom she has lost, and the other, her actual world, which is dominated by the fear of losing people around her. The upcoming chapters analyze and explore this theme of loss and grief in Smith's life in poems like, 'Skinhead,' 'Incendiary Art,' 'The Five Stages of Drowning,' 'Emmet Till: Choose your Own Adventure,' '67 Minutes from being Finished,' and 'Close to Death,' in an attempt to figure out at which stage, or stages of grief, Smith is actually and personally experiencing.

Literature is considered to be a witness to all the deep pain and sorrow inside the human self. It presents all the hidden stories inside the mind of the writer once he picks a pen and decides to write. When applying trauma theory to literary works, the chains are to be connected, and the mystery is to be solved. In the poetry of Patricia Smith, the stages of the trauma theory, according to Herman's encounter, are to be noticeably examined. According to Herman, post-traumatic stress disorders are three main symptoms; Hyperarousal, Intrusion, and constriction. For her, the traumatized person should undergo these three symptoms before starting his recovery process.

Starting with the hyperarousal state, this state is profoundly extended in most of Smith's words. It reflects the overall state of continuous vigilance that Smith along with people around her suffer in poems like 'The Undertaker' and 'The Five Stages of Drowning'. The symptoms of hyperarousal are a result of the non-stop practiced violence against black people. Smith as a creative writer simply represents this state through a phone ring in 'The Undertaker'. The normal reaction when a phone ring is simply to answer the phone, nevertheless, Smith perfectly dramatizes the scene by making the act of jumping a normal reaction of all the attendance. The idea is that all the gathering people in the room jump at the same time. Smith aims to highlight this act of vigilance and waiting for death as a public feeling. She flawlessly applies this feeling by making the unusual seem usual. This poem along with others displays the general state of hyperarousal and waiting for bad news, a state that clearly dominates Smith's words and language. These traumatic feelings and the hyperarousal symptoms will take their time till the traumatized person tries to contain them. After that, he will face another wave of intruders such as flashbacks and dreams, which is known as the intrusion; the second symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder.

The research traces how the state of intrusion devastates Smith in many poems. The intruders in Smith's poems appear in two main methods; one is that of a visual form in poems like 'When the Burning Begins,' 'Choose Your Own Adventure,' 'That Chile Emmett in Tat Casket,' 'See What Happens When You Don't Be Careful,' and 'The body'. One of the main traumatic experiences in Smith Poetry

is that of witnessing racial crimes. Smith's mother once forces her to uphold the corpse of her classmate in 'See 'What Happens When You Don't Be Careful'. This experience accompanies Smith in many poems. The experience haunts Smith throughout the foreshadow of the incident during wake up time, and the nightmares that dominate her sleeping time. The image of the child Emmet Till also is another intrusive visitor. Till, the 14-year-old African American, was a victim of a racial accident. He was accused of offending a white woman in her family's grocery store. Smith along with her generation was forced to keep in their mind this memory. Their parents think at this time that by doing so they warn them from the bad consequences of dealing with white people. Smith writes many poems considering this accident.

The other form of intrusion is auditory, throughout voices, and sounds. Smith reflects this state in poems like '34,' 'Up on the Roof,' 'Ethel's Sestina,' 'The Five Stages of Drowning,' 'Saga of the Accidental Saint,' 'The Undertaker,' 'A Street in Lawndale,' 'Thief of tongue,' 'Elegy,' 'Skinhead,' 'Katrina,' and 'The President Flies Over'. Smith expresses this state throughout introducing the voices of the victims, the mothers of the victims, and the perpetrators themselves. Considering the voices of the victims, Smith writes her Poem '34'. Throughout the poem, Smith introduces the voices of the thirty-four victims who were left to die during Hurricane Katrina. Smith aims to give them the last chance to say their last word before passing away. The voices intrude her mind and control her thoughts, therefore she writes her book *Blood Dazzler* to memorialize their reminiscence. The voice of her father intrudes on her

thoughts as well. Smith's father, who is killed in a robbery, represents her soulmate. His voice accompanies her in most of her poems. Smith wrote her long poem 'Elegy', to commemorate their strong relationship. The voice of Emmitt till is also included in Smith's thoughts. She reflects this in poems like 'Choose Your Own Adventure' and others.

The voices of the grieving mothers in Smith's poems are illustrated too. In her Poem 'The Mother', Smith unmutes the voice of a heartbroken mother who cries her kid's death. The mother wonders how the story of her kid will be told as it is too short to be told. In 'Sagas of the Accidental Saint', Smith creates a latency of the sounds of the anguished mothers who lost their kids in murders. Throughout the lines, Smith mentions the kids by 'my daughter' and 'my son', to demonstrate the non-stop number of the victims. In her poem 'The Undertaker', Smith represents the victims by their name to convey the close bond that connects her with the mothers, as if the victims are her sons.

The voices of the perpetrators are highly illustrated in Poems like 'Skinhead', 'Sagas of the Accidental Saint,' and 'The President Flies Over'. In 'Sagas of the Accidental Saint', Smith uses the voices of the police officers who have committed a racial crime against a black man, while they claim that it is a suicide. The poem reflects the feelings of discrimination and prejudice. In her poem 'The President Flies Over' Smith mentions President George W. Bush as responsible for the big number of victims. Smith uses the persona of President George W. Bush to show how he sees the hurricane from his own perspective while he is flying over in his private plane. Furthermore, She creates the President's

words 'I understand that somewhere it has rained' in a sarcastic way to illustrate how the president estimates the situation. While in her Poem 'Skinhead', Smith demonstrates the ugly face of racism by personalizing a member of one of the famous racial movements. She illustrates that the skinhead is proud of his crimes and he commits them for the sake of his race.

The constriction state, the third stage in PTSD, follows the intrusion symptoms. During the constriction state, the traumatic person prefers to avoid people and stay alone, believing that by doing so he can protect himself from repeating similar traumatic experiences. He believes also that avoiding reliving the same experience will make him better. In Smith poems, this stage is well illustrated in poems like 'Saga of the Accidental Saint,' 'Five stages of drowning,' 'When Black Men Drown their Daughter,' and '34'.

In her poem 'Sagas of the Accidental Saint', Smith intelligently applies these suppressed feelings state by using sarcasm. The police officers claim that the accident is suicide while the victim is handcuffed. Smith reflects the state of constriction that people feel when the persons who are supposed to protect them become the criminals themselves. In her poem, 'The Five Stages of Drowning', Smith reflects the suppression state of the young girl when being thrown in the river by her father. The scene demonstrates the state of helplessness and constriction of the young girl who cannot do anything to survive.

After passing through the three main symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorders, The traumatized person is ready to start his recovery journey. The recovery process is

divided into three stages which are the establishment of safety , remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life. Recovery is a very complex process that requires a full awareness of not only the patient , or his family , but also friends and society. It is a challenging task that reflects the collaborative work of soul and mind. It doesn't have specific time to be achieved , hence every survival has his own circumstances.

The establishment of safety and restoring control upon the self is the first phase in recovery. It is the central step in recovery since the recovery stage cannot develop without securing safety. During the establishment of the safety process , the traumatic person should restore himself back and have control over his life. He should make his own decisions and explain his own opinions. This stage could take months to years, depending on the surrounding environment. Smith's relationship with her mother has a deep influence on her trauma and suffering. Her mother aims to change Smith's culture , language, and even her color. In her poem 'All Purpose Product', Smith represents a turning point in the mother-daughter relationship. The poem is a self-experience of Smith , in which her mother pushes her to use a product that has dangerous side effects to change the color of her daughter's skin. The poem represents the inevitable confrontation between them. It represents the point in which Smith establishes safety and gets free from her fright. Reaching this point mainly depends on scarifying surrounding harmful relationships as Herman points out. In the case between Smith and her mother , this confrontation represents Smith's scarifying and getting free from this

relationship. Furthermore , the way Smith mentions her mother in many poems confirms this point. Throughout her poems , Smith mentions her mother using the third person pronoun ‘she’ while in most of her poems she mentions herself and her father as ‘we’. This usage of the pronouns demonstrates how Smith puts herself with her father in one team versus her mother.

Smith’s first step in her journey of recovery is reached. Consequently, moving to the second step of recovery is easily achieved. The second step of recovery is called remembrance and mourning. During this stage, the traumatized person should well recognize what actually has happened to him. He should remember and tell what exactly occurred to him. The stage resembles the perfect time for a confrontation between the traumatized person and his own soul. The person should tell the unspeakable and reveal the depressing emotions and horrors inside his soul. This confrontation with the traumatized person’s soul is mainly the core of the second stage of recovery. This stage moves through three main phases; reconstructing the story, transforming the traumatic memory, and mourning the traumatic accident.

Reconstructing the story is the first phase in remembrance and mourning in which the traumatized person faces two main unfathomable questions throughout his narration’s attempts. The first question is that of ‘why’ whose answer is beyond human understanding. The second one is that of ‘why me’ which stands in the mind of the person who tries hard to figure out the answers. Answering the first question of ‘why’ in Smith’s poetry is chiefly because of her mother. Smith recites a lot of stories about her

hard relationship with her mother, a matter that affirms her declaration of her perpetrator. Furthermore, Smith considers her mother as the main responsible for her parent's divorce, and accordingly for her father's departure. The answer to 'why me' would be simply because her mother rejects their real identity and color. Smith clearly illustrates the answers to these two questions in poems like 'A Street in Lawndale,' and 'Motown Crown'.

The second phase in remembrance and mourning is transforming the traumatic memory. According to Herman, the phase of transforming the traumatic memory could occur by two methods; the first is the use of direct exposure or flooding. The second is the use of formalized testimony in treating the traumatized person's suffering. The testimony method works through creating a detailed record of the traumatic experience by recording therapy sessions. Smith as a creative writing teacher has to share her feelings and revolutionary beliefs with people. Furthermore, she has to share her poetic knowledge and motives with the kids and students she is teaching as well. Being a creative writing teacher and a poet at the same time supports using the testimony method. Her talent in creating the scenes and linking them to the real story makes it easy for her to freely share her thoughts and experiences. Smith shows this powerful talent in poems like 'Sweet Daddy' and 'Ethel's Sestina'.

The last phase of the remembrance and mourning stage is that of mourning the traumatic accident or event, which is considered the most durable step in the recovery process. Grieving the traumatic loss is a hard mission, its

complexity is due to the survivor's feelings of fear and pride. The traumatized person is afraid of his belief that once he starts the grieve, he will not be able to stop it. While his pride prevents him to grieve his loss, as by doing so, he announces the victory of the perpetrator. For these two important considerations, it is essential to support his act of grieving and consider his actions as an act of courage and resistance rather than humiliation and submission. The resistance to mourning is so important, it acts as a magical solution through revenge, forgiveness, or compensation. During the step of recovery, the same helpless state that once overwhelms the victim during the traumatic experience reappears to redirect him towards restoring power. The traumatized person may seek revenge thinking that it will help him to overcome his pain, however, Herman explains that revenge fantasies increase the traumatic feeling. Furthermore, it may recall the intrusive symptoms of the original incident.

Smith prefers to use literary revenge to overcome her pains. In her poem 'Skinhead', Smith describes the radical white supremacy against black people in a satirical and ironic way. She uses the persona of a skinhead member to show off his real ugly face. She repeats this type of revenge in her poem 'The President flies over'. Smith uses the persona of the president to memorize the story of his infamous fly-over from his perspective in the conscious of history. Therefore, the remarkable line of 'I understand that somewhere it has rained'(19) resembles Push's misjudgment of the situation. Therefore, Smith's act of revenge is extremely effective, vital, and eternal.

Seeking revenge may last for some time, then it will be replaced by forgiveness. Some survivors may not only forgive the perpetrator, but they may pity him. A lot of Smith's poems are a testimony to racial crimes' victims. Smith represents the grieving mother's pain and torment in poems like 'A Street in Lawndale,' and 'The Mother'. Smith also mourns the loss of her father who was a victim of a robbery. The mourning of the loss phase may last for a long time, depending on the traumatized person's passion for telling the story. After repeating the story many times, he finds himself no more interested in telling the story. He sees the traumatic experience as something that belongs to the past. Moreover, for the first time he thinks about his life, this is the exact moment in which he can move on to the third step in recovery.

The third stage of recovery is reconnection. It starts with the traumatized person's passion in life and in creating a mission for his life. During this step, the survivor starts to think about his life. He compares his life after the traumatic experience with his life before it. He aims to replace his damaged life with a life that is even better than his life before the traumatic experience. The main aim of the third stage of recovery is engagement with oneself, society, and real life. It is a new gateway to life. It is a turning point from the states of helplessness, segregation, and isolation to reach safety, self-reconnections, and empowerment. It reflects the truth mirror, in which he can see the whole story. He can clearly see now how he was a victim and he can work on avoiding the repetition of the harmful experience, moreover, he can make his own future plans.. He is ready to dominate his life

and control his deeds. He is able to build trustful relations. The stage moves through steps like learning to fight, reconciling with oneself, reconnecting with others, finding a survivor mission, and resolving the trauma.

During the learning to fight step, the traumatized person works on updating his way of recognizing the normal feelings and concepts like fear and anger. Throughout the passing period, he used to exaggerate his feelings of grief and torment. He is ready now to be involved in real life situations and learn to fight after flight. It is time to decide whether to stay alone or face a real situation. Smith's decision in this step was to face real life and fight. Her basic role in normal life is crystal clear. Smith always works on leading the persons that undergo racial incidents to stand still and fight. She reflects their screams and calls in many of her poems , like Sagas of the Accidental Saint’.

During the reconciling with oneself step, the traumatized person gets over the past experience and reconnects with himself. He starts to plan his daily missions. He aims only to recreate a new self, a new successful character, and a new well-planned future. He learns how to value himself. He finally feels self-acceptance and self-forgiveness. Reaching this point supports the step of connecting with others. The traumatized person now is self-confident and free from any restrictions. He has the ability to filter his surrounding social relations. Therefore, he knows which people really deserve his trust. Throughout Smith’s poems, she is motivated against her mother on one hand, while she is entirely fascinated with her father on the other. This unbalanced relationship is because the mother refuses

her daughter's color and physical form. Furthermore, Smith's undeclared belief in her mother's responsibility for her separation from her father increases the gap between them. Smith believes that her relationship with her father is threatened three times. The first time is through the nonstop-fights between her parents, the second time is by her parent's divorce, while the third time is her father's murder. Despite all these attempts, Smith's relationship with her father is immortalized in her poems in poems like 'Elegy,' and 'Sweet Daddy'.

After a period of building new trusted social ponds , the traumatized person is ready to create a social mission to support others. The traumatized person gets to the moment when he should find a mission in life to relate him to real life. He has to participate in social events, get involved in social life, and contributes to helping others The survivor learns how to participate in social events and helping other victims. Smith is aware of her heritage, culture, and physical characteristics, therefore, she uses her linguistic weapon to protect her folk for preventing the repetition of similar situations. In her poem 'Thief of Tongues' , Smith criticizes the obsession of obliterating identity that affects so many people around her claiming change. Smith chooses her social mission to be a supportive voice for people who suffer racial accidents in poems like 'Close to Death,' and 'All purpose product'.

There is no end to the trauma. According to Herman the resolution of trauma is endless , and there is no absolute recovery. Thus traumatic experience chases the traumatized person all over his whole life. Therefore, some resolved and

fixed situations may reappear again. Accordingly, the traumatized person has to keep in his mind that some impacts may return back. He should recognize this fact and deal with it. He should keep on his ordinary. Nevertheless, the resolving the trauma step is a timeless period. Tracing whether Smith has reached this stage at recovery from her traumatic events is a complicated matter. The situation here is a mix of getting recovered and socially participating in helping people in getting recovered as well. Smith's social role is a result of her deep belief in the poet's responsibility in healing the social problems. Smith's contributions in such social situations are very effective and recognized in her society. These social contributions reflect the self-assigned mission that she decides to follow. The recovery stage in Smith poems is illustrated in poems like 'All Purpose Product', 'Motown Crown,' 'Skinhead,' 'The President flies Over,' 'Rebuilding Nicole's Mama,' 'The Undertaker,' 'A Street in Lawndale,' 'Elegy,' 'and Sagas of the Accidental Saint'.

Throughout the close examination of Smith Poetry, and the efforts of applying the trauma theory on selected poems by her, the thesis concludes that the traumatic experiences in Smith's life deeply exist. They come out from her personal experiences that she has passed through her life as a victim or even as a witness. The role of literature, particularly of poetry, represents a testimony for Smith. This testimony allows her to come over her traumatic experiences and to stand up again. Smith successfully uses her literary abilities, and efficiently functions her tools in dramatizing the events, and highlighting the negative issues in her society. By doing this, not only does she help herself, but she also

helps the people around her who have passed similar situations. Poetry is proven to represent the voice of trauma. It deeply reflects the soreness and suffering of the victims of traumatic incidents. Patricia Smith resembles the tool that frankly translates these traumatic feelings into words. She goes through all stages of post-traumatic stress disorder and most of the recovery steps. She expresses all the suppressed emotions that she has been through. She reflects the voices of the mothers of the racial victims that she witnesses during her life. Smith certainly deserves to be considered a sound of trauma.

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