

Multi-dimensional Traumatic Aesthetics in Craig Wright's *Grace*^(*)

Mahmoud El Bagoury
Lecturer of English Literature, Suez University

Abstract

This study points out how the American playwright Craig Wright's *Grace* is replete with multi-dimensional traumatic aesthetics: physical, existential, emotional, and psychological. The aesthetics of trauma are reflections on the varied dimensions associated with traumatic experiences. The play demonstrates that traumatic aesthetics can plunge man into an existential void which distorts his beliefs, disrupts his cognitive equilibrium, and fragments his perception of human existence, self, emotions, and memories. Physical trauma has been existentialized to disclose the characters' distorted beliefs, existential anxiety, and alienation. Emotional trauma has been existentialized to unfold the characters' perspective on the futility of life, skepticism, and self-abhorrence. Psychological trauma has been contextualized to divulge the bitter effects of trauma on the characters' psyche. *Grace* is a dark play which dives deeply into the nature of suffering and the existential anguish of disappointed faith through the eyes of a young couple, Steve and Sara, their next-door neighbor, Sam, and the building's German exterminator, Karl. As their stories converge, Wright's characters find themselves face-to-face with their traumas. The traumatic effects include distressing memories, negative flashbacks, existential anxiety, distorted beliefs, and alienation. The play ends with three dead bodies. Steve's broken faith instigates him to kill Sara, Sam and himself.

Keywords: Trauma, existential anxiety, alienation, post-traumatic stress disorder, fragmentation, addiction to trauma, traumatic memory

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المُلخَص

جماليات الصدمة مُتعددة الأبعاد في مسرحية "النعمة" لكريج رايت

توضح هذه الدراسة كيف أن مسرحية "النعمة" للكاتب المسرحي الأمريكي كريج رايت مليئة بجماليات الصدمة مُتعددة الأبعاد: الصدمة الجسدية والوجدية والعاطفية وال نفسية.جماليات الصدمة هي انعكاسات للأبعاد المتنوعة المرتبطة بالتجارب الصادمة. توضح المسرحية أنجماليات الصدمة بإمكانها أن تُسقط الإنسان في فراغ وجودي يشوه مُعتقداته، ويُحدث خللاً في توازنه المعرفي، ويُشتت إدراكه للوجود الإنساني، ولذاته، وعواطفه، وذكرياته. تأخذ الصدمة الجسدية صبغة وجودية لتكشف المعتقدات المُشوّهة للشخصيات، والقلق الوجودي، والاعتراب. تأخذ الصدمة العاطفية صبغة وجودية للكشف عن منظور الشخصيات حول عدم جدوى الحياة، والشك، وكراهية الذات. يكشف سياق الصدمة النفسية الآثار المريرة للصدمة على التركيبة النفسية للشخصيات. "النعمة" مسرحية سوداوية تغوص بعمق في طبيعة المعاناة والألم الوجودي بسبب الإيمان الضائع من خلال زوجين شابين هما ستيف وسارة، وجارهما سام، والمسئول عن تطهير المبنى، الألماني كارل. بينما تتداخل قصصهم، تجد شخصيات رايت أنفسهم وجهاً لوجه مع الصدمة. تتمثل آثار الصدمة في شكل ذكريات مؤلمة، واسترجاعات سلبية، وقلق وجودي، ومُعتقدات مُشوّهة، والاعتراب. تنتهي المسرحية بثلاث جُنث حيث يدفع الإيمان الضائع ستيف إلى قتل سارة وسام ونفسه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصدمة، القلق الوجودي، الاعتراب، اضطراب ما بعد الصدمة،

التمزق، إيمان الصدمة، الذاكرة الصادمة.

Introduction

Craig Wright is a contemporary American playwright known primarily for his plays: *Grace*, *Recent Tragic Events*, *The Pavilion*, *Mistakes Were Made*, *Main Street* and many others. He was born Jewish in 1965, but he converted into Christianity when he was 14. For Wright, theater is about how to make people recognize how they are stuck inside existence. He rejects personal identifications and ontological certitude. In this light, the existential anxiety is skillfully enacted in his plays, an anxiety arising mainly from the characters' basic awareness of the threat of non-being. Out of their submersion into uncertainties, the characters

are preoccupied with the essence of man's position in the world. Besides, most of his plays depict America's decline into something miserable and full of self-deception, a decline which drives the individuals into psychological problems and traumas. He is clever at crafting sharply drawn characters with flaws and human failings because they lead disappointed lives out of having worries about God and the decay of societal values. His characters always examine their past choices and wonder whether or not they have to live with them forever or if they can start afresh. As a playwright, Wright indicates that art should be reflexive of the bitter effect of traumatic experiences on the individual's self-concept, identity, and belief.

Wright's *Grace* (2005) critically examines the lives of four characters whose traumatic experiences undermine their faith in God and in themselves. The playwright uses the stage to disclose the traumas of his characters in an absurdist style because the characters try to find meaning behind their severe traumatization, but their traumas remain absurd and meaningless. A Christian couple, Steve and Sara, move from Minnesota to Florida to open a chain of gospel-inns. They stay at a hotel where they meet a positivist computer scientist named Sam and the building's Jewish German exterminator Karl. The portrayal of Steve on the one hand and Karl and Sam on the other underlines the bitter conflict between belief and knowledge, a conflict which is traumatic to each of them, for the play is an indictment of conventional theology. Both Karl and Sam are existentially traumatized by Steve's blind certainty because they are filled with doubt and disbelief. Karl and Sam's agnosticism can best be interpreted in the light of the physical and psychological traumas they have experienced throughout their lives. Through the portrayal of Karl and Sam, the playwright draws attention to his view that traumatic aesthetics can distort man's belief in God if He does not intervene to protect him. During the Second World War, Karl saw his mother on fire. He also saw his father cut into two pieces. The Nazis, moreover, pushed the bayonet point in his eye, raped his Jewish girlfriend Rachel before his eyes, and then compelled him to rape her in front of them. Sam lost his fiancée and half his face in a horrific car accident. Sara is bitterly tormented by her husband's blind certainty and lack of romantic interest. So, she falls in love with their next-door neighbor Sam. Sam-Sara

relationship proves to be emotionally and existentially traumatizing to Steve that he loses his faith in divine justice and in himself. Steve's disappointed faith poignantly pushes him to kill Sara, Sam, and himself.

The present study reflects on the ideas of notable trauma scholars such as Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, Bessel van der Kolk, Onno van der Hart, Richard Mollica, Dori Laub, and others in order to explore how multi-dimensional traumatic aesthetics are contextualized in traumatized characters in Wright's trenchant play *Grace*, an existentialist tragi-comedy which, to use Primo Levi's description of traumatic literature, tells "a sorrowful, cruel and moving story..., full of a tragic, disturbing necessity" (72). Trauma studies emerged in the humanities since the 1990s to shed light on traumatic experiences in literature. Literary trauma theory tries to emphasize that literature envelops the relationship between language and the psyche; that is, literature is a medium through which the unrepresentable of the psyche can be revealed, or as Michelle Balaev points it out: "The unspeakable void became the dominant concept in criticism for imagining trauma's function in literature" (1). Caruth's seminal books *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) stand out as landmarks in literary trauma studies and her analysis of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, *Moses and Monotheism* and *Project for a Scientific Psychology* expands the understanding of literary texts through an analysis of traumatic experiences of characters because she views that "literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing" as traumatic events leave behind a sorrowful voice that "witnesses a truth that the survivor cannot fully know" (3). In line with Caruth's core argument, van der Kolk and van der Hart rightly observe that trauma "is always the story of a wound that ... cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown" (3-4). Responses associated with trauma are reactions to abnormal circumstances and this abnormality gives rise to different symptoms which fall outside consciousness to result eventually in a disruption of cognitive equilibrium.

Besides, Richard Mollica defines trauma as a painful disorder which describes "social and psychological injuries to the mind and spirit"

(36). This definition recalls Herman's view that trauma is an experience that overwhelms "the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning" (33). This leads to a fragmentation in the individual's perception of human existence, self, emotions, and memories. Herman further argues that traumatic experiences "confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe" (44). The impact of trauma on characters takes the form of physical, existential, psychological, and emotional wounds. These wounds can result in distorted beliefs which badly affect the individual's connection to God. Herman, moreover, proposes that the symptoms of trauma can be represented in literature by portraying characters who struggle to transform their traumatic memories into narrative memories. According to Freud, the human mind is haunted by a tendency to avoid displeasure by repressing memories of unpleasurable experiences. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he asserts that "traumatic neurosis" is the direct outcome of a "disturbance of the mental capacities" which evokes hysterical symptoms (6). These symptoms manifest themselves in the form of unexplained pains, hallucinations, neurotic tics, and traumatic compulsions which happen outside consciousness. It is within this trauma discourse that this study is contextualized.

What the characters experience throughout the play is in conformity with Caruth's general definition of trauma: "The response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (91). The characters try as hard as they can to interpret or make sense of their traumatic experiences, but in vain, and accordingly they fall into the black hole of trauma where they are haunted by distressing memories, negative flashbacks, existential anxiety, distorted beliefs, and alienation. Under such a prism, Magda Romansaka argues that while being under traumatic stress, the traumatized characters "seem to be stuck, unable to move on, to go forward, as if they are stuck in the moment of trauma and lost in it forever" (252). More to the point, the characters of the play are haunted by Caruth's diagnosis that all traumas have a "moving and sorrowful voice that cries out, a voice that is released ... through the wound" (2). The playwright uses a post-traumatic camera to capture the internal

wounds of his traumatized characters. His insightful portrayal of the inside of his fragmented characters reflects his deep insight into human psychology, or the psyche: the container which holds trauma. Being under a sense of burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness, they try to put together the broken pieces of their lives to find meaning, but in vain. More specifically, the characters' inability to achieve inner peace triggers a sense of existential anxiety inside each of them, a sense which, to use Herman's well-chosen words, "tears apart a complex system of self-protection that normally functions in an integrated fashion" (34). This sense kills the potential human being within them that they feel that life, past, present and future hold nothing for them.

Wright's characters are fragmented individuals who experience all sorts of traumatic aesthetics, whether physical, existential, emotional, or even psychological. The characters' multi-dimensional scars shatter their sense of fullness and plunge them into an existential void where believers become doubters. The play provides an influential investigation into the aesthetics of damage associated with trauma which distort the characters' beliefs, disrupt their cognitive equilibrium, shatter their inner peace, and destroy their self-awareness. The aesthetics of trauma intertwine to heighten the characters' suffering. Physical trauma and existential trauma intertwine to create a synthesis in which physical trauma has been existentialized. The existentiality of physical trauma unfolds the characters' distorted beliefs, existential anxiety and alienation. Besides, emotional trauma and existential trauma intertwine to create a synthesis in which emotional trauma has been existentialized. The existentiality of emotional trauma reveals the characters' existential angst, skepticism, and loss of self-definition. Psychological trauma has been contextualized to divulge the negative effects of trauma on the characters' psyche.

The Existentiality of Physical Trauma

Throughout the course of the play, Wright seeks a synthesis of physical trauma and existential trauma from a perspective that can encompass them both. The existentiality of physical trauma manifests itself through the bitter conflict between Steve on the one hand and Karl and Sam on the other over the existence of God. Wright dramatically investigates the affinity of reaction between physical trauma and

existential trauma: the physical traumas which Karl and Sam have experienced without God's intervention to stop any of them are the reason behind their atheism, existential anxiety, and alienation. Steve's blind faith, however, is the magnifying glass upon which the existential pains of both Karl and Sam are reflected. Following the views of the existentialist German philosopher Martin Heidegger, it can be noted that traumatic anxiety has shattered the absolutisms of both Karl and Sam and plunged them into the loss of significance, or as Heidegger puts it: "Anxiety discloses an insignificance of the world; and this insignificance reveals the nullity of that with which one can concern oneself" (393). The physical traumas Karl and Sam have experienced map out a human existence ruled by a force of whose nature they can form no conception and accordingly they have a tendency to nullify this force altogether.

Karl's doubts flourished in 1936 out of the physical traumas he has experienced before the Second World War. His father used to hide the Jews from Hitler because he believed that "the Jews are God's secret" (21). Karl tells Steve that when the Allies started bombing, he saw his mother on fire. He also saw his father cut into two pieces. When the Nazis came and found Karl and his Jewish girlfriend Rachel hidden in the basement, they pushed the bayonet point in his eye, raped Rachel before his eyes, and then compelled him to rape her in front of them. Karl's comment on what has happened to him and his family illustrates the existential anxiety by which he is bitterly tormented: "Ever since then, I know two things for sure. I know there's no God. There's no one watching the world, or keeping anything from happening. And, worse, I know my father is a fool. He is someone who makes himself foolish living for a lie" (21-22). These words are reminiscent of Jerry's argument in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* (1958) in which he affirms that God has forgotten this world. Karl also tells Steve that the former's wife died from cancer in her left parts and accordingly reemphasizes the non-existence of God: "This is what I want to say to you. There is no Jesus. And there is no God" (54). The collapse of Karl's faith can best be seen as a result of the collapse of what Heidegger calls "being-in-the-world", a state of being which gives the individual a sense that he/she is an organic, authentic unit in the world (230). In other words, Karl's severe traumatization resembles Heidegger's depiction of traumatic anxiety:

"The 'world' can offer nothing more, and neither can ... others. Anxiety thus takes away ... the possibility of understanding oneself ... in terms of the 'world' and the way things have been publicly interpreted" (232). From this angle, Karl's disorientation can be understood from his inability to make sense of his severe past experiences. Therefore, he denounces the existence of God out of a physical trauma represented by a rape and murder case. The following conversation between Karl and Steve highlights the playwright's view that physical trauma can lead to atheism and existential angst if God does not intervene to protect the individual:

KARL: There is no God.

STEVE: How can you be so sure?

KARL: Because I am! I know! It's what it is, I know it!

STEVE: For absolute sure.

KARL: Yah, for absolute sure! (20)

Karl's failure to interpret his traumatic past experiences drives him to believe that the world has no logical sequence of events because there is no metaphysical force to govern the world righteously. In a sense, his physical traumas collapse his conception of what Heidegger calls "entity-within-the world" which the individual confronts when he realizes that "the totality of involvements that constitute the significance of the world is, as such, of no consequence" (231). By contrast, Steve proclaims that the very simplest incidents in his life are contingent on God's grace. He even tells his wife Sara that "there are Jews for Jesus" (12). For Steve, if God wants to befall his grace upon someone, He can devote even the Jews to fulfill it. The following conversation between Karl and Steve is highly traumatic to Steve because it indicates Karl's newfound faith in the positivist formula of human existence, a formula which denies any metaphysical impact on reality:

KARL: Well then, I got some news for you.

STEVE: All right.

KARL: One, there's no Jesus.

STEVE: Okay.

KARL: Two, there's no God.

STEVE: Interesting.

KARL: Three, mind your own business and everything works out. (19)

Being existentially traumatized by Karl's above-cited declarations, Steve raises the following dialectical statement to Karl: "Well, if you think there's no Creator, you must think the Earth just made itself" (20). Steve's traumatizing certainty comes into full play when he tells Karl that he has never seen something come out of nothing, but Karl's reply is illustrative of an anguished mind: "That's a bunch of donkey doody" (20). Steve traumatizes Karl once more when he declares that there are historical records proving the existence of a man named Jesus and the stories of his life, death, and resurrection affected the most powerful change in the history of mankind. These words vividly heighten Karl's existential anguish and unconsciously drive him to reconsider the physical traumas he has experienced without God's intervention to stop them.

Besides, when Sam, a computer genius, first appears in the play, he is portrayed as a man filled with frustration and disbelief. Like Karl's, Sam's agnosticism and existential anxiety can best be interpreted in terms of the physical trauma he has experienced. Sam and his girlfriend were going out driving down the highway when a truck whammed them from the side, turned over their car, killed the pretty girl, and scraped half the skin off Sam's face. Sam is existentially traumatized out of this horrific automobile accident. In existentialist terms, Sam's traumatic anxiety can be understood from what Eric Santner calls "internal alienness" (7), a state of being in which the every familiar becomes strange for the individual that self-estrangement shatters any ethical conviction within him, even the existence of God. In a debate between Sam and Steve over the concept of God, Sam declares that he regards Jesus as "a figure of speech" (34). Being severely traumatized by this description, Steve tells Sam that Jesus is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life. 'The reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being who sustains all things by His powerful word'" (34). Sam's following reply to Steve's conviction is analogous to Nietzsche's claim that God is dead:

SAM: I think Jesus was probably someone who lived and died and did some impressive things, politically and personally. And today He is a mythical figure used by charlatans and multinational corporate churches to extort money from people who find life too difficult to face without hearing some lie every Sunday morning, like, 'It's all gonna work out,' or 'God's on your side.' (34)

Sam's broken faith out of a physical trauma manifests itself most clearly when he tells Steve: "I don't know if there's a God. My guess is there probably isn't" (34). Disappointed, Steve asks Sam if the latter is mad at God for "religious hypocrisy", but Sam traumatizes him again when he declares: "But I don't think there's a God to be mad at" (35). Steve hits the nail on the head when he tells Sam that the physical trauma he has experienced is the reason why the latter embraces nihilism: "You're mad at God for killing your fiancée. And you're mad at God for what He's done to your face. Just admit it, Sam. It's okay. You're allowed to say it" (35). It becomes clear thus that the horrific automobile accident has changed something in Sam's life that he himself cannot grasp, a state of existence he deems deformed. This traumatic hole in Sam's life pushes him to fall into a space of nothingness in which his authentic selfhood is thrown into instant oblivion. Sam's physical trauma undermines his sense of fullness. The void within Sam's spirit stems mainly from of a physical wound which unleashes a psychic wound respectively and consequently the psychic wound damages the self. In this context, Herman rightly observes that "the traumatic event ... destroys the belief that one can be *oneself* in relation to others" (53). This can be seen as the reason behind Sam's traumatizing feeling of alienation. The physical trauma from which he suffered leaves him fragmented and alienated: he lives in a world to which he does not seem to belong, and therefore alienation devours him. Sam's alienation resembles Sarah. J. Mann's depiction of social alienation: "The state and experience of being isolated from a group or an activity to which one should belong or in which one should be involved" (7). He lives in a single room to keep himself clean from any contamination from the outside world. He wants no bother because he is not involved anymore. He conforms to neither the social nor the religious norm. Most importantly, Sam's alienation is in conformity with Wesley Barnes' argument that alienation "is a state reached after the individual

has paid a price" (209), a state which can best be regarded as, to use Emile Durkheim's terminologies, "egoistic suicide" (208), resulting mainly from his inability to integrate into a human community, seeing it stifling and deterministic. The sudden death of his fiancée and the physical wound in his face are the price Sam has paid to fall into alienation. At a certain point, Sam embodies a modern Sisyphus whose sense of burdensomeness always looms large before his eyes, a sense which is existentially traumatic to him.

Through the portrayal of Karl and Sam, violent and horrific images on stage drive them closer to their cathartic conditions as their distressing memories remain frozen in time in the form of negative flashbacks, existential anxiety, distorted beliefs, and alienation. Karl's physical trauma reminds him of a world transformed by the Holocaust, a world which is traumatic, meaningless, and devoid of an orderly sequence of events. By analogy, Sam's physical trauma reminds him of a world which is capricious and self-destroying. They cannot interpret their traumatic experiences, make sense of them, or even put them into an ordered scheme. They consider themselves lonely rebels and outsiders, isolated in their own private worlds. So, they provide their own insight into the human condition—that man has been abandoned by God. Out of their belated rumination over their physical traumas, they are contemplative and critical of religion and human existence, and they are eager to share their opinions with the Bible-quoting character Steve whose bombastic vocabulary make them both more confused and uncertain.

The Existentiality of Emotional Trauma

The play also tackles the bitterness of emotional trauma, but the playwright seeks a synthesis of emotional trauma and existential trauma from a perspective that can encompass them both. In Scene Five, Sara and Sam discuss one's haunting desire to have kids. Sam bitterly tells her that he once met a woman on a chat room and that the woman was obsessed by an emotional urge to have a baby, but the problem was that the woman was diabetic and the disease screwed up her system. These words are, of course, existentially traumatic to Sara because her marriage is childless. In this context, Sara's traumatization reflects on Greg Forster's argument that trauma is "a word, an observation, a sensory perception, a

feeling—something in a person's present life" which gives rise to bitterness and existential angst. Sara's childless marriage drives her to realize how her existence is infertile and fruitless.

However, the existentiality of emotional trauma is contextualized through the love affair between Sara and Sam. Due to her husband's emotional indifference and lack of romantic interest, Sara declares her love for Sam, but Sam asks her to look at his bruised face which represents a fatal blunder in his way towards self-harmony. At first, Sam rejects Sara's friendship because it takes the form of charity and pity, two feelings which remind the traumatized individual of his weakness: "I don't want your charity, I don't want your pity, and I certainly don't want any more of your dry-ass cookies" (24). He is unable to accept his new relationship with Sara without his normal face, but Sara casts doubt on physical beauty when she declares: "You can be loved *just because you exist*" (41). In fact, Sara's entry into Sam's life is the stimulus that causes the sap to flow freely and brings about the regeneration of the withered Sam. Sam-Sara relationship can be seen as a win-win situation: he is to save her from her husband's fatal certainty and emotional indifference; she is to save him from his sense of shame and incompleteness. A traumatized individual who suffers from alienation like Sam finds meaning when he shares his life with another being that feels and shares the same emotions. The love care Sam and Sara receive from each other triggers a sense of comfort inside each of them. She heals his soul which is trapped within a deformed body and he heals her heart which is in bad need to care and warmth. What makes Sam-Sara care much fruitful is that it is an unconditional care. In this case, care turns out to be a loving treatment because the care giver takes up his/her burden spontaneously regardless of any gains behind or even any ethical imperatives. Metaphorically speaking, Sam-Sara relationship, a relationship which encompasses meaning for two traumatized individuals, can best be seen as a way to create a sanctuary of inner peace and safety for each of them.

Nonetheless, Sam becomes an abhorrent burden to Steve because his relationship with Sara report four traumatic emotional responses within him: shame, fear, anger, and helplessness. Shame is a negative emotion thought to arise from the individual's negative appraisal of himself/herself: Steve's self-esteem has been shattered by Sam's intrusion

into his life. Fear is the hallmark emotional symptom of the void within the individual: Steve's sense of fullness has been shattered by Sam that he feels that without his wife Sara, the future holds nothing for him. Anger is a negative emotion thought to arise from the violation of religious and moral values: Steve is intensely angry about his wife's relationship with Sam because it is beyond the law. Helplessness is a negative emotion thought to be a response to the feeling of loss: Steve is helpless because Sara has fallen in love with a man who has neither face nor faith. Being under these negative emotions which can plunge the individual into an existential void, Steve asks Sara to consider going back to Minnesota since the conditions under which they are living in Florida are unbearable, but she replies, "I don't think we should be married anymore" (48). Sara's reply is existentially traumatic to Steve because it touches upon Heidegger's view that being-in-the-world involves being-with-others. Thereafter, Steve, being upset by the loss of his wife to a disbeliever, bitterly addresses God, asking: "What are you trying to tell me?" (49). Steve's traumatic question recalls Robert D. Stolorow's view that the traumatized individual falls into "*an ontological unconsciousness*—a hallmark of the experience of emotional trauma" (117). In other words, Steve becomes skeptical at the mystery of God's divine life within him. He experiences the loss of his sense of being because he is strongly dependent on Sara as a partner in his expertise of faith, or as he puts it: "My expertise... is faith. I'm not a knower. I'm a believer. And that's what real estate is all about. It's about faith" (29). The loss of his wife to a positivist computer scientist who has no faith brings a threat to Steve's certainty that he falls into a space of skepticism.

Therefore, Steve tries to put an end to this relationship by telling Sara that it is irrational to fall in love with a man with a bruised face, but he fails to turn Sara against Sam. Distressed, he tries to lay the blame on Sam, but the latter tells him he has not made a plan to have Sara because he does not believe in paradigms, whether existential or metaphysical: "I don't have a plan. I never believed in anything growing up, and, to tell you the truth, I'm not sure what I believe now" (50). Sam goes one step further when he tells Steve that before meeting Sara, his life was meaningless that he used to look at his life as a mistake and now she represents a hope for salvation for him:

All I know is, I thought my life was over. Done. I thought, I'm walking around and thinking and doing things but that's just because there's been some kind of mistake. Until she came over. And then things changed.... She was a sign to me, she was a message that, uh... that I wasn't dead. That it wasn't a mistake that I was alive. That life is maybe about more than I thought it was. She saved me. And I don't know how to say no to that. (51)

Disappointed, Steve tries to undermine Sam's above-cited conviction by incurring suspicion about his relationship with Sara, telling him that Sara's entry into his life is an act of God Who drives her into his way to salvage him, but Sam strongly denies Steve's argument. So, Steve falls prey to traumatic anxiety associated with skepticism: "No way did everything, everything go wrong" (51). He is existentially agonized by the fact that he lost his wife to a man with neither face nor faith. When Steve's attempts to end Sam-Sara relationship come to nothing, he bitterly feels he has been abandoned by God: "No way does God do that to a person. No way" (52). It can be noted thus that Steve has become skeptical at divine justice, but Sam's comment on Steve's newfound skepticism is a biting satire against divine justice, a comment which is existentially traumatic to Steve:

Maybe you're right, maybe there is a God, but maybe in God, there's no justice.... So, there's no saying what God will and will not do to anybody, if there even is one.... No, but maybe there isn't, because to have justice, Steve, you'd have to have cause and effect. To have cause and effect, you'd have to have time. And to have time, you'd have to have space. You're the one that told me in God there's no space and time, well, if there's no space and time, there's no justice. (52)

These words vividly indicate that Steve is existentially suffocated by Sam who incites him to suicide by asking many questions, invading his space, and incurring suspicion about his convictions. Therefore, the last moments of the play are highly traumatic. Having been suffocated by Sam's invasion of his space, Steve kills Sam, Sara, and himself, thereby devastating the Sam-Sara sanctuary of inner peace. In existentialist terms, Steve's traumatic anxiety plunges him into what Heidegger calls "being-toward-death" (296), a state of being in which the

individual finds himself/herself face-to-face with the impossibility of being because of the diminution or even loss of the sense of being-in-the-world.

The Contextuality of Psychological Trauma

Psychological trauma has been contextualized to disclose the bitter effects of trauma on the characters' psyche. Traumatic aesthetics are eventually deposited in the psyche in the form of psychological disorders. Throughout the course of the play, Karl's mind and psyche cannot interpret, recover or even hide his distressing past memories. He has no personal or ontological triggers to dissociate himself from this bitter moment as though his memory becomes his arch enemy. He is anguished by a traumatic past as though the past is dismantling the present, since he is haunted by the terrible Hitlerian sadism which reminds him of Hitler's insistence on animalizing the human, a racist anthropology in which humans are looked upon as less than animals, or as Alex Bein puts it: "The word 'parasite' is used to designate the Jew as an individual" (12). The animalistic dehumanization of the Jews and the campaigns of mass murder committed by the Nazis against Karl and his family left behind psychological scars in his psyche and accordingly these scars deform his reality.

Nevertheless, Steve is not aware of the fact that Karl has no ability to evade the unconscious representation of his traumatic events which incomprehensibly visit him in the form of a negative flashback or hysteria, a psychological disorder in which the repressed event can be awoken in consciousness in the form of a psychological pain. In this context, Karl's suffering touches upon Freud's argument that the traumatized individual has a "passive experience, over which he has no influence" because the experience is repeatedly repeated in his unconscious mind as if it were taking place at that very moment (14). Thus, Karl reenacts what he cannot remember. This is called traumatic reenactment: the automatic repetition of the past. The traumatic reenactment carries with it what Dori Laub calls the "collapse of witnessing" (76), the inability to make sense of what constitutes the traumatic event. Freud argues that a traumatic individual sometimes experience the repetition compulsion, or as van der Kolk points it out,

"He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating.... He cannot escape from this compulsion to repeat; and in the end we understand that this is his way of remembering" (271). Karl's reliving of the past in the present is due to his inability to integrate it appropriately in memory. Following Herman's classification of symptoms of trauma, Karl experiences what she calls "intrusion" (35); that is, the outside has gone into inside without meditation. He appears to be under Richard McNally's diagnosis that "intrusive recollections are disturbing thoughts and images of the event that come to mind even when the person does not want to think about it" (105). Out of a rape and murder case, Karl falls into psychological disorders which severely traumatize him.

In addition, Sam is psychologically traumatized with shame owing to the physical trauma in his face. Before the accident, there was beauty and self-possession. After the accident, everything becomes nightmarish. Reality has been deformed and disrupted in his mind and psyche. His near-death experience remains to be incomprehensible and that's why he is bitterly tormented. His trauma leaves behind extreme feelings and wounds, but Wright proves to be skillful enough to theatricalize the incomprehensible. Fragmented memories haunt Sam throughout the play and these memories unfortunately dissect his life because they leave behind psychological wounds which remain unhealed. He is portrayed as a man suffering from a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Julie Rea Harper defines PTSD as "a condition that causes hyper and irrational responses to situations or 'signs'—responses, which seem unmerited in a given context—as the normative population would experience it" (378). Negative flashbacks haunt him when he is upset and distressed: he is always seen as reliving traumatic events in the form of flashbacks. Being internally fragile, he falls into the black hole of trauma. Even his emotions are traumatized, but they can be observed by his facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures. He is tormented by distressing memories that he becomes unconsciously haunted by internal demons which symbolize or resemble an aspect of the traumatic event, or as Daniel Schacter points it out: "Memories as records of how we have experienced events, not replicas of the events themselves" (5). The internal demons are revealed through the photos of his dead fiancée: they

have taken a trip to Italy and took 700 pictures of the best moments of his "motherfucking life" that he sees he will never have back again (24). He tries to download the photos from memory cards onto his hard drive, but the memory cards prove to be empty and meanwhile the photos are granulating and losing information every time he opens them. Sam's turning to inanimate objects such as the photos of his dead fiancée demonstrates that he withers psychologically that he cries out in despair: "—And now she's fucking dead and all I have left are these pictures that your fucking memory cards and your fucking camera and your stupid fucking community college programmers have kidnapped" (24). To use van der Kolk's terminology, Sam's association with the photos of his dead fiancée can best be seen as an "addiction to trauma" in which the traumatized individual has no ability to evade self-harm (314).

Sam also experiences psychogenic amnesia because he cannot handle his traumatic memories which are unendurable. Psychogenic amnesia is a psychological disorder associated with repressed memories. Sam's insistence on downloading the photos of his dead fiancée from memory cards is indicative of the fact that he is unable to normally remember her face in memory. Being mentally distracted, he sometimes insists on telling his stories overtly, but this might be taken as his defense mechanism to overcome traumatic memories. In other words, he is inclined to abide by Shakespeare's words in *Macbeth* which urge us to "give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak whispers the o'ver fraught heart and bids its break" (214). This mechanism, however, recalls Anne Sexton's poem "The Silence" in which she describes silence itself as a traumatic event: "The silence is death./ It comes each day with its shock" (319).

Moreover, Steve's murder crime can best be interpreted in terms of Freud's notion of "ego-instincts". Freud argues that "ego-instincts arise from the coming to life of inanimate matter and seek to restore the inanimate state" (38). Put another way, the death drive controls Steve as he lost the sexual instincts represented by Sara's presence in his life. Caruth calls this behavior "the experience of passing beyond death without knowing it" (65). Steve's murder crime is reactionary because chaos disrupts the events of the play. For Steve, Sara's love to Sam is

incomprehensible, a melodrama, and out of this sudden abrupt, Steve's reaction is unexpected and traumatic. His last words in the play are quite telling in this regard: "And so I did what any poor, stupid, helpless human being would do. I changed everything. I recognized my entire life around this 'universal love' that I thought I saw, that I thought I felt. It felt like the most perfection and beauty I'd ever felt in my life, and this is how it ends up?" (55) It becomes clear thus that Steve is bitterly tormented by the symptoms of psychological trauma which leave him disconnected and unable to trust other people who shatter his sense of security. The loss of his sense of security plunges him into a psychological void in which suicide becomes an impulsive act that he kills Sara, Sam, and himself.

Conclusion

To conclude, Craig Wright's *Grace* tackles multi-dimensional traumatic aesthetics through the portrayal of four characters who fail to handle their traumas because they remain absurd and meaningless. The play highlights the playwright's view that man's beliefs can be distorted if God does not intervene to protect him. The physical traumas which Karl and Sam have experienced throughout their lives are the reason behind their agnosticism, existential anxiety, and alienation. Wright seeks a synthesis of physical trauma and existential trauma which can encompass them both. The existentiality of physical trauma is what envelops the traumatic aesthetics of both Karl and Sam. However, Steve's blind certainty is the magnifying glass upon which the distress of Karl and Sam is reflected. Due to the rape of his Jewish girlfriend Rachel and the brutal murder of his parents by the Nazis, Karl embraces atheism because he comes to the conclusion that God does not care. Due to the sudden death of his fiancée and the physical trauma in his face, Sam now has faith in nothing that he embraces nihilism. Steve remains to be severely traumatized by Karl and Sam's atheism throughout the play. Wright also seeks a synthesis of emotional trauma and existential trauma. The existentiality of emotional trauma unfolds itself through the love affair between Sara and Sam. Sara's husband, Steve, is suffocated by Sam's intrusion into his life, an intrusion which distorts his belief in God and in divine justice respectively. Sam-Sara relationship results in skepticism and existential angst within Steve that he kills Sara, Sam, and himself.

Sara's turning to Sam can best understood from her husband's emotional indifference and lack of romantic interest. Psychologically, the characters of the play confront internal demons that bitterly traumatize them. Karl is haunted by negative flashbacks and distressing memories associated with the Hitlerian sadism represented by the rape of his girlfriend and the murder of his parents. He also experiences traumatic reenactment because he is unable to integrate his traumas appropriately in memory. Sam is haunted by fragmented memories that he appears to be under what van der Kolk calls "addiction to trauma". This is manifested by his belated association with the photos of his dead fiancée. The physical wound in Sam's face leaves him fragmented and filled with a sense of shame and incompleteness. Further, he suffers from a post-traumatic stress disorder out of his inability to interpret or make sense of his traumatic experiences. Moreover, Steve is psychologically tormented by the love affair between his wife and Sam, a relationship which leaves behind psychological scars. All the characters' attempts to heal their wounds are doomed and consequently these wounds remain unhealed. This is skillfully demonstrated through the portrayal of the characters' psyche. Thus, they remain to psychologically suffer throughout the play till the murder case which ends the life of Sara, Sam, and Steve.

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