

Narrative Remedies: Exploring Therapeutic Expression in Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata*

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Abstract

This research paper explores the therapeutic dimension of writing as a means of healing, with a specific focus on Phyllis Alesia Perry's novel, Stigmata. Perry's work serves as a powerful example of how literature can be employed as a therapeutic tool for individuals navigating through trauma and adversity. The paper examines the novel's narrative structure, character development, and thematic elements, highlighting the healing potential embedded in the act of writing. By examining the protagonist's journey and the broader implications for readers, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of literature as a therapeutic medium. Although Stigmata contains various therapeutic dimensions, this paper tries to limit on the scope of scriptotherapy to reach the research end. First, the paper develops Suzette A. Henke's theory of "scriptotherapy" which is supported by Jennifer Lynne Bird's "Narrative Writing," and Sayantani DasGupta and Marsha Hurst's "Narrative Medicine" on the basis set by Jeffrey C. Alexander's notion of the "agent of the carrier group," Ron Eyerman's notion of "collective representation," and Dominick LaCapra's notion of "working through" since all these notions directly or indirectly contribute healing the traumatic wounds of people. In reading the novel, the employment of the theories helps discover how Stigmata proves to be therapeutic by analyzing and interpreting the essential and relevant textual evidence. Employment of the already produced literature by the scholars/critics will authenticate the central logic in meeting the research end.

Keywords: trauma, collective memory, collective representation, scriptotherapy, healing

1. Introduction

The history of African Americans in the United States is profoundly shaped by the brutal institution of chattel slavery. The suffering, torture, and dehumanization experienced by enslaved individuals reverberate through generations, leaving a legacy of intergenerational trauma. Phyllis Alesia Perry's novel "Stigmata" poignantly captures this intergenerational trauma and explores its enduring consequences through the narrative of Lizzie, a contemporary African American woman. Lizzie, though separated from the horrors of

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Received on Sept. 23, 2023

Accepted on Jan. 19, 2024

Published on Jan. 31, 2024

slavery by time, grapples with the weight of history inherited from her ancestors. This “historical/cultural trauma,” as Jennifer Mullan-Gonzalez terms it, manifests in Lizzie’s hypersensitivity to stress and emotional challenges. The novel meticulously traces the transmission of trauma, demonstrating how the agonizing experiences of past generations continue to impact the present. This connection is illustrated through Lizzie’s connection to Ayo, her great-great-grandmother, who endured the horrors of the middle passage and the brutality of chattel slavery.

Perry utilizes *Stigmata* as a potent tool for navigating and potentially healing this inherited trauma. The act of writing itself functions as a form of “scriptotherapy,” enabling both the characters and the reader to confront and process the painful realities of the past. Cathy Caruth’s notion of trauma and Dominick LaCapra’s concept of “working through” inform Perry’s approach, suggesting that engaging with the traumatic past is crucial for achieving healing and understanding. However, Perry’s characters do not succumb to resentment or demonization. Instead, they exhibit a remarkable sense of “double consciousness” as described by W.E.B. Du Bois, navigating the complexities of their identity within a society still marked by the vestiges of slavery. Their focus is on personal growth and resilience, not on perpetuating anger or seeking revenge. This emphasis on self-building resonates with Alexander’s idea of “carrier groups” and Eyerman’s concept of “collective representation,” demonstrating how African Americans have forged a strong sense of community and solidarity in the face of historical trauma.

Ultimately, *Stigmata* offers a powerful portrayal of the intergenerational impact of slavery on African Americans. By employing the concept of scriptotherapy and highlighting the enduring strength and resilience of its characters, Perry suggests the possibility of healing and moving forward while acknowledging the undeniable scar left by the past. This haunting legacy, though painful, becomes a source of empowerment and self-understanding, reminding us of the ongoing struggle for racial justice and the continued need to grapple with the enduring impact of historical trauma. Officially 246 years from 1619 to 1865 and unofficially about additional 100 years till the 1960s, there began, continued, and existed chattel slavery in the USA giving the strong impression of cultural trauma to the black people. As the impact of the trauma remained unaddressed for a long, it got transmigrated up to the contemporary generation as intergenerational or historical trauma that is cultural in nature due to its effect on the collectivity of black people. The purpose of the study, in this reference, is to address the intergenerational/historical trauma to help the African American people heal since the researcher believes to discover therapeutic assets in Perry’s *Stigmata*. As a representation of black people and their suffering, Lizzie, the female protagonist’s struggling effort to write her traumatic experiences helps her heal from the trauma that had generated a rip in the personal, familial, and communal fabric. The employment of

Henke's "scriptotherapy" as a theoretical frame and 'neo-slave narrative' as a narrative frame remain central in the study. The paper seeks to answer the questions: How does Perry's *Stigmata* function as a therapeutic narrative? and Why does Perry use the neo-slave narrative as a narrative frame?

2. Review

Perry's *Stigmata* incorporates a re-memory of trauma since there is a presentation of the traumatic transmigration of the ancestors into the later (contemporary) generations of African American people. There is a great deal of literature produced on this noteworthy contemporary novel. Gabrielle P. Foreman argues *Stigmata* to be a "living ghost story told in a non-linear style that is part magic realism, part fantastic" where the narrative moves back and forth between the "central protagonist Lizzie DuBose, her grandmother Grace and Grace's grandmother Ayo, who was stolen from Africa and enslaved. In the world of *Stigmata*, Lizzie's body will eventually host all three women" ("Wearing" 28). Foreman considers the residing of the ancestors in Lizzie's body as the appearance of the ghost, and he is interested to argue about the narrative that has a supernatural theme.

Eva Tettenborn digs out the connection between Lizzie's quilt that she inherits from her grandmother and the African culture. For her, the quilt "might hold the key to Ayo's appeasement as it would not only represent the very specific, individual sufferings of women [. . .] but instead signal how their stories can be contextualized in a philosophical framework that speaks for the experiences of the African diaspora" ("Africana" 107-08). Here, Eva discovers a diasporic vision in the novel *Stigmata* which she is interested to contextualize in the context of the sense of attachment to the culture of African people living in America. This reference to the quilt works as a dimension of healing. It is possible for them by being connected to their ancestral culture of quilting.

For Lisa A. Long, *Stigmata* encroaches on the "minds and bodies of [the] historical subjects" and the narrative "dramatize[s] the inherently violent nature of the pursuit of historical veracity," and such endeavors "[not] only do violence to the past but also pain those who submit themselves to historical events" ("A Relative Pain" 461). This means that the encroachment on the historical subject that Perry does, as argued by Long, is a fruitless effort. Perry does not target writing her text considering it as historical fiction in a straightforward manner, but she uses imaginary characters to represent the historical/cultural memory of the African American people. Time traveling of the imaginary characters, namely Lizzie in Perry's narrative, into the past is an attempt of the author to create the history of the dislocated black people in antebellum as well as postbellum America. But this idea, according to Long, complicates the national memory of the African people instead of easing and helping to heal.

Long further argues that Perry imagines "physical pain in order to authenticate [the] historical renderings," which confuses late twentieth-century audiences (461). She finds Perry's technique problematic. Long authenticates her argument citing Paul Gilroy's

citation of Toni Morrison: “[Memory] is much more in danger now than it was thirty years ago” (461). Long’s quoting of Gilroy’s understanding of Morrison makes us realize that the memory in the late twentieth century is more in danger than the past because the authors like Parry try to encroach the minds of imaginary characters to confuse the real sense of trauma faced by African American people. She argues that the attempt to enter the imaginary minds and imagine the pain is the rape of history.

Although there have been various research works on the text, none of these researchers, and the others in my knowledge, have explored writing as a therapeutic dimension in *Stigmata*. Therefore, the present research sheds light on therapeutic dealings in *Stigmata* with the support of the notions of Suzette A. Henke, Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, and Dominick LaCapra.

3. Methodology

Utilizing a qualitative analysis approach, this research examines the text of *Stigmata* to identify patterns, themes, and character dynamics that contribute to the therapeutic impact of the work. Additionally, insights from interviews with Phyllis Alesia Perry and relevant literary scholars may be incorporated to enrich the analysis

4. Analysis and Discussion

The debate about the horrors of the middle passage gets intensified when the apologists of the slave trade argue that “Africans, at a lower stage of development than Europeans, were immune to this treatment” (*Black Imagination* 6). It is rationalized by James Anthony Froude in his book *The English in the West Indies; or, The Bow of Ulysses* where he argues: “[slaves] could be raised from their primitive state only with the aid of European civilization, without it, they would inevitably recede into darkness” (cited in 6-7). This begins the biggest problem in the lives of those black slaves in the Americas in the form of collective cultural trauma. In this context, Rinaldo Walcott talks about missing or void or gap in the African American historical memory related to the middle passage. The survivors were not permitted to mourn their dead fellow captives in the journey that Rinaldo Walcott sees began “collective trauma” which he clarifies arguing: “[although] it was different for each slave, I see this crisis as a collective trauma for Black people specifically” resulted from the slavers’ denial to “put their dead to rest in ways that accorded with their customs” that they could not “mourn their dead in ways that might allow them to get over the loss” (*Middle Passage* 60). Editors also argue the same “For every single one defined the whole” (*Black Imagination* 17). It is a clear suggestion that the experience of each of the individuals of black people during the middle passage is a collective experience that turns out to be a cultural trauma which strikes back as Walcott finds “return[s] to structure [the] present” (*Middle Passage* 61). Thus, the individual middle passage experience of the slaves is a collective experience since they share similar brutality, and therefore the trauma resulted is cultural trauma.

Arguing back about the fate of the slaves, it is baffling to decide whether those 15 percent who perished on the voyages were lucky or the rest 85 percent who survived because they were the people forced to be slaves under the slavery system in the Americas. Gates writes: “Those who managed to survive endured a lifetime of unimaginable hardship, bound by [European American] people who carefully and willfully did all they could do in every possible way to strip away every aspect of their slaves’ humanity” (*In Search*). This striping of the slaves’ humanity and the slavers’ justification of their deeds are the beginning of the elongated brutality in the name of the slavery system there.

The slavers’ justification of the slaves being treated inhumanly and the violent origin of the middle passage’s returning to structure the present set a foundation to answer the scholarly question related to the doubt about the significance of the use of the middle passage reference in the contemporary era. It is countered with the argument made by the editors of *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*: “The error in African-American studies had been to look to print and to language for evidence of African survivals” (8). Because the then black people were not permitted to keep a record of the middle passage experience through any means except remembering them, the editors argue it is irrational to ask for the proof record in print form using language. The slaves at that time spoke diverse languages since they were taken from different parts of Africa, and they could not speak the slavers’ language too, meaning it was impossible for the blacks to use the language and keep the print record of the middle passage experience.

The editors of *Black Imagination* further argue that the black slaves carried the void of the middle passage and passed it down to future generations. They write that the slaves “[passed] on and re-remembered from generation to generation [. . .] they remade, reimagined, and retold” (17-18) their middle passage and the chattel slavery’s brutality. Walcott’s argument, in the same line, justifies the void of the cultural trauma of the black people’s middle passage experience which “[is] re-membered, disremembered, forgotten, and recuperated in the Americas” (*Middle Passage* 60). The combined reading of these two sources proves that the middle passage memory comes to structure the lives of the people even in the contemporary era through the means of memory passed down to intergenerational people and literary representation plays a crucial role in this.

Remembering and remaking the middle passage experience is possible through representation which Walcott defines as “[an] artistic representations across literature, film, music, and visual art that seek to offer imaginative insights into its horrors” (59) which is an offering of a solution that he sees “as a kind of reparation making, a working through of the acknowledgment of the missing or lost” (61). Representation of the violent origin of the middle passage in any form of the genres: David Dabydeen’s poem ‘Turner’ (1994), and Tom Feelings’ artwork *Middle Passage* (1995), for example, become “[a] working through of the collective traumas of the Middle Passage” (62). In this reference, Although Walcott suggests that the concept of the middle passage is required to be taken

as a “memory of ancient cruelty” (62), he sees the positive aspects in it as well. He writes: “[the] painful Middle Passage could become, ironically, a positive connecting line to all of us whether living inside or outside the continent of Africa” (66). In this line of argument Helene Christol, in her article “The African American Concept of the Fantastic as Middle Passage,” argues about Toni Morrison’s representation of the middle passage and the art of resurrecting “Beloved,” a murdered daughter, as “[the] fantastic as therapy that bridges the gap artificially created by white colonization between Africa and America, the living and the dead, the past and the present (*Black Imagination* 169). Representation of the middle passage experience thus turns out to be therapeutic.

Formation of the black feminism and triple consciousness is based on the DuBoisian theory of double consciousness. This research holds that the double (triple) consciousness, in the context of African American people, is the realization not only of how bad white people and black men are at black women in imposing their perspective to see and define black them but also of how well black women are at themselves in understanding and self-building. It does not mean that black women are always good at themselves. The triple consciousness is the confession of personal weakness(es) of the black women too. Following the confession of their personal weaknesses, they work to build their truer selves conducting the journey within by the discovery of internal conflict and the repairment of them. The positive thing is they can have a better approach since they have triple lenses when the whites have only one, and the black men have two. This triple consciousness is the result of the weaknesses of the DuBoisian double consciousness.

Double consciousness, as developed by W. E. B. DuBois in the African American context, is the bearing of two perceptions by black people to view themselves and the world. The perceptions include the perception of their own and the externally imposed perception of the colonial whites. In many references, blacks are compelled to see themselves from the parameter set by the colonial whites. It is the situation of having no true consciousness of the people. It creates the problem of adjustment and leads towards the state of splitting the self in the process of defining who they are. Double consciousness, for W. E. B. Du Bois is the sense of “looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” that makes black people feel twoness: “an American, a Negro” containing “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (*The Souls* 8). The warring ideals in one body are sure to create chaos in the life of an individual who contains them. This situation is likely to lead a person to protest and resist as no one likes the imposed perception. Du Bois argues further: “The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self” (9). Merging of the double self by the people experiencing a history of strife might yield diverse results. Du Bois believes that the double consciousness does not give true self to black people since they are “gifted with second-sight in this American world [. . .] which yields [them] no true self-consciousness” (8). Departing from the Du Boisian argument the

present research holds the affirmative ground to settle this warring situation. Brent Hayes Edwards cites William H. Ferris, a black intellectual's idea, who takes DuBois's *The Souls of The Black Folk* as "the political Bible of the negro race [for] setting the definitive terms of debate for a national dialogue about the significance of race in the lingering aftermath of the slave trade" (VII).

Although DuBois has contributed to the history and memory of the black race, various scholars like Mocombe and Nahum Welang, have pointed out that he has failed to refute the rootedness of racial science in general and include black feminism in particular. In this reference, Nahum Welang develops the triple consciousness theory (TCT) inspired by the DuBoisian theory of double consciousness to address the limitation of double consciousness in relation to the lived reality of African American women. He argues that black female voices are marginalized by emphasizing "white patriarchy and black hypermasculinity [. . .] and the prioritization of white women's interests within and beyond mainstream feminist spaces" ("Triple Consciousness" 296). Going beyond DuBois, Welang states about the argument of TCT that "black women view themselves through three lenses and not two" and these lenses include "*America* (epitomized by the systemic sovereignty of white patriarchy), *blackness* (a racial identity dominated by the patriarchal attitudes of black hypermasculinity) and *womanhood* (a gendered category that prioritizes the interests of white women to the detriment of black women)" (305), where he argues "Black feminists, TCT affirms, are able to reimagine misguided narratives of black womanhood in contemporary American culture by unpacking the complexity of this threefold consciousness" (296). This understanding of TCT lets Black women in contemporary US setting work for the formation of their identity addressing the case of double marginalization.

For setting TCT, Welang studies "how black women in contemporary American non-fiction (Roxane Gay's *Bad Feminist*), music (Beyoncé's *Lemonade*), television (Issa Rae's *Insecure*) and film (Marvel's *Black Panther*) are legitimising their intermediate existence, accessing their alternate selves and reimagining their identities" (305) to gather arguments for the necessity and rationality of the formation of TCT. Gay discusses the requirement of the "inclusion of pluralist voices in the mainstream feminist movement," Beyoncé talks about the black women's "betrayal by black men and white women" using the genre of gothic fiction, and Issa Rae critiques the "archetypes attached to black womanhood" (296). He does not only study these literary texts but also refers to the concepts of black intellectuals like Bonnie Thornton's "dialectics of black womanhood," Alice Walker's "the conditions of twin afflictions" and Frances Beale's "double jeopardy" which have discovered "the uncomfortable intermediate space black women inhabit at the intersection of race and gender" (298). Thus, Welang concludes the requirement of his formation of TCT arguing "DuBois's double consciousness, and its sycophantic contemporary reimaginings, are therefore flawed because they do not represent the varied and complex interests of black women" (298).

Lizzie DuBose, the protagonist and one of the narrators, is a representative character from the contemporary generation of African American people in the US. She suffers from intergenerational/historical/cultural trauma and her suffering is a result of the slavery system that lasted for 246 years officially and the continuity of maltreatment of black people for another one hundred years in the US which was much brutal and inhuman in nature. She is institutionalized (taken to different hospitals considering her case to be a mental one) for fourteen years between 1980 and 1994. It happens after she reads the diary and uses the quilt that she receives as her grandmother Grace's gift packed in a trunk. The diary is written by Joy, her great-grandmother, where she shares the painful experiences of her mother Ayo, the great-great-grandmother of Lizzie. Lizzie reads the diary and uses the quilt that causes her to have visions of the great-grandmothers and has the real experience of their sufferings. Her suffering is the result of the transmigration of the souls of her grandmother, great-grandmother, and great-great-grandmother which not only causes her to be psychosomatic as the family interprets but also suffers physical scars on her wrists, ankles, and on her back. These physical manifestations of the scars are stigmata that are interpreted as the ancestral legacy of historical/cultural trauma suffering. The parents, scared of the symptoms as psychosomatic, institutionalize her at the age of twenty. In this reference, Kara E. Jacobi interprets: "Lizzie's dreams, visions, and physical encounters with the past are the result of a curse, brought on by Ayo in an effort to share the unimaginable traumas of her abduction/capture, being forced to America on the Middle Passage, then being sold and abused by white men and women as a slave in the American South" (*They Will Invent* 35). The stigmata reflect the site of cultural trauma causing the tear in her individual and familial legacy that is the tear in the social fabric, and ultimately tear in the existence and identity of the African American people. Stigmata is interested in the use of writing as a therapeutic tool that has its tripartite scope of healing.

5. Conclusion

This paper concludes that the healing of the contemporary African American people, who suffer intergenerational/historical trauma, as well as neo-slavery has been possible with the notion of scriptotherapy along with the narrative technique of neo-slave narrative. The development of the sense of collectivity by representing the byproduct of the middle passage and chattel slavery, aided with the milestone-setting effort of the contemporary African American rape survivor female author's collective representation of the trauma suffering through the protagonist Lizzie who gets healed from the state of her intergenerational trauma after she practices journal writing helps the African American people unite and work through the problem.

Lizzie does not stick to the historical context even after having the ancestral visions for a long time. The beauty of the author is that she expresses the history of the legacy of slavery and intergenerational/cultural trauma as its byproduct establishing the connection between the first generation of slaves and the contemporary generation of African American

people. She works as the agent of the carrier group who witnesses the suffering and then represents them for the collectivity. This collective representation through writing works as the healer. She overcomes fear and the sense of being controlled by writing her traumatic experience as part of scriptotherapy. With the formation of the sense of triple consciousness, contemporary African people, the author as well as the character(s) in the text become more oriented towards self-building and identity formation, and they do not turn against the perpetrators in the process.

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