

Trauma in Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro*: A character analysis

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ABSTRACT

Trauma, meaning wound, is a common phenomenon in our modern world and this phenomenon is represented in many works of literature in various ways. One of the examples of literary work that attempts to represent trauma is Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro*, a 1914 Japanese novel written by one of the most famous Japanese author. This research aims to answer the question of how trauma shape a person's identity in the translated version of Natsume Soseki's *Kokoro* (1957). This research focuses on the character development of one of the main character in the story, Sensei. Employing Caruth's (1995) trauma theory as a the theoretical framework, this study uses descriptive qualitative as the approach. The result finds that Sensei's identity is shaped by two major traumatic event in his life, the betrayal of his uncle and the death of his close friend. In response to the two tragic events, Sensei constructs an identity that are characterized by attributing cynical attitude, attaching guilt, and casting fear. Because he feels he is haunted by his trauma, he decided to commit suicide in order to be free. The way Sensei constructs his identity in response to his traumatic past is also a reflection of a postmodern notion identity in which a person's identity is never absolute and is prone to change.

Keywords: *Identity, trauma, Japanese literature.*

INTRODUCTION

Pain is a fact of life. Human beings experience pain at some point during their life, whether they come in physical or mental form. The world is often a cruel and an unfair place that does not allow anyone to always get what they want. In response, sometimes people lash out, whether to others or even themselves. Furthermore, while some people may become stronger through pain, there are some who instead become traumatized by them.

The prevalence of trauma, both personal and collective, within our modern age has led Kurtz (2018), as well as Calvo and Nadal (2018), to define the modern age as a period characterized by trauma. The biggest example of modern trauma would be the holocaust and the horrors of World War II. In addition, “both trauma and the sublime incommensurability, disruption, terror, and pain; they mark the limits of reason and resist representation, forcing critical thoughts to a crisis” (Calvo & Nadal, 2018, p. 2). Therefore, the inexplicable nature of trauma has pushed theorists to their critical limits.

In general, trauma can be defined as a form of wound that was inflicted due to external events.

While trauma can come in the form of a physical wound, in modern times, trauma is associated with a damage to a person's psyche (Kurtz, 2018). The harm that trauma does can be disruptive to the point that it can lead individuals to question the world around them and even themselves, shifting the notion of identity that an individual has in their head. This shift in the notion of identity is what Hall (1996) would call as the hallmark of postmodern identity, in which a person's identity is always in a state of constant flux and is never fixed.

Within the realm of trauma representation in literature, Caruth is considered to be the pioneer in looking at literature to see how trauma manifests. Caruth (1995) has this to say in regards to the general description of what constitute as trauma:

While the precise definition of post-traumatic stress disorder is contested, most descriptions generally agree that there is a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which take the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (p. 4)

With this, it can be said that trauma is the way humans react toward intensive catastrophe to the point where the victim relives those tragic moments through flashback and compelling them to avoid anything that may trigger that flashback. Even with this definition however, Caruth (1995) writes that it contradicts a certain fact. In particular, this phenomenon is not defined by the experience itself, because it does not affect everyone the same way, nor does it defined by the way people assign their individual feelings to the experience. Rather, trauma is a phenomenon defined by “solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it” (p. 4). This means that trauma is defined by the way people respond toward tragedy, specifically, the way the people incompletely absorb a tragedy and only came to fully understand it after experiencing repeated images of that tragedy.

The fact that trauma is a belated and recurring experience is especially important to note. This is, in part, because the nature of the

tragic events is intensely unbearable and shocking. Trauma is also a phenomenon that manifests itself as a voice that cries out, demanding its victim to bear witness and remember the tragic incident that plague its victim (Caruth, 1996). Which is why trauma is not so much a symptom of unconscious, but a symptom of history. Particularly, in the way that trauma itself manifests, against its victim’s will, in a repeated nightmare as if the wound in its victim’s mind demanded to return to the tragic event in order to fully process it. What is perplexing however, is the fact that, while the flashback is generally accurate, it is not a phenomenon that can be recalled by a trauma victim willingly, meaning they can not simply access their traumatic memory should they want to themselves. This suggests that traumatic flashback is not a repression in the face of overwhelming tragedy, but rather a phenomenon not fully observed and accepted by the mind of its participants. Which is why, the history that the recurring nightmare trying to tell neither belongs in the past due to the incomplete integration of the experience nor the present due to incomprehensibility of the images received. This makes

relating to others of what those images are difficult, but nevertheless, transmitting the horror of the tragedy is not impossible even if its not complete (Caruth, 1995).

In conjunction with Calvo and Nadal statement, literature becomes a fertile field for authors to represent and understand trauma. This is reflected in the fact that literature is often used as a medium of cautionary for human beings to cope with trauma. Examples of this can be found in many literary works written by holocaust survivors, such as Elie Wiesel's *Night* (1960) and Primo Levi's *If This is a Man* (1947), that narrated their experiences under the Nazi's fascist regime. Wiesel's work in *Night* was done in an attempt to never forget the tragedy that happened to him and so that he could keep fighting to prevent such tragedies to ever happen again (Berger, 2016). Through *If This is a Man*, Levi offered readers an insight in which no tragic events can ever completely broke a person (Sands, 2017).

Examples of literary works above are possible due to the nature of literature as a form of representation. According to Hall (1997), representation is a way for

humans to interpret and make meaning out of the reality that they live in. Literary writers incorporate what meaning they glean from the world at large and represent it in the form of a fictional story. This representation manifests in the way literature depicts the daily life of an individual and allowing them to describe the way an individual may see the world. This would allow readers to be able to empathize with and come to understand how and why people do certain things. In addition, Cullen (2011) argues that literature have the potential to allow individuals to know regarding the terrible state of the world and motivates them to make changes., literature is an act of representation.

There are many scholars that have come to analyze a work of literature through the lens of trauma theory. For example, there is DeBorde's (2018) analysis of trauma in nineteenth century novels. Another study overviews representations of trauma in various literary works (Abubakar, 2017). Meanwhile, Jamli and Roshanzamir (2018) study trauma as a construction of identities in Virginia Woolfe's *The Waves*. These studies have found that trauma is potrayed as a haunting repeated

images that continues to linger in the victim's mind long after a tragedy has occurred and compels to do various activities in response to that.

Most studies on trauma as exemplified in the research above are in western literary texts, but trauma studies into Japanese literary works is still rare. Stahl (2019) has made an attempt to analyze the representation of trauma within a selection of Japanese literary works. However, he states that Japanese literature has rarely been psychoanalytically analyzed using the framework of trauma. To his knowledge, his study is the first research into trauma in Japanese literature that has ever been done in English or Japanese. This is something that Stahl finds baffling considering how the last 150 years of Japanese history have been shaped by trauma. One possible reason for why this is the case is because of the honor culture in Japan. Japanese honor above all else, which is to say that it values adherence toward strict code of values. This is materialize through cultural acts of honor suicide such as *junshi* and *harakiri*. While honor suicide has generally become frowned upon in modern day Japan, it was considered a noble act during pre-westernized Japan (Mili, 2016). Within the context of trauma, this

can mean that trauma is considered by scholars as not social phenomenon to be investigated in Japan, but merely a deviation of honor.

More research into the representation of trauma in Japanese literature may shed light on the reason why characters within Japanese literature, or perhaps Japanese people in general, committed suicide. This, and in addition to putting more research into representation in Japanese literature, is the reason why this research uses Natsume Soseki's 1914 novel titled *Kokoro*, one of the most famous Japanese novel written by one of Japan's most renowned literary figures. One of the characters within the novel, Sensei, struggles with the burden of two traumatic events that shaped his outlook and behavior throughout his life. This makes him an appropriate subject matter for this research.

Because of the importance of understanding the phenomenon known as trauma, as well as literature crucial role in providing that understanding, I conduct a research regarding the impact of trauma toward the behavior of a character within a novel. The novel

that I chose would be Natsume Soseki's translated novel titled *Kokoro* (1957a). Caruth's (1995) theory of trauma is used in this study because Sensei is a character haunted by the trauma in his past. The way the past tragedy continues to haunt him and influences his action in the present fits the description of trauma defined by Caruth.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative descriptive approach and textual analysis as a data analysis method. The method and approach are used because *Kokoro* (1957) is a written literary work which means that the words written in the story is the primary source of data as well as the basis for interpretation.

There are four steps involved in the data analysis. The first step is collecting the data through close reading analysis. The second step is categorizing those findings. The third step is interpreting those findings based on Caruth's (1995) trauma theory. Finally, the fourth step is drawing conclusions based on those interpretations.

The data for this research is the 1914 Japanese novel titled *Kokoro* by Natsume Soseki and

translated by Edwin McClellan in 1957. The novel tells the story of an unnamed narrator's growing relationship with an old man he called Sensei. While the two shares an affable bond, Sensei is a quiet, distant man who mostly keep to himself, and views humanity as a whole in a pessimistic regard. This creates a certain tension in their relationship. In the third part of the novel, it is revealed that Sensei's cynical worldview is shaped by the betrayal of his trusted guardian, his uncle, and own misconduct that results in his closest friend's suicide. Haunted by the guilt of his past, Sensei resolves to take his life, but not before writing a letter to the narrator regarding his past. Based on the summary above, it can be seen that Sensei is a man experiencing some forms of trauma due to a tragic event that happened in his past. Which is why Sensei's dialogue and action is the data for this study. The data is collected by searching evidences of the impact of trauma by using close-reading analysis.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the textual evidences, this study found that Sensei's identity is shaped by two major traumatic events in his life. The first trauma is when Sensei's uncle cheated him out of his inheritance when Sensei was young. The second trauma is when Sensei witnessed the death of his friend who he called K when he was in his college years that. K's death is indirectly caused by Sensei's remark toward him. As a result of both of these events, Sensei's mind and worldview became twisted and distrustful of people and humanity at large. In addition, Sensei is burdened with guilt as well as self-loathing, and did various activities in order to avoid thinking about this tragedy as well as to atone himself. In the end, Sensei decided to take his own life in order to be free from the burden of his trauma. It can be drawn, therefore, that Sensei's character development is a reflection of a postmodern identity in which a person's identity does not stay the same throughout their lives and is prone to change based on social circumstances.

As a result of the tragedy of the betrayal of his uncle and the death of his friend, Sensei constructed a traumatic identity that are characterized by attributing

cynical attitude, attaching guilt, as well as casting fears. The portrayal of these characteristics can be seen in the example below.

One impact of Sensei's trauma is that it causes him to adopt a cynical perspective regarding the world. Sensei comes to both hate and distrust humanity at large, including himself. Caruth (1995) states that trauma increases the need for trauma victims to avoid any semblance of external influences that may cause them to relive their trauma. Based on Caruth's statement, it can be interpreted that Sensei's cynicism comes from his desire to avoid potential trauma. By assuming the worst out of people, he can watch out and protect himself from anyone who would dupe him. An example of Sensei's direct distrust can be seen when he is reminded about his talk with the narrator regarding humanity's quality. This can be seen in the quote below.

You remember of course that day when I said that there was no such thing in this world as a species of men whose unique quality is badness; and that one should always be careful not to forget that a gentleman, when tempted, may easily become a rogue. (...) **I now confess to you that I was then thinking of my uncle. With hatred in my heart, I was thinking of my uncle, who seemed to typify all those ordinary men**

who become evil for the sake of money, and who seemed to me the personification of all those things in this world which make it unworthy of trust. (1957c, Para. 37)

This quote emphasizes how much his uncle betrayal has shaped his identity and makes him think of humanity in a negative light. This is shown in the line where Sensei directly states how what his uncle did is a representation of why humanity is the worst and how he still has grudges toward his uncle after all this years. Sensei's hatred is amplified by the fact that someone that Sensei's regarded highly like his uncle is capable of such betrayal for money. This is also the reason why Sensei's uncle becomes a person in Sensei's mind that represents the worst of humanity. In addition, the fact that he still bears hatred for his uncle in his letter toward the narrator reflects the way trauma can still persist in the present. It is not a phenomenon that stays in the past, but always find its way into our presence (Caruth, 1995).

However, Sensei also comes to hate himself as a result of his cynical perspective. This self-loathing can be seen in the following quote.

When I was cheated by my uncle, I felt very strongly the unreliableness of men. I learned to judge others harshly, but not

myself. I thought that, in the midst of a corrupt world, I had managed to remain virtuous. **Because of K, however, my self-confidence was shattered. With a shock, I realized that I was no better than my uncle. I became as disgusted with myself as I had been with the rest of the world.** Action of any kind became impossible for me. (Soseki, 1957c, para. 283)

In this quote, the evidence of Sensei's self-loathing is particularly apparent with the line of how much he disgusts himself and becomes inaction as a result. This quote also reveals how Sensei's self-loathing is a result of his own cynicism toward humanity. Sensei's doubtful nature serves as his psychological shield to prevent others from harming him, effectively allowing him to avoid any potential external stimuli that may trigger trauma once more. However, Sensei now realizes how he is not any different from the rest of humanity that he despises, the judgemental gaze that he casts upon others now turn to himself, resulting in self-loathing. His self-defence mechanism ends up working against himself.

In addition to his cynical attitude, Sensei also feels guilty as a result of his trauma. This can be explicitly seen in the quote below when he blames himself for K's

death even when he is supposed to be happy because of his marriage to Ojousan.

I did not cease to blame myself for K's death. From the beginning, **I was afraid of the suffering my own sense of guilt would bring me.** One might say that I went through my marriage ceremony, which I had looked forward to for so long, **in a state of nervous insecurity.** (1957c, para. 280)

In this quote, Sensei shows evidence of harboring guilt, especially in the line where Sensei continuously blames himself for what happened with K. This is further emphasized with the line where he is plagued by insecurity during his marriage ceremony, moment in his life where he is supposed to be happy. This insecurity may come from the fact that Sensei both fears of how guilt is going to weight him down, but also he fears if anybody exposed what he did toward K.

As a result of his guilt, Sensei is driven by a desire to redeem himself. This can be seen explicitly in the quote below.

I felt very strongly the sinfulness of man. It was this feeling that sent

me to K's grave every month, that made me take care of my mother-in-law in her illness and behave gently towards my wife. It was this sense of sin that led me to feel sometimes that **I would welcome a flogging even at the hands of strangers.** (1957c, para. 292)

Evidences of the actions that Sensei takes in order to make amends is shown in the line that said how Sensei still visits K's grave every month and still cares for Okusan as well as Ojousan. The narration that mention these actions is preceded by the first line that said how Sensei's guilt is weighting heavily on him and it drives to him do all of those actions, emphasizing how those are all actions that Sensei takes in order to redeem himself. In addition, Sensei's desire for redemption is emphasized in the line that said how Sensei would welcome flogging by strangers. This further illustrates Sensei's wish to be punished in order to be forgiven for his sin.

However, Sensei fails to cope with the overwhelming guilt because of his trauma. Which is why, when he hears about the news of the death of Emperor Meiji, he decides to commit suicide to follow the Meiji

era into its grave as a pretense to be free from the guilt that he felt. His decision to commit suicide can be seen in the following quote.

I turned to my wife, who had reminded me of its existence, and said: **"I will commit *junshi* if you like; but in my case, it will be through loyalty to the spirit of the Meiji era."** My remark was meant as a joke; but I did feel that the antiquated word had come to hold a new meaning for me. (1957c, para. 300)

In this quote, Sensei's suicidal thought can be seen in the line where he decides to commit *junshi*, or following one's lord to the grave, in response to the death of Emperor Meiji. The act of *junshi* that Sensei intends to do is a form of suicide that originated from *harakiri*, an act of disembowling established in the 15th century. This particular act of suicide is a reflection of an old Japanese tradition that values honor above all else, a cultural practice that has been frowned upon in the modern age, but nonetheless was very popular during the era of pre-westernized Japan (Mili, 2016). For Sensei, the death of the Emperor Meiji, as well as the death of General Nogi, marked the end of an era that he lives in, remarking to himself that he were, as well other people who lived in the Meiji era, "left behind to

live as anachronisms" (Soseki, 1957c, para. 299), as relics of a bygone era. Which is why he decides to follow suit and take his own life as a form of loyalty, a form of redemption and a form of escape from traumatic pain.

Finally, as a result of his trauma, Sensei feels constant fear that haunts his life. Based on Caruth (1995) statement of trauma as a repeating images that haunt the victims' mind, it can be interpreted that this fear is a form of Sensei's trauma that continues to haunt him long after K's death. The way the story portrays Sensei's fear is when Sensei feels like he is haunted by a phenomenon described as dark shadow that would often be contrasted with the happiness of his current situation. One example of this can be seen in the following quote.

Half a year after that, Ojosan and I were married at last. On the surface at least, I suppose it was a happy occasion. (...) **But over my happiness, there loomed a black shadow. It seemed that my momentary contentment led nowhere, except to a sorrowful future.** (1957c, para. 276)

In this quote, the presence of fear is in the form of a black shadow that hinders Sensei's apparent happiness and how it would lead him to a dark future. This is a reflection of the fact

that trauma can still persist within a person's mind if its not confronted and addressed directly. Sensei hope for happiness with marriage is a form of escapism as he wants to leave his trauma behind.

Apart from the description of a dark shadow, Sensei's fear is is also directly described as a nameless fear. This can be seen in the quote below.

From then on, **a nameless fear would assail me from time to time. At first, it seemed to come over me without warning from the shadows around me, and I would gasp at its unexpectedness.** Later, however, when the experience had become more familiar to me, my heart would readily succumb--or perhaps respond--to it; and I would begin to wonder if this fear had not always been in some hidden corner of my heart, ever since I was born. **I would then ask myself whether I had not lost my sanity.** (1957c, para. 291)

In this quote, Sensei's fear is directly potrayed as a nameless fear that appears in his heart out of nowhere at random intervals. However Sensei becomes accustomed to it and responds to this familiriaty by saying whether or not he is losing his mind. This sequence of events can be interpreted as a representation of how trauma, in its early birth, feels shocking to the victim because of its intensity. However, after repeated exposure to the tragedy, victims

assimilate the traumatic event into their being (Caruth, 1995). This can be seen in the way Sensei's initial shock of this fear wears off as he begins to familiarize himself with this feeling to the point where he even questioned if this fear that he has now is already within himself to begin with.

Based on the findings, the trauma that Sensei went through causes him to construct a cynical and pessimistic identity. Sensei feels his life is like an unending pain because of the guilt that he feels inside and the constant doubt that he has toward other people. Sensei has also become a person who, driven by his trauma, obsesses with trying to redeem himself and wanting to escape from his trauma instead of confronting them. This overall development and change of identity is a reflection of Hall's (1996) theory regarding the nature of post-modern identity in which a person does not have a consistent absolute identity and is prone to change as a result of various circumstances.

Based on the description above, it can be seen that the way Sensei's trauma shapes his identity and how he behaves, to a certain extent, bear similarities to previous studies such as DeBorde's (2018)

and Stahl's (2019) study. In these cases, trauma becomes a haunting image that continues to present itself to its victims, an external force that drives its victims to either reenact the tragedy that started their trauma or to escape from it entirely.

However, there are two factors that differentiate Sensei's circumstances and these factors are, what I believe, something that can fill the gap in the previous studies regarding trauma. The first one is the fact that Sensei, as much as he is a victim of a traumatic event, he is also the one who is responsible for the tragedy that befell his friend. Many of the previous studies that had been done regarding the impact of trauma toward a person's identity analyzes characters who are passive victims of a tragedy. In contrast, Sensei's trauma comes about as a result, not only because he is a victim, but also because he is a perpetrator of a tragedy. The action that he takes to drive his friend into suicide causes him to feel guilty and also makes him hate himself. Trauma, in the end, is not just about having tragic events happened to you, but also coping with tragedy that happened because of you.

The second factor is that Sensei's subsequent decision to commit suicide in order to escape trauma is, in a way, reflects the cultural values held at the time the story takes place. The mention of the death of Emperor Meiji at the end of the story put the story's setting around the Meiji era, an era where Japan began to embrace westernization and modernization. The first instances of this conflict of modernity can be seen during the betrayal of Sensei's uncle. Mili (2016) states that this betrayal reflects the fact that "Sensei's sense of traditional honour is seen as clashing strongly with the realities of modern Japan or perhaps simply the dark side of human nature" (para. 14). In other words, Sensei's old value comes into conflict to the changing of times as well as the dark reality of humanity. The second instances is the circumstances of Sensei's friend, K, where his spiritual belief of total abstinence clashes with the affection that he harbours toward Ojosan. His inability to holds true to his conviction, and also in part due to Sensei's word, drives K to commit suicide. This too, according to Mili, a reflection of the fact that K could not accept and be open toward a modern

understanding of love. The third and final instances is in Sensei's own decision to finally commit suicide. Sensei sees the death of Emperor Meiji and General Nogi as a sign of a passing time and the end of an era, and so, he decides to take his own life as a show of loyalty toward the era that he lived in. Based on this third instance and Mili's interpretation, it can be interpreted that Sensei's decision is influenced by Japan's old cultural value that sees honor as something to be regarded highly above all else. Sensei's guilt over the death of his friend causes him to think that the only way to redeem himself is through death. In addition to this, I believe that he only uses honor to disguise the fact that he wants to be free from his trauma. However, I do not believe that Mili's interpretation is all accurate, specifically in the instance of the betrayal of Sensei's uncle since I believe that what clashes with the harsh reality of the world is not Sensei's old value, but his innocent view of the world.

In conclusion, the portrayal of trauma in Soseki's *Kokoro* (1957a) in some ways has similar findings to the previous studies, specifically in the way its repeating images

continuously haunt its victims, thus causing them to commit various actions. Where it differs, however, is Sensei's circumstances as not just a passive victim of trauma, specifically in the way he plays a part in driving his friend into committing suicide, and also how the cultural value of the story's setting informed his decision to take his own life. Sensei's role as the perpetrator of a tragic event and the way his national or cultural upbringing affects how he copes with his trauma are two differentiating factors that could fill the gap in the previous studies regarding trauma representation in literature.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to analyze the way trauma shaped Sensei's identity in *Kokoro* (1957a) using Caruth's (1995) trauma theory as the basis of interpretation. Previous chapters found that there are two major traumas that shape Sensei's identity which are his uncle's betrayal and the death of his friend. The trauma that Sensei experienced caused him to be cynical against humanity, including himself, made him experience negative emotions such as guilt and fear, and made him actively seek

a way to both redeem himself and to escape from his trauma.

As a result of his trauma, Sensei's identity is constructed into a cynical, pessimistic person who feels life is a pain and hated everyone including himself. Sensei is also a driven person who is motivated to escape and to make amend as a result of his trauma, but also contradictory a person who has resigned to his fate and feel incapable of making changes to himself. This is reflection of a post-modern identity in which a person have a fragmented, incomplete identity that is bound to change in response to external stimuli.

Sensei's constructed identity, placed within the greater context of trauma literature, solidifies the representation of trauma in literature as an external force that continues to haunt its victims well after the tragic occurrences have happened. Beyond the repeating haunting image, trauma is also a spectra that drives its victims into committing various actions in response to the phenomenon, whether they are done in an effort to reenact it or to escape from it altogether.

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