

Feminine Narrative, Trauma and Cultural Theory

Nurten Gunduz, Tzu Yu Allison Lin, Mehmet Sincar
Gaziantep University, Gaziantep, Turkey

This article analyses the stories of two women in terms of narrative and healing: Edith Hope in Anita Brookner's *Hotel du Lac*, and Umut the survivor of the earthquake in Türkiye in February 2023. The authors draw a comparative view between two women who stayed in hotels in order to recover from traumatic experiences. Cultural trauma theory highlights an approach, in a way in which different types of trauma can be seen as results of unanticipated, catastrophic incidents. All traumas of different communities are interrelated to each other. That is why, getting conscious, taking responsibility, and sharing experiences can heal.

Keywords: trauma, healing, responsibility, narrative, women

Introduction

The feeling of belonging to one's home is controversial, particularly in terms of traumatic experiences. Cathy Caruth (1996) believes that traumas are based on complicated, unexpected, catastrophic events. Individuals are not able to have a control over them. The survivors of traumas mostly register those experiences subconsciously, in order to delay the pain (Brown, 1995). That temporal delay which is known as the "latency period" in the literature helps the individual to get over the first shock and avoid getting imprisoned by the traumatic event for a short term (Baysal, 2020). However, trauma comes back for haunting the victims and they are exposed to various forms of trauma in their nightmares, dreams, or daily lives just as Edith Hope in *Hotel Du Lac* has experienced from her childhood.

In cultural trauma theory, Caruth claims that "sweeping under the carpet" or leaving behind the trauma could only lead the trauma to emerge more and to repeat itself as a fate. One way to survive is to consider "the endless possibility of a new future" and to share traumas with the society both for self-healing and for creating social awareness in the community. It is not just the individual's responsibility. More importantly, it is a must-have for all cultures to take action, to listen, to understand, and to create a sharing environment for both individuals and other people. As Caruth asserted, "One's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another", traumas can be engaged in creating a link between the cultures.

This study applies the cultural trauma theory, in order to understand the relation among these terms: trauma, healing, and responsibility. This article focuses on establishing a connection between the trauma of a female teacher who survived in Hatay, after the earthquake in Türkiye. She stayed in a hotel in Antalya (opened

Nurten Gunduz, Ph.D. student, Department of Educational Administration, Faculty of Education, Gaziantep University, Gaziantep, Turkey.

Tzu Yu Allison Lin, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer, Department of Foreign Language Education, Faculty of Education, Gaziantep University, Gaziantep, Turkey.

Mehmet Sincar, Ph.D., Professor, Department of Educational Administration, Faculty of Education, Gaziantep University, Gaziantep, Turkey.

to earthquake victims) to rehabilitate. Edith Hope too—she took a month break in Switzerland, in *Hotel du Lac*, to recover after she messed up her life and caused a scandal incident in her hometown, London. These two women have to escape from the traumas. They both looked for a home to return, as they both needed to find their own selves back.

Cultural Trauma Theory

Madigan (2020) explains that there are two distinct kinds of trauma theory: traumatic events and traumatized societies. The traumatic events present to the cases of “how individuals and societies interpret and understand their deepest fears and emotions” (Schmidt, 2013). The theory of traumatic events has been employed to explore the nature of trauma, the identity of the survivor, and its construction of responsibility. Traumatic events theory can be applied to analyze these two women: the childhood traumas of Edith Hope in the novel, and the traumas of the earthquake survival teacher in Türkiye, in order to see the way in which these two women take their responsibilities and heal.

The period between the painful event and Freud’s “traumatic neurosis” is called the latency period. It is the shock the victims have experienced, and this time can alter from person to person depending on the identity of the survivor. This latency period is the time survivors avoid knowing and accepting, so it is completely something like spiritually comatose. On the other hand, the codes of the catastrophic event are registered in the identity of survival. The unbearable nature of the incident and injury leads to an unbearable nature of the victim. Depending on the nature of the traumatic event such as the loss of beloved ones, natural disasters, wars, rape, abuse, or departures, the codes may emerge in different forms in the nature of the victims. In other words, the codes in the identity of the victims are the resurrection of the painful event which are registered into their mind and soul in an enigmatic way. Since their existence, human beings have been exposed to countless traumatic events either individually or in a collective way, and these traumatic events have been derived from either natural disasters including floods, earthquakes, drought, and pandemics, or grown out of human acts like wars, terrorist attacks, holocaust (Kellermann, 2007). No matter what the origin is, or whether it is individual or communal, Caruth (1996) asserts that each of the traumas is connected to others, they have a mystery bridge to switch from one to another. Caruth defines that as the “history of trauma” and “the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas”, therefore; the traumas are always beyond the individual or just the victim, or even beyond the generation, the other way round, they are the history of all community, passing from one another. For that matter, traumas or the history of traumas climb over the victims and transform into sharing site which they can get more comprehensible, not maybe for the survivor but for the next generations (Baysal, 2020). For Caruth, since it is also the concern of the future and next generations, it is the responsibility of both the survivor and the community to heal and to share in order to provide “an endless possibility of a new future” both for the individual and for society.

Within this context, trauma literature takes an important place in healing and in setting the communities in motion by creating an environment of the injuries of people whose traumas are tied up with the traumas of others. It is crucial and the responsibility of the witnesses and victims to speak, to write, and to share since staying in silence will not make any further move into the healing of individuals and societies. On the other hand, trauma narration is a paradoxical issue due to the fact that traumatic events like torture, wars, rape, and genocide are in-articulating topics to talk about as their nature while trauma theories call for “to speak” in order to get over it. Keeping silence is derived from sometimes a social taboo, sometimes individual fears or anxiety,

sometimes respect for other victims, or sometimes it is just a conscious preference as survivors suppose it is better for the healing. However, Caruth asserts that healing starts when somebody gets conscious of knowing and accepting a catastrophic event and gets ready to take action to speak, to move on, and to take responsibility both for themselves and for society.

Edith Hope

In this section, Edith Hope in *Hotel du Lac* and her childhood traumas will be seen through the perspective of cultural trauma theory. This perspective leads the readers to see Edith's way of identifying herself to "home", in terms of her feelings of alienation and isolation in the society. Edith's relation with her unhappy and desperate mother is the key to examine her childhood trauma. In other words, this mother-daughter relation has a dramatic effect on Edith's identity as an adult woman, on her decisions in her adult life as she questions the value of a family life. Yet, without feeling at home, Edith unconsciously feels that she belongs to nowhere. After all, as a writer, Edith chooses to work on her own novel, *Beneath the Visiting Moon* (Brookner, 1984, p. 24), to fulfil her social responsibility and also self-healing.

Edith Hope's memories of her father, mother, and aunt conduct a journey to her childhood, which makes the readers see the forgotten injuries. As in Caruthian cultural trauma theory, traumatic scenes emerge in the mind of Edith. Edith does not want to remember her painful memories with her affectionless, depressed, scornful, and rude mother. Her mother is a woman, who is full of sorrow and suffering in all the scenes that Edith remembers. On the day of Mrs. Pusey's birthday, Edith remembers that she had to make the birthday cake alone for herself, in her parents' house. Edith envies the loving relation between Iris Pusey and her daughter Jennifer, simply because she feels that these two charming people "seemed destined for better things" (Brookner 1984, p. 33). The mix emotion of jealousy and admiration shows Edith's way of mourning her childhood. In the story of Edith, she is not the only victim, as her painful story is tied up with the tragic story of her mother who had unhappy, disappointing life, and her desperate father who is also another victim of her mother and their marriage. Maybe at some point, Edith unconsciously takes her own healing process by writing fictions, as in her writings, each female character has a sort of liberated lifestyle, having chances to come across to romantic scenes with her "flatter ego" (Brookner 1984, p. 26).

Edith feels that she does not belong to somewhere—not to Hotel du Lac, or to her childhood house, or to her apartment in London. In other words, she is continuously in a process of self "exile" from "home" (Brookner 1984, p. 8). Houses and spaces are psychical surroundings. They need cultural codes such as people and relations to contain deeper meanings (Çakmak, 2018). Home has always been the symbol of identity, as it is where one belongs to, where one shapes his or her characteristics (Biedermann, 1992, p. 179, cited in Yüksel, 2013). In this sense, the loss of home could also be interpreted as the loss of identity.

In *Hotel du Lac*, Brookner draws forth the picture of rootless women in the universe, in the modern age, and represents the characters who are doomed to stay in temporary locations (Yüksel, 2013). Brookner's choosing a hotel as a set in the novel can also be explicated with a deeper meaning of having no root or home not just physically but also spiritually. People prefer to go to hotels when they have nowhere in the name of "home" to stay in the city or country they exist. Nearly all the characters in *Hotel du Lac* are deprived of home in one way or another. The gorgeous, sophisticated lady, Monica is sent to this luxurious prison by his noble husband whom she both hates and fears like the prisoners feel the same for the guardians since the husband waits for an heir from her. Monica also does not feel at home in the hotel, she implies several times that she

neither likes the companionship of the hotel residents nor the hotel itself. She feels happier when it is time to leave the hotel and return; however, she does not have a sense of belonging to her husband and his house either. Another lonely character, Mme de Bonneuil is also chased out of her own huge beautiful house inherited from her family and sent to an exile living in the hotel as her young daughter-in-law does not want her at home and she does not want to upset her son.

Edith is a productive writer, an independent person who does not rely on someone to live on, because she has thoughts and emotions. She is strong enough to heal herself by writing—by visualising her feelings into words on paper. According to cultural trauma theory, trauma is an unwitting repetition of traumatic events in the recordings of the unconscious mind, and the first steps to recovery are the awareness and acceptance of the traumatic events, also with the awareness of an endless possibility of a new future and the following steps are sharing and taking responsibility both for the survivor itself and for the other people in the community as the victims are tied up with one another. Edith Hope takes the first step toward healing and experiences an awakening period in *Hotel du Lac*, she gets her self-awareness, and her own deeper identity by questioning her traumas, her desires, her relationships, and her identity, and also by setting against the patriarchal authority. Outka (2011) asserts that recovery includes the meaning of reobtaining what is lost and then healing. In order to get what is lost, the survivor first must remember the hidden knowledge in their traumas, and of course, they must tell the truth to themselves which means acceptance of traumatic events; hence, they can restore their self-existence and their social order (Herman, 1992). Edith starts to heal when she starts to remember her subterranean traumatic events and when she establishes a bond with her inner self as a way of regaining her lost identity.

Besides writing her novels, Edith also writes to her lover David. Sharing her thoughts and observations in the Hotel by writing letters means that Edith takes on a process of healing. She is in need of telling her story, sharing and disclosing it in a confidential way as a means of recovery through writing. Molloy (2016) highlights the two significant objectives that writing to heal serves, especially when it is addressing traumas: it assists writers to disembroil the muddy period of the survivors' inner life and also helps to make connections with individual and social problems. The theorists in trauma studies emphasise the vital power of literature and writing in healing and increasing the resilience of victims besides its contribution to the empowerment of the community by giving testimony (Andermahr & Pellicer-Ortin, 2013; Moore & Begoray, 2017). In this respect, Edith is embodied with literature and writing in *Hotel du Lac*, holding the power of healing in her hand, and taking responsibility in the social trauma circle.

Umut

In the light of cultural trauma theory, the research questions are on the nature of the trauma and earthquake, the perpetrator, the nature of the survival, the changes and effects on her ideas, feelings, and character, and the nature of healing and responsibility, her perception of healing and responsibility. A pseudonym, Umut, has been used for the survivor teacher in order not to uncover her real, private identity. "Umut" means "hope" in Turkish. The words quoted in this section, from Umut, are the result of several zoom meetings, in three hours time.

Cultural trauma is a particular kind of collective trauma that influences collective identity and also causes deep wounds in the identity of survivor. When the basis of individual and group identity is upended, a cultural trauma emerges and this sets off a discursive process to figure out what happened, place blame, and identify strategies to mend an interpreted situation as leading different actors offer responses to these concerns in the

ensuing meaning conflict, articulating trauma narratives that compete for acceptability and attention (Demertzis & Eyerman, 2020). In order to understand the collective trauma of a society, one needs to analyze the nature of an individual's trauma in depth, and the nature of the perpetrator as a survivor's trauma is like one atomic particle of the collective trauma. Understanding what happened and who or what was to blame, and then acting appropriately, is a step toward recovery that a human needs. Demertzis and Eyerman state that cultural traumas suggest fear, misery, and opportunity and the latter results from our ability to pick up new skills, adapt to changing environments, and both change and live in the world.

The great southeast earthquakes that occurred in Türkiye on February 6th caused tragic stories and traumas in the community (Telli Yamamoto & Altun, 2023). Hatay was one of the cities which were strongly affected. Thousands of people in Hatay lost their families, friends, or relatives and many more lost their homes. Umut, a survivor teacher from Hatay, who was trapped in remain fragments, narrates her experience on the earthquake day as in the following words:

... my husband told me to wake up and grab the child, an earthquake was happening. I remember I grabbed the younger child and run to the kitchen since there was a door opening to the garden in the kitchen...the earthquake stopped just for ten seconds and my mother-in-law tried to open the kitchen door, but she couldn't. ... It was all dark. I did not know where I was, I had the baby in my arms but I did not realize whether I was carrying him or not, I had no idea. Just darkness...

Umut describes the moment she was captured by the walls as an unconscious process, she was hearing people, and she was awake but her mind was not clear. She even could not identify the physical existence of her baby that she was holding tightly. She did not know where she was and she did not know what to do. In cultural trauma theory, Caruth (1996) explains the very beginning part of trauma as an unconscious period and she underlines that traumas are not experienced consciously. Rather, they are catastrophic events that individuals record unconsciously. Caruth also speaks of a latency period in which the influences of the perpetrator's experience are not clear and vivid. This latency period is explained as a time when the victim of the crash is unconscious during the experience in order to stay away from the harm of the perpetrator. For Caruth, this latency period helps the victims to avoid the pain and tragedy as they are not fully aware of the experience itself. Umut puts into words the latency period in cultural trauma theory in her narration:

... In just one second, all the scenery to escape faded away in my mind. In the end, we were dying. Because I remember there was a constant massiveness on me, something fell on my head and a light came out of my eyes, I still have a visual impairment in my right sight when I get sad. However, enigmatically, there was no pain in my body that day, a rubble fell on my back but no pain, a rubble fell on my head but no pain, there was a huge wall on my left leg but no pain...I knew we were dying and I was feeling that my child was lading with my weight but I did not feel anything...

The latency period may include both unconscious time during the experience and after the experience. The victims avoid feeling the pain in all ways including physically, mentally, and emotionally. That is why the survivors intend to delay the pain by also not remembering it as Umut spoke to herself at the moment she was rescued: "... on that day, I promised myself not to look at social media and learn anything about other stories...". Because of trauma, the fictional character, Edith Hope, one of the victims of the society is linked with a real person Umut, one of the victims of the earthquake in many interweaving codes. Umut desired to get away from grief and sorrow as she avoided the physical pain unconsciously when she was under the wall in order not to be captured by the traumatic experience. Edith Hope in *Hotel du Lac* had a similar experience when she hid behind the chair during the frightening conversation between her soulless mother and aunt.

Caruth (1996) claims that we are connected to each other in a shared past and a shared future in the community. Caruth explains the shared past as the history of traumas which is transferred to the next generations. Within this context, the history of traumas exceeds the survivors and transforms into a sharing pool making the catastrophic traumas more perceivable for other generations. In other words, your traumas do not only belong to you, as you are a part of the community, traumas are also tied up and they are transferable as a part of the whole community. As in Edith Hope who takes after her poor mother's trauma and grief, Umut has a similar story. When Umut was a newborn baby, her mother also experienced an earthquake and had to stay in a tent for a year. She remembered her mother's memories in the earthquake and she believed that she inherited her mother's fate as Edith believed she was bequeathed her mother's grief. Umut puts that belief into the following words:

... My mum used to say that I stayed in a tent and she used to heat my baby food over a candle. I never thought that became a trauma for me, but I remember under the wall I said "Damn, I am living exactly the fate of my mum." The phrase that "the fate of the mothers is the dowry of the daughters" was haunting my mind anticlimactically... My mum used to tell me I was about a 40 day-old-baby when the earthquake hit Surgu, Malatya, my hometown. I stayed in a tent for a year. Surgu is usually freezing, even in August we usually wear jerseys... and in the earthquake (in Hatay) I remember I was frozen and I was out of breath...

A traumatic experience that survivors encountered in their childhood or at their very young ages may re-emerge when they get adults and can shape their adult identity (Downey & Crummy, 2022). Caruth (1996) states that we do not experience traumas, instead, we record them unconsciously and we sweep them under the carpet until they come back in different forms to haunt and capture us. When individuals place their private objects in their homes, they can reinforce a sense of belonging and their ontological well-being (Çiçek, 2021). That is why, losing one's home and one's belongings physically or symbolically leads to isolation. The loss of space also means pushing ontological security boundaries (Çakmak, 2018). Self-isolation is a kind of response of survivors who experienced these traumas (Brand, Schielke, & Brams 2017). In this sense, plenty of similar codes have been encountered in the fictional story of Edith Hope who lost her home and roots metaphorically, and in the story of Umut who lost her home and everything she had in the earthquake.

Edith loses her father as a metaphor for her home, the only place she has a sense of belonging and she feels secure. After that, she cannot make a boundary with any space or home. Her home in London is not the place she feels at home as in her last letter to David she even cannot say "Coming home" she just writes "Returning". Hotel du Lac is a place she feels in exile as she describes her room in the hotel like a jail she has been imprisoned. This novel of *Brookner* is one of the classics that the readers can encounter lots of ontological and social isolation figures. As a consequence of that Edith is socially isolated, she feels imprisoned by the norms and rules of the society. She always questions the norms, she revolts against the rules laid down by the patriarchal society. Besides that, Edith watches and analyzes the people around her as if she was from another dimension which demonstrates to us that she feels herself out of the community.

In Umut's narration, it is possible to see common codes including ontological and social isolation figures besides the feeling of monachopsis as in Edith's story. Umut also feels like she is in another dimension, not in the real world and with real people. She is not aware of time and space as can be concluded from her words in different parts:

I remember debris fell on my back following I stepped out of the door, then I had no idea whether I was on the ground or in the sky. It was all dark. I did not know where I was, I had the baby in my arms but I did not realize whether I was

carrying him or not, I had no idea. Just darkness..., ... then, the following day, or 2 days later, I do not know, I did not realize, it must be 2 days..., ...when I think in detail, I guess we stayed 3 days there, I felt it was a very long period of time. The days are tangled with each other..., ...I sheltered myself from the rain, I even did not realize that it was another debris field. I did not know where I was. I was just gazing...

As Edith gazes and analyzes the people in *Hotel du Lac*, Umut also watches the other survivors as if she was in another dimension. She just watches the people and questions the norm of modern society:

...I was just gazing at people. It was raining heavily, people were trying to find something, children were wet, young children, sick children. There were people who could not take a breath... People who could find their dead relatives were draping them in blankets... there were 2 dogs wandering around a blanket, they must have taken the smell of the corpse. I guess he was our neighbor. I see everything but I did not have feelings. I did not have the energy to say something. No feelings, no grief, it was like my soul was concreted...

Umut also questions the norms that shape society after the earthquake experience in her words:

...There was a petrol station where a crowd of people used to be sheltered from the rain. I mean, all the norms, traditions, rules, and manners that shape society can vanish in one second. In just a minute, between 4:16 and 4:17 everything, every norm disappeared and people turned back to their factory defaults. I do not only mean looting. People, women, and men in the same area, next to each other were having a shit or pee. They had to, neither they could get closer to the buildings nor they could get out of the station. Everything you have believed, everything you have been trained can fade away in a minute...

Umut went to a hotel in Antalya to rehabilitate after the earthquake as Edith was sent to Hotel du Lac to heal, to get stronger and wiser. However, both of the characters do not feel better in a hotel, and they perceive the places they reside as a temporary station, so they have the desire to leave. Although they are aware that they do not have a home to go back to, they are also aware that they do not belong to these hotels as Umut states:

... we stay in a hotel room, and people seek an order, I know it seems nonsense to invest in any objects, that idea collapsed, but I also know this hotel room is temporary. The conditions made us stay here... It is a small room, a boring room, I want to leave but I still do not feel secure...In my story, I do not feel permanent anywhere...

When the victims have experienced or witnessed traumatic events, their neurological structure change in accordance with the scenes they have been exposed to (Dye, 2018). Cultural trauma theory defines these images the survivors have experienced as an unconscious recording procedure as victims' minds have an attempt to survive by getting away from consciousness and as a result of that, pain and grief (Caruth, 1996). For Caruth, the first step to recovery is to lessen the unconscious latency period, which also means rejecting the experience, and to walk into the territory of consciousness in which survivors get control in their hands. Accepting the traumas that you have been exposed to and getting conscious gives you the feeling of empowerment back, rescues you from the role of victim, and may decrease the negative feelings and nightmares about the traumatic events (Casement & Swanson, 2012). The second step survivors need to take after getting their consciousness is to see the new possibilities for a better future and to take responsibility for both themselves and for society. Caruth asserts sharing traumas through speaking, writing, and reading is the responsibility of all survivors, which both helps the recovery and also creates a better society.

In *Hotel du Lac*, Edith experiences an awakening period and uses the power of literature and writing as an author to recover and to fulfil her responsibility. In Umut's story, her awakening and recovery period starts when she is not afraid of telling her story and listening to other survivors' stories. She states that she speaks with people but she does not want to be a part of negative energy and creates negativity, on the contrary, she desires to be a

positive energy. She asserts that she accepts earthquake happened and she cannot change it. She underlines that rejecting creates the main problem, even though it is not very easy, she wants to accept and move on.

... about the healing, there is something I believe spiritually, maybe God maybe something else I cannot name. That may sound strange to you, but I saw a dream the previous night of the earthquake, there was a river flowing from the sky to the ground and there were dead children in it. The following day, the earthquake happened. In my dream, I tried to change it by making affirmations...now I believe it was a miracle to be rescued from the debris. Everybody experienced awful things, I try to focus on the miracle to heal by making affirmations. I need to heal myself by focusing on positiveness...

Umut states that speaking, sharing, or sometimes even making fun of our wounds helps us feel better and she adds that the stories of earthquake victims should be written and analyzed in order to get a better understanding since their psychology is something more complicated and catastrophic than it is thought to be. Here is what she said about sharing traumas:

...I guess, you see yourself better when you tell. Now, for instance, when I'm telling you, I wanted to tell you in detail. I do not remember I have talked that much... There is something, we came together with survivor family members and we even made jokes on our stories in the earthquake, we laughed at night but in the morning, we went into hysterics and burst into tears..., I consider writing my experiences because there is a different psychology of disaster areas. Emotions get frozen, maybe as a necessity for protection, for being fine. Because it is a terrific horror and shortage territory. People are carrying their dead, the corpses pile up, but nobody is crying, you have your own dead in a blanket but you do not cry... you have dead but you do not have a funeral home... there is a lyric that I have understood only that day "If I were a wracked grave, would you seek and find me?"...

Umut is a teacher and she will go back to the disaster area to do her profession even though she does not have a home there anymore. Most of her students will probably be the survivors of the earthquake who have experienced awful events including losing their beloved, losing their homes, and losing their roots. Umut is aware that it is impossible to turn everything back as it used to be and it will not be easy to get over and move on for herself, for her students, and for the community. However, she also believes that recovery starts when you accept and get ready to move on. As a teacher, she states that she will move on where she was forced to leave and she will do her best both for her own well-being and her students' recovery. As a part of society, Umut will take a step into the territory of awareness and responsibility just like in the words of her brother-in-law who saved her from the debris "...even if your leg is broken, you shall not stop, you shall not stop, and you will go up..."

Conclusion

The narration of traumas can lead the readers to see lives in a new light. We can have a deeper understanding of traumatic experiences and reconstructing the existing selfhood. Moreover, the impacts of the narration of collective traumas of communities may lead to a new sense of understanding in terms of shaping a new society (Madigan, 2020). The pain caused by a trauma may damage the sense of identity of a community, at its root (Alexander, 2004). But this could be the beginning of a positive way for the social change.

To start the change, the first step to be taken must be to break the taboos on traumas and speak about them. Sharing is the primary responsibility of survivors. If we do not speak, write, and read about traumas, we will forget them in our consciousness but we will experience and remember them unconsciously forever; on the other hand, if we speak, write, and read, we will heal and be awake and have a social consciousness. We must accept both the grief of the past and the blossoming of the future.

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