

Psychological Trauma: An Existential analysis in the Select works of Don DeLillo

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ABSTRACT

This study explores and analyses the theme of trauma in existential aspects within the three novels of Don DeLillo namely, *Zero K*, *The Body Artist*, and *Falling Man*. The research aims to explore and unravel the intricate layers of psychological trauma experienced by the characters in the select novels. By employing qualitative research methodology, this research conducts a complete examination of character development, which probes how DeLillo's protagonists pave their fractured realities in response to extreme existential crises. The analysis is based on existential philosophy and psychology which renders insights into human experience as manifested in the novels. The research seeks to contribute to an in-depth understanding of DeLillo's works which encapsulates the human predicament marked by human decision amidst uncertainty, mortality and meaning in the contemporary society. The cause and effect of psychological trauma and the existential action by the protagonists will be scrutinized to decipher the human decision taken during the psychological trauma to cope with it.

Keywords: Psychological Trauma, isolation, solitude, loneliness, Choice, mortality, Death, meaning

INTRODUCTION

The methodology of this study is qualitative research. The key term of the study is the psychological trauma which will be dealt with reference to existentialism both in philosophy and psychology. The structure of the research is the classification of the cause of psychological trauma into two categories. The first is the general cause and the other is the individual cause. Both the cause create impact in the existence of human being. The General cause of trauma is the phenomenon which is any unavoidable event or situation. This situation which is general could create an impact in the whole community or the people who encountered the traumatic phenomenon. Deciphering the trauma of an individual will be the persona but not the real self of an individual. The real trauma and its impact can be analysed through the general cause of traumatic phenomenon. The strategies employed to decipher the impact of an individual are existential choice and decision. The other one is the existential action taken by the individual. The aim of the study is to identify the traumatic effect in the individual, with the illustration from the select novels of Don DeLillo; *The Body Artist*, *Falling Man* and *Zero K*. While examining the previously conducted research, the trauma alone is traced in the novels through the narrative techniques adopted by the author. This research will analyse the individual's action and decipher the real impact of trauma from the general traumatic phenomenon from the philosophical perspective of Sartre and Heidegger.

Trauma in philosophical aspect

Heidegger considers that individuals have never isolated but have embedded themselves into the world. According to Heidegger, trauma is an inherent part of any being or individual in the world. He says the life must

be experienced as it is and it should be accepted. He presents that the being in the present encourages one to heal and prepares an individual to accept the future that could lead to complete recovery. Personal motivation helps any individual to recover from Trauma (Ekeh, 2016). 'Past' sometimes has the form of haunting presence in the present. The past creates the impact in the individual as it creates longing from some idealised past of innocence and also the realization of the traumatic experiences and its escape from the memory of the past (Banifatemi, 2020). This aspect of both pleasant and unpleasant aspect is considered as 'sweet disgust' by Sartre in his work "nausea". The experience of nausea happens when one is disconnected from the world. The state of alienation is felt in the traumatised characters.

Existential Isolation in psychological Trauma

The human sufferings to the extreme and the unexpected and inevitable shocking situation in which the death of loved ones or the mass death is involved, the trauma is generated. The trauma ceases the concept of purpose or the existential meaning making process. The one who feels alienated is either has an impact of trauma which results in one being isolated. Some prefer to be in solitude and some suffer the loneliness. Thus, the state of alienation is common in the characters who experience either isolation and loneliness or solitude. Keith Neudecker in *Falling Man* undergoes the trauma as he is one among the victim of 9/11 attack in World Trade Centre. He feels alienated when he finds himself helpless. He seeks support from his ex-wife, though he doesn't truly have any concern towards her. The repeated image of a person who is dead in the attack and some toxic incidents emerges in his mind often. The image of the person could hallucination because he still fears the man could take revenge as he had opposed him many times as he was his business rival before the attack. He couldn't feel comfortable talking with anyone except a 9/11 victim named Florence with whom he is physically and mentally intimate. Keith Neudecker encounters the existential isolation and he tries to locate himself in a zone which he feels comfortable and forget his traumatic memories of death. Yalom considers the unavoidability of death creates fear in humans. Individuals get terrified over the state of non-being. The realization of an individual that one is wholly responsible to live a life and to encounter death alone. This primary concern for an individual produces overwhelming anxiety (Berry-Smith, 2012). The only way to overcome the existential anxiety and isolation is to find meaning or existential purpose in life (Frankl, 1959).

Lauren Hartke in *The Body Artist* feels the solitude and is not been isolated. She prefers being alone and she engages herself with her art before her husband's death and uses her art and creativity as a technique to recover from the trauma of her husband's death. She also has the experience of hallucinating the self-created image and names it as Mr. Tuttle. She feels comfortable with her hallucinating image. The trauma which leads to death anxiety is an existential experience and it makes one realize the finitude of existence (Hays, 2021). Lauren does not fall into the prey of trauma which shatters and destroys the 'survivor's defences' (Kate Du Toit, 2017).

Meaning and Existential Choice

Lauren creates meaning and focuses not on pessimistic aspects of loneliness and isolation but the solitude which she chose herself as a remedy to overcome trauma. According to Yalom, existential isolation refers to the gulf which is unbridgeable between the self and the world (Yalom, 1980, p.358). Lauren overcomes isolation by sharing her aloneness with Mr. Tuttle. She creates meaning in her life and moves on. Keith in *Falling Man* moves on by choosing his passion towards poker play and becomes a professional poker player. As Yalom sees a human with life's purpose as "meaning-giving subject" (p.462), Keith and Lauren both are meaning -giving subject. Frankl considers that meaning already exists and has to be found by humans. They do not create (1959). Both Yalom and Frankl consider 'meaning' to be the pathway to heal from trauma. In *Zero K*, Jeffery undergoes trauma after witnessing cryopreservation, the freezing of the human body for potential future revival. He undergoes sense of dislocation and confusion. Some blurring image of reality and some visions creates emotional turmoil in Jeffery. He too hallucinates and has long-term trauma, both childhood trauma and the suddenly created trauma by witnessing cryo-conservation centre. He confronts with mortality and tries to overcome his loneliness and existential isolation by making decision on his own by choosing his own profession as an economic teacher and not merely accepting to hold the business of his father who abandoned him and his mother. Thus, Jeffery makes meaning to overcome trauma. According to Sartre, the notion of 'choice' lies in the need of individuals to believe in meaning and it is significant in one's existence (Pines, 2002). Viktor Frankl (1985) considers the will to find meaning and strive in the primary motivational force of human existence (p.154). Sartre says that man is not free to reject the world but is free to choose his own attitude and approach towards the world (Robert, D, Cumming, 1965, p.259).

Conclusion

The General cause of the trauma of the protagonists in the select novels where of different reasons. While existentially analysing the general cause, the impact of the trauma in the individuals were deciphered. The common cause of the three protagonists is the 'Death'. The death of someone or the death of the mass. Witnessing of mortality and the realization of the death has created the trauma which has been identified to be the seizure of meaning making sense that hinders to move into the existence. The Trauma pauses the existence of a being as pointed out by existential philosopher Heidegger. He insisted that the survivor must undergo such experience and must accept the reality. The ways to overcome such trauma were initiated by psychologist named Frankl, Philosopher Sartre, and Psychiatrist Yalom. Frankl proposed 'meaning', Sartre 'choice' and Yalom combines the meaning and choice as the existential responsibility of a being who exist in the world. The three protagonists from three different novels of DeLillo, prove that they have created meaning and are "meaning-giving subject" as said by Yalom. Individual trauma, such as isolation and loneliness were found in Keith, Lauren and Jefferey. Keith and Jefferey underwent isolation and loneliness and they made meaning by their choice of deciding their professions. Lauren chooses solitude and creates meaning from it. Thus, the three protagonists overcame the trauma with meaning-making process and it proves that the three of them are authentic being as said by Jean Paul Sartre.

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