

Betrayal Trauma: Memories of Violence in Edwidge Danticat's

The Dew Breaker

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Abstract

The paper titled, “Betrayal Trauma: Memories of Violence in Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker*” critiques into the violence and its resulting trauma exercised by the Haiti’s government on its citizens in the 20th century. Its impact on the lives of the Haitians has influenced them both physically and psychologically. The sequence of stories narrated by several victims of the perpetrator/s makes up as the crux of this novel by Danticat. The paper is a study on the ways in which the Haitians had to suffer grief, loss, pain and death based on Betrayal Trauma Theory (BTT).

Key Words: Danticat, Haiti, *The Dew Breaker*, Haitian/s, Betrayal and Trauma

These were our bedtime stories. Tales that haunted our parents and made them laugh at the same time. We never understood them until we were fully grown and they became our sole inheritance. (Danticat, *Krik? Krak!* 180)

Haitians in Haiti and in the Diaspora have to overcome many obstacles in their lives as they were forced to face indomitable crimes committed against their community. The dictator regime of Papa Doc Duvalier and his son, Baby Doc Duvalier, is a 29 year period from 1957 to 1986 which has caused an irreparable damage to the Haitian nation. The terrorism setup in the name of militia, with the members known as tonton macoutes, has exercised violence forced over the lives of the Haitians. The horrible nightmares, psychological and physical impairments gave them trauma for generations. The most unfortunate for Haitians is that the betrayal of its own government still affects their personal lives brutally even after the regime's end.

Edwidge Danticat is a stupendous Haitian American writer born in 1969 at Port-au-Prince, Haiti. She is an exponent of many prolific works, and a recipient of numerous prestigious awards and honors. Her work *The Dew Breaker* (2004) is a text that can be read either as a novel or a short-story cycle, known as a novel-in-stories. It is a book divided into nine short stories under the titles: "The Book of the Dead," "Seven," "Water Child," "The Book of Miracles," "Night Talkers," "The Bridal Seamstress," "Monkey Tails," "The Funeral Singer," and with "The Dew Breaker" having the same title as of the text. The main sequence of the story, paints the portrait of an aging Haitian barber, settled into a comfortably ordinary life with his wife and daughter, in the United States at present. His name is never revealed till the end of the novel except for various other names which are used to denote him. The whole novel is spoken from the view point of his daughter Ka, who has never fully understood her father from her childhood

days. His past, his long ugly facial scar has all been but a mystery to her. The scar always makes her feel that her father must have been a victim of a terrible incident from the past.

The title of the novel eponymous to the short story “The Dew Breaker” has its own significance. The breath of earth as dew drops on grass, in the early morning air, is beautiful and refreshing which reminds one of intricacies buried deep within nature. The dews are the mirror of the world which reverberate its fragility and of earth’s joy every morning. These dew drops are believed to be broken by the dew breaker, as a metaphor for breaking the human spirit by the supreme political power, in Haiti. Every time the people of Haiti’s spirit gains strength in the morning they are stomped to be broken of their trust on their own land by their own leaders. Hence, the title of the novel *The Dew Breaker* speaks about the Haitian lives, of how their souls are shattered every day into particles of insignificance. Such is the feeling of betrayal being broken innumerosly where the soul or the very spirit of God’s blessing undergoes excruciating pain.

Betrayal Trauma Theory (BTT) as a critical concept of enquiry was developed by Jennifer Freyd in the year 1994. Betrayal Trauma happens when a victim is betrayed of trust by someone, upon whom the victim is reliant for support and for survival. According to Freyd, “betrayal trauma occurs when the people or institutions on which a person depends for survival significantly violate that person’s trust or well-being: Childhood physical, emotional, or sexual abuse perpetrated by a caregiver are examples of betrayal trauma” (Freyd, *Blind to Betrayal*, 15). Ka in the novel, undergoes betrayal from her childhood days where her parents hide their true identities and about their past until when she becomes an adult. She happens to find out the truth unexpectedly when her father throws away a sculpture of his image sculpted by Ka in the lake before it was being delivered to a valued customer, a Haitian actress. Ka had been ignorant of her

father's past life as a dew breaker, a militia man, who was designed to kill Haitian people going against the then ruling government by the Duvalier regime. Her caregivers, her parents have always wanted to live a perfect familial life opposing to how their lives were in the past. It was full of bloodshed, pain and tears. Later in the novel, Ka's mother, Anne Bienaimé's step-brother who was a pastor, can be found murdered by the dew breaker, her own husband in which Ka and herself are yet unaware of. The big scar on the dew breaker's face is often referred to in the novel, signifies the symbol of retaliation and struggle of Anne's step-brother during the act of murder. This gives a false impression of the dew breaker being a victim than being the prison guard or the dew breaker.

Freyd in her work *Betrayal Trauma: The Logic of Forgetting Childhood Abuse* (1998) explains how betrayal happens when, "people or institutions on which a person relies for protection, resources, and survival violate the trust or well-being of that person" (9). Throughout the novel, the dew breaker plays a very important role in all of the stories narrated by the victims and how they were affected by him. And the stories also depict how the victims were betrayed by their own government for fighting against its evils when they were living in Haiti, during the Duvaliers' regime. The government is set to protect the well being of its people. But with the failure of protecting its people, the government's betrayal purges out all hope in its own citizens, and in turn instills fear and rebellion.

Ka Bienaimé is the daughter of the former Tonton Macoute, who was the dew breaker, the perpetrator, the torturer during the Duvaliers' Regime. He flees the place and his homeland Haiti with his wife Anne Bienaimé to the US. He starts anew with a life creating his own space and a happy place with his new family who are blessed with their "good angel," a beautiful baby girl, Ka. She grows up to be a teacher and a part time sculptor who gets inspiration from her

father. Everything seems very beautiful until one day when her father destroys the sculpture of him created by Ka and ends up betraying and breaking her trust.

Ka's father reveals his big secret with a Haitian proverb, "One day for the hunter, one day for the prey. Ka, your father was the hunter, he was not the pray" (DB 21). He continues to say that he "never was in prison" but was "working in the prison," and he also gives the reason for his big ugly facial scar on his cheeks that, "It was one of the prisoners inside the prison who cut my face in this way" (DB 21). He also reveals that he killed this man who cut his face by shooting him like he had "killed many people" before (DB 22). Later in the novel, through the story of another victim, this man who cut him happens to be his wife's step brother, a famous priest, the Haitian Pastor, who was ordered by the Duvalier to be killed for preaching against him and his rule (which Bienaimé's family is unaware of).

In her memoir *Brother, I'm Dying* (2008), Danticat recalls how Papa Doc Duvalier, in the early sixties, ". . . refused to step down or allow new elections, despite a growing dissatisfaction with his increasingly repressive methods of imprisoning and publicly executing his enemies" (51). His militia recruited both men and women who received an identification card upon joining the militia called the Tonton Macoutes, "which showed their allegiance to Papa Doc Duvalier, an indigo denim uniform, a .38, and the privilege of doing whatever they wanted" (BID 51).

Each story is a link to the dew breaker which vividly portrays the life of both the victims and the dew breaker during and the post Duvalier regime. Every victim had to live in terror, its resulting trauma, because of the Duvalier regime and his militia. And, "most of the narrators in *The Dew Breaker* have a difficult time trying to remember and to narrate experiences marked by brutal oppression and imposed silence, but revisiting their memories "turns into a source of restoration and regeneration"' (Ibarrola-Armendáriz 1):

In the chapter entitled “The Funeral Singer”, for example, three young Haitian women meet in the restaurant owned by one of them in Brooklyn, *Ambiance Créole*, to share their traumatic experiences. The central character confides: “I thought exposing a few details of my life would inspire them to do the same and slowly we’d parcel out our sorrows, each walking out with fewer than we’d carried in” (Ibarrola-Armendáriz 1).

Betrayal Trauma Theory gained importance when the basic ethic of human relationships get violated with, “the emergence of integrating evolutionary processes, mental modules, social cognitions and developmental needs” (Freyd, *Betrayal Trauma*, 26). An establishing element of the dissociative characteristic of BTT suggested that all human beings hold “an intricate mental mechanism” to find violations of “social contracts” or “cheater detectors” (Cosmides 187). BTT provides an entirely different framework theoretically against the proposal by Betrayal Trauma which suggests that anyone who is lacking in the ability to distinguish the cheaters would be unable to evolve and therefore, fall as a victim to natural selection. When the victimized is involved in abused betrayals where escape is unimaginable or impossible, just for the purpose of survival, the cheater-detecting mechanism becomes disabled. The result of such a betrayal trauma put forth a theory of dissociative amnesia or psychogenic amnesia which proposed to analyze both the function of attachment or affection in the survival of humans and the importance of obstructing painful experiences.

Betrayal trauma is a theory that can predict, “the degree to which a negative event represents a betrayal by a trusted needed other” and in turn influences “the way in which that event is processed and remembered” (Freyd, *Betrayal Trauma*, 9-10). BTT stresses the significance of betrayal as a “core antecedent” of “dissociation” inherently aimed to safeguard the relationship with that of the caregiver (Giesbrecht and Merckelbach 122). BTT implies that a

child when is dependent on its caregiver for support and survival will have, “a higher need to dissociate traumatic experiences from conscious awareness” (Giesbrecht and Merckelbach 122). Therefore, betrayal is rather meant to have a blind eye towards the betrayer by the affected children. Ka, as the protagonist of the novel, is blind to betrayal committed by her own family and turns out to be the child who has been deceived or betrayed. In order to dissociate herself from being traumatic due to her parent’s nightmares and their secrets she is still unaware of, she engages herself into various jobs consciously.

Ka works as a sculptor in the present. She obtains her inspiration from her father and loves her mother dearly. She comes to know Haiti only through her parent’s memories, whenever they recall through their recurring nightmares. She knows Haiti only through stories on journals, newspapers and television or the tales they tell of the place by making her believe in them. She knows very little about Haiti, the place she and her parents are supposed to be belonging to. She answers to the policemen while searching for her missing father in the beginning of the novel, she introduces herself thus, “I was born and raised in East Flatbush, Brooklyn, and have never even been to my parent’s birthplace. Still, I answer “Haiti” because it is one more thing I’ve always longed to have in common with my parents” (DB 4). She has no memory of Haiti and knows very little about its culture, where she tries to learn and picturise an imaginary Haiti. Language and food are her sole identities which remind her of being a Haitian. Ka as a child and as an adult had always thought and only imagined her home, Haiti, to be a beautiful place different from the US – the land she was born and is now living in. She had never had the chance to visit her homeland physically. Though living in the United Nations made her feel comfortable with her life, and with her environment of work, she has always had a thought of never belonging to this western land. Her home is Haiti where her parents were born, and had lived

before they had immigrated to the US. This is the only information she has about Haiti. It is the land of her parent's birth. It can be a conscious dissociation of trauma due to her blindness to betrayal by avoiding a visit to Haiti and trying to trace her roots by herself.

She knows nothing of her relatives or about the people her parents might have known during their stay in Haiti. She does not know anything about their real native places. Her parents have always lied every time about their place of birth or where they belong to whenever they were interrogated by anyone around them. She had always been taught to keep their identities undisclosed. It could have been to keep their secretive past hidden from people which Ka is unaware of (she had thought many at times in order to keep themselves safe). This makes her feel very uncomfortable and yet accept their world of privacies. She chooses to believe in them because they are her parents who have taken care of her and have protected her for so long. They are the ones who will continue to protect her in the future too. And this is what she tries to believe, that her parents would never have or will ever deceive her. To reiterate, this blind trust paves way to blindness towards betrayal. Betrayal blindness is a part of betrayal trauma theory which plays an important role in people who chose to turn a blind eye that they have been deceived or being betrayed.

The image of the dew breakers keep changing through the progression of the novel-in-stories, altering from the perspective how the militia was in the beginning, with the missing father(s) who were very cruel and abusive torturers in Haiti to the individual father who cares and have respect for their family. The individual/ political father or missing father(s) who are/were the dew breakers usually deceive their members of an institution by hiding their past in the novel. Understanding about betrayal and as an emerging theory of trauma with its various

branches of study and with comparison to Danticat's *The Dew Breaker* will help study trauma underwent by the Haitians more profoundly.

Haitians suffer wherever they are and wherever they go and it is heart wrenching to see them go through difficulties day-to-day. The Haitian people had to undergo too much of violence in the past. Experiencing all the atrocities caused by these Tonton Macoutes, the Haitian people had to disperse to various other states and countries, outside Haiti. Therefore, returning to their home or homeland was a great challenge physically. The remembrance of all the torturous experiences they had to undergo in relation to the place of violence, and their deserted homes; it turned out to be their trauma and as their traumatic memories. Henceforth, a psychic space is required for them to be created, in order to be in touch with their past and their Haitian culture. A space for them is needed where they might feel less hurt, both physically and psychologically. In doing so, such traumatic memories can be avoided (though cannot be fully eradicated), through retrieving their cultural values and traditions in a way easier to remember and not to be otherwise forgotten. It is important for them to remember their culture to identify themselves as to their emergence of existence amidst the multicultural society in the US.

In this novel, Danticat introduces a new way of recreating oneself in order to live a peaceful and normal life. Doubling is a process by which a person tries to create a double identity, which turns out to be in contrast with the other identity. The dew breaker creates such a doubling process, in order to become a person he was not, in the past. This is how a world is created beyond, the recorded self; a world newly formed beyond the memories of the within or of the inner-self.

The Dew Breaker uses this psychic space to make a return to Haiti. The former dew breaker wants to forget about his past, his violent history, and recreate a new history, a new

Haiti. He wants to make a new world of his own, where he is happy with his small family, living a normal life he has so much yearned for. The very language he knows is only Creole, which reflects the very cultural-space he is from. For Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “the geography of imagination inherent in [cultural domination] did not need the concreteness of *place*. Rather, it emphasized *space*” (“The Otherwise” 222). Though he is not present in the place of his birth, there are reflexes of the very culture he is from. In “The Book of Miracles” Anne contemplates on the miracle she had longed for which she enjoys recounting to Ka:

A long time ago, more than thirty years ago, in Haiti, your father worked in a prison, where he hurt many people. Now look at him. Look how calm he is. Look how patient he is. Look how he just drove forty miles, to your apartment in Westchester, to pick you up for Christmas Eve Mass. That was the miracle Anne wanted to share with her daughter on this Christmas Eve night, the simple miracle of her husband’s transformation, . . . (DB 72-73)

For the dew breaker, Ka is his good angel. She is his savior. She is the savior who has saved him from the perils of his distress, and has given a hope to healing. And she is the representation of a normal life (with a wife and a child), which is his fortunate gift. His past, his identity is revealed, through various stories of the victims, briefing out his tortures which were inflicted upon them. As the dew breaker and Ka’s father, as contrasts to each role, he creates a psychic space; as a place of escape beyond the traumatic memories, beyond the self-identity he had strived to create or recreate long ago (through the help of his wife and his daughter).

The dew breaker is a sign of change and acceptance of the change. He is the character whom every reader would despise. But taking his situation into account, he had been pushed into the society through politics, to do everything against his consciousness and belief system. He had

been betrayed by his own country, and has made his return impossible to his own homeland, both physically, and also to have a painful psychic visit. This is why he has created a world for himself, though against his own will. He has found life (Ka). He has started living a normal life, within the space, he has chosen to know about and live in it. This is how he has rejuvenated, creating a space for himself, a family, a home in the US; irrespective of the place he remembers of, the Haiti. Therefore, *The Dew Breaker* is a novel-in-stories which, “. . . provides access to history that would otherwise be unknown, builds bridges of understanding between cultures, and expands Haiti’s community of survivors with sympathetic readers who share the weight of this nation’s traumatic experiences” (Bellamy 194).

This is how Danticat weaves together stories of political terror at the hands of the militia and forced migrations. The concepts of exile and diaspora very well redefine Haitian cultural identity, and how they face trauma, outside of place and habitual home space. Danticat emphasizes that there is life after death, similar to the dawn of life after trauma. Thus, one can victoriously overcome trauma by believing in life after it, even if not immediately but one day for sure.

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