

# Psychodynamics of Violence and Trauma

## Abstract

Psychodynamics of violence and trauma is the study of disorganization of the psychic material that leads a human being to be violent and suffer from the trauma accompanying the violence. Violent acts can be physical, sexual or psychological in nature. Violence in its raw form and trauma that it leads to are palpable in Coetzee's works. J.M. Coetzee's works bring out the multifacetedness of violence and also the trauma associated to it.

**Keywords:** Psychodynamics, Violence, Trauma, J.M. Coetzee Colonialism, Apartheid, Dusklans, Disgrace, Suffering, Torture.

## Introduction

The term 'psychodynamics' stems from Gustav Fechner's use of the term "psychophysics" in his work *Elements of Psychophysics* (1860) which is the study of the relation between physical stimuli and the intensity of the perception of the stimuli. Early synonyms of psychodynamics include: the 'dynamic view' or 'mental dynamics' (Freud 1923), 'dynamic psychology', or 'energy psychology'. In 1979 psychodynamics meant the forces, motivated by deepest of human needs.

In human thermodynamics, psychodynamics is the study of mental processes, namely conscious and sub-conscious dynamics as related to basic human drives and instincts. Psychodynamics is the theory and systematic study of the psychological forces that underlie human behavior, especially dynamic relations between conscious and unconscious motivation. Sigmund Freud developed psychodynamics to describe the processes of the mind as flows of psychological energy in an organically complex brain.

Psychodynamics of violence and trauma is the study of this disorganization of the psychic material that leads a human being to be violent and suffer from the trauma accompanying the violence.

Violence is among the leading causes of death for the people aged 15-44 years worldwide, accounting for 14% of death among male and 7% of death among females. Not only death, many more are injured and suffer a range of physical, sexual, reproductive and mental disorders due to violence. It also affects the national economy, a lot needs to be spent on healthcare, law enforcement and lost productivity.

"Violence is the expression of physical force against self or other, compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt" (OED 2009). Force is used as a tool to make the other work according to your will or submit as he fears of being hurt. Violence can be physical, non physical or mental. Some violence is visible while other is invisible, grief and pain cannot be calculated. With the development of technology certain types of violence such as terrorism, wars, riots, and civil unrest have been made visible by media but still much more is hidden in home, workplaces and even in medical and social institutions set up for the help of the people.

Violence in various forms exists in the society. Violence emerges at four different levels- individual, relationship, community and social. Certain biological and personal factors influence an individual's predisposition to aggression, he either becomes a victim or the perpetrator of violence, for example, demographic characteristics (age, income or education), psychological or personality disorders etc. when they interact with family, community, culture and other external factors, create a situation where violence is inevitable.

At the relationship level one's relationship with the family, friends, partners and peers influence violent behaviour. Factors such as lack of affection, bonding, family dysfunction, marital or parental conflict etc. enhance violence in an individual. The community level studies the social atmosphere such as schools, workplaces and neighbourhoods and identifies poverty, high population, and low social capital as



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the main causes of violence. The fourth and last level studies the societal factors that create an environment in which violence is encouraged. The WHO also develops a typology of violence according to which violence can be divided into 3 broad categories according to characteristics of those committing the violent act, who the victims are, who has committed the act and what kind of violence they have been subjected to. The three categories are:

1. Self directed violence,
2. Interpersonal violence and
3. Collective violence

Self directed violence is subdivided into suicidal behaviour and self abuse. Suicide and Self-harm are the thirteenth leading cause of death. In the year 2000, an estimated 8, 15,000 people killed themselves. Stressful events or circumstances can put people at increased risk of harming themselves. Factors like poverty, loss of loved ones, arguments with family or friends, breakdown in relationships and work related problems are some common experiences which turn people towards suicidal attempts. Suicidal behaviour includes suicidal thoughts, attempted suicides whereas, self abuse, includes acts such as self-mutilation.

Interpersonal violence is divided into two sub-categories: Family and intimate partner violence i.e. violence largely between family member and intimate partners such as abuse of children and the elderly. Community violence includes youth violence, rape or sexual assault by strangers and violence in institutions such as schools, prisons and workplaces etc.

Collective violence is the use of violence by people who are members of a group against another group or set of individuals, in order to achieve social, political or economic objectives. Social violence includes crimes of hatred committed by organized groups, terrorism and mob violence. Political violence includes war, war related violent conflicts, state violence etc. Economic violence includes attacks by larger groups motivated by economic gain such as disrupting economic activity, denying essential services or creating economic division and fragmentation.

Violent acts can be physical, sexual or psychological in nature. They also involve deprivation and neglect. Violence continues to pursue its victim long after the act and haunts him throughout life. Judith Herman in his book *Trauma and Recovery* writes, "Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried. Equally powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work. Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told. Murder will out" (1). Violence will always announce its presence, its force being such that no matter how we wish it away as a reality, it will return.

Violence traumatizes people that is, experiencing or witnessing violence can lead to traumatic symptoms. Violent types of trauma such as experiencing sexual or physical abuse can contribute to future perpetration of violent behaviour. According to Herman; powerlessness, terror and helplessness characterize a traumatic event.

Thus, Trauma is the resulting injury caused by violence. According to the Oxford Dictionary of Sports Science and Medicine, trauma is the, "Physical damage caused by a blow, often the result of an external force"

or psychologically it states it as, "An event causing psychological shock that may have long lasting effects and lead to neurosis." The change of meaning of trauma from physical to psychical took place during the latter half of nineteenth century. Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer the precursors in the field traced that hysteria was a result of psychical trauma evolving from physical degeneration. Freud's works justified the use of the word 'trauma' in its psychical meanings. Freud labelled strange symptoms like trance states, violent mood swings, amnesia, physical paralysis etc. as traumatic effects of violence or accidents. Freud and Breuer in 1893 published Preliminary Communication in which they claimed that almost all hysteria was caused by psychical trauma. They wrote,

"In traumatic neurosis the operative use of the illness is not the trifling physical injury but the affect of fright- the psychical trauma. In an analogous manner, our investigations reveal, for many, if not for most, hysterical symptoms, precipitating causes which can only be described as psychical trauma. Any experience which calls up distressing affects- such as those of fright, anxiety, shame or physical pain- may operate as a trauma of this kind."

Freud in 1896 named his approach 'psychoanalysis' that is treatment of people suffering from traumatic neurosis or hysteria. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961), Freud describes a traumatic event as,

"We describe as 'traumatic' any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield...the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise efficacious barrier against stimuli. Such an event as an external trauma is bound to provoke a disturbance on a large scale in the functioning of the organisms energy and to set in motion every possible defensive measure....There is no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus, and another problem arises instead-the problem of mastering the amounts of stimulus which have broken in and of binding them, in the psychical sense, so that they can then be disposed of....There is then a continuous stream of excitations from the part of the periphery concerned to the central apparatus of the mind, such as could normally arise only from within the apparatus. And how shall we expect the mind to react to this invasion?"<sup>(23-24)</sup> This Energy released by traumatic impact results in traumatic neurosis.

The International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis describes Trauma in its psychoanalytical terms as, "trauma denotes an event of such violence and suddenness that it occasions an inflow of excitation sufficiently strong to defeat normally successful defense mechanisms; as a

general rule trauma stuns the subject and sooner or later, brings about a disorganization of the psychic economy. (1800)"

The word trauma in Greek means 'a wound' and traumatic is 'piercing of the skin, breaking of the bodily envelope'. As Freud studied the effects of trauma on mind, trauma study now includes many fields like philosophical, ethical and aesthetic concerns about why, how and what causes traumatic events. Trauma theory is now a part of many critical theories like the Freudian psychoanalysis, feminism, new historicism, and deconstruction.

According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality that is not otherwise available. The mind does not react immediately to trauma; it is registered but remains unknown to expression. Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) writes that the victims deny the knowledge of the traumatic experience, he says, "Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud"; they are "unspeakable" <sup>(1)</sup>.

Considering trauma from a socio-cultural aspect we study the legal, social, and psychiatric aspects of trauma. Recent studies are based on two disorders of the psyche resulting from trauma: Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Multiple Personality Disorder. PTSD results from the intolerable presence of trauma in the psyche while in Multiple Personality Disorder the victim suffers from the symptoms of dissociation and splitting where the trauma remains repressed from the psyche resulting in the splitting of the victim into various personalities. The experience of trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his will. The experience that Freud calls 'traumatic neurosis', is the repetition and reenactment of an event that cannot simply be left behind. Cathy Caruth writes that these repetitions suggest a larger relation to the event beyond that can be seen or known. Trauma is not a simple memory, traumatic recall remains insistent and unchanged but it can never be integrated into understanding.

A traumatic event is something life-threatening or even scary that you see or that happens to you, examples include fire disaster, violence or a life-threatening accident. Trauma also includes witnessing someone being killed or injured. Discrimination or racial exploitation is also a traumatic event. Colonialism and apartheid are always accompanied with violence and trauma.

Apartheid was a system of legal racial segregation in which a minority of whites ruled over majority of non-white inhabitants of South Africa. Racial segregation in South Africa began under the colonial rule. The inhabitants were classified in different groups and residential areas were segregated by means of forced removals. Black people were deprived of their citizenship. The government segregated education, medical care, and other public services. The black people were provided inferior services to those of white people.

Violence begets Violence. Apartheid sparked internal resistance and violence. A number of popular

uprisings and protests were met with police brutality which in turn increased support for armed resistance struggle. Apartheid, by definition means 'apartness', as a social institution, it created disjunctions and social gaps. It fuelled power struggles, which were the breeding ground of antagonism and hostility. It was responsible for callous violence. Social tensions, mistrust, fear and guilt were created by Apartheid and this triggered violations at various levels.

Violence also includes an attack on a person's dignity, worth and value. Violence reproduces itself, the feelings long repressed of an abusive childhood come forth in the form of wife beating, sexual abuse etc. Structural violence- hunger, poverty, and humiliation result in intimate and domestic violence. Violence is everywhere in social practice, its everyday prevalence renders it invisible.

Violence takes many forms and is understood differently in different countries and among different cultures. There are wars within nations for expansion of territory and for the control of natural resources. Violence is engineered by state against its citizens and instigated by religious denominations. Violence is perpetrated by racism, sexism and classism. Violence knows no boundaries and is widely prevalent and pervasive in all spheres of life. It is present across caste, class and race, and across age, religion, culture and location.

Violence and trauma seem to have a special charm for J.M. Coetzee, the white South African author. Violence in its raw form and trauma that it leads to are palpable in Coetzee's works. J.M.Coetzee's works bring out the multifacetedness of violence and also the trauma associated to it. His oeuvre portrays different forms of violence. In his works almost all his characters are a part and parcel of the violence during and after colonialism. Anna Izabella Cichon writes about the presence of violence and pain in the works of Coetzee and the affect they have on the victim and the society in the article "Violence and Complicity in J.M.Coetzee's Works", she writes; "Coetzee broadens his perspective and subjects to scrutiny the effects of tortures, both in the individual and social dimension. He focusses on the victims of tortures with their suffering, pain and reaction to brutality, and on the moral devastation of the community in which abhorrent acts are carried out" <sup>(46)</sup>.

J.M.Coetzee's works depict, the colonial violence and suffering during colonization and decolonization, with Apartheid adding to the woes of people. *Dusklands* by Coetzee portrays the Dutch colonial struggle and the Vietnam War whereas *Disgrace* depicts the postcolonial woes. David Atwell in his book on J.M.Coetzee describes Coetzee as a violent writer, "Coetzee does not merely write about violence: his writing is violent" <sup>(55)</sup>.

Colonialism and policies related to colonialism breed violence. Apartheid which was a system of legal racial segregation also played an essential role in adding to the woes of the colonized. Racial segregation was a policy which involved discrimination on the basis of race and colour, and the rule of minority of whites over the majority of blacks. Apartheid bred hostility and was responsible for callous violence. Social tensions, mistrust, fear and guilt were created by Apartheid and these instigated violations at various levels.

In the Life and Times of Michael K Michael K is the victim of racial discrimination and has to leave his home in search of a new land of equals. Against the background of civil war Michael is treated with contempt as he does not have travel permits he is put to forced labour and concentration camps from where he escapes for freedom, for which the minorities are fighting, "so that minorities can have a say in their own destinies" (15).

The World Health Organization defines violence as: "The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against, one self, another person or against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation" (5). This definition includes the use of power and force not only socially but also politically across the world in the nature of war as well.

In *Waiting for the Barbarians* the minority of whites rule over the majority of blacks. The imperialists hunt for the natives in the deep interiors of the country. They name them as Barbarians but the Magistrate wonders if there are any Barbarians. The village Magistrate sympathizes with the natives yet he has to be a party to the imperial officers who take the natives as prisoners and torture them. The tortured people do not evoke any sympathy from the beholders. They are looked at, "as though they are strange animal" (21). The inhabitants of the fort now take pleasure at the sites of torture. The perpetrators realize this and make the spectacle more exciting. One of the horrid scenes is, the perpetrators write on the victim's backs the word "ENEMY..." (115) with charcoal and beat them up till the inscription vanishes from their skin. The Magistrate who is in fact one of the colonizers, when he visits the torture chamber is horrified to witness the dark chamber and the violence inflicted on the colonized. He thinks he interfered in the imperial rule, therefore he is taken to be a party to the oppressed and has to endure pain and humiliation at their hands. He is taken to be an enemy by his own people.

The existence of slavery in society is also symbolic violence as the slave works against his will for money or to fulfill his needs. J.M. Coetzee in almost all his works has portrayed the misery of slaves. In *Dusklands* in the second novella 'The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee' the native Hottentots are slaves to the Boer farmers. They work in the fields of the Boer farmers. They cannot fulfill their daily needs and look for help from the masters. The master is the owner of the slave. Klawer is a faithful Hottentot who helps Jacobus Coetzee through all the good and bad times. He even helps him fulfill the basic needs of everyday life when he needs that.

Frantz Fanon argues the use of revolutionary violence as the most effective mode of opposition to the violence of colonial oppression. He writes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, "Violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction, it makes him fearless and restores

his self-respect. (74)" He proposes the use of oppositional violence so that the colonized can take hold of their history and pave way for a better future. In Coetzee's *Dusklands* the wild Hottentots resent the presence of Jacobus Coetzee, a white imperialist hunter and avenge themselves when he falls ill by ignoring him and separating him from the village to abandoned huts where he is not taken good care of and the small village children tease him. He says, "I was lead to the cluster of huts beyond the stream that marked the boundary of the village proper. . . . I was unlashd from my bier and laid out in the shade by strange hands. The onlookers drifted away, all but two invincible old men and the children" (77).

Violence can never be understood solely in terms of its physicality-force, assault, or the infliction of pain alone. Violence also includes assaults on the personhood and dignity which in turn gives violence its power and meaning. Violence, be it colonial, structural or symbolic always leads to destruction. A question always arises as to who is responsible and for what. J.M.Coetzee in his works shows us the brutal face of violence meted by the South Africans during colonialism and still writes of the present society which is suffering the aftermaths of this violence.

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