Tracing Psychological Facts in Amabelle Desir, the Fictional Heroine of Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones*

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Abstract

This study explores Edwidge Danticat's The Farming of Bones in the light of testimony therapy. As a historical novel, The Farming of Bones interweaves the events of the 1937 Parsley Massacre into the life account of its fictional character, Amabelle Desir, not only to revive an act of mass violence in the collective minds but also to stake a claim for the documentary testimony of its narration. Danticat recounts the relationship between the victims and survivors of the Parsley Massacre through Amabelle's testimony, who has to take the risk of re-experiencing the traumatic events of mass violence imposed on them in Rafael Trujillo's regime without being a part of those events. Thus, a close reading of Danticat's The Farming of Bones and exploring the effectiveness of testimony in the real world help us find out how Amabelle's narration on behalf of the dead brings her a new life as a newborn baby in a fictional world.

Keywords — *trauma, traumatic memories, post-traumatic stress disorder, testimony, testimony therapy*

I. INTRODUCTION

This study explores Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* in the light of testimony therapy. As a historical novel, *The Farming of Bones* interweaves the events of the 1937 Parsley Massacre into the life account of its fictional character, Amabelle, not only to revive an act of mass violence in the collective minds but also to stake a claim for the documentary testimony of its narration. According to Rice-Sayre, testimony "speaks for all those oppressed, disappeared, imprisoned 'without a name'" (68). Therefore, Danticat recounts the relationship between the victims and survivors of the massacre through Amabelle's testimony as she has to take the risk of re-experiencing traumatic events of mass violence imposed on them in Trujillo's regime without being a part of it. In *Testimony Therapy*, Janie A. Van et al. point to the Chilean psychologists Cienfuegos and Monelli, who first described the positive effects of giving testimony: "During the Chilean dictatorship, they tried to get in touch with former political prisoners of the regime. They collected their stories as a way of documenting the oppression, but they also discovered that giving testimony in this way seemed to help these former prisoners" (361). In fact, this method helps traumatized persons tell the story of what happened to them until it no longer stimulates any anxiety. In this regard, the main concern of my paper concentrates on Amabelle Desir, the main character of the novel, who gives voice to her long silenced and traumatic memories of the Parsley Massacre as a way to overcome her anxiety and promote a new view of life. Thus, a close reading of Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* and exploring the effectiveness of Testimony help us find out how Amabelle's narration on behalf of the dead brings her a new life as a newborn baby: "she is paddling like a newborn in a wash-basin." (Danticat 308)

II. Material

According to The Encyclopaedia of Trauma and Traumatic Stress Disorders, testimony therapy is "a form of therapy based on the concept that giving written and/or oral testimony of traumatic experiences usually associated with torture and organized violence can serve to relieve posttraumatic symptoms" (267). On this account, testimony offers "a way back to the community when the survivor feels alienated, alone, and devalued. It is a portal back to humanness and acceptability" (267). The testimonial structure of The Farming of Bones, reveals that Danticat has chosen testimony as a therapy to deal with Amabelle's Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). According to American Psychiatric Association (APA), this sort of stress disorder is common among those who have "experienced, witnessed, or [been] confronted with an event . . . that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury" (467). Therefore, Amabelle's life account, which is filled with multiple losses to grieve as well as physical and emotional scars, is a good proof for her PTSD. She feels a spiritual resilience for a new life while lamenting her lost beauty and youth: "I knew my body could no longer be a tempting spectacle, nor would I ever be truly young or beautiful, if ever I had been" (227). Heather Hewett asserts that "the

experience of living in a changed body is in many ways what makes her unable to forget her past" (128).

As a survivor with a direct witness of a massacre, Amabelle is struggling with a collective trauma, which makes her juxtapose her own life story with an account of the lives of others in order to realize her own trauma that is attached to this account. However, the recollection of the horrible past scenes is so tense that at times she believes herself to be back amid the dead victims of the massacre to the point she feels herself closer to ghosts rather than citizens: "We were those people, the nearly dead, the ones who had escaped from the other side of the river" (Danticat 218). Brian Norman argues, "This is the ghostly position in which any testifying survivor often finds herself" (402). Amabelle's reflection on her entire life leads to an inner tension between her own self and those of others. She feels guilty for having survived the massacre and, therefore, cannot live as a living citizen or even talk about the harrowing scenes she witnessed. She has repressed her bitter memories of the massacre events for the last twenty years, but as Lois Tyson asserts that, "repression doesn't eliminate our painful experiences and emotions" (12). Amabelle is suffering from a silenced trauma and finds herself on the brink of traumatic repression. At times she feels like giving up by throwing herself in the river or off a cliff since she has difficulty in integrating her sufferings into her life. She sees no meaning in life when she compares pigeons which are full of life and sound to ghosts: "The way pigeons moan is the same way ghosts cry when they are too lonely or too sad when they have been dead so long that they have forgotten how to speak their own names" (Danticat 24). In fact, she is experiencing a life-in-death since she has not come in terms with her repressed anxieties and as Lois Tyson asserts, "until we find a way to know and acknowledge our repressed wounds, fears, guilty desires, and unresolved conflicts, we hang onto them in disguised, distorted, and self-defeating ways" (13)

On the other hand, she feels the ghostly presence of the dead who craves justice through her voice. Getting overwhelmed by such thoughts, Amabelle describes herself as "feeling like an old ghost had slipped back under my skin" (Danticat 295). In fact, she assumes responsibility in documenting the human-rights violation on behalf of the dead. Lucia Suarez observes the novel "imagines the names of those whose deaths went undocumented and uncovers the masks of pain this denied history creates" (27). Additionally, in order to document the victims' violated human rights, Amabelle has to become a part of the past while at the same time she tries to keep herself in the present time. Consequently, she feels a double existence between the dead and the living while losing her sense of being. In fact, she sees no boundaries between herself and the dead when she points to the corpses in Massacre River as those "who are searching for loved ones mistaking the living for the dead" (183). However, Amabelle eventually has to shed her status as a traumatized ghost and become a citizen of the present by finding a way to overcome her repressed trauma. That is why Amabelle says: "All I want to do is find a place to lay it down now and again, a safe nest where it will neither be scattered by the winds nor remain forever buried beneath the sod" (Danticat 264). Jara and Vidal believe that "remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of social order and for the healing of individual victims"(1). Besides, Rice-Sayre believes that testimony "speaks for all those oppressed, disappeared, [and] imprisoned 'without a name'" (68). Similarly, Amabelle knows that narrating the victims' silenced story is the only way she can serve the dead and claim their rights because life narratives can contribute directly or indirectly to human rights redemption.

Amabelle appeals to the act of narration not only to bring up the buried justice on behalf of the dead but also as a way to lessen the tension of her inner traumatized self. Amabelle finds out while the tragic events of the genocidal atrocity cannot be undone, they can be expressed fully and, then, redirected toward a recovered mind. In this way, Amabelle's re-experiencing and reliving her shattered traumatic memories lead to the reconstruction of a coherent narration, which is the focus of testimony therapy. Consequently, while Amabelle's traumatic mind impaired her to cope with the demands of social life, she turns to language and transmits the testimony of the massacre's victims. In this way, she seeks her lost identity through the act of narrating the story of her life as well as others. According to Saunders and Aghaie, "the isolated personal grief, in which trauma victims tend to feel cut off from the rest of the world, once it is expressed in songs and stories, is transformed into a communal experience, which provides a sense of shared meaning and acceptance" (21). Amabelle brings her suppressed emotions out in the open with the hope of the reconciliation of a fragmented mind. Xu Yan points out that Amabelle suffers from a sense of non- existence and therefore, "she struggles to juxtapose, through narrating, pieces of her own past experiences together into a complete identity" (218).

Based on psychoanalytic criticism, Amabelle's attempt to establish a coherent life narrative is what is known as regression. According to Lois Tyson regression, which is "the temporary return to a former psychological state" can be "such a useful therapeutic tool" (15). Tyson claims that the acknowledgment of repressed experiences can "alter the effectiveness of a wound only when we relive the wounding experience" (15). On this account, Amabelle recounts her past stressful life events in order to interpret them in a more understandable way

and turn the trauma of unspeakable nightmares into meaningful narrations. In fact, she wants to create a life out of the genocidal slaughter she has eye-witnessed. Pennebaker believes that "translating distress into language ultimately allows us to forget or, perhaps a better phrase, move beyond the experience" (1251). Besides, Cienfuegos and Monelli assert that testimony "aimed at facilitating the integration of the traumatic experience and restoration of self-esteem . . ." (43). That is why Amabell's internal anxieties change into a sort of inner relief as she goes through the process of testimony on behalf of the dead.

A psychoanalytic reading of the novel reveals how, through flashbacks to past events, Amabelle's present trauma unleashes the regressive memories: "Someone threw a fist-sized rock, which bruised my lip and left cheek. My face hit the ground . . . A sharp blow to my side nearly stopped my breath . . ." (Danticat 192). In reality, Amabelle brings her traumatic memories from unconscious to conscious mind, which are no longer tormenting: "Symptoms are not built up out of conscious experiences; as soon as the unconscious processes in question become conscious, the symptom disappears" (Freud 241-242). Here, memory processes trauma retrospectively into a narrative that makes sense of it; a story that should be told: "trauma is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or a truth that is not otherwise available" (Cathy Caruth 4). That is why immediately after the massacre, "people gathered in a group to talk. Taking turns, they exchange tales quickly, the haste in their voices sometimes blurring their words, for greater than their desire to be heard was the hunger to tell" (207). However, as a part of her testimony, Amabelle appeals to her wild imagination and uses her dreams to nurture her restless mind. For instance, she imagines Sebastian's return in her mind and articulates: "Thinking of Sebastien's return made me wish for my hair to grow again - which it had not - for the inside of my ears to stop buzzing, for my knees to bend without pain, for my jaws to realign evenly and form a smile that did not make me look like a feeding mule" (Danticat 227). Therefore, she forgets about all her pains in his presence, and at least for a few seconds, she feels Sebastien next to herself.

Amabelle processes her trauma in the form of narrative exposure as a reaction to post-traumatic disorder. However, once Amabelle narrates her traumatic experiences, she should release herself from its devastating chains and start a new life. For instance, by narrating her parents' drowning in the river to Sebastien, Amabelle turns her trauma into a narrative exposure: "The water rises above my father's head. My mother releases his neck, the current carrying her beyond his reach. Separated, they are less of an obstacle for the cresting river" (50-51). By the way, when later she says to Sebastien; "I had the dream of my parents in the river . . . I always see it precisely the way it took place", he replies: "I don't want you to have this dream again . . . We'll have to change this thing, starting now" (53). These lines foreshadow a change in Amabelle's personality towards starting a new life since eventually, the same river that symbolizes death for Amabelle turns into a criterion to accept her status as a testifying survivor: "To step across it and then come out is what makes me alive. Odette and Wilner not coming out is what makes them dead" (265). Having crossed the river and leaving the Haitian world behind, Amabelle is assuring herself of overcoming the past memories. Therefore, the survivor's participation in the past experiences through testimony leads to a delightful tranquillity as she regains her identity and is no longer a walking dead: "I looked to my dreams for softness, for a gentler embrace, for relief from the fear of mudslides and blood bubbling out of the riverbed, where it is said the dead add their tears to the river flow" (308). She starts a new life as a newborn baby while "paddling like a newborn in a wash-basin" and "looking for dawn" (308).

CONCLUSION

Amabelle is hunted by traumatized memories as a result of being the eye-witness of genocide and feels herself trapped in a loop of fruitless struggle to pass her ordinary life. Thus, in order to relieve herself from those fearful memories, she turns to narrative exposure as a therapy to encounter her past. Brian mentions that in an interview, Danticat describes the aim of narration in her novel, *The Farming of Bones*: "The book itself, the story, the telling is meant as a path towards healing" (410). In fact, language as a means of narration connects Amabelle to the outside world, which represents her sense of being. According to Paulann Grech and Reuben Grech, narrative exposure therapy is a way to "facilitate the process of conveying fragmented autobiographic memories related to the traumatic events into a coherent narrative-the testimony" (7). In other words, to desensitize the traumatized memories of one's life account, gradual exposure to those memories decreases the main symptoms of PTSD. That is why Danticat engages Amabelle in forming a narrative of her life events with a special focus on the period of the Parsley Massacre. In fact, Amabelle's suffering from a disorganized state of mind leads her toward giving testimony upon the happenings of the Parsley Massacre. Gradually, re-narrating helps Amabelle step out of her trauma by confronting her traumatized memories, which no longer stimulate any anxieties. Amabelle's unleashing the buried memories of the Parsley Massacre serves as a recapturing of self-respect. Hence, disclosure has a positive impact on her traumatized mind as it turns trauma into a coherent and meaningful narration. In this regard,

giving voice to her tormenting memories in the form of testimony looks promising for Amabelle to overcome her nightmarish memories, which show the power of narration in shaping the existence of Amabelle in her post-traumatic life.

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