Aspects of Analysing Trauma Fiction by Observing *Lolita*'s Impact on the 21st Century Novel, *My Dark Vanessa*

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A *Szép sötét Vanessám* elemzése az irodalmi traumaelmélet szempontjából, a *Lolita* hatása a 21. századi traumafikcióra.

Absztrakt: A traumakutatás az irodalomban csak a 20. század végén vette kezdetét, így a pszichológiai elemzés a szépirodalomban viszonylag új terület, ezért a traumafikció elemzése kihívásokat állít elénk. A traumaelemzés további kutatása elengedhetetlen, mivel az irodalmi kánon darabjai új értelmezéseket nyerhetnek ezzel a módszerrel. Ez a cikk a traumafikció elemzésének módszereit mutatja be mind a pszichológusok, mind az irodalomelméleti szakemberek részéről. A középpontban a trauma következményei állnak. A trauma hatására az elbeszélő emlékei megváltoznak, homályosak lesznek, így kihatnak a narrációra. Az ilyen irodalmi művekben az olvasó is szerepet játszik, mivel ő az, aki összerakja a történet darabjait, amikor az elbeszélőt a múltja visszarántja a mélybe. Továbbá, mivel az ismétlődő trauma nagyobb valószínűséggel eshet meg fogságban, elszigetelt környezetben, fontos, hogy a regény helyszíneit alaposan megfigyeljük. A hangsúly nemcsak a fizikai környezeten van, hanem a PTSD miatt a pszichológiai aspektusokon is, mint például az emlékeken és a disszociációkon.

Abstract

Trauma studies in literature have only appeared towards the end of the 20th century, hence psychological analysis in fiction is a relatively new field, therefore observing pieces of trauma fiction has its challenges. Further improvement of trauma analysis is essential since earlier pieces of the literary canon can gain new interpretations with this method. This article aims to apply several methods of analysing trauma fiction from both psychologists and literary theorists. The focus is on the impact of trauma and its effect on the narrator's memories making her fractured narration unintentionally unreliable. Consequently, the reader plays a significant part while reading trauma fiction since they are the ones who put the pieces of the story together when the narrator is set back by the overwhelming event. Moreover, due to the fact that repeated trauma is more likely to happen in captivity, it is essential to observe the setting of the novel. The emphasis is not only on the physical setting but also, due to PTSD, on psychological aspects like memories and dissociations.

Contemporary writers often focus on giving voice to those female characters that used to be silenced in literature; one of many examples that depict this phenomenon is the disturbing story of Vladimir Nabokov's classic, *Lolita*, which a man poetically narrates and he says the following: "I knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord" (Nabokov, 2015, 308). In the last couple of pages of the novel, Humbert Humbert acknowledges that Lolita's voice is absent from his memoir, as a result, the reader only knows the Lolita that Humbert Humbert creates with his vivid, obsessive descriptions.

Since the publication of Nabokov's shocking novel in 1959, Lolita's side of the story intrigued authors from all over the world. Stories started to be created where Lolita could describe her own experience, for instance, French journalist and writer Christophe Tison experimented with Lolita's point of view in his novel, *Journal de L,* in 2019. Also, Alisson Wood in 2020 wrote a memoir about being in an abusive relationship with her high school teacher and she entitled her story *Being Lolita.* Moreover, in 2020, Kate Elizabeth Russell published her debut novel, *My Dark Vanessa*, which can be best described as a reverse modern-day *Lolita* story. Russell's novel depicts the realistic dark side of age-gap romances where the female voice is not silenced anymore. This thought-provoking psychological fiction creates a brutally honest picture of a taboo relationship and thus broadens the palette of trauma literature.

My Dark Vanessa's disjointed plotline gradually reveals the pieces of the story to the reader as we follow the exceptional Vanessa Wye, a fifteen-year-old scholarship student at Browick boarding school, who is entangled in a convoluted relationship with her English professor, Mr. Strane, while also observing her as a thirty-two-year-old woman who is stranded in her life as a hotel receptionist. From the moment Strane first touches Vanessa, she loses herself under his influence, as he creates the perfect victim out of her.

Consequently, this article argues that we can observe the influence of *Lolita* in 21st century literature in *My Dark Vanessa* as Vanessa narrates her unusual experience of first love, which is rather her testimony as a trauma survivor. Moreover, the article sheds light on recent trauma studies which offer multiple methods of analysis.

Trauma and Literature: The Most Important Trauma Terms

In the late 19th century, in Vienna, Freud and his partner Josef Breuer published their findings about the conditions of abused women under the title *Studies on Hysteria.* They stated that "hysteria was a condition caused by psychological trauma" and the symptoms have caused a condition they called "double consciousness" (Herman, 2022, 16), which nowadays we call post-traumatic stress disorder. Judith Herman first published *Trauma and Recovery* in 1992, and since Freud, it is often said to be one of the most essential works which had a significant impact on the field of psychology as a laudatory quote from *The New York Times* suggests on the cover of the book. Around the same time in the 1990s, trauma studies first appeared in literature when Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, based on Freud's theory of trauma, was published in 1996.

Since Caruth's literary trauma theory became known, it has been challenged by other scholars, such as Richard McNally, while others have used her theory to further improve it, like Michelle Balaev, whose interest in trauma is directed towards the importance of place. Furthermore, Joshua Pederson offers an alternative model of literary trauma analysis in three points. First, he suggests that instead of focusing on the details of the text, scholars should switch their focus to the unity of the text

Kata Bodnár: Aspects of Analysing Trauma Fiction by Observing *Lolita*'s Impact on the 21st Century Novel, *My Dark Vanessa*

7

(Pederson, 2014, 338). Second, they should carry out an extended narrative analysis, and finally, they should pay close attention to crooked events or memories because trauma tends to alter the mind (Pederson, 2014, 339).

One of the most essential terms to understand is trauma itself. Balaev defines trauma as an "overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self" (Balaev, 2008, 150). Although the traumatic event is abrupt, the effect of trauma becomes perceptible only after the traumatic event has already happened, not instantly. The other term that we frequently hear in connection with trauma is PTSD, which is the aftershock of the traumatic event. When someone cuts themselves, the wound is visible; eventually, it will heal and, in most cases, it will vanish, while the "wound of the mind" (Caruth, 2016, 4) is invisible. This is why it is important to recognize the symptoms of PTSD to find this invisible wound and help the patient recover from the extraordinary event.

Therefore, PTSD appears after a traumatic event that the individual has lived through, and this experience is stored in the victim's memory. This recollection can take over the mind after a similar experience triggers the brain to bring out the old memories in present situations, which is when PTSD develops. Also, the individual who has experienced trauma is more likely to lose their identity because the trauma can destroy it; consequently, the individual will begin to doubt themselves.

Balaev defines a trauma novel as a text which "provides a picture of the individual that suffers but paints it in such ways as to suggest that this protagonist is an 'everyperson' figure" (Balaev, 2008, 155). In contemporary popular literature, one of the most common themes is sexual violence to which Herman also draws attention when she highlights that "The last and most recent trauma to come into public awareness is sexual and domestic violence" (Herman, 2022, 13). *My Dark Vanessa* falls into this pattern since the novel's main focus is childhood sexual abuse and its consequences.

Vanessa's Trauma Narration and the Role of the Reader

As Caruth writes, "Trauma is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (Caruth, 2016, 24). *My Dark Vanessa*, as a modern-day *Lolita* story, discusses topics and themes from *Lolita* that are still important to write about in order to have a better understanding from a female perspective. Although there are similarities between Vanessa's and Lolita's stories, it is essential to focus on how Russell aims to represent the same experience in a different way. "To comprehend the magnitude of trauma, it is necessary to focus on the individualized nuances and textures of each victim's narrative" (Horvitz, 2000, 5).

Before we move on to analyze the narration, we need to take a look at the narrator to understand why she tells her story the way she does. At the beginning of her narrative, Vanessa implies to the reader that something awful is going on in her life. "Me dropping everything and doing anything, devoted as a dog, as he takes and takes and takes" (Russell, 2021, 6). She is clearly suffering, but she is unable to see the truth of the

consequences of her trauma, that she was sexually abused by her English professor at the age of fifteen. And, as Herman says, "rape, by its nature, is intentionally designed to produce psychological trauma" (Herman, 2022, 84).

Before meeting Strane, Vanessa was an average small-town girl who wanted to experience life; however, she was completely unaware of the upcoming trauma that would destroy her identity. After the first sexual interaction between Vanessa and Strane, she consequently suffers from the symptoms of PTSD every time Strane initiates sexual intercourse with her. As long as it keeps happening, Vanessa is sinking deeper into a hole of forgetting who she is.

The reader has a significant role in *My Dark Vanessa* since the reader functions as a witness to Vanessa's trauma narrative because this novel corresponds to the second stage of Vanessa's recovery, as in this stage "the survivor tells her story of the trauma" (Herman, 2022, 254). Also, "As the narrative closes in on the most unbearable moments, the patient finds it more and more difficult to use words" (Herman, 2022, 256). After Strane's suicide, Vanessa mentions him for the first time to Ruby – the therapist whom Vanessa goes to after her father's death as her ex-boyfriend suggests to her that she will benefit from it – and she tries to form the words, but she cannot say them out loud yet. "I falter, wanting to explain, but the words aren't there. They don't exist" (Russell, 2021, 195).

The moment Vanessa finally tells her traumatic experience, "In the telling, the trauma story becomes a testimony" (Herman, 2022, 263). Similarly to Humbert Humbert's testimony in front of the jury in Nabokov's *Lolita*, this is Vanessa's testimony to the world and to the girls who have found themselves in a similar situation. The reader is a witness to the story but also, the reader's role can be identified with the therapist's role since Vanessa is not the only character the reader is interested in, the reader wants to understand what motivates Strane as well. "In her role as witness, the therapist is caught in a conflict between victim and perpetrator. She comes to identify not only with the feelings of the victim but also with the perpetrator." (Herman, 2022, 208).

Pederson's second point in his analysis suggests that in the case of trauma fiction, scholars should pay close attention to the narration of the novel (Pederson, 2014, 339). Thanks to the disjointed plotline Vanessa's voice can be heard in two different timelines: on the one hand, as a fifteen-year-old teenager, and on the other hand, as a thirty-two-year-old woman. Due to this narration technique, the reader is able to see Vanessa before her relationship with Strane and also the consequences that still affect her in the present.

This fractured narration of the novel is essential since it depicts the qualities that Caruth and Herman claim to be important, as they state that trauma is both amnestic and unspeakable as the victim's mind shifts from the present moment to somewhere else. Otherwise, why should literary scholars study trauma narration if it is unspeakable? The unspeakable quality makes the books interesting because, as a superficial reader, you are likely to miss the details that are essential to notice in order to understand the trauma narrative. When Vanessa thinks about Strane, she does not consider him the villain

Kata Bodnár: Aspects of Analysing Trauma Fiction by Observing *Lolita*'s Impact on the 21st Century Novel, *My Dark Vanessa*

9

of her story; he represents aspects of her life that she cannot put into words to say out loud. "They seem like the real monsters, all those unspeakable things" (Russell, 2021, 256).

In Russell's novel, the victim's internal conflict with her fractured memories drives the narrative forward, similarly to Herman's suggestion that "The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma" (Herman, 2022, 1). From the beginning of the novel, the reader is aware that some girls at Browick claim that Strane assaulted them during their years at the boarding school. However, in Vanessa's view, what is between Strane and her is an enchanting love story that devours her. In the first therapy session with Ruby the therapist, they talk about all those recent allegations against famous men, and Vanessa tells Ruby that the only reason these men can do such things to women is that victims allow them: "We all turn a blind eye" (Russell, 2021, 9), including herself with the use of the first person plural pronoun, although at this moment, due to her incomplete memories, she does not identify herself as a victim yet.

Another essential aspect in relation to narration is the question of reliability, especially in the case of trauma narratives. As Caruth and Herman say, and it has already been mentioned, the experience of trauma is amnestic and unspeakable, which suggests that if the protagonist suffers from PTSD, the reader cannot trust them fully as their memories are unreliable. Pederson discusses McNally's reconsidered trauma model, pointing out that in McNally's view, "the memory of the trauma can be altered, but he rejects…that it is absent…" (Pederson, 2014, 338). McNally argues that the reason behind the amnestic feature of trauma is the unwillingness of the victim to think about it (Pederson, 2014, 337). Hence, McNally suggests that trauma is memorable and speakable; this is why a new generation of scholars should consider the victims' accounts as reliable and not exclusively unreliable (Pederson 2014, 338).

Despite the new theory of McNally, the novel seems to correspond with Caruth's and Herman's ideas that the overwhelming experience is both unspeakable and amnestic, therefore, the reader can find contradictions in Vanessa's narration, which gives the reader reason to consider Vanessa as an unreliable narrator. In the case of Vanessa, the amnestic quality is present when Strane asks her if she remembers their past encounters in the present timeline. Her answer in her mind is the following: "I don't remember, not exactly. So many of my memories from back then are shadowy, incomplete. I need him to fill the gaps, though sometimes the girl he describes sounds like a stranger" (Russell, 2021, 7). Regarding memories, Vanessa heavily relies on Strane's own narrative about what happened between the two of them and how willing and satisfied she was during their time together. It is clearly visible that even after all these years, she is still dependent on him.

We can further classify Vanessa as an unreliable narrator since Olson argues that there are two types of unreliable narrators: the "fallible" and the "untrustworthy" (Olson, 2003, 101). The "fallible" narrator's thoughts can be distorted "because they are

children with limited education or experience" (Olson, 2003, 101), while an "untrustworthy" narrator modifies the narrative to make sense of its paradoxes (Olson, 2003, 104). Consequently, we can argue that Vanessa falls into the category of a "fallible" narrator since she went through this overwhelming experience as a child, she does not consciously deceive the reader.

We can observe this "fallible" quality of Vanessa's narration through several examples. Vanessa is confused about the point when her attraction towards Strane started. At one point in the novel, she states that it is easy to determine when it started, the first time she stepped into his classroom, and he looked at her. However, further in the book, when we are in the past account, she questions herself: "But if it didn't start when he first touched me, when did it?" (Russell, 2021, 303) Due to these contradictory memories, it is challenging for her to put together what actually happened.

One time, Vanessa describes her memories as "fractured…like shattered glass" (Russell, 2021, 260). Her narration is fractured similarly to her memories. Vanessa believes that together with Strane they are capable of repairing her memories, but the truth, which she is not willing to acknowledge, is that after something breaks, even if it can be mended perfectly it will not be the exact same thing again. She desperately wants to live in those memories of her childhood where Strane is Humbert and she is Dolores, even if they hurt her every time, she revisits those traumatic situations. As a way to find herself, she has to leave the past behind, but she is incapable of that as long as Strane is present in her life. His suicide is a wake-up call to Vanessa to realise what is happening to her and to start to claim her own life back.

Isolation, Captivity and the Importance of Place in Trauma Novels

"Considering the multiple models of trauma and memory presented in the trauma novel draws attention to the role of place, which functions to portray trauma's effects through metaphoric and material means" (Balaev, 2008, 149). Hence, the setting plays a significant role throughout the novel since "the physical landscape is a referent for the individual's sense of self or identity" (Balaev, 2008, 161). Vanessa is a lazy person, and her room or apartment is always chaotic, representing that something unpleasant is going on in her life. The chaos in her mind is projected into the disorder in her personal environment, as she describes how her "room turns into a mess of clothes" (Russell, 2021, 22).

She feels like an outsider at Browick as if no one understood her except Strane. "Besides, hardly anyone else at Browick seems to struggle like I do" (Russell, 2021, 19). She had a fallout with her best friend Jenny a year before when Jenny started to hang out with Tom, and she spent less and less time with Vanessa. The phone calls are limited, and the students are only allowed to go home during holidays. Thus, there are no interactions available beyond the walls of the boarding school.

Kata Bodnár: Aspects of Analysing Trauma Fiction by Observing *Lolita*'s Impact on the 21st Century Novel, *My Dark Vanessa*

11

"Captivity, which brings the victim into prolonged contact with the perpetrator, creates a special type of relationship, one of coercive control" (Herman, 2022, 109). The boarding school can be seen as a form of captivity for Vanessa, and she is also held in captivity by Strane, who has the most powerful influence on her life and self-development as "the victim is shaped by the actions and beliefs of the perpetrator" (Herman, 2022, 109). In the case of Vanessa, the trauma is not a one-time-only event; victims who are held in captivity suffer repeated trauma as they cannot escape from their situation.

The boarding school setting and the fact that Vanessa is in isolation contribute to her victimisation. "Traumatic reactions occur when actions are of no avail. When neither resistance nor escape is possible…" (Herman, 2022, 49). Vanessa is under the influence of Strane and since she thinks that she is in control, she does not consider that she is trapped in an act of violence from which she cannot escape. By the time of the rape, she is so heavily entangled with the idea that Strane is her antidote to loneliness that she wants to impress him by proving that she is mature enough to have a sexual relationship with a man.

The isolated setting of the novel allows the trauma to happen more than once, and since "repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality" (Herman, 2022, 140), Vanessa's repeated childhood traumas may explain her present state. Balaev also supports this observation when she describes "that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity" (Balaev, 2008, 149). In the case of Vanessa, her identity is not even fully developed yet when her childhood trauma occurs. As a consequence, Vanessa is still keeping in touch with Strane even as an adult. This behaviour pattern is supported by Herman when she states, "adult survivors of chronic abuse in childhood are often still entangled in complicated relationships with their abusers" (Herman, 2022, 247). In the present timeline, Vanessa and Strane have late-night phone calls and frequent text messages, she even has a special ringtone just for him, so she knows that he is the one calling her.

Regarding trauma novels, place can be not only physical but also imagined in the mind, so memories and flashbacks can be observed as places as well. Balaev defines place as "a physical environment inhabited, viewed, or imagined by a person who attaches and derives meaning from it" (Balaev, 2008, 159). Also, Pederson's third point suggests that scholars should pay close attention to the places of narrative where dissociation can be found when the physical body stays at the scene while the mind travels far away from that place (Pederson, 2014, 339). Herman calls this phenomenon with a psychological term an "altered state of consciousness" (Herman, 2022, 16).

Symptoms of PTSD can be divided into three main categories: "hyperarousal", "intrusion" and "constriction" (Herman, 2022, 51). In Vanessa's case, "constriction" can be observed: "The helpless person escapes from her situation not by action in the real world but rather by altering her state of mind" (Herman, 2022, 62). One of the first times

Strane purposefully touches Vanessa, she can feel his hand patting her knee, but her sight is at the window, looking at a red balloon, and her mind "slips out" (Russell, 2021, 46) of her, thinking "I'm a red balloon caught in the boughs of a tree" (Russell, 2021, 46). The image of the balloon trapped in the tree's branches suggests that from this moment Vanessa is not free anymore; she is caught between the hands of a predator.

Vanessa's mind tends to play this trick every time she is raped by Strane. She narrates their first kiss as the following: "I can't focus on what is happening, my mind so far away it might as well belong to someone else" (Russell, 2021, 82). Their first time together is forced by Strane in his house near the boarding school therefore Vanessa is not in control of the situation or the environment. She describes it in the following way: "My mind feels like the lake on a calm day, glassy and still" (Russell, 2021, 103). When Strane comes to Vanessa's house during the holidays, he treats her dog aggressively, and during the act of rape, her mind is with the dog downstairs in the living room. In this situation, we can observe that Vanessa unintentionally identifies with another victim, in this case, her dog, who is also unable to talk about his sufferings.

At other times her mind slips into listing things like "loaves of bread dough rising on a warm kitchen counter, a conveyor belt moving groceries while my mother looks on…" (Russell, 2021, 251). This happens after she impulsively decides on her eighteenth birthday that she wants to see Strane because they did not say goodbye when she was expelled from the school. She has to distract herself since she cannot bear the reality of his actions. Sometimes she sees or imagines a naturalistic setting because in nature she feels free: "I see the night ocean, waves hitting the granite shore…" (Russell, 2021, 276). One of the last times when Strane comes to her apartment, during Vanessa's college years, her mind slips into the kitchen, where the half-empty cup is in the sink.

Overall, her mind tries to freeze the moments before her rape as pictures she can turn back to during the traumatic event. Babe, the innocent dog lying down in the cosy family living room, has never been hurt by humans before Strane. Images of the shopping experience show that before she left to visit Strane, her mother asked her to bring back some milk. Vanessa replays these peaceful images in her mind such as the cups in the sink before Strane lays his hands on her in order to destroy her over and over again.

Conclusion

All in all, this article discussed how trauma, a psychological term, implanted itself in literature through trauma novels. When analysing such novels, scholars first have to identify the overwhelming experience of the protagonist and observe how they process the traumatic event through their narration. However, interpreting a trauma story is not that straightforward since the narrator usually has fractured memories, which makes them unreliable. Moreover, it is essential to explore the setting of trauma novels, not just the physical place where the actual trauma happens but also the imaginary space

Kata Bodnár: Aspects of Analysing Trauma Fiction by Observing *Lolita*'s Impact on the 21st Century Novel, *My Dark Vanessa*

13

that the victim creates to escape to. Isolation and captivity can prepare the ground for trauma as typical features of trauma novels.

    My Dark Vanessa is a testimony of childhood sexual abuse which offers a great territory to scholars who are interested in literary trauma analyses since we can observe the process of Vanessa becoming a victim, then witness the overwhelming experience that she goes through, and finally, the consequences of trauma are well portrayed in Vanessa's shattered identity, fractured memories, and symptoms of PTSD.

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