TRAUMA AND AGORAPHOBIA IN JANE URQUHART’S A MAP OF GLASS

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ABSTRACT
A Map of Glass (2005), written by the Canadian novelist, Jane Urquhart, is one of the postcolonial novels filled with notions of love, loss and memories. However, it presents one of the main characters struggling with trauma and agoraphobia, which have prevented her from living a normal life for a long time. This study focuses on this topic in the novel and sheds light on the reasons behind the character’s trauma, the consequences of the trauma and whether she has managed to convalesce from such trauma and restore her life. This study applies Dominick LaCapra’s concepts of “acting out” and “working through” in analysing the protagonist’s condition of trauma. This study traces the process that the character goes through to free herself and overcome her condition. Additionally, it provides further knowledge about the lives of traumatised people, the difficulties they face, and their ongoing struggles with life in order to gain a more complete understanding of the horrors of trauma since most people are ignorant about these issues.

Keywords: agoraphobia, A Map of Glass, Dominic LaCapra, Jane Urquhart, trauma.

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INTRODUCTION

Psychological trauma has been one of the main topics raised when dealing with postcolonial literature. However, although *A Map of Glass* (2005) by the Canadian novelist Jane Urquhart (b. 1949) is considered a postcolonial novel, trauma in this novel is not attached to postcolonial matters. Actually, the trauma that this novel manifests is more related to environmental causes that cannot be classified under postcolonial motives as our arguments will demonstrate.

Psychological trauma is damage to a person’s mind as a result of one or more distressing events that caused overwhelming amounts of stress that exceed the person’s ability to cope or integrate the emotions involved, eventually leading to serious, long-term negative consequences. People who go through traumatic experiences often have certain symptoms and problems afterwards. The severity of these symptoms depends on the person, the type of trauma involved and the emotional support they receive from others. The range of reactions to and symptoms of trauma can be wide and varied, and differ in severity from person to person.

The protagonist of *A Map of Glass*, Sylvia Bradley, is a middle-aged woman who lived a terrible childhood and was raised in a troubled environment, which has prevented her from developing a healthy personality and has hindered her from functioning in life. Trauma might happen to a person for many different reasons and it may cause severe damage unless the trauma is worked through. It results with Sylvia growing up having a special condition of agoraphobia and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) that holds her back for a long time until she manages to break through by finding the courage to pursue her passion.

Agoraphobia is a mental and behavioural disorder, specifically an anxiety disorder characterised by symptoms of anxiety in situations where the person perceives their environment to be unsafe with no easy way to escape. These situations can include open spaces, public transit, shopping centres or simply being outside their home. The symptoms occur nearly every time the situation is encountered and last for more than six months. Those affected will go to great lengths to avoid these situations (American Psychiatric Association, A. P., 2013). Being in these situations may result in panic attacks. In severe cases, people may become completely unable to leave their homes (PubMed Health, 2016).

In the novel, Sylvia’s agoraphobia condition developed while growing up and got her imprisoned inside her house for a long time. Sylvia’s process is not easy nor is it quick. On the contrary, it takes her years of processing to finally feel strong again. Therefore, in order to explain the behavior of the traumatised Sylvia in *A Map of Glass*, two concepts in relation to trauma theory are applied. These two concepts by Dominick LaCapra, “acting out” and “working through”, are processes that are interconnected and necessary to overcome trauma. These two concepts, derived from the theory of trauma, are said to be responses made to overcome the trauma experienced by people (Schick, 2011).

Childhood trauma can have serious effects on an adult’s personality. Individuals who experience trauma in childhood may suffer the persistence of symptoms even when they grow up, which definitely hinders them from doing simple activities and pushes them to be introvert people who fear the outside world, people and any gesture of intimacy, leaving them trapped in their past and unable to move on and function in life. *A Map of Glass* shows these dramatic effects on Sylvia’s personality, who has lived an abnormal childhood that resulted in a serious condition of developing relationship with things instead of people and being emotionally attached to them and making her unable to communicate with people around her. The novel illustrates the challenges that Sylvia faces and how she manages to completely change her life by finding her true passion. This paper aims to explain the effects of trauma on Sylvia in *A Map of Glass*. 

of Glass and highlights the way the traumatised character manages to overcome her negative experience by applying LaCapra’s concepts of “acting out” and “working through”.

Urquhart’s A Map of Glass has attained a wide variety of studies and has been the focus of numerous critiques. Some studies have been conducted on this novel ranging from dissertations to articles in literary journals. Arnaud Barras (2015), in his study “Economy, Ecology, Ecopoiesis: Trace and Plasticity in Jane Urquhart’s A Map of Glass”, examines the novel from an environmental perspective and discusses issues, such as deforestation, colonial economy, historical geography and land art, through the concept of plasticity:

By staging art as a response to the effects of economy on ecology, physiology and psychology, A Map of Glass brings together the traces of human existence and enables characters and readers alike to envision the ecosystem from an environmental historicist perspective. In this sense, environmental art reveals to us that ecopoiesis—the situated coproduction of organism-and-environment—is brought forth by the plasticity immanent in complex ecosystems. (2015:7)

By combining the traces of destruction left by human activity with traces of creation in his/her work, it is concluded that the artist undermines the damaging effects of economic exploitation.

Another study by Susan K. Moore (2008), entitled “Walking Towards the Past: Loss and Place in Jane Urquhart’s A Map of Glass”, examines the notions of loss and place in the novel and analyses the text through Julia Kristeva’s concept of loss. Here, A Map of Glass is described as an in-depth exploration into loss; loss of place, loss of nature, loss of love, loss of memory, and even loss of language itself, explaining the necessity to recover that loss. On the other hand, a study by Anne-Sophie Letessier (2018) “Isn’t the Place Only Ruins and Vacancies Now: Reconstructions in Jane Urquhart’s A Map of Glass (2005)”, examines reconstructions as a form of reflection, attempting to solve the complicated issues of place, land, inheritance, belonging and memory. It is found in this study that Urquhart’s concern with “ruins and vacancies” can be read in the light of her ongoing interest in the relationship between human lives and “the land as physical environment, aesthetic milieu and possible habit” (Omhovère 17).

Although studies on Urquhart’s A Map of Glass are not abundant, most of them have dealt with the novel from either an environmental or postcolonial perspective. However, this study focuses on the issue of trauma and applies LaCapra’s trauma theory “acting out” and “working through” with focus on agoraphobia.

**Trauma**

Trauma is a Greek word for “wound”. Although the Greeks used the term only for physical injuries, nowadays trauma is just as likely to refer to emotional wounds. We now know that a traumatic event can leave psychological symptoms long after any physical injuries have healed. Trauma results from “an event, series of events or set of circumstances that are experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening, and that have lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being” (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, 2012, p. 2). Although many individuals report a single specific traumatic event, others, especially those seeking mental health or substance abuse services, have been exposed to multiple or chronic traumatic events. In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of
Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (American Psychiatric Association), trauma is defined as when an individual is exposed “to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violence” (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013, p. 271).

A person subjected to trauma may respond in several ways. They may be in a state of shock, extreme grief or denial. Apart from the immediate or short-term response, trauma may also give rise to several longer-term reactions in the form of emotional lability, flashbacks, impulsiveness and strained relationships. Besides the psychological symptoms, trauma can lead to physical symptoms, such as headaches, lethargy and nausea. Some people may be affected a lot more than others. Such people may be entrapped in the emotional impact of the trauma and find it difficult to move on with their lives. Such long-term manifestations of trauma can lead to a psychological condition called post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. A qualified psychologist can help people who face a traumatic experience recover from the experience and lead a productive life.

Trauma is divided into three main types: acute, chronic and complex (Plumb et al., 2016). Chronic trauma is the type that this paper is concerned with. Chronic trauma happens when an individual experiences diverse horrible instances. This sort of injury happens over and again, aggregately and even increments after some time or occasions; for example, reoccurring physical or sexual maltreatment, dismissal or fight experience. Chronic trauma can likewise result from a build-up of multiple traumatic encounters for the duration of one’s life or advancing severity against family members. An individual may have experienced a cataclysmic event, war, detainment, evacuating, ambush and a serious accident at different occasions throughout their life. The results of chronic trauma are ordinarily more genuine, in light of the fact that one horrible experience brings back old feelings and issues associated with another. Casualties of chronic trauma regularly live ruinous, imprudent and wild live which requires serious and frequently painful clinical intervention.

The definition of psychological trauma is not limited to diagnostic criteria. In fact, some clinicians have moved away from considering trauma-related symptoms as indicators of a mental disorder and, instead, view them as part of the normal human survival instinct or as “adaptive mental processes involved in the assimilation and integration of new information with intense survival emphasis which exposure to the trauma has provided” (Turnbull, 1998, p. 88). These normal adaptive processes only become pathological if they are inhibited in some way (Turnbull, 1998), or if they are left unacknowledged and, therefore, untreated (Scott, 1990). Trauma has also been characterised more broadly by others. For example, Horowitz (1989) defines it as a sudden and forceful event that overwhelms a person’s ability to respond to it, recognising that a trauma need not involve actual physical harm to oneself; an event can be traumatic if it contradicts one’s worldview and overpowers one’s ability to cope.

**METHODOLOGY**

Any type of action that can trigger nightmares or flashbacks with regards to an upsetting previous occasion that one has been attempting to neglect can negatively affect the person’s psychological and actual wellbeing. This clarifies the theory of trauma, which can be viewed as the impacts that are imprinted on an individual’s mind subsequent to having gone through an extreme enthusiastic encounter that shows as repeating dreams or nightmares, and which makes it hard for the person to proceed onward. Trauma is also described as an experience that a person undergoes that devastates them as a result of horrific events, such that they may have uninvited recurring images (Caruth, 1996). Trauma keeps a person from proceeding onward...
throughout everyday life; it disturbs all or any normalcy and creates much upheaval. Cathy Caruth recognises Sigmund Freud’s definition of trauma as a wound that is inflicted upon the body, before further developing this definition to include a violation of the mind, in which the wound cannot be seen in plain sight:

The breach in the mind’s experience of time, self and the world are not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (Caruth 1996, p. 4)

In order to enlighten readers and make sense of the behaviour of the characters in A Map of Glass, two concepts in relation to trauma theory are applied. These two concepts, “acting out” and “working through”, are processes that are interconnected and necessary to overcome trauma. These two concepts, derived from the theory of trauma, are said to be responses made to overcome the trauma experienced by people (Schick, 2011). LaCapra is a trauma theorist who defines the concept of “acting out” as “the tendency to repeat something compulsively” (LaCapra 1998), during which the person experiences repeated memories of traumatic events, and the concept of “working through” is “a kind of countervailing force” (LaCapra 1998), such that the person endeavours to break away from the existing situation and is able to separate between the present and the past.

This therapy, however, has proven to be somewhat resistant to some people. They are only able to experience the process of acting out because it is difficult for them to work through their trauma. The problems may recur, even if they are worked through, as Schick states, “[w]orking through is itself a process that may never entirely transcend acting out... [it] is never achieved once and for all” (Schick, 2011). One must work through the painful experience in order to overcome trauma and this can only be achieved by addressing the issues that prevent one from living a normal life. In light of these two concepts, this study examines Sylvia’s condition and the process she experiences to break through such intense trauma.

**DISCUSSION**

The novel, A Map of Glass, by Urquhart, is written in three parts and depicts the lives of characters from different backgrounds and different periods of time (two centuries and five generations) to tell a story about love, loss and historical geography. Sylvia is a midlde-aged woman who suffers from a type of autism that makes her fear the smallest changes in her life and surroundings, comprising change of things, places and habits. A fear of strangers as well and any kind of intimacy have made her maintain a relationship with things rather than people. Being a lonely child, who is raised in a suffocating house by troubled parents, has caused her psychological condition. Sylvia is rescued from her parents’ house by a doctor who is interested in her condition. He marries her in order to study her condition closely. This marriage helps to facilitate her life but her husband’s care forms a kind of prison to her. He pushes her to live a redundant and monotonous life; when she can wake up, what type of food to consume, her medications and time of sleep. All these contribute to a boring life but at least it is better compared to the type of life she had before her marriage.

Later on, she meets Andrew Woodman, a historical geographer, and her world changes drastically. This love affair has enabled her to overcome her lifelong fear of the outside world.
Andrew provides her with the emotional support she needs at this point. He is a good listener and manages to eradicate all of her fears and concerns. Their relationship leads Sylvia to regain her normal life back, become steadier and more extrovert due to the open discussions and the warm atmosphere Andrew provides. Unfortunately, Andrew dies and, one year later, Sylvia gets the courage to leave the house and travel in a quest to seek more information about her lover and the story of his ancestors. She makes an unlikely connection with Jerome McNaughton, the young artist who discovers Andrew’s body. She shares with him the story of her unusual childhood and her ecstatic affair with Andrew. As such, Sylvia suffers from trauma. This paper aims to examine how childhood can affect a person’s ability to move on in life and develop healthy relationships. Thus, the analysis of the two concepts of acting out and working through will be conducted based on the trauma experienced by the main character, Sylvia, in Urquhart’s novel.

**Acting Out in a Map of Glass**

In the psychology of defense mechanisms and self-control, acting out is the performance of an action considered bad or anti-social. In general usage, the action performed is destructive to oneself or to others. The term is used in this way in sexual addiction treatment, psychotherapy, criminology and parenting.

Sylvia is a middle-aged woman who suffers from autism and agoraphobia, as well as an unstable childhood, which have exacerbated her condition. As she was growing up, Sylvia developed a fear of people. She had no companions and scarcely associated with her parents. Instead, she found a connection with objects and things that do not change or move:

> She had left the dinner table in mid-meal in order to be closer to the three china horses that stood on a table in the corner of the dining room. Her parents had once or twice tried to introduce a pet, a kitten or a dog, into her life, but the unpredictability of live animals had disoriented her, though she had always been and remained delighted by the notion of animals. She preferred the stillness, the sheen, of the three miniature beasts on this table. (Urquhart 2005, p.121)

The three horses gave her the relief that they would never leave or move. They will always be in the same place where she put them. On the other hand, any person holds or change their place would cause her discomfort:

> To Sylvia’s great discomfort, he had stood beside her and lifted one of the china animals from the polished mahogany. “They’re lovely horses,” he said, and then, “Do you have names for them?” He held the blond horse in his fingers as he spoke. “No,” she had whispered. Then with her hand atop his she gently eased the horse back to the tabletop. They don’t like to be touched, to be changed. (Urquhart 2005, p. 121)

Due to her constant disturbance of people, she came up with a way to isolate herself from the outside world whenever she feels threatened. She is able to “think about china horses, for instance, or the county atlas she had memorised, or she could let a succession of rhymes play in her mind” (Urquhart 2005, p. 59). Sylvia’s parents are very worried and uncomfortable with her condition. They fail to deal with their daughter or show her love and affection in the right way. This failure leads Sylvia to develop traumatic symptoms along with her autism, which
makes it worse for her to coexist and interact with her surroundings. Thus, with her fear of people, resulted in her rejection of any kind of intimacy:

As a child Sylvia had been certain that her mother’s few attempts at embraces had been meant to restrain her, to cause her to stop doing something, or to move her in a direction other than the one she had wanted to take. (Urquhart 2005, p.103)

She considers any human touch an act of threat and cannot tell the difference between the act of harm and the act of affection, “… is just that I can’t ever classify touch, can’t seem to understand degrees of contact. All accidents, all injuries, involve contact, impact, don’t they? What is the difference, really, between touch and collision?” (Urquhart 2005, p. 102).

It is clear that her parents failed to offer help and support when she needed them the most. They treated her as a sick person. She never forgets how her father used to introduce her to people; “My daughter is disabled’ was a sentence she had heard him use on more than one occasion, often in her presence as if she hadn’t been there at all, or as if she were locked in an adjoining room” (Urquhart 2005, p.120). Also, she lives in small town and surroundings where nothing is expected to happen. She was denied the right to study in college by her parents although she was doing great in school:

She had felt almost happy when lost in the satisfying task of learning facts. There had been no talk about university, though her grades had always been exceptional: there were no universities in the County and both parents had accepted that their daughter would never leave home. (Urquhart 2005, p.119)

It is clear from this excerpt that studying facts and learning new things were things that Sylvia was good at. Also, leaving the house and going to school is the only way for Sylvia to help her socialise with people. After high school, her fear of people grew:

A stranger in the house could cause almost anything to happen to her: utter paralysis, a loss of motor skills, total withdrawal, awkwardness, collisions with furniture, or, at best, rote behavior of a more or less civilised kind. (Urquhart 2005, p.119)

Interacting with each other, the environment and the small town in which Sylvia lives, with no goals and no aspirations for the future, the maltreatment that she receives from her parents and the isolation from other people, increase her fear and hinder her from developing a healthy personality and functioning in life. According to LaCapra, Sylvia’s reaction to the world, her fear and her disability to connect are included in the “acting out” process since they are considered “symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder” (LaCapra, 2014).

Working Through in a Map of Glass

Working through is defined by LaCapra as “a person who tries to gain critical distance on a problem, to be able to distinguish between the past, present and future” (LaCapra, 1998). Sylvia’s first step to breaking through her condition is to leave her house. Having to leave the house, Sylvia finds herself for the first time confronting the world, no matter how disturbed she feels. It helps her to abandon the life (prison) she has built for herself and makes her face life changes she has feared for a very long time.
When Sylvia turns twenty, she marries Malcolm, a doctor, who shows a huge interest in her condition and wants to study it closely. He enters Sylvia’s life and rescues her from her parents, who believe that it is a “miracle” to find someone taking care of their sick daughter. However, he is nothing like her parents. He offers help and support all the time. Yet, he could not give her the love she desperately needed:

Malcolm had pretended to be interested in all this, or perhaps he had really been interested. His tone when he talked was unthreatening, pleasing, careful. It was not unlike the tone her father had used to coax her out of bed, down the stairs, off to school in the past, except that, unlike her father, Malcolm seemed to want to enter her own world and to discuss what it might be that intrigued her there. (Urquhart 2005, p.124)

Malcolm helps Sylvia in many ways to gain courage and overcome her fear. He builds another life for her. He teaches her how to drive, how to buy things, and how to normally respond to questions and regular conversations. Malcolm “had taught Sylvia about conversation. The introduction of a new piece of information usually requires that a question be asked, he had explained, even if the information comes about as a result of a previous question” (Urquhart 2005, p. 105). However, Sylvia’s reaction to questions and conversations is an act of necessity only. She never enjoys it; “she had never let go of her fear of questioning but tried, anyway, to follow Malcolm’s advice when they were in social situations” (Urquhart 2005, p.105).

Yet, it was the beginning for her to learn to socialise with other people, which results in making new friends. For instance, Julia is a blind woman who takes part in helping Sylvia to interact and find things in life that she is passionate about, such as the tactile maps that Sylvia keeps making for Julia to help her imagine what the county looks like. Sylvia finds relief in making these maps. Not only is she helping a friend but finally she feels like she has something to share with other people. She is not different anymore:

Julia had been the only person whom Sylvia had made an effort to visit, […] Later, she made the trip simply because Julia interested her and because she had felt so comfortable in the company of someone who was unable to look at her. These had been her first purely social encounters and she was surprised by how much she enjoyed them. (Urquhart 2005, p. 102)

With Julia and Andrew, Sylvia is finally able to react and to normally get involved in conversations and activities with other people:

Later, when she had been with Julia, or Andrew, she had learned about the pleasure of conversation, the comfort of listening and being listened to, and in time she’d been able, quite naturally, to choose one path or another into long episodes of talk. (Urquhart 2005, p. 105).

Julia also helps Sylvia express herself and how she feels about things like touch and eventually makes her overcome the sense of threat. Julia had lifted one of her pale arms and asked Sylvia to touch it. She had said:
“Put your hand there, just above my wrist”. Sylvia hesitated. Then she placed her palm on the milk-white skin. “See how naturally your fingers curl around the shape?” Julia continued. “Human beings were made to touch one another”. Sylvia was surprised by the smoothness and warmth of her friend’s arm. But then everything about Julia was soft, pliable. (Urquhart 2005, p. 105).

Later on, her relationship with Andrew, the historical geographer, sets her free and enables her to overcome her condition completely. She knows what it feels like to love, to be loved and how to express that love. She learns to listen and care about what people say and feel. She needs Andrew to be just like her mentor, who leads her through her turbulent life and provides her with the emotional support she desperately needs. He is far more different than her husband, who subjects her to a monotonous and redundant lifestyle. Andrew is more open and supportive in terms of emotional care, “Even when we were far, far apart, […] Andrew rolled through my mind like active weather […] and when I wasn’t with him, I was waiting”. (Urquhart 2005, p. 150).

It is clear that love, affection, and passion are the things that Sylvia most needed. She had never discovered them in her home or during her childhood. So, when she finally finds them, she reacts positively and follows their lead to break through her condition, “When she was a child, there had been – apart from other people – two things that particularly separated her from calmness: wind in a room and outdoor mirrors” (Urquhart 2005, p. 132). However, this fear and disturbance “was gone by the time she began to meet Andrew” (Urquhart 2005, p. 133).

When Andrew dies, driven by curiosity and seeking more information about her lover’s death, Sylvia finds the courage to travel outside the country to meet a complete stranger, Jerome, the artist who finds Andrew’s body. She meets him several times and wins him as a friend while sharing what they know about Andrew and the story of his ancestors. In this context, LaCapra states:

… in the working through, the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem, to be able to distinguish between past, present and future. For the victim, this means his ability to say to himself, ‘Yes, that happened to me back then. It was distressing, overwhelming, perhaps I cannot entirely disengage myself from it, but I’m existing here and now, and this is different from back then’ (LaCapra, 1998)

That is exactly what Sylvia has done. She leaves everything that is holding her back in the past and focuses on her present and future. She chooses a path that is totally different. Although it is difficult, she manages to get through it eventually. Sylvia’s journey is not easy nor is it fast. It takes her years of suffering and struggling to admit that she is traumatised, and then to work through her condition and to conquer it. In loving, caring and healthy relationships, she finds the courage to take the first step in changing her life, “I am now in the world; she had whispered to the squares of cement that were passing beneath her feet” (Urquhart 2005, p. 61).

CONCLUSION
Jane Urquhart’s A Map of Glass tells the story of Sylvia who has trouble functioning in life. Through her childhood, the reasons behind her incapacity turn out to be due to her family and surroundings. The maltreatment of her parents and the small town she lives in are the main reasons that have caused her condition. Her parents do not understand her plight and
psychological needs, and this adds to her suffering. The acting out process for Sylvia takes the shape of fear. She is afraid of people and socialising, which makes her an introvert. She suffers from a fear of change and a strong desire to see everything around her remain as it is and also a fear of any kind of intimacy. Such fear represents one of the figurative symptoms of trauma that are manifested in Sylvia’s character. While the working through process begins with Sylvia leaving her parents’ house and meeting new people, the love and attention that she receives from both her friend, Julia, and her lover, Andrew, are the main factors that help her conquer her condition and gain herself back.

REFERENCES


