Shattered Stories: Postmodern Temporalities in *Toby's Room*

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Pat Barker, a prominent contemporary British novelist, embarked on her writing journey in her early twenties. Initially, her works focused on the lives of working-class women, reflecting their struggles and experiences. Over time, her literary themes shifted to explore the profound impact of world wars, delving into issues of trauma and identity. With a repertoire of 16 novels, Barker achieved significant acclaim, including winning the Booker Prize for Fiction in 1995 for *The Ghost Road*. Undoubtedly, the vivid wartime memories of her grandfather and stepfather, who served as living repositories of historical horrors, left a lasting imprint on her storytelling. Barker has popularly said, "The Somme is like the Holocaust: it revealed things we cannot come to terms with and cannot forget. It never becomes the past" (Knutsen 52).

For many transgenerational war victims apart from their narratives family, photographs and chronicles have been the major instruments of transmission of trauma. For Barker, chiefly her family has been a tool in the transmission of transgenerational trauma. Later, her increased interest in war further made her study about war and then base her novels on war and war veterans. The focus of Barker was mainly on war veterans rather than the cause of war or the actual event of war. This apparently establishes the influence of transgenerational trauma in her writings.

Barker in her interview when asked about her grandfather and stepfather's influence on her writings, she said, "…. the war which had ended decades before was still a potent force in their lives, and in the lives of their relatives. The past wasn't over. It wasn't even the past"("Pat Barker")

The contemporary Postmodern world emerges as a consequence of the World Wars and the existential void they engendered. It is characterized by pervasive fragmentation, reflecting a fractured reality. This fragmentation resonates in the works of modern writers, whose narratives mirror the disjointed nature of Postmodern existence. Among literary genres, the novel holds prominence in capturing and critiquing the complexities of the human condition. Postmodern novels, in particular, subvert traditional narrative conventions and linear chronology. Key features of Postmodern narrative techniques include disrupted temporality, fragmented storytelling, and a deliberate challenge to conventional sequentiality. Therefore, postmodern narratives mandate their readers to conceptualise meaning dynamically through socio-cultural environments and narrative techniques. Cathy Caruth, a forerunner in the field of trauma studies proclaims that: "the inability fully to witness the event as it occurs, or the ability to witness the event fully at the cost of witnessing oneself. Central to the very immediacy of this experience, that is, is a gap that carries the force of the event" (Caruth 7).

It has been a long-debated aspect about the authenticity and intensity of narrative representation of the catastrophic events by the next generation of writers. The degree to which the history can be portrayed remains questionable. In that sense, history and truth has always been placed in a dichotomy. The passed-on memory of traumatic events from one generation to the other, the second generation precisely called the 'hinge generation' has been a recent topic of research in the literary arena. In *After Such Knowledge*, Eva Hoffman asserts that, "The second generation is the hinge generation in which received, transferred knowledge of events is being transmuted into history, or into myth. It is also the generation in which we can think about certain questions arising from the Shoah with a sense of living connection" (xv).

According to Hoffman, collective trauma and its memories of calamitous trials that are transferred to the next generation or 'the hinge generation'. This memory as theorists of memory studies call 'Postmemory', is the passed-on memory from one generation to another. She claims such memories to be the true bridge between the past and the present. They draw a line between the eroding past, its memories and the diffusion of its memories into the present as transgenerational victims of those catastrophes. The transgenerational victims are the next generation of people who have had no firsthand experience of the catastrophe and might have

witnessed the survivors or have read and heard stories of the event through any medium. They feel responsible to mark and protect the presence of past historical events by writing about them.

This generation is called the 'Generation of Postmemory'. When they involve into recreating the history, the authenticity is often put into question because of their lack of firsthand experience of the catastrophe. As a result, their narrative is often dyssynchronous and fragmented, reflecting the distorted memories of trauma. "Postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation" (Hirsch 107). Hoffman proceeds to talk about the impact such traumatic memories have on the present among the survivors of trauma: "It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present" (ibid).

Pat Barker's *Toby's Room* is the second of the *Life Class Trilogy* that deals with the lives of a group of artists during World War. It is a strong novel on the long-lasting effects of war. The narrative of this novel adheres to postmodern narrative techniques. Caruth writes in her seminal work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* that: "inherent contradictions of experience and language" (Balaev 1). This evidences that traumatic narratives reflect fragmented traumatic experiences through disrupted language, which is a representation of post-memory.

> "Women on board? There must be a group of nurses going out. He rolled up his coat to form a pillow and slipped into a deeper sleep, from which he woke, jolted half out of his wits, because some blithering idiot had fallen over him.
>
> 'Look where you're going, you –' Too late he registered the peaked cap. 'Sorry, sir.'
>
> 'Good God, it's Neville, isn't it?'.

> Didn't know the bloke from Adam. But then he took off the cap and there, impossibly, in army uniform with the caduceus badge of the RAMC on her chest, stood Elinor Brooke.
>
> Of course it bloody wasn't. Fighting off the last vestiges of sleep, he said, 'Captain Brooke, sir'."(Barker 147,148)

The narrative transitions fluidly between the hospital in 1917 and the soldiers' camp, disrupting conventional linearity. This fragmented structure reflects a distorted sense of space and time. The seamless oscillation between past and present demands active reader engagement, requiring them to discern temporal shifts and contribute to the process of constructing meaning. This is a distinctive technique Barker incorporates in her novel to emphasise the distorted recollection of events and flashbacks of the trauma victims.

> And slowly, with the bitterness of that realization, the hut took shape around him. While he slept, they'd moved him from his cubicle on to the main ward. In the next bed, Trotter was struggling to ingest the regulation amount of gruel. The nurse who was feeding him looked across at Kit. You're awake, then'.(148)

The narration again devolves into the present. This particular line involves a spatial setting that takes an active role in this shift of time. The hut gradually changes into the sight of the hospital. These techniques contemplate the time-space uncertainty related to trauma and postmemory. "For the postmodernist, fragmentation is an exhilarating, liberating phenomenon, symptomatic of our escape from the claustrophobic embrace of fixed system of belief" (Barry 81). Barker also uses these techniques to liberate her tormented self through such narratives. These narrative techniques thrive throughout the novel, making it a characteristic work of Postmodern Postmemory. Balaev states that "certain novels demonstrate through different narrative techniques that an extreme experience can elicit a disruption or a transformation of consciousness that illuminates the dynamics of memory and identity"(xvi).

From the historical background of the author, it is observable that her personal experiences as an intergenerational trauma victim in her family have a major role to play in her narrative style. Being the 'hinge generation', her writings are heavily influenced by her post-

memory which is reflected in her novel's characters and their memory which in turn resounds in the narrative style. Such writings eventually initiate an effort from the readers to comprehend the trauma of the characters. This is a significant step in the inclusion of the readers in the trauma narratives, where they understand and get involved in the meaning-making process. The third-person omniscient narrative technique employed by the author helps to include the readers in the process of meaning-making.

The author thus plays the subtle role of a storyteller who involves other characters to tell the story of the war victims. With this mode of narration, she can be omnipresent in the scene though she wasn't really a part of it, just like the real instance of world war. This again, is a crafty technique of Barker to address the question of authenticity of transgenerational writers. The fragmented structure of the novel serves as a reflection of its central theme. Trauma, as the novel's predominant focus, is mirrored in the disjointed memories of its characters, echoing through its non-linear narration. This asynchronous narrative style invites readers to actively engage in constructing meaning, aligning with the disrupted experiences of trauma survivors.

This paper claims that the elusive and dyssynchronous narrative of Barker is the technique she had intentionally and artistically used in her writings to bleed the history of her ancestors. It mirrors the post-memory and symptomatology of the self as a bearer of the collective memory of the generation before her and the entire transgenerational victims of war.

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