

Surviving Through Identity Shift: An Expression Of Complicated Grief In Colson Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys*

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Abstract:

Trauma because of racial oppression is very common in African American Society. The segregation through Jim Crow Laws and its adverse effects on children are brought in the paper. The paper tries to focus on the incidents that happened in Nickel Academy while mass protests for equality happened outside the school gate. The brutality faced by colored boys traumatized their whole life by altering their psyche towards life. The paper will deal with the different types of trauma and how the protagonist copes with it. The paper tries to unravel the effects of complicated grief in witnessing corporal punishment, unjust death of dear ones and discrimination. It also focuses on post-traumatic stress disorder in the behaviour of the surviving protagonist. The four phases of coping with grief from attachment theory by John Bowlby and the importance of witnessing by Dori Laub will be explained in detail.

Keywords: Post-traumatic stress disorder, complicated grief, phases of grief, identity shift, trauma.

INTRODUCTION

Trauma is one of the inevitable challenges faced by African Americans. Most of the painful experiences witnessed by African Americans were exerted by the whites. The Whites had an upper hand in dominating and disciplining the Blacks. As a result of this racial oppression, most African Americans have trauma that affects them for a lifetime. Trauma studies in literature became significant during the 1990s, after the publication of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma Narrative and History*. Trauma is the mental response to a painful incident in one's life. Many are affected by Post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, Prolonged Grief disorder, etc. Prolonged Grief disorder or Complicated grief is a mental malady that an individual faces through unfortunate and sudden events like a suicide or the death of dear ones. Complicated grief affects the person's interpersonal relationship with others and it leads to depression, numbness to emotions and even identity disturbances. It stays for a long time causing drastic damage to a person's emotional well-being. The person with complicated grief isolates himself from his social milieu and conceals his traumatic past and true identity as a kind of survival mechanism. Turner in the novel, *The Nickel Boys* undergoes the same mental disturbance after witnessing his friend's death while they were students at the Nickel Academy. The paper focuses on the cause of complicated grief in Turner and how he overcame and embraced his true identity. It also throws light on the sadistic treatment by the whites in punishing the blacks.

Colson Whitehead, the author of eight novels has won the Pulitzer Prize for the second time for the novel, *The Nickel Boys*. The praise for the novel is countless as the tale is haunting and uncovers the cold brutality of the white teachers in the Dozier School for Boys in Florida. The Nickel Academy, a juvenile reform school for both whites and blacks is a fictionalized institution of the Dozier School. Though the novel is set in the civil rights era, the traumatic incidents faced by the students affect them even in the present. In the prologue of the novel, it is said that the students from the University of South Florida discovered the unnamed dead bodies of the students who studied there whose bones showed severe fractures. The novel discloses the inhumanity of the whites in incorporating corporal punishments and solitary confinement at Nickel Academy. The characters Elwood, Turner, Griff, Desmond, Jaimie and others witness the

flogging and spanking done to their friends and themselves which unconsciously alter their psyche making them wounded individuals.

The APA Dictionary of Psychology defines ‘trauma’ as Any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person’s attitudes, behavior and other aspects of functioning (1104). Trauma theory in literature investigates the cause and effect of the painful incident undergone by the individual. It attempts to explore how the trauma had occurred and how the individual used different strategies to cope with it. As trauma is said to be an unexpressed or expressed reaction to a painful event, trauma theory focuses not only on the language used by the narrator or character but also on the actions that reveal symptoms of depression, isolation, anxiety attacks, etc. In *The Nickel Boys*, the African American population is traumatized by forced segregation in all the public places. The stereotypes against the blacks were generalized and they lacked many basic opportunities because of it. Every incident that the boys faced before entering Nickel Academy added suffering to their trauma. The segregation in schools because of the Jim Crow law affected their education and discrimination in public places robbed them from visiting places without prejudice. Elwood Curtis, one of the main characters in the novel might have been respected and adored in every way by a white man if only he was white. He was ambitious and refined and the white men he encountered in his life before Nickel Academy admired him for his studious nature and steady character. But as he was coloured, he could not relish most of the rights that the white children had. Segregation does not stop with being separated; the coloured were given poor facilities and were robbed of some essential rights.

In one of the early chapters, the narrator mentions an advertisement for an amusement park named ‘Fun Town’. The advertisement announced that children with perfect grades countersigned and approved by their teachers would be given free admission to the park. Even though Elwood had perfect grades, he could not visit Fun Town as he was coloured. Every time the radio played the advertisement for this park, Elwood gets reminded of him being fully qualified to enter the park free of cost and not being eligible to enter. The segregation affected most of the African American children as they had to undergo discrimination when they cannot understand the concept of it. Dr. King said that the concept of segregation was not welcomed and appreciated by “some whites, not all whites, but enough whites”(10) to make this a practice. The Blacks were given no choice to express their opinions as the whites were in the driving seat to control the lives of the Blacks before the Civil Rights Movement. In another Chapter, the narrator explains how the Black children were given ‘secondhand textbooks’ from white schools. The textbooks had swear words which intimidate and denigrate the identity of the black students. Phrases like “Choke, Nigger! You Smell, Eat Shit, Drop dead Nigger” (27) were written all over the book when textbooks were distributed to the students in Lincoln High School. The white children were brought up in such a way as to despise the coloured even when they study separately. Even those who disregarded segregation like Mr. Parker did not stand up for Elwood when he was unjustly taken to Nickel. His grandmother Harriet rightly points out, “It’s one thing to tell someone and another thing for them to do it” (16).

Trauma has three types; Acute Trauma is when a person gets traumatized after a single heartbreaking incident in his life. Chronic trauma is when a person gets traumatized by repeated abuse and violence of any kind for a prolonged period. Complex Trauma happens when the person is invasively affected by various incidents. Elwood suffers from Acute and Chronic Trauma and as a witness to Elwood getting flogged and his death, Turner suffers from all three types of trauma. Elwood and Turner share a deepknit friendship and the death of Elwood has left a deep void in the life of Turner. As a result of this complicated grief, Turner shifts his identity to Elwood Curtis.

Elwood’s life before Nickel is marked by Acute Trauma. Elwood’s days at Nickel Academy were disparate from his days with his grandmother. Elwood was arrested and sent to Nickel Academy when he travelled in a car to reach Melvin Griggs Technical, the coloured college. The Car was driven by Rodney, a coloured driver but he might have stolen the Car from a white man. While arresting Rodney, the white policemen arrested Elwood leaving no chance for him to express his stand. After the court ordered Elwood to be

sent to Nickel Academy, all his hopes of getting educated in a technical institute got shattered. He convinced himself that Nickel Academy is a school where he could still get his education. Many of the boys in the coloured section of the school were arrested without being interrogated. This discrimination faced by the coloured boys before entering Nickel Academy acts as grassroots to their chronic trauma.

After entering Nickel, the coloured boys had to endure the sights and sounds of their friends getting flogged and this added to their misery. Elwood underwent corporal punishment in the 'White House' when he tried to make peace with the boys who bullied Corey. Everyone waited for their turn to get beaten and the large fan is switched on so that the cries of the boys are unheard by the public. The ones who bullied were less hurt than the ones who got bullied. Such was the system at Nickel. Earl and Spencer, the teachers who flogged them were so intense in flogging that they sometimes lost count. When it was Elwood's turn, he read the instruction that said, "Hold on to the rail and don't let go. Make a sound and you'll get more. Shut your fucking mouth, nigger" (67). The pain was unbearable for Elwood that he lost his consciousness. From Acute trauma, Elwood undergoes chronic trauma after entering Nickel Academy as he witnesses and undergoes the same repetitive abuses from the officers.

Partisan ideas of the officers at Nickel can be seen in the episode where Griff was asked to lose in the annual boxing match conducted at the school for the white boy to win. Mr. Spencer said, Good Sportsmanship means letting the other person win sometimes. He tried euphemism. It's like when a tree branch has to bend so it doesn't break... The superintendent told Griff that his black ass had to take a dive in the third round or else they'd take him out back (101).

Though the coloured boys hated Griff, they supported him and exhibited solidarity during the match. They believed that if Griff won, it was their victory. Griff won the match but was killed on the same night as they warned. 'Out back' emblemize the 'boot hill' where innumerable dead bodies of the students were buried. The boys were beaten to death. Though the students were made to believe that Griff escaped Nickel Academy as he won, his bones were found at boot hill fifty years later by the archaeologists. Turner was the only witness to hear Spencer manipulating Griff. Turner was sent to Nickel for the second time when he met Elwood. None of the white boys were killed and buried in the 'boot hill'. White boys received corporal punishments in the 'white house' for the crimes they did but the 'out back' phrase was only used for black students.

The narration through the end of the plot shifts from the past to the future and ends with the present. All through the text, the reader is made to believe that Elwood had escaped from Nickel Academy successfully but the readers are told in the final chapter that, it was Turner who survived and Elwood was killed by Harper, the only white man who befriended Turner and Elwood. Like how the White students were taught to despise the Black students by writing swear words in the textbooks, Harper's father who was not compatible with him had taught him to shoot. Turner being the survivor of this traumatic incident, suffered from complicated grief and as a means to survive and to overcome this anxiety, he changes his name from Turner to Elwood Curtis. He does not stop with changing his name but also changes his identity. He tries to live his life as Elwood. Elwood was influenced by Dr. King's ideas of nonviolence and believed that the civil rights movement would bring equity among whites and blacks. One can see in the future that Turner has become a person whose character is very similar to Elwood. Turner never trusted any white man in the novel. He feels,

Nickel was racist as hell – half the people who worked here probably dressed up like Klans on the weekends – but the way Turner saw it wickedness went deeper than the skin colour (103).

It is the same Turner who wants to expose the secrets of 'boot hill' to the public by the end of the novel. He believed that no matter what happens to him for changing his identity, he wanted the world to know the painful happenings that happened at the colored section inside Nickel School. He believed that his testimony would bring a change in the society. Like Elwood, he believed in the goodness of the world. Complicated Grief can be seen in all the survivors of the Nickel Academy. Even after many years after leaving Nickel Academy, Turner could not come up with any other name for his company but 'Ace Moving'. Ace was the highest rank the coloured student was required to achieve in school to get out of

Nickel. Nickel followed him wherever he went and whatever he did. In one of the episodes, Turner met Chickie Pete who plays trumpet and was also a survivor of Nickel Academy. The narrator says, The boys could have been many things had they not been ruined by that place.... But they had been denied the simple pleasure of being ordinary. Hobbled and handicapped before the race even began, never figuring out how to be normal (164)

The boys were forever wounded and were not able to assimilate with the normal citizens. Turner had a hard time trying to be a normal husband to Millie. He questioned himself whether it is normal for a husband to buy flowers for his wife in one of the chapters. He was confused as he did not know how a normal person or a person who has not witnessed Nickel would lead his life.

The American Psychological Association's *APA Dictionary of Psychology* defines Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as,

A disorder that may result when an individual lives through or witnesses an event in which he or she believes that there is a threat to life or physical integrity and safety and experiences fear, terror, or helplessness. (815)

It happens to someone who has undergone or witnessed a traumatic event that acts as a threat to one's emotional well-being. Turner in the novel exhibits symptoms of PTSD in the episodes after Elwood's death. The betrayal of Harper and the death of Elwood have altered the psyche of Turner turning him to isolate himself from others and neglect any memory or person associated with the Nickel School. He showed symptoms which included outbursts of anger even at the slightest mention of Nickel School or any incidents associated with it. He denied his trauma and married Millie without revealing his past or his real name. Turner had nightmares that disrupted his peace even after having successfully escaped from Nickel Academy. These symptoms show that Turner had PTSD. Being the only witness to all the traumatic events that happened at Nickel School, he was overwhelmed with complex trauma and survivor's guilt. The complicated grief of Turner being the survivor and witness to trauma heals over time and he tries to accept the reality and embraces his true identity through Bowlby's four stages of grief. According to Bowlby and Parkes' Attachment theory, when a relationship is formed with deep attachment, emotions such as anger, guilt, and regret are unavoidable when the relationship ends. The relationship between Turner and Elwood was formed when they were in the darkest phase of their lives. Hence, the relationship between them was intense. One can see that it was Turner, who helped Elwood escape from the solitary confinement in the Cleveland dormitory. He could not stand the thought of his friend being beaten to death by the officers at Nickel Academy. Turner displayed the four phases of grief mentioned by John Bowlby in *Loss – Sadness and Depression* when Elwood died. They are

1. Phase of numbing that usually lasts from a few hours to a week and may be interrupted by outbursts of extremely intense distress and/or anger.
2. Phase of yearning and searching for the lost figure lasting some months and sometimes for years.
3. Phase of disorganization and despair.
4. Phase of greater or less degree of reorganization (Bowlby)

The initial phase, Shock and numbness happen in Turner when he recalls the death of Elwood. He was not ready to accept the loss of his friend and he could not remember whether Elwood cried for his help as he was in shock. He was much concentrated in escaping and he could not stop running even after seeing Elwood getting shot by Harper.

He (Elwood) stumbled forward two steps and fell into the grass. Turner kept running. He asked himself later if heard Elwood cry out or make any kind of sound but never did figure it out. He was running as there was only the rush and roil of blood in his head. (199)

The Shock and numbness of emotion happen not only because of Elwood's death but also because Harper killed him.

The second stage Yearning and Searching can be seen when Turner yearns for the company of Elwood. Turner in the epilogue shows confusion, despair and even regret in giving the letter to the official who came for inspection. He feels that if he stopped Elwood from writing the letter and if he did not deliver

the letter, Elwood would not have died. He even wishes that he should have burnt the letter. He feels that even though he saved Elwood from the twin rings 'out back', Elwood was buried in boot hill. He searches for the meaning of Elwood's loss and decides to return to Nickel Academy to disclose the torments they underwent. He believed that it was what Elwood wanted, he says, "I'm going to take a stand....Elwood and fine moral imperatives and his very fine ideas about the capacity of human beings to improve. About the capacity of the world to right itself "(205). Turner believed that by revealing their collective trauma, the white world would right itself.

The third stage, Disorganisation and Despair happens when Turner isolates himself from others. In the prologue, the narrator says that Turner (Elwood) stayed away from the get-together arranged in the school for many years to avoid remembering the places, memories and Elwood. He knows the reality that Elwood is no longer alive but could not accept his absence from his life. When he decides to visit the school fifty years after he left the school, he comes out of his cocoon of despair. It took him years to finally accept the loss of his friend. The prologue also says that "When they found the secret graveyard, he knew he'd have to return"(6). It can be understood that when they were able to find Griff's bones, they could also find Elwood's remains if he was buried in boot hill.

The fourth stage is marked by Reorganization and Recovery. In this stage, Turner accepts the death of his friend and confides his painful past of being a victim and being a witness in the Nickel Academy to his wife Millie. When he vents to his wife, he feels accepted for who he was. He had always felt the experiences at Nickel followed him everywhere and its fierceness never ceased each time he got reminded of the trauma. But after his encounter with Millie in expressing his truth, he found peace. He says, Nickel hunting him to his final moment—a vessel in his brain explodes or his heart flops in his chest—and then beyond, too...He hadn't thought about going out like that in years—he'd packed it up in a box and put it in his basement, next to the boiler and the neglected fishing gear. With the rest of the stuff from the old days. He stopped embroidering that fantasy long ago. She chipped off the bad parts. He hoped he did the same. (187-88)

He confronts his trauma with the love and support of Millie who begins to call him by his first name Jack. He was all along Jack Turner but nobody addressed him that way except his mother. When Millie calls him Jack, he realizes that he should let go of the name Elwood and embraces his own identity. He decides to encounter the public with the truth he knew about the school.

Dori Laub in her essay, "Truth and Testimony: The Process and Struggle" explains her experience as a witness to the Holocaust. Being a survivor it becomes her responsibility to reveal the truth to the public. The survivors survived to share their testimony and also they need to share their testimony to live. She explains three levels of being a witness to the Holocaust.

I recognize three separate, distinct levels of witnessing in relation to the Holocaust experience: the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience, the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others, and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself (61)

She also explains how the survivors waited for Hitler to die to share their experiences. This scenario that Dori Laub shares can be drawn parallel to the experience of Turner. Turner decides to share his painful experiences at Nickel after fifty years when the school is completely closed. He was in despair that he had to mask his true identity and adopt a new identity to survive. The third level of witness Laub mentions can be seen through the website officialwhitehouseboys.org where every survivor of Nickel Academy has shared their traumatic experiences at Nickel. Dori Laub also says that there should be reconciliation between the two worlds the one that is wounded and the other that is not wounded by the same cause. When Turner confides with Millie, she listens to him and comforts him. He realizes that he was not alone in his suffering and understands that Elwood is not going to return. He accepts his trauma and finds comfort in the fact that he was not alone. Dori Laub explains that it is through this process that one coexists with the trauma peacefully

Turner heals with a shifting of identity from Turner to Elwood Curtis and then to Jack. When he was addressed Turner, he was hopeless and numb about white society. He witnessed the painful experiences at Nickel and the loss of his parents. When he was addressed Elwood, he lived with the trauma which he

thought was never ending and ruthless. He was depressed, isolated and tormented by the memories of the past. He was also influenced by the ideals of Elwood who believed that change would be brought after the civil rights movement and the change happened as the former Richmond Hotel told the customers, 'Sit anywhere you like' to Jack. Racial Segregation was abolished after 1964. Later when he accepts his identity as Jack, he becomes a combination of the characteristics of Elwood and Turner but a healed version of both. He was brave to stand as a witness in surviving the brutalities experienced at Nickel Academy. The development in healing can be seen through the shifting of identities. When he had food at the 'Blondie's' which was formerly called the 'Richmond Hotel', Jack does not get triggered to remember Elwood who spent most of his childhood there. This signifies that Jack has come out of the sensitive phase when he got reminded of Elwood and his death continually. Thus, through shifting identities, undergoing the different stages of grief and realizing the importance of being a witness, Turner heals from his trauma.

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