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## **Trauma, as a motif in Douglas Stuart's novel, Shuggie Bain: the study of Shuggie Bain in the light of trauma theory**

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**Abstract**---Shuggie Bain, by Douglas Stuart, is the 2020 Booker Prize-winning semi-autobiographical novel that depicts the vicissitudes of Shuggie's family, and that of the general public of Glasgow during the 1980s. The policies of Margaret Thatcher had severely affected the industrial town of Glasgow, shutting down many industries and factories, and pushing its citizens to unemployment. With this as the political background, Douglas portrays the struggles of the alcoholic mother Agnes Bain (Shuggie's mother) and the resultant cause of misery to everyone around her, especially her son Shuggie, which marks the plot of this novel. He is the victim of intergenerational trauma caused due to bad parenting, physically too he suffers because of his sexual identity crisis. This study is based on the trauma theory in literature with a special focus on the personal model of trauma as well as the collective trauma of the people in Glasgow. The theory applied is drawn out from the trauma models put by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed experience; trauma narrative and history* (1991) and Erikson in *Notes on Trauma and Community* (1996). This thesis paper intends to show how Douglas has portrayed the character of Shuggie Bain, as an ever-optimistic protagonist, highlighted by dissecting the characters in the novel.

**Keywords**---trauma, alcoholism, complex trauma, hope.

## Introduction

“There are wounds that never show on the body that are deeper and more hurtful than anything that bleeds” (Hirschberger). Mental anguish can be intense and could impact various aspects of our lives. It is painful in the same way as physical pain. However, unlike physical pain, we are unable to determine the source of mental discomfort. The only way to sense is that we feel a kind of tightness in our body when we are emotionally broken. Emotional pain has no fixed cause and no fixed remedies. As a result, we must go through what we are going through. If we inadvertently scrape or hurt ourselves, it will recover over time. However, in the case of mental suffering, we must first comprehend the emotions before attempting to resolve them on our own. If a person experiences intense stress or anxiety due to sexual assault or any adverse disaster, it may lead to traumatic events. These traumatic events can come quickly and be unexpected and upsetting, or they can take years to develop, such as the effects of long-term abuse or neglect.

Trauma is defined as an emotional reaction to a variety of traumatic situations, including abuse, assault, generational violence, problematic relationships, and natural disasters. Trauma has no age limits; it can affect anyone at any time and have long-term consequences for one's physical and mental health. Many individuals, even youngsters, are the victims of numerous traumatic disorders such as anxiety, rage, ignorance, isolation, and even substance use disorders which are appalling aftermath of a fast-paced society. Psychological trauma does not result in bodily harm, but it frequently results in a mental threat to our lives. The more traumatized we are, the less chance we have of recovering. According to researchers, this can only be treated with the aid of care and support. Trauma is classified into three types: acute trauma, chronic trauma, and complex trauma. Acute trauma is caused by a single traumatic incident, such as rape, a difficult relationship, or an accident. A person with a shift in behavioral patterns might develop a long-term mental disease as a result of this one incident. Long-term sickness, domestic abuse, or war can all cause chronic trauma. Acute trauma that is not addressed might progress to chronic trauma. Finally, complex trauma arises when two people have intertwined painful experiences such as child abuse or domestic violence.

Apart from physical trauma, traumas can be classified into what is known as collective trauma, which affects a group of individuals or the entire society, causing anxiety and sadness. The collective pain is transformed into collective memory, which is passed down through generations, posing existential concerns. Kai Erikson (1991) is a sociologist, who explained in his article ‘Notes on Trauma and Community’ the similarities and dissimilarities between individual trauma and collective trauma. In it, he mentions that “individual trauma is a blow which breaks a person's feelings and thoughts making them less reactive to the situations and collective trauma which destroy the social life of people and the bond that sticks them together”. Also, this trauma causes severe threats like fear, excessive grief, vulnerability, and identity crises more to the present generation than the past ancestors who were the victim of it. The main cause of this could be natural disasters, political issues, colonization, pandemics, etc. Moreover, in his

view, collective trauma can dismantle the basic structure of the society resulting in pressure on a collective level.

The pioneer of traditional trauma Cathy Caruth (1996) defined trauma as “a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but it is, in fact, a break in the mind’s experience of time” (Caruth 61). She emphasized the point that when a person is exposed to any external agent, gradually makes internal changes leading to a loss of identity. People can become caught at an unfathomable point, inflicting harm to their awareness and language. The essential point is that the traumatized person is unaware of the horrific experiences they are having because they have become entangled in the web of trauma and it is too late to recall them. They became a part of the past, living a life that was a combination of past and present occurrences, and they were unable to articulate their inner thoughts to others around them, causing mental difficulties. Cathy attempts to demonstrate in her book *Unclaimed experience* that trauma has a cyclical character and disrupts the recurrence of flashbacks in the psyche of a traumatized person. Furthermore, the book highlights the inescapability and survival aspects of trauma as a crucial component of a traumatized person’s life. Life is usually complex and confusing; it is quite difficult to go on when a person succumbs to trauma. In the novel 'Shuggie Bain,' Agnes Bain and her family lead such a life. Shuggie Bain's life is marked by a traumatic upbringing, a shattered family, and broken parenthood.

A pillar of courage amidst the chaos of a rustic life. The emotionally dipped novel Shuggie Bain is written by Douglas Stuart, a Scottish American writer. It is his debut novel that won the 2020 Booker prize award. This is a bildungsroman that tells the heart-wrenching narrative of a young boy from childhood to adulthood. The protagonist of this novel lives with his mother and half-siblings in the Glasgow suburbs during the 1980s. It’s a period marked by industrial decline, poverty, unemployment, and family strife. Thatcher's policies in the 1980s had a significant impact on the men and women of Glasgow, the anguish of working-class people and their families reverberated silently throughout the city. The pages of Shuggie Bain have the pain and sorrows of each member of Glasgow city.

Shuggie Bain, the title character, is the youngest son of Agnes Bain, an alcoholic mother. Shuggie had been seeing his parents' fights since he was a child. Daily squabbles and tears have a mental and physical impact on his youth. A child's happy spot is always his or her house, and parents will constantly keep an eye on them. Unfortunately for Shuggie and his siblings, their parents are preoccupied with their issues, and no one is available to care for these tiny buds. Agnes, like Shuggie, plays a pivotal role in this novel. She is the female protagonist and a domestic abuse victim. Her husband, Big Shug, abandoned the family, leaving them impoverished and despondent. As a result, she dove into the pool of booze and grew addicted to it over time. Her frequent alcohol usage and smoking generate family strife, leading to even more serious issues. She walks around the home with a cigarette on her lips or a can of beer in her hands at all times. She is also experiencing health complications as a result of her smoking, such as coughing and breathing difficulty. Her shattered connection with Big Shug follows her like a shadow, driving her to drink until it fades away. She is completely unaware of the negative consequences of her actions on her children. Shuggie's

mother is the center of his universe. He will go to great lengths to make her happy. He always goes to school after seeing his mother's face, and when he gets home, he expects her to be ready to listen to his stories. With love and tenderness, he is knitted to his mother. When she failed to love and care for him, he adjusted. Shuggie's femininity was frequently mocked and mistreated by children. A boy named Bonny Jhonny assaulted him sexually and called him 'wee poof' and later everyone in the pit used it as a weapon to attack him.

On the other hand, his half-siblings, Catherine and Leek, find their way to escape from the harsh realities that they daily witness. Leek got admitted to an arts college, and he is in search of money to join there in the shortest possible time. Catherine is about to marry Douglas Jr. and is getting ready to go to South Africa. So, Agnes and her troubles can only be treated by Shuggie. Shug used to visit Agnes late at night to consummate with her and he leaves the place when she starts her queries. He shattered her physically and psychologically, making it impossible for anybody to replace her in her physical form. So, in such a situation, Shuggie is the only one who defends her and loves her unconditionally. The novel's narratives provide a sense of harshness that Thatcher's policies brought to Scotland, resulting in total catastrophe. The usage of drugs changed happy children into hostile monsters, and they began to gaze at girls with lusty eyes. The woman of Glasgow smells like cigars and vodka. Anguish, drugs, alcohol, and shattered families pervade every corner of Scotland. As a result, this gripping work illustrates the complexities of industrialization, themes of unconditional love, and courage to withstand adversities.

### **The repressed self of Shuggie Bain**

In Cathy Caruth's essay *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history* (1996) she mentions that traumatic events find repetition in the form of memories as flashbacks. In this novel too, we see the transition from present to past. The novel begins in 1992 when Shuggie is already 16 years old, and then the writers take us back to the events leading to the formation of this Shuggie. So, Stuart follows an unconventional way of expressing the repressed memories in Shuggie, who is also a kind of author-surrogate, through his narrative technique. Though the novel is not an autobiography it had many autobiographical inclinations. In an interview with the BBC, Douglas Stuart said that he had "the real need to get the story out" of him. In this way, the exploration of Shuggie's repressed psyche can also be a pathway to the writer's mind.

The traditional trauma model advocated by the pioneers in the study of Psychoanalysis; Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman, and Shoshana Felman, opine that trauma is a shock that is inflicted upon the human psyche under unexpected-depressing events. *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history* (1996), Balaev (2014) summarizes that "trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language". By nature, traumatic events haunt the consciousness in the form of memories and flashbacks. And it normally happens as an aftermath of such a devastating event. For instance, in Shakespeare's play Macbeth, both Macbeth, and Lady Macbeth repent their sin of killing king Duncan. It is not only the person who did the act of murder who suffered because of the traumatic event

happened, but also the one who was indirectly involved in it. Lady Macbeth, though she did not commit the murder had developed excessive guilt that was embedded in the repressed corners of her psyche, which found its expression in her sleepwalking and her obsession with washing her hands. Zhong and Liljenquist (2006) describe this as the “Macbeth effect—that is, a threat to one's moral purity induces the need to cleanse oneself”. In Shuggie Bain too, we see how he is affected by his mother's alcoholism and his broken family. For him, his world centered around his mother. Even when his half-siblings, Catherine and Leek were not able to cope with their mother's self-destructive habits, Shuggie stood by her. So, in his story, Shuggie suffers from his mother for her mistakes in life. “Shuggie had been watching his mother quietly. He was always watching” (Stuart 51).

The absence of a father figure puts the children in the family to earn for themselves very early in their life. Shuggie too had to mature early, since he possessed a defective support system for his parents. His philandering father Shug was one of the main reasons for his mother's addiction, and his abusive relationship with Agnes left the children in the house to resort to their hideouts. Leek says this to Catherine, “Let's not talk about home. Let's just pretend we've run away” (Stuart 31). Shuggie, being the youngest child, had always been close to his mother, he is the only person who had access to her all the time. He had seen her being beaten up by his father, her father, and in many other compromising situations with other men but, he had also seen her repenting for her mistakes, he had seen her cry, he had seen her agony. These left Shuggie in a dilemma, as to whether to leave her or live with her, and he chose the latter. It was his unconditional love for his mother that urged him to be her helping hand. But all those instances when he had to forcibly try to forget her mistakes, he was taking a great toll on himself. He was battling with his sense of morality and goodness and ultimately had to give up all for the sake of his mother. He knew that if he tried to rationalize his mother's action, she might disappoint him.

Shuggie was not only affected by his mother or family but also by his sexual orientation. Shuggie is gay, but he could not accept that his effeminate nature and tried to force masculinity on him. He tried to walk and talk like a man, he tried to memorize soccer scores, and he even tried to be in a relationship with girls. But, everyone except him was convinced that he was gay and they ridiculed him for the same. He was bullied by his classmates, and the people on the streets, and some men even tried to trespass his physical boundaries. He was afraid of being labeled as gay because he knew that society looked down upon gay men and the blame would be cast on his upbringing. He knew that fingers would be pointed at his mother.

### **The ticking time-bomb: atrocities of an alcoholic mother**

Nearly most of the novel's plot is focused on the character, Agnes Bain, the alcoholic mother of Leek, Catherine, and Shuggie. Being a beauty, who was often compared to the actress Elizabeth Taylor, and an ardent romantic, she has unreal expectations about her life... Agnes' unchecked emotions and desires, invited troubles into her life and also of her children. Eloping with Shug and the resultant abandonment of her first husband, damned her to eternal misery, which

drove her to alcoholism. The trauma bond that Agnes had with Shug, though made her happy once, had changed to an extreme form of guilt. "The guilt sank like dampness into her bones and she felt rotten with shame" (Stuart 75). Her consciousness pricked her for her errors. According to the *London Review of Books*, the novel "has a didactic fairy-tale quality. To the extent that it engages in adult psychology, the mentality portrayed is either vicious and predatory (Shug) or victimized (Agnes)". Wullie, beating his 36-year-old daughter, Agnes, and the burning of the curtains takes the reader to a dramatic experience of the character's shattered self.

Agnes reached across the mattress for her cigarettes, she lit one and sucked loudly, she coaxed the end into a blazing copper tip. She looked at the light for a moment, and her voice cracked with the poor I's as she sang along with the cassette. Her right arm extended gracefully, and she held the glowing cigarette against the curtains. Shuggie watched as the ash started to smolder and then gave off a gray smoke. He started to squirm as the smoke burst with a gasp into an orange flame... there was dead silence in her. (Stuart 58). The situation turned abysmal as the family moved to Pithead, a settlement of the mineworkers. At Pithead, where Agnes had no support from her parents and the growing waywardness of Shug turned him into an unbridled libertine. His relationship with his co-worker, Joanie Micklewhite, and his subsequent abandonment of his family wrecked Agnes's belief to give her family a fresh start. With the only earning member in the family gone, the responsibility of taking care of the household was shifted to Agnes' shoulder, which she used as another chance to emotionally aid her deadening addiction to alcohol. Shuggie was the only one who was available to her, to vent her burden of responsibilities. Agnes Bain exploited Shuggie's dependence on her in order to keep her company, often letting him skip school and sending him to collect their government-issued financial services or food supplies.

Agnes' life shined bright, though not for long, as she joined the Alcoholics Anonymous, where her wish to lead a sober life was transformed into reality. Her life plummets for a second time and forever after Eugene, her boyfriend coaxes her to drink again. In a drunken stupor, she harms her children; Catherine and Leek choose to abandon her. Agnes sank in the dreaded, unfathomable ocean of despair, loneliness, and sadness until appeased by her death. Her death also metaphorically augments her self-condemnation: she died inhaling her saliva. Her life is a lived example of Neil Strauss' words "people go through so much pain to avoid pain". Looking back at Agnes' life, she always wanted to be in the limelight, she wanted to be loved by everyone, mainly Shug. She was jealous of her parents' love for each other. She worshiped her icon, Taylor, but "she was also difficult, challenging, forthright, strong, all of which Stuart associates with his mother. Taylor drank, loved, and lost like her mother and Agnes Bain" ("Diving Deep with Douglas Stuart: The Many Layers of Shuggie Bain").

"Feelings are for weaklings" (Stuart 69) said, Leek about Catherine. Leek and Catherine, like Shuggie, had to bear the brunt of their mother's problems. They did, however, find a method to escape on their own. Catherine and Leek had a particular kinship that enabled them to withstand the mayhem. On the other hand, the children decided to separate themselves from Agnes when her drinking

habits intensified. Catherine relocated to South Africa after marrying Donald Junior. She doesn't want to look after her mother since she knows she'll end up drinking for the rest of her life. As a result, she believes Agnes will never return to normalcy. Her future is also a source of anxiety for her. She doesn't want to sabotage her chances by remaining in Pithead or caring for her mother. In Leek's case, his lone friend Catherine abandoned him and went away. He'd had enough of seeing his mother destroy herself, so he decided to move away from her. Leek then got an opportunity from Arts College for his further studies, and he began looking for ways to finance his tuition. However, due to Shuggie's loneliness and his mother's worsening position, he abandoned his plans to attend college and began working in construction to support them. But, alas, it does not endure very long. When Agnes tries to commit suicide, Leek finds it tough to deal with. As a result, he separated himself from Agnes and Shuggie.

During the tough times for Agnes, only the little boy Shuggie took care of her. Every child commits to their parents to protect them from harm. Since the day we were born, they have looked after us and provided us with all of the comforts, love, and security we require. As a result, every child owes their parents for everything they have done to make them happy. In Agnes' instance, she was unable to be a decent mother to her children. However, she adored them but was unable to express her feelings due to a multitude of issues. So, without recognizing Agnes's distress Catherine and Leek walked away from her life. After marriage, Catherine never phoned or spoke to her mother. Agnes had completely vanished from her life. They were unconcerned about Agnes' plight. They simply abandoned her to find consolation. This is an instance revealing the egocentric attitude of Leek and Catherine. If all of Agnes' children had stuck by her side, she would have gradually stopped drinking.

### **Conclusion**

In the general run of things, a person inflicted by any trauma has four responses to it; fight, flight free, or freeze. In this novel, we see how different characters adopt different life choices to combat the traumas they mostly share in common. In the case of Agnes, she froze herself and quit living- she metamorphosed into a "terrible half -a- person" (Stuart 324). Leek and Catherine gave up all grounds for changing their mother. they resorted to running away from their obligation to their mother. Leek moved out of their "shattered house", to earn a living as an artist, and Catherine, by marrying Donald Jr, carried forward the vicious cycle her mother had started. Shuggie alone dared to fight back his odes. He cared for his mother, until her very end. He orbited around her like the moon around the earth, never to break away from the powerful force of love. Stuart in his interview at the Jaipur Literature Festival said: To me, it is the redemptive, unconditional quality of Shuggie's love for Agnes that lets him stay hopeful in a heart-rending way even when Leek, his older brother, can see that she will never be freed from the clutches of alcoholism.

Even after her death, Shuggie did not liberate himself from the harrowing memories of his mother. Nonetheless, he remained hopeful for a better future. He helped his friend Leanne to feed her homeless, alcoholic mother. Thus, bestowing some hopefulness to her otherwise hopeless-life. The novel is a Pandora's box,

tightly packed with a series of despondency, gloom, dejection, and misery. There is almost no indication of a bright sky apart from the optimism that Shuggie possesses. Since the persona of Shuggie Bain is heavily modeled on the author, his success in life also supplements a hope for betterment and an optimistic ending for this story of Darkness.

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