

GROWING UP WITH GHOSTS: DYNAMICS OF REMEMORY AND TRAUMA IN A MALAYSIAN FILIAL MEMOIR

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ABSTRACT

Communicating stories matter when writers highlight the dynamics of mining the most private experiences for material. Whether humiliating or painful, it is often in the hands of writers that stories are made profound, interesting and fascinating. Yet, to readers, vivid scenarios, specific identification, convincing characters and real-life snapshots, just to name a few, present insights into human condition. Malaysian writers who report such investigations describing more than just their own memories and histories include Bernice Chauly and her critically acclaimed memoir, “Growing Up with Ghosts”. “Growing Up with Ghosts” begins with a private memory of a four-year-old girl at the freak drowning of her father and gradually unfolds into a patrio/matriographic memoir that recounts the paternal and maternal history of her Chinese and Punjabi ancestries. Using key concepts of memory theory and trauma studies including rememory, postmemory and empathic unsettlement, this article primarily examines the collection of episodic and semantic memory presented in the memoir. The reflexive and often sporadic, chaotic recounts following the death of her father provides a vivid depiction of the experience of post-parental death. The findings reveal how the filial memoir implicates the reader through “empathic unsettlement” of the trauma suffered by the memoirist through acts of memory, rememory and postmemory. The reader also suffers the burden through postmemory in the act of reading the delayed, indirect and secondary memory of the memoirist. Reading a multigenre, multivocal

narrative can capture the theme of loss and grief not merely as a form of self-positioning, but more significantly, as a move towards creating an “identity forging discourse”.

Keywords: trauma writing, patrio/matriographic memoir, emphatic settlement, Bernice Chauly, Malaysian literature

INTRODUCTION

Memoirs, as “catalogues” of life, seen from communication studies are particularly useful for investigating hopes, feelings and desires. Journalist-memoirist, Susan Shapiro, explains that memoir writers provide glimpses on what it means to capture detailed recollection, growing up in changing, developing and dynamic private spaces (Shapiro 2012). This study aims to address this issue with the objective of studying the ways in which different fragments of realities are enmeshed and embedded in memoirs. The key to exploring this issue in memoirs lies in the reading of them using the lenses of memory, rememory and postmemory. Specifically, a multicultural account of Bernice Chauly, *Growing Up with Ghosts* (2011) (hereafter, *Ghosts*) coming to terms with unsettling questions regarding her parents’ death, is introduced in this study. *Ghosts* is a patrio/matriographic memoir by Chauly, but it recounts the paternal and maternal history of her Chinese and Punjabi ancestors. *Ghosts* is a filial memoir documenting episodic and semantic memory of the memoirist and members of her extended family. In addition, this memoir attempts to piece together the events and thoughts surrounding the passing of her father, Bernard Surinder Chauly. Thus, the filial memoir, written as a multigenre, multivocal narrative, contains testimonies that oscillate between the personal/private and the public, creating a manuscript as this study asserts, making readers suffer a phantom pain of loss and trauma along with the memoirist. This essay uses these lenses to investigate the Malaysian writer, director and curator of Bernice Chauly’s 2011 memoir *Ghosts*.

In the following sections, we analyse the dynamics of rememory within trauma studies. This background will enable us to situate our analysis of the emerging issues following Chauly’s experience with posthumous issues. Of interest to our discussion are the images presented in the memoir of a young woman attempting to find a voice amidst challenging and changing times of girlhood and later young adulthood. The developments of key issues on trauma and memory are presented to suggest that memoirs, such as what this study explicates, offers opportunity to experience the reader’s engagement with the unsettling, uncertain tensions of growing up independent of a father figure. Prior to that, Chauly must situate within

the large corpus of Malaysian literature. To what extent does Chauly's memoir echo the themes and concerns of Malaysian literature?

MALAYSIAN AUTHORS AND HISTORY

Malaysia as a young nation has produced a considerable number of authors who continue to challenge the conventional idea of who or what constitutes a Malaysian. The varied and rich themes and concerns of Malaysian writers' echo "the tessellated milieu of agendas, visions and revisions we call contemporary Malaysia" (Sheryll Stodhard in Amir Muhammad, Karim and Stodhard 1997, xv). From the pioneer writers of the 1940s and 1950s, such as Wang Gungwu, Sybil Kathigasu and Ee Tiang Hong, to the writers of the post-independence period, such as Lee Kok Liang, Wong Phui Nam, Cecil Rajendra, Edward Dorrall, Lloyd Fernando, Muhammad Haji Salleh and K.S. Maniam, the concordance of issues represented in their body of work is symbolic of "a literature of reconciliation, offering various perspectives of the rocky path to nationhood" (Fadillah 2004, 14).

An important feature of the "literature of reconciliation" is the significant role of history on each work of fiction, play and poetry produced by Malaysian literary writers. The authorial-defined social reality (Raihanah 2009) that is depicted in each Malaysian narration represents a facet of Malaysian life and history. In addition, the euphony of voices that makes the contemporary literary canon of Malaysian literature continues to delve into the history of the nation from its colonial past to the world war period to independence and beyond. Maznah and Wong stated that: "Historical studies may empirically relate events, but perhaps only literature can heighten the representation of a lived experience; it may even be a medium more productive than committee reports for feeding into the reinvention of the future" (2001a, 31–32).

The watershed of Malaysian history including the Japanese occupation, the emergency period that followed it and the bloody riots of 13th May 1969, is a constant feature in contemporary historical fiction of the 21st century by Malaysian novelists, such as Chan Ling Yap, Tan Twan Eng, Tash Aw, Rani Manika and Hanna Alkhaf. Each period of the nation's history is given the literary representation that brings to life a particular period of Malaysia's story which allows contemporary readers to experience a time that was.

Apart from the history of the land, personal history is also a significant aspect of Malaysian literature. K.S. Maniam in his bildungsroman novel, *The Return* (1983), utilised a substantial amount of his personal story growing up as a first-generation

Indian Malaysian in the estates of Bedong, Kedah (Pillai 2007). Similarly, the diasporic Malaysian poets, such as Hillary Tham and Shirley Lim, are known to tap into their personal stories to represent an issue of being Malaysian from afar (Khoo, Ruzy Suzila and Raihanah 2018; Fadillah Merican et al. 2004). The personal narrative allows the Malaysian writers to “write what they know best”, as the poet laureate Muhammad Haji Salleh once said.

In the context of this study, personal history is presented in the form of a memoir. Malaysian memoir is a thriving canon. From the state’s men and women to activists, the genre captures “the history of the self” (Heehs 2013, 4) and that of the nation. In fact, Wong (2012, 81) asserted that scholars’ interest in this genre, specifically by Malaysian female writers, “is part of a larger excavation and recuperation of neglected, ignored and indeed, forbidden moments in the country’s past”. As a genre, the memoir juxtaposes the documentation of “truth” and the “narrative qualities of omniscience, dramatisation, point-of-view and other elements of writing” (Wong 2012, 83). Nonetheless, at its core, memoir as a genre celebrates “the play of imagination and the constrains of referentiality” (Wong 2012, 84). Similar to works of fiction, memoirs by Malaysian women, such as Sybil Kathigasu, Khatijah Sidek, Angela Yong and Muthammal Palanisamy, present a literary inclusion to the Malaysian literary canon and as a pertinent source of the nation’s history (Haslina 2013). One such Malaysian memoirist is Bernice Chauly, whose memoir traces her journey in discovering her multiethnic, multicultural heritage and her trauma of losing her father at a tender age of four. Reviewers have categorised the memoir as,

A biography, a diary and a history...a love story, a searching journey into the heart of the Punjab and into the Guangdong province and the story of an ancient curse. But most of all, it is the story of a little girl just looking for her father. (Ampikaipakan 2011)

Ghosts is a filial memoir that documents the episodic and semantic memories of the memoirist and the paternal and maternal histories of her Chinese and Punjabi ancestors. On the one hand, psychologists define episodic memory as: “Involving thinking about a past event—it is personal, emotional, populated with players and specific places, imbued with detail, and it often has relevance to our sense of self and the meaning of our lives” (Ryan, Hoscheidt and Nadel 2008, 5). That is, episodic memory “allows the rememberer to have the conscious experience, or auto-noesis, of being mentally present once again within the spatial-temporal context of the original experience—the phenomenal experience of remembering” (ibid.). On the other hand, semantic memory is “characterized by merely knowing (noetic) consciousness, and nondeclarative memory by nonknowing (anoetic)

consciousness” (ibid.). However, scholars agree that “of course, this ability presupposes that the individual can retrieve the spatial-temporal context in which the to-be-remembered event occurred. Thus, spatial-temporal context remains a critical component of episodic memory” (ibid.).

Chauly (2011, 18) positions herself in her memoir as follows:

I am Punjabi, a *sardani* of the Khalsa. Of the pure, from the tenets sprung from the loins of Guru Nanak. From the plains of the Punjab, and the wheat fields of Amritsar. I am Chinese, from the port city of Canton, from Fatshan, from Lam Soy Chea, from the village of fisherman and of joss stick makers.

This memoir attempts to reconstruct the events and thoughts surrounding the death of her father, Bernard Surinder Chauly.

In an interview, Chauly describes the “ghosts” in the title of the book, which is written as a filial memoir, as a symbol of the trans-generational connection that she attempts to make with members of her lineage, whose “untold histories”, “difficult” lives and muted dead voices she continues to mourn (Lee 2011). As she states early in the memoir, “I grew up with ghosts. I grew up with the dead, and the voices that resonate. I grew up with myth. I grew up with grief, and its untold stories” (Chauly 2011, 18). Thus, the filial memoir, which was written as a multigenre, multivocal narrative, contains testimonies that oscillate between the personal/private and the public. Hence, a manuscript that demands the reader to suffer a phantom pain of loss and trauma along with the memoirist is created.

TRAUMA: MEMORY, REMEMORY, POSTMEMORY

“The term, trauma, is best understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but the mind” (Caruth 1996, 3). Caruth (1996) made a compelling argument regarding the phenomenon of trauma affecting not just physique but also comprehension and feelings surrounding a conflict, tragedy and vulnerability. Caruth contextualised trauma in terms of external and internal health. The nature, shape, contours and consequence of trauma, along with its chaos, are undeniably complex. However, a comprehensive review of trauma is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, an awareness of how trauma is linked to the climate of uncertainty and fear is necessary to the current discussion into Chauly’s narrative.

Traumatic experiences are remembered when one is overwhelmed with fear by the memories that one relives (Bloom 1999). One of the earliest studies on trauma could point to Pierre Janet's work, whose categorisation of "narrative memories" and "traumatic experience" is an important point of departure (cited in van der Kolk, McFarlane and Weisaeth 1996). Narrative memories are generally regarded as daily experiences that are consciously perceived, remembered and narrated by oneself. By contrast, traumatic experience is stored as memories that have emotions and trauma attached to them that are often "not consciously accessible" (Danneels 2013, 10). In Chauly's memoir, narrative memories and traumatic experience are intertwined to present the readers the thought process of the recollection of the past and the emotions that are attached to them.

The existing literature has many trajectories regarding how trauma and memory are best understood. One of the methods by which memory is linked to trauma can be explained through a bottom-up approach. In making a connection between memory and trauma, the listener or readers are encouraged to observe the "ambivalent desire to look, to grapple with real suffering" (Miller and Tougaw 2002, 19–20). The following extract from Seager accentuates the position of memory and how it deals with conflicting and supporting experiences: memory is "stored intact as a copy of earlier experiences" (Seager 2016, 166). And as he explains, "since our awareness of memory is a mental function there will have to be judgments implicated in the production of conscious memory experience" (Seager 2016, 36). In turn, memory and trauma co-exist, thereby leading to a re-membering of specific points in life. In other words, trauma is a collection of record of the past and a form of memory that registers and retrieves "the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned" (Caruth 1995, 151). However, the message, in whichever discipline it is professed to by respective scholars, is the cohesive alignment between memory and trauma that engages a top-down perspective.

A top-down approach signifying memory and experiences suggests the presence of fantasies and imagination. Seager (2016) notes that the knowledge acquired from our experiences is not necessarily a knowledge that we have, prepare and apply for but is about "how the world is being presented to us and the consciousness of the qualitative nature of our experiences" (Caruth 1995, 166). In turn, this connection may create adaptations, in which they relive the reality of the past whilst the trauma is called for, thereby recovering "a past that encounters consciousness through active recollection" (Caruth 1995, 152). Whilst reliving and engaging with sporadic reality of the past, this experience with the world, fantasies, and imagination enactments are "the truth of an event, and the truth of its comprehensibility," thereby making the concept complex to explain and listen to (Caruth 1995, 152). These images of trauma, which has specific temporal-

spatial details, emotions and personal connections, often have relevance to our sense of self and comprehension about life (Ryan, Hoscheidt and Nadel 2008). That is, although trauma and memory exist together, they allow the story to be communicated, “to be integrated into one’s own,” and onto ““others’ knowledge of the past” (Caruth 1995, 153).

In the process of communicating and dealing with trauma, LaCapra (2004) identifies the pivotal stage of “work-through” process that individuals undergo in the healing process. Specifically, an individual dealing with trauma will verbalise trauma that is accessed “unconsciously in the form of flashbacks, nightmares or reenactment” (Danneels 2013, 11). Similarly, scholars working within trauma studies in the likes of Dori Laub argued that this process is fundamental because it is through the very process of narration that an individual “reclaims his position as a witness” (Laub 1995, 70). However, LaCapra (2004, 204) cautions that this process is not problem-free because trauma can never be “fully overcome.” Through repetitions and re-enactments or a combination of both, an individual experiencing trauma works through multiple cycles of understanding and healing, occasionally re-enacting a memory (Morrison, 2005) or postmemory which is “communicable, shared, and permanent, because it is spatial and material” (Hirsch 2012, 83).

Depictions of childhood memories, such as those identified by Saxena (2019), Millei, Silova and Gannon (2019) and Saber (2019), reveal certain “landscapes” of trauma, memory and loss. In her study of multicultural and multinational protagonists in selected fiction, Saxena (2019) argues that childhood memories can be linked to relationships, relations and legacies, altering new ways of looking at nationality, culture and ethnicity. For example, in a fiction set in Southeast Asian settings, alienation is constituted by and deeply embedded in cultural and historical contexts; the ways in which their distressing predicament is encased is contingent upon multitudes of identities. That is, when one character, through childhood memories, learns to identify with hyphenated identities, one can neither be a British nor a Chinese nor can one identify with the “Japanese in entirety” because one shares family relations through a wide varying cultural and ethnicity “webs” (Saxena 2019, 190–191). In Millei, Silova and Gannon (2019), we come across an example of another (re)conceptualisation of childhood memories and the notion of loss. This example unfolds how every day, unofficial experiences of childhood is a concept aligned with the self, at private and public levels, preserving, resisting and portraying ambivalence against dominant discourses of childhood.

In contrast to Saxena’s (2019) contention, Millei, Silova and Gannon (2019, 10) argue that early memories “[re]create subjectivities with, within, and against dominant narratives and with those the ways they were simultaneously reiterating,

rewriting, silencing or resisting pre-given categories of childhood”. The belief system surrounding memories renders human beings coping with hardship and making sacrifices to stabilise the self, family and society. This system mirrors personal preferences, actions and behaviours that consent, validate or dissent (childhood) dilemmas. Saber argues that stories of loss and grief change across a diverse individual with familial, societal and national roles. Saber also noted that these fractured and fragmented memories illustrate that readings loss and grief move from “political self-representation” to “identity-forging discourse” (2019, 14). That is, whatever the circumstances of human beings, whether they are in extreme pain or absolute happiness, memories of loss and grief (re)assert themselves in the grand scheme of things.

Following these readings, many issues have been encountered and embraced on trauma and memory. Such scholars as therapists, neurobiologists, film critics and, most importantly, literary critics have enabled effort to achieve considerably profound impact on trauma and memory. Several important considerations include exploring trauma and memory towards reclaiming cultural heritage (Agarwal 2015; Resende-Santos 2015), positioning trauma as a source of empowerment and liberation (East and Roll 2015; Cameron 2016) and localising refugee settlement in view of trauma (Morina et al. 2016; Kalmanowitz and Ho 2016). Nonetheless, research on trauma goes beyond the lines of reading and understanding; it is also a project of listening outside the pathology of individual suffering (Caruth 1995) and vicarious experience (LaCapra 2004). Accordingly, research on uncovering individual suffering is about the (re)conceptualising of memories as it is about internal health (re)discovery. As Hurston explains, uncovering individual suffering is akin to “the dead-seeming cold rocks”; “I have memories within that came out of the material that make me” (1942, 3).

How are issues on memory and trauma, which focus on individual suffering, chaos and uncertainty, developed in Chauly’s memoir? This study argues that as readers engage with *Ghost*, the interaction with issues inherent in Chauly’s elaboration creates spaces that relatively encourage readers to associate with the narrated memories through shared decentralised and personalised identifications, including complex filial issues, in which the selves are shaped and emerged. Chauly’s rememory is one that “needs the reassurance, of being believed” and of “being acknowledged” (Danneels 2013, 13). From traumatic re-enactments to reality fragments of the past, readers are exposed to how the consequences of traumatic events shape her personality and identity. In this way, the space of Chauly’s empathic unsettlement and trauma are continually activated and accompanied by the readers’ engagement. Such engagements in memoir-reading will present extensive “notion of episodic memory, the ability to recall, relive, and replay

episodes of our lives” (Seager 2016, 151). These alignments reveal the methods in which the memoir presents human interaction and signifies “delayed” and indirect postmemory accompanying readers (LaCapra 2004).

TRAUMA AND REMEMORY: RAISON D’ETRE OF *GHOSTS*

Scholars of memory theory have contested the subjectivity and reliability of a recollection of a past event. A few scholars asked the following question: Is it perhaps “a narrative constructed about the past in the present?” (Boyarin 1994, 22). One dimension of memory is trauma or the affliction of the mind. Studies suggest that the “wound of the mind” caused by “the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self and the world,” albeit prematurely experienced, is “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, 4).

In *Ghosts*, the trauma or mental wound experienced by the memoirist happened on 6th January 1973. She narrates in the opening page of the memoir:

I remember the day my father stopped singing. Just as he sang me to sleep, he sang me to wake.... When we drove in the wide blue car with fins, with the windows open, he sang to me while we drove past the Chinese mansions on Macalister Road and onto the winding road with trees that would take us to the beach on Batu Ferringhi. He sang when he tickled my wriggling feet and splashed water on my face open face, stinging my eyes. I heard him singing as I wandered up away from him, to be towelled dry, my face turning again and again to see him waving to me, his voice getting fainter and fainter.... I was a child of four, and my father never sang to me again. (Chauly 2011, 12)

The definitive recollection of the memory begins with the cheerful images of her father singing. The voice of the narrator’s life begins with the one memory that continues to haunt her. However, the recall is not of a fond memory but rather of a tragic circumstance surrounding the end of a childhood memory: the constant singing by her father as he attends to her that abruptly ends at the age of four when he dies suddenly from drowning. Caruth explained that trauma “does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned” (Caruth 1995, 151). Accordingly, the true magnitude of a trauma lies in “its unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 1996, 4). This “unassimilated” episode of her past continues to haunt the memoirist and

clearly showcases the extent of her suffering as presented later in her letter to her grandfather 15 years after the father's passing,

It was difficult childhood as Mother had to raise three of us. I was an angry child and I always felt that Papa had been wrenched away from me in the cruellest of ways. His death is still affecting me, fifteen years after it happened. (Chauly 2011, 266)

The way trauma continues to affect an individual is a subject that fascinates scholars of memory and extreme experiences. Most significantly, trauma affects its victim in a manner that remains puzzling. Caruth (1995, 153) asserts:

For the survivor of trauma, then, the truth of the event may reside not only in its brutal facts, but also in the way that their occurrence defies simple comprehension. The flashback or traumatic re-enactment conveys, that is, both the truth of an event, and the truth of its incomprehensibility.

In the opening page of *Ghosts*, the recollection proceeds from a simple memory of a gesture that her father used to do, which is sing to her, to the incomprehensible abrupt end to that gesture with his death. The magnitude of the trauma is captured in the continuation of that opening paragraph when Chauly, perhaps in retrospect, visualises the drowning of her father: "And then the sea came up and swallowed my father. The sea slithered salt, water and sand into his mouth and throat and lungs and his heart, the sea coiled its might around my father and silenced him" (Chauly 2011, 12). Even though she is not privy to the details of his death when she was four, the strong reconstruction in this excerpt suggests a clear postmemory towards visualising the unsaid, thereby sealing the level of trauma suffered by the memoirist. In this case, postmemory considers Marianne Hirsch's definition: "the experience of those who grow up dominated by the narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generations shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated" (quoted in Edelstein 2008, 151). Although the young Chauly was present during the unfortunate occurrence, her experience is generally coloured by the narratives of others, including testimonies from her family and, as shown in the memoir, from newspaper clippings that covered the incident.

The testimonies from members of her extended family signal the magnitude of the loss suffered by all parties involved. This discussion defines testimony as "record[ing] movement from individual experience to the collective archive, from personal trauma to public memory" (Miller and Tougaw 2002, 13). The testimony of her paternal grandfather, Jaswant Singh, about his son's passing reads:

I was at work when you died, when the sea claimed you. I was under the tree and I felt stillness in the air. As if the dead had walked past me. I knew something was wrong. When they came to get me, I could not walk, I could not rise up. My son, my son. Beloved of all my sons. God put me on top of the mountain, and then he cast me down below. (Chauly 2011, 198)

Moreover, Chauly's mother, who finds out that she is three months pregnant when her husband passed, is severely traumatised. In her letters to her dead husband four months after the unfortunate incident, Jane continues to mourn her loss:

How long can I last? ...I feel like I have been cheated by fate. Why did you have to leave me so soon? Life is so mysterious. Why, why, why did you have to leave me so soon? I can't find an answer to this.... God you have been so unfair. (Chauly 2011, 202–203)

The tragic circumstances of the death of Chauly's father presents the following questions: What can Chauly accomplish through this extended recollection of what was a traumatic episode in her family's history? How can recounting and rehashing a painful story of life be beneficial? Accordingly, we bring in scholars of memory theory to assist in our discussion. Scholars suggest that the importance of memory lies in the lessons learnt from the "nuanced awareness of patterns of experience in the past" (Boyarin 1994, 19). Additionally, memory ingrained with trauma is located "on the threshold between remembering and forgetting, seeing and not seeing, transparency and occlusion, experience and its absence in repetition" (Huysen 2003, 8). Thus, the *raison d'être* of the memoir is a constant reminder of the writer's commitment to rememory, not just of her personal loss but that of her maternal and paternal family. Chauly recounted:

My memory begins on the day you died. My memory begins and ends there. Static. Cloudless. Beach, sand, laughter, silence. Mother's screams. Manji beats her chest. A dead body. Papa. My papa. Grey hospital walls. The doctor talks and talks. Mother cries. I sit and stare at the grey hospital walls. (2011, 14)

The author consciously reconstructs her filial past and a tragic personal memory. As she says at the onset in the presence of her father's scrap book based on his European trip in the summer of 1960: "The scrapbook. A door into memory. A great big book of your memories. Passages from the past into no future. I want more memories. More books, pages filled with your hand, but there are none" (Chauly 2011, 149).

Furthermore, the filial memoir creates a boundary for the extended family of Chinese and Punjabi background to forge a unified stand regarding their loss, despite their initial resistance to the unlikely intercultural, interreligious relationship between Jane Loh Siew Yoke and Surinder Chauly. The letters sent by Surinder to Jane glaringly describes the resistance from his family. In a letter dated 15th August 1966, a few days after he declared his love for her, Surinder, a Punjabi Sikh, describes the abuse he suffered at the hands of his family members for his continued relationship with Jane:

My darling Jane, you do not know how much trouble I have been having with my family for the last few days. Even the little love I had for my father has been lost for what he said to me. I was feeling mad on Friday night that I went out and cropped my hair... When I went home the next day my parents were so mad with me that they beat me. ...Yesterday my parents forced me to go and see a priest in Taiping. I refused to go but they forced me into my brother-in-law's car and took me there. There I was forced, in front of the whole congregation in the temple to drink some holy water and some other things. But they will have no effect on me. The priest even took away the money I had with me. They tried to force me to say that I will stop loving you and not marry you, but I just kept my mouth shut and didn't say a word. (Chauly 2011, 150)

Through the inclusion of private correspondence between her mother and father before their marriage, Chauly paints a realist depiction of the challenges that they faced in formalising their relationship. Evidently, theirs was not a fairy tale romance. As Chauly's maternal grandmother, Poh Poh, recalls a decade after his passing:

Surinder, he was tall. So handsome. But when your mother told us about him, I was very angry. I said, how can you do this to your father? After everything he has done for you? (Chauly 2011, 213)
I did not like Surinder at first...Yes, I was bitter, disappointed at first. We never married outside. It was all arranged. (Chauly 2011, 277)

These rememories by Chauly and members of her family enable her to create an opportunity for a shared temporal and spatial memory among members of her extended family, who up until her father's demise were unhappy about the marriage. To quote James Brow's agricultural analogy of memory: "Almost everywhere, it seems, the sense of belonging together is nourished by being cultivated in the fertile soil of the past" (Brow 1990, 1). The memoir, similar to the birth of grandchildren, is the ultimate peace offering that every member could share to ensure that the memory of the deceased is cherished and preserved (Chandran and Mohammed Ariffin 2015). Caruth stated vis-a-vis trauma and

healing that “trauma thus requires integration, both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure” (Caruth 1995, 153). The “transformation of the trauma into narrative memory” enables the story to be “verbalised and communicated” and where integration occurs, thereby facilitating the trauma to be part and parcel of shared “knowledge of the past” (ibid.). This realisation subsequently reduces “the force and the precision that characterises the traumatic recall” (ibid.).

CULTURE OF TRAUMA AND THE READER

The investigation into the engagement with the “emphatic attitude towards the traumatic story of the victim” (Danneels 2013, 13) can be unravelled by focusing on memoir’s narrative strategies. To quote scholars of memory and trauma, *Ghosts* is a string of “testimonial writings” that “holds together on the page what the mind tends to keep apart” (Miller and Tougaw 2002, 7). However, the question that one asks upon reading a memoir accounting extreme experiences of accidental loss and death is one that the majority of the scholars of trauma have voiced: “[W]hat implicates us [the readers] in the lives of others?” (Miller and Tougaw 2002, 5).

Unlike the memoirist who continues to be haunted by the painful events of her past, the reader’s engagement with trauma-based memoir can be described in two significant methods. The first would be relatively disengaged and even “ambivalent”. Memoirs of this sub-genre cause the reader to “look, to grapple with real suffering and at the same time to look away – to put the book down” (Miller and Tougaw 2002, 20). Nevertheless, just as Chauly is endowed with “the burden of narrating the extreme” (Miller and Tougaw 2002, 7), the reader also suffers the burden through “post memory” in the act of reading the “delayed,” “indirect,” and “secondary” memory of the memoirist (Hirsch 1997, 13). As LaCapra (2004, 135) states, the burden for the reader is that:

Empathic unsettlement is in the “virtual not vicarious experience” of a “secondary witness” who puts oneself in the other’s position without taking the place of – or speaking for – the other or becoming a surrogate victim who appropriates the victim’s voice or suffering.

The reader’s involvement can also be observed in recognising the silences and the unsaid in the testimonies and “fill[ing] in the blanks from their own storehouses of memory and phantom pain” (Miller and Tougaw 2002, 10), thereby creating a substantially needed affiliation between the writer and reader. An example can

be observed in Chauly's recollection of her mother's last days as she suffers from cancer:

We prayed with you every night, Hail Mary, Our Father and the prayers of St. Theresa of Avila. We kissed you and hugged you and told you that we loved you. We forgave you and you forgave us. No more harsh words, only love. But you got weaker and weaker and thinner and thinner. There was no more hunger, only the morphine could comfort you now. I was afraid to sleep, afraid to lose you in the night. (Chauly 2011, 286)

The main gap in the preceding extract would be misunderstandings that must have occurred between Jane and her children, thereby requiring them to forgive one another at Jane's death bed. However, Chauly opted to exclude any of the misunderstandings in the memoir except in a letter from her mother dated 22th January 1992:

Dearest Bernice

I just want to tell you that whatever has happened and will happen between us, you are always my daughter. As long as you and I live, the bond between us is forever there no matter where we are. (Chauly 2011, 284)

The approximation that readers attempt to reach in their own mind as to the level of estrangement that the mother and daughter possibly suffered is purely based on "their own storehouse of [personal filial] memory". Any reader would be able to relate to the need to forgive and be forgiven because the strains of filial relationship are considerably real for the majority of readers. That is, readers can associate with the narrated memory through shared identification. Nancy Miller and Jason Tougaw stated that "the culture of first-person writing needs to be understood in relation to a desire for common grounds – if not an identity-bound shared experience, then one that is shareable through identification" (Miller and Tougaw 2002, 2). Through the sheer act of collective "listening" and "witnessing" of the testimonies by the members of the Chauly and Loh families, the reader is implicated in the healing process. Scholars argue that "in complex and often unexpected ways, the singular 'me' evolves into a plural 'us' and writing that bears witness to extreme experiences of solitary individuals can sometimes begin to repair the tears in the collective social fabric" (Miller and Tougaw 2002, 3).

Despite these minor diversions, the filial memoir creates a space where memory is beyond the "prison house of the past", with the memoirist as the captive prisoner "den[ied] of human agency" (Huysen 2003, 8). To quote Zora Neale Hurston's

conception of memories, Chauly is discovering the “memories within” that help shape the person she is today (Hurston 1942, 1). Scholars of trauma and testimonies have agreed that the possible primary goal of the memoir lies in the “speaking out” and “recorded collective response” (Miller and Tougaw 2002, 13). For the readers, the memoir of Chauly is also akin to a “traumatic realist project”, in which one documents an event that “belongs to the past, but whose effects belong both to the present and the future—to the living readers where post-traumatic responsibilities are both retrospective and prospective” (Miller and Tougaw 2002, 7).

CONCLUSION

Chauly’s memoir, similar to the majority of contemporary memoirs, contains personal history and elements of the literary. Aspects of the supernatural exist throughout the narrative particularly when she attempts to understand the family curse that originates in Punjab. This curse is about the “snake goddess” and the sacrifices she demands of the males in the Chauly family, which culminated in the early death of her father and uncles. The accounts by Chauly are reflexive of the reality of posthumous stories. Chauly goes beyond the stereotypical depictions of being a multiethnic descent and problematises varying realities rendered through her cultural and, most importantly, filial accounts. Thus, this process of understanding is non-linear but cyclical because the interaction is continuous among experiences, meanings, expectations and identities, including among memory, rememory and postmemory.

Furthermore, the reading of this multigenre, multivocal narrative implicates the readers through the empathic unsettlement of the trauma suffered by the memoirist through acts of memory, rememory and postmemory. *Ghosts* offers and engages the readers with the possibilities of spaces that may encourage and transmit trauma within the memoirist’s self: A self that emerges in tension with intimate familial spaces of father/daughter, mother/daughter and mother/father that emerge from everyday experiences. The methods by which Chauly engages readers with mother–daughter and father–daughter memories, occasionally supportive or at other times challenging family circumstances, exhibit the discursive complications of realities, tensions and trauma because of the manifold nuances and deliberations surrounding her growing up with the loss. Significantly, Chauly’s memoir can be read as a move towards creating an “identity forging discourse”, one which is reflexive and often sporadic with chaotic images of the self that departed and the selves that live on with the trauma of the experience of loss and grief.

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