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Gendered Violence and Insidious Trauma: A Critical Reading of Kyung-Sook Shin's Violets

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Abstract:

This paper aims to analyse the novel Violets by Kyung-Sook Shin through the theoretical lens of insidious trauma and examine the impact of gendered violence on the psyche of women. By shedding light on feminist interventions, this paper also aims to critique conventional Trauma Theory which often centres on a single catastrophic event experienced by predominantly male subjects. Situating women's trauma within this debate, the paper demonstrates how persistent acts of marginalization and gendered violence accumulate over time and shape identity and interpersonal relationships, and advocates for a broader and more inclusive understanding of trauma that recognizes both visible and invisible wounds.

Keywords: *Insidious Trauma, Gendered Violence, Trauma Theory, Women's Psyche*

Introduction:

Trauma is typically associated with a single, catastrophic event that occurs in a person's life. According to Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed*

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Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History, the memory of that event repeatedly resurfaces in the future, creating what she famously refers to as a "double wound" (3), in which the subject is hurt both at the time of the event and later on when it is relived and reexperienced. When one examines the development of trauma theory, it becomes evident that earlier trauma theorists focused largely on the influence of large-scale traumatic events like the Holocaust and the World Wars on combat veterans—who were primarily male soldiers. Such an understanding of trauma however raises some serious questions. What about daily occurrences of violence and abuse on women that go unnoticed and cannot be categorized as a major event, particularly because such events do not conform to the model of a single extraordinary event? Does it mean that such events do not leave any traumatic impact on the survivor? While issues like domestic violence and abuse are social concerns, they are often bracketed as a "private issue" between two individuals, thus trivializing the traumatic impact of such events on a woman's psyche. Judith Herman in *Trauma and Recovery* notes that because privacy was valued so highly, women's pain was disguised in their private lives. She writes: "The real conditions of women's lives were hidden in the sphere of the personal, in private life. The cherished value of privacy created a powerful barrier to consciousness and rendered women's reality practically invisible" (41). In this light this paper will attempt to analyse the novel *Violets* by Kyung-Sook Shin through the theoretical lens of insidious trauma, a relatively new development in contemporary trauma studies. In doing so, it will particularly throw light on the impact of gendered violence— everyday misogyny and sexism on the psyche of women in a patriarchal society.

Feminist critics of trauma theory:

Feminist psychotherapists and theorists argue that trauma theory should adopt a more inclusive approach that centre the experiences of women and other marginalized groups. Cathy Caruth is considered one the

chief pioneers of trauma studies. However, there has been a lot of criticism around Caruth's theory. Critics argue that Caruth's theory of trauma which focuses on a single catastrophic event as the locus of trauma overlooks the slow and damaging effects of everyday oppression faced by marginalized groups. In the *Future of Memory* (2010), Jane Kilby notes that the future of trauma theory will inevitably be shaped by globalization (181). Trauma studies, in recent years, have moved beyond their Eurocentric focus to include slavery, colonialism, apartheid, Partition and other non-Western histories. In a chapter titled "The Future of Trauma" in *Trauma: The New Critical Idiom*, editors Lucy Bond and Stef Craps write about how the Jamaican American poet Claudia Rankine in her poem from her poetry collection *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), describes a trauma counsellor mistaking her Black patient for an intruder, making it an allegory for how mainstream trauma studies have ignored racial and cultural differences (105). Stef Craps in *Post-Colonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bond* (2013), shows how foundational texts of cultural trauma theory have indeed tended to marginalize or ignore the traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority groups. He further argues that despite violence and suffering being a universal phenomenon, trauma theory has been mostly devoted to events that took place in Europe and the United States. He also critiqued theorists like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Geoffrey Hartman and Dominick LaCapra, as they had trauma theory revolve around Holocaust history only. In *Trauma: The New Critical Idiom*, editors Lucy Bond and Stef Craps further note that although PTSD was initially shaped by activists opposing the Vietnam War and advocating women's rights, critics argue that the concept fails to address trauma caused by racism, sexism, classism and other forms of structural oppression. They further argue that the problem lies in its narrow focus on sudden catastrophic events. Small but repeated humiliations, exclusions and acts of bias can be just as damaging as major violent incidents, yet they are often not acknowledged as trauma (108). Women's trauma can be situated within this debate and it also

highlights the need for broadening the scope of trauma studies to include both the visible and invisible wounds of structural gendered oppression.

Insidious Trauma:

To address every day and collective forms of trauma, scholars have proposed new concepts. The term “insidious trauma” was coined by feminist and trauma theorist Maria P.P. Root. In her essay “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality" from the book *Personality and Psychopathology: Feminist Reappraisals*, she notes that one important point raised by feminist critics of trauma theory is that early studies on trauma focused mainly on white men and that modern studies of trauma was also focused on soldiers during war and men during railway accidents (231). She further proposes a broader framework that identifies three types of traumatic impacts: direct, indirect and insidious. Direct trauma, according to Root, refers to immediate exposure to life threatening and harmful events, including war, industrial accidents or interpersonal violence and it can occur not only when a person is witness to such an event but also when they are forced to commit such an act that violates their moral beliefs. Another category according to her is indirect trauma which occurs when individuals are affected by traumatic experiences of others through witnessing violence, hearing repeated accounts of suffering or being closely connected to the victims of trauma. The third category which she talks about and is according to her “totally neglected” (240) is insidious trauma. She writes that insidious trauma is “usually associated with the social status of an individual being devalued because a characteristic intrinsic to their identity is different from what is valued by those in power, for example, gender, colour, sexual orientation, physical ability” and as a result “is often present throughout a lifetime and may start at birth” (240). Thus, unlike direct trauma, insidious trauma does not result from a single catastrophic event but from persistent devaluation of individuals because of aspects of their identity such as gender, race, class or sexual orientation. These experiences often begin

early in life and accumulate over time, thus shaping an individual's worldview and sense of security. According to Root, in the essay "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality", insidious trauma's effects encompass some very "normative", yet nevertheless traumatic, experiences of groups of people (240). Therefore, because it is embedded within everyday social structures and often appears "normal", insidious trauma has historically remained invisible within traditional trauma theory.

Root further distinguishes between three types of insidious trauma, the first two distinctions of which is crucial to the present analysis of *Violets* by Kyung-Sook Shin. The first type, as she mentions, includes trauma arising out of systematic discrimination such as racism, sexism, ageism and homophobia, where individuals are constantly devalued because of their identity. Oh San, the protagonist of *Violets,* experiences marginalisation from the very moment of her birth because she was born when the family was expecting a boy child. The second type of insidious trauma according to Root occurs through transgenerational transmission of trauma, where the unresolved trauma of previous generations shapes the worldview and coping mechanisms of the later ones. When this idea is applied to *Violets,* it becomes apparent that Oh San's experiences are also shaped by intergenerational trauma because her mother was also a victim of marginalization and abuse which in turn influenced the environment in which San grew up. The third type of insidious trauma as put forth by Maria Root is trauma that develops alongside a progressive physical illness that threatens a person's sense of security. However, this dimension is not central to the present study and therefore will not be examined in detail here.

Reading *Violets* Through the Lens of Insidious Trauma:

Laura S. Brown, another feminist trauma critic writes in a chapter titled "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective of Psychic Trauma" in the book *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* edited by Cathy Caruth, that trauma is defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of

Mental Disorders (DSM-III-R) as an event that is "outside the range of normal human experience" (100). Brown, however, questions this definition through her experience as a therapist. She recalls one incident, a legal case, where one patient of hers had been sexually abused by her father for years and showed all symptoms of PTSD. Yet during the court case, the defence attorney argued that incest is relatively common and the patient's experience itself could not be considered "outside the range of human experience" and that according to that logic her suffering could not be called trauma (Brown 100-101). This reveals a major problem. Laura S. Brown, in this context refers to Maria Root's theory of insidious trauma which refers to the "traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit" (Brown 107). This definition highlights how everyday expressions of oppression can indeed cause deep psychological harm.

In *Violets* by Kyung- Sook Shin, the central protagonist Oh San's life reflects how insidious trauma, the first two types as stated by Maria Root, operates across time and how the marginalization and emotional neglect which she faced during her childhood did not have a devastating impact on her right then yet left lasting psychological impacts that shaped her identity and interactions as an adult. It is seen at the very onset of the novel how San faced discrimination from the very moment she was born. Viewed as "an uncelebrated girl", she accepts her mother's "closed eyes" instead of a "loving caress" and "a cursory glance" from her father when he comes back home from work to her birth (Shin 1). She also faces a similar lack of warmth from her grandmother, whose reaction mirrored the same disappointment as her father. The strained family environment becomes even more complicated when the father leaves the house suddenly to not return for nine years, leaving San confused. In his prolonged absence, she grows up in an environment marked by tension between her mother and grandmother. The conflict between them erupts into violence one day when

the mother attacks the grandmother with shears and injures her head. This incident forces the father to return, not alone but with a new wife, as a consequence of which San and her mother are forced to leave the house and move to a rented room in the village. Eventually, her mother too abandons and leaves her alone in Suwon city. While the mother's actions appear irrational and ruthless on the surface, her hostility towards the grandmother as well as her own daughter can be understood within the framework of intergenerational trauma. As a woman who had to give up on her dreams due to financial constraints and then had to get married, it is understandable that the wounds she carried manifested in her interactions with her daughter Oh San, where she unconsciously transferred the burden of her suffering on to the next generation. Another formative incident in San's childhood which becomes an integral part of her memory in the later years of her life is her encounter with her friend Namae, with whom she shared a very close bond as both girls came from strained family backgrounds and found comfort in each other's company. Kyung-Sook Shin writes: "The fact they have something to be ashamed of makes the two draw closer" (7). However, this bond is abruptly shattered when Oh San impulsively kisses Namae, an act which one may assume had stemmed from a longing for affection on San's part. Namae completely distances herself from San after this incident, despite San trying to ask for forgiveness several times. This rejection from her only friend becomes another subtle yet significant source of trauma in her childhood. These incidents from her childhood can be considered instances of insidious trauma because all these incidents closely align with the definition of insidious trauma as articulated by Maria Root, who notes that rather than stemming from a single catastrophic incident, insidious trauma develops over time through the persistent marginalization of a person because of their gender, class, race or sexual orientation. These incidents are important to be acknowledged because as the narrative progresses and San grows older, it becomes evident that she carries the psychological residues of these early experiences.

In the essay “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality", Maria Root further writes about the consequences of insidious trauma. She writes that repeated experiences of insidious trauma shape a person’s reality in such a way that safety no longer feels secure. As a result, individuals remain constantly alert to possible threats and “activation of survival behaviors, heightened sensitivity, paranoid-like behavior, and hostility are frequently observed in response to seemingly "minor" stressors by outsiders” (241). These observations become relevant in the context of the novel, where Oh San develops similar patterns of vigilance, emotional withdrawal and eventually a fragmented perception of reality as she navigates life. After being abandoned by her mother, San moves to Seoul city and lands a job at a flower shop. This relocation coupled with the unfamiliar urban environment and encounters with new people, act as a turning point in her life and further intensifies her sense of isolation and emotional vulnerability. She finds it impossible to detach from the painful memories of the past. Moreover, occasional letters from her mother, whom she loves and resents at the same time, along with encounters with men who briefly show interest in her without any intention of genuine commitment further aggravate her condition, leading to a growing sense of disassociation from reality. Root in “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality”, identifies these behaviours as “egocentrism and self-referencing; quickness to anger (fight); social and emotional withdrawal (flight); perseveration (rumination); and shutting down (dissociation)” (248).

San’s gradual psychological fragmentation which had resulted from insidious trauma can be understood in three distinct phases—

The weight of memories: As much as she tries to move beyond experiences of trauma from her past, she encounters new ones that deepen her existing scars. Despite her efforts, her loneliness becomes evident in small acts, more particularly when she is alone in her apartment. For instance, Oh San would place a chair with a hat on top of it across her when she sat down to eat to create the illusion of someone else’s presence in the

room (Shin 40). During this period, she also receives a letter from her mother who signs it not as mother but by her name Lee Mirae. San is seen ignoring the letter, deliberately shifting her attention to other things in her room. This reflects how she struggles to confront her unresolved feelings towards her mother. As the story unfolds, San finds a co-worker and roommate, Su-ae. San's twenty-third birthday episode, becomes a significant part of the novel which highlights the unresolved trauma she carries from childhood. One of her earliest memories from her birthdays was of her mother making seaweed soup for her. While her mother initially prepared the soup only on her birthdays, she later began preparing it on other significant occasions, also on the days when she abandoned her to go and live with another man. San eventually started to associate the dish more with abandonment than celebration. On her twenty-third birthday, her act of preparing the soup for herself reflects the contradictory and confused nature of her emotions—on one hand she wanted to get rid of those memories because it reminded her of her mother but on the other hand she simultaneously clung to those memories, also because it reminded of her mother. She then visits the flower shop and mostly roams about aimlessly in the city, decides to watch a movie but falls asleep inside the movie hall, and then visits a live café. She again imagines seeing her mother's face in the crowd. She receives another letter from her mother stating that she is gravely ill and calls San to come and euthanize her. The mother also mentions how she is all alone, being abandoned by the man she had once chosen above her daughter. But San folds the letter away without finishing reading it. This reveals her emotional conflict and the unresolved resentment she had towards her mother. The past memories of her childhood keep on haunting her and they keep resurfacing. In another instance where she goes to Gupabal farm with Su-ae, she gets involved in an incident exactly the same as the incident moments before she kissed her friend Namae in her childhood. When Su-ae tries to push her playfully, she shouts, "Stop that!" (Shin 103), with blazing eyes. Su-ae, startled, asks her, "It was

just a joke. What's with that look you gave me?" (Shin 103) Only later one realizes it was because as the author narrates: "When Su-ae had placed her hand on San's back, she had felt vertigo akin to being pushed off a cliff. She had lived through this scene before. And that was what had made her shout" (Shin 103). The author further writes what reflects how trauma returns in the form of uninvited memories, "Memory is an unannounced visitor. It lies crumpled in some corner of the body, then suddenly knocks on the door of reality and makes you scream" (103). San's trauma, therefore, cannot be associated with one single event but a cumulative burden of experiences and memories that kept resurfacing and increasing with the passage of time

Disassociation— Blurring reality and imagination: While San tries to navigate her life in the city, and juggles between memories of past life and her present, another incident takes places which destabilizes her mental state further and one might consider this as pushing her into the second phase of her gradual psychological fragmentation. This incident involves her encounter with a photographer, known for his womanizing tendencies, who shows interest in her. Although their interaction is brief and insignificant from an outsider's perspective, for San, who was already struggling with human connections, it left a deep emotional imprint. The temporary attention she receives from him becomes magnified in her mind. In the chapter titled "The Man Inside Her" of the novel, it is seen how San begins to imagine his presence everywhere, so much so that it feels like he has become a part of her. This suggests blurring of the boundary between imagination and reality. She imagines him entering her body: "But then he approached again, little by little, and slipped into her body" (Shin 122). After this point, she feels he has become a part of her, walking with her, eating with her and occasionally commenting on her activities too. She starts dissociating from reality and barely responds to Su-ae, her concerned friend. Upon being asked, she keeps on telling Su-ae that she has a headache when in reality "A dull ache blooms in her chest. It's the sorrow of not being able to follow, the regret of being unable to take off after. A far, far-off

longing" (Shin 129). In the coming days, she tries to meet him and calls him many times. On several occasions she stands in front of his office, lingers there as if gathering courage to meet him but never actually goes inside. Instead, she plants violets in a construction site nearby, an action that reflects her inner conflict. It seems that unable to express her feelings, she channels them into the silent ritual of planting violets. This action also hints at her growing emotional deterioration. As seasons change and autumn arrives, her condition worsens:

> San begins to behave more like a fool. She stumbles on stairways and swims into walls at the pool. Her already slow speech slows even more, and she answers the simplest questions with vague mumbles. She seems to be looking at something but isn't really looking at anything. On those occasions, her dark eyes seem sad but also absent. (Shin 143)

In the section "Nothing Happened This Past Summer", San records a diary entry about her childhood memories with her then best friend Namae, revealing how deeply her past still continues to shape her present consciousness. She writes "Because I loved that child. And wherever she ended up later, in that moment at least, she loved me" and later reflects "As I put on the clothes I'd spread out on the grass, I thought: I will love you more than myself. But she must've thought the opposite" (Shin 153). It can be interpreted that her memories, more than being nostalgic, are marked by guilt. And her current fixation with the photographer, who becomes less a real person and more of her imagination, can be understood as a projection of her unresolved desire to be seen, understood and emotionally validated, something she never received as a child.

Complete fragmentation and collapse: In the days that follow, her inner disintegration becomes visibly pronounced, marking the third and final phase of her psychological fragmentation. She cuts her hair short and even shaves her eyebrows. In this fragile mental state, she visits her old village, perhaps hoping to find Namae. But the village had changed a lot

and most people had left. She only meets Namae's aunt who informs her that Namae too had left the village and had become a nun. The aunt also informs that San's mother had once come looking for her there, looking gravely ill. These revelations further destabilize San's psyche. She suddenly remembers the photographer and reality around her seems to blur:

> A fleeting memory of the man causes her heart to squeeze momentarily. As she recalls his face, the village's trees – acacias, oaks, and pines – rustle like they might charge at the slightest provocation. Her gaze shakes as they look up the mountains. Wild brambles creep up around her feet, up to her neck. She waves her hands, trying to cast off the vines entangling her. (Shin 180-181)

This scene suggests her increasing inability to differentiate between the external world and the turmoil within her. She abruptly leaves the village and upon her return when Su-ae asks about her whereabouts, she replies that she went to the beach. What she says next further reflects the complete fragmentation of her mind:

> I went by train and then by bus. No. Maybe it wasn't the beach. It was a place where red flowers bloomed everywhere. No. It was the beach. A vast beach with white, firm sand. The sand was rough, and there was a long and white table, the planks rough to touch but solid, right in front of the blue ocean. You would have been surprised if you saw it, too. It was the firmest and most beautiful table I'd ever seen. (Shin 186)

Soon after, an incident occurs which completely shatters her. She calls the photographer up and asks him to meet her. But when they meet finally, he fails to even recognize her; her "eyes widen in devastation" (Shin 194). She breaks down into tears while the photographer, confused and helpless, leaves the café. She leaves too. She could not comprehend how this man who had consumed the whole of her—her thoughts and imagination—does not even recognize her anymore. In a moment of further emotional confusion, she calls another man, Mr. Choi, a frequent customer

in their shop who had always shown lustful interest in her. She perhaps wanted emotional validation, to feel loved for once. Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery* writes "Trauma impels people both to withdraw from close relationships and to seek them desperately" (73). This idea is reflected in San's feelings towards the photographer and Mr. Choi. While she feared intimacy, she also longed for connection. In that state of vulnerability, she forgets the nature of the man she was reaching out to. Mr. Choi misinterprets her request to meet him and makes inappropriate advances towards her. Although she tries to resist, he forces himself on her and rapes her. This incident throws light on the vulnerable state of women already burdened and scarred by trauma. Having suffered trauma from gendered violence in her childhood, San again becomes a victim of male exploitation. After this encounter with Mr. Choi, San roams about in the street like a ghost and reaches the construction site where she planted violets but does not find the violets there anymore. She then moves towards the excavator and tries to fight it as though it were alive, but the machine eventually swallows her. While the ending is open-ended and one does not know if she survived or not, what becomes evident is how insidious trauma born out of repeated acts of violence, drives her to the brink of self-destruction.

Conclusion:

An examination of Oh San's life in the novel *Violets* by Kyung-Sook Shin reveals that traumatic incidents which she endured in her childhood, shaped her life as an adult. Judith L. Herman in the chapter titled "Disconnection" in the book *Trauma and Recovery,* writes: "The sense of safety in the world, or basic trust, is acquired in earliest life in the relationship with the first caretaker" (67). She further notes that this sense of trust originates with life itself and sustains a person throughout the life cycle. During situations of terror, when an individual turns to this source and cries for comfort and protection and their cry is not answered, the sense of basic trust is shattered. As a result, traumatised people feel utterly abandoned, alone and "a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades

every relationship, from the most intimate familial bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion" (Herman 68). This insight is relevant to San's case, who was abandoned by her own mother, when she needed and sought care the most. This abandonment left her without the foundational sense of security which is necessary for healthy emotional development and as the narrative unfolds, one sees how such early emotional deprivation shapes her perception of the world as she grows up.

At the same time, reading *Violets* through the theoretical lens of insidious trauma throws light on the subtle and often invisible forms of trauma that shapes San's life. The tragic ending of the novel highlights how trauma may not always develop from one single event of magnitude, but rather through repeated acts of violence meted out on a person for their gender, sexual identity, ethnicity and class. And while the psychological effects of trauma articulated by trauma theorists remain the same for everyone, the framework of insidious trauma under feminist reconsiderations expands the scope of whose experiences are recognized, allowing women's trauma, resulting particularly from gendered violence to be acknowledged and voiced.

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