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Reconstructing the Self: Trauma and Healing in Katie Piper's *Beautiful*

DR. KHUSHBOO AGRAWAL

Assistant Professor
Department of English
CMP Degree College, University of Allahabad

VAISHALI GUPTA

Research Scholar
Department of English
CMP Degree College, University of Allahabad

Abstract: The paper is an effort to study and analyse the effect of trauma and its resilience in Katie Piper's autobiographical book *Beautiful* (2011) based on her traumatic experience of a brutal acid attack. *Beautiful* presents Piper not merely a victim rather a survivor who reclaims her autonomy. The book highlights complexities of trauma, identity, and gruesome violence. Acid Attack has been a major issue and the autobiography not only highlights the pain and suffering of a survivor but also challenges and exposes the societal standards of beauty and equality. The paper employs qualitative research methods and textual analysis. The study is grounded on trauma theory primarily of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Bessel Van der Kolk to understand the intersection of trauma, recovery, and resilience. It seeks to investigate how the author portrays her reconstruction of self and identity and stabilizes reconnection with society. It uncovers Katie Piper's journey of traumatic accident, identity crisis and her struggle to rise again as a survivor and mark her victory. There have been few studies on Katie Piper but this research solely focuses on narratives of trauma and recovery. The lived experience of suffering and loss makes this work sensible and thoughtful. Her autobiography deconstructs narratives of trauma and disfigurement and fosters the process of healing. Literature has always acted as a medium to comprehend the underlying problems and this autobiography serves as a powerful testimony and provides deep understanding of physical and psychological turmoil of an acid attack survivor. Hence, the paper intends to study how Piper mirrors trauma, loss, and healing.

Keywords: *Identity, Recovery, Resilience, Trauma, Violence*

Introduction

Acid Attack is a life threatening act and a grave concern for the world against women. Despite increased media attention, it remains a ubiquitous issue. This vicious crime is predominantly carried out with the intention of ruining the identity of girls by disfiguring face. It has been used as a weapon mostly against women to control and dominate them. The reason for such crime is generally rejection in marriage proposals, property disputes, jealousy, and domestic violence. The crime against women is not only about violence and cruelty, but their impact runs much deeper on women's psychology. It continues to persist in the twenty-first century when women stand equal to men in every sphere of life. Because of social ostracism, it becomes difficult for survivors to overcome trauma. The societal indifference and the established norms make them suffer as they are not readily embraced in the society which hinders their progress. Scars actually sideline them from society and therefore they strive hard for economic stability. In addition, they underwent psychological trauma and isolation along with severe physical pain restricts them to rebuild their lives. There have been many cases in the past few years like Laxmi Agrawal, Katie Piper, Anmol Rodriguez, Natalia Ponce de Leon, Muskan Khatun and many more. Such cases underscore the severity of this crime. Literature offers direction to them and delves into the pain of several survivors who plenty of times go unreported. In recent years, survivors have come forward and demonstrated fortitude. The study probes firsthand accounts of an acid attack victim and focuses on her endeavour to survive an unprecedented brutality.

The paper explores the lived experience of trauma of an acid attack survivor, Katie Piper and traces isolation, fear, and sheds light on how scars turned into strength resulting in a transformed life. Katie Piper's autobiography *Beautiful (2011)* provides an account of trauma, disfigurement, and resilience. The study foregrounds that Piper's story uncovers the traumatic experience which affects fragmented memory and identity. It elucidates physical and emotional pain and the journey of survival. The book is not merely a representation of acceptance of her scars but also reflects suffering, survival, and tenacity. The paper follows these questions to analyse Piper's autobiography through close reading – What are the traumatic experiences of Katie Piper? How does it impact her social connection and identity? How does Piper through her writing portray survival and healing? Methodically, the paper is grounded on theoretical frameworks of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman and attempts to analyse torment, healing, and recovery of survivors.

Theoretical Framework: Trauma Theory

The Greek term Trauma means physical wound. However, it is also used to represent emotional harm on the mind. Cambridge Dictionary defines “trauma as a severe and emotional shock and pain caused by an extremely upsetting experience, or a case of such shock happening.” In literature, Cathy Caruth,

a well-known pioneer of trauma theory in her book *Unclaimed Experience Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) illustrates, “trauma describes as an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomenon” (Caruth 11). Therefore, trauma is a response to any distressing event and does not occur at the time of event but affects belatedly. It returns in nightmares, flashbacks, and fragmented memories which never goes away. The original event is repeated that haunts survivors and one loses control over emotions, furthermore gets detached with oneself and the world. Trauma articulates through literature and storytelling. It affects narrative structure and the psyche. In addition, it creates silences, absences, and disjointed narratives that allow survivors to heal and relieve their stress and emotions. The paper resonates with Piper’s suffering even after the original event of acid attack had passed but it disrupted her memory through flashbacks and memory. Trauma comes in breakthrough and is reinforced through repetition. Her book presents violent and shocking experience as traumatic and accords with what Caruth argues that trauma comes in delayed memories of what had happened. As Caruth writes:

Traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it: that immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness. The repetitions of the traumatic events which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight thus suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing. (Caruth 91-92)

With reference to feminist psychiatrist Judith Herman, her book *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) provides a foundational framework for understanding trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). She delineates psychological trauma from individual experiences to its broader political dimensions. She divides the process of recovery into three stages—safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life—which directly align with the framework of this research paper. As Judith comments:

Recovery unfolds in three stages. The central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety. The central task of the second stage is remembrance and mourning. The central task of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life. Like any abstract concept, these stages of recovery are a convenient fiction, not to be taken literally. They

are an attempt to impose simplicity and order upon a process that is inherently turbulent and complex. (Herman 155)

The body acts as a site of trauma and it is important to control mind and body in order to establish safety in survivors. Healing is not a sudden trait but a long process which involves safety, remembrance, and self-recognition. Survivors need connection to overcome isolation. The gradual meeting with people and relationships is necessary to heal from trauma. Without any financial stability, proper medication, and suitable environment, survivors may not feel safe and secure which increases risk of psychological issues in victims. So, healing begins in a safe environment. Following, the process of narrating traumatic past, memories, and events in the form of a story empowers survivors to confront the challenges and develop a new self and reconnect with society and reestablish their relationships. This study is grounded on trauma theory which inspects the complexities of trauma and recovery of an acid attack survivor and aims to contribute to how it is drawn in narrative structure.

Acid attack survivors face difficulty in coping up with the world after the attack. As Russ Newman asserts “Resilience is the human ability to adapt in the face of tragedy, trauma, hardship, adversity and ongoing life stressors.” (227). Throughout her journey, Piper’s act of resilience not only led her to overcome adverse circumstances but also developed the ability to adapt to a transformed life. Therefore, the study explores Piper’s determination to reshape life which empowered her inner development. She exemplifies resilience through her emotional endurance and self-reflection which contributed to her personal growth.

Review of Literature

Katie Piper in an open letter published in 2017 in *Scars, Burns and Healing* describes her traumatic experience and highlights its psychological impact on her life and entire family. Through this letter and Katie Piper Foundation, she raises awareness against acid attack and supports burn survivors. The study entitled “Exploring an individual’s experience disfigurement: A Narrative Analysis” (Wilson 2012) presents about the impact of disfigurement on identity. It illustrates Piper’s response to disfigurement that made a positive impact on her. It highlights big and small narratives to show complex feelings about her appearance and how people react to her. The study addresses a significant gap as much research has not been done from this perspective. The paper is limited to how Piper suffered and overcame distress, pain, and agony.

The Invisible Wounds: Acid Attack in Piper's *Beautiful*

Katie Piper is an English model and was born in Hampshire in 1983 to David and Diane. She belonged to a middle-class family where her father owned a barber shop and mother was a teacher. At an age of twenty-two, she was second runner up to Miss Winchester. She was a young, talented, and confident girl but her life turned disastrous after she faced a terrible acid attack. The book *Beautiful* describes the horrendous acid attack that happened in March 2008, which changed her life. The horrific event has been portrayed in chapter 7 entitled 'Destroyed'. The darkest phase began when acid was splashed over her face. The attack was planned but Katie was unaware of the horrific incident which shattered her completely. It was so depressing and terrible that she could not understand what had happened to her. "I heard a horrible screaming sound, like an animal being slaughtered. What was making that noise? Then I realised it was coming from me" (Piper 74). This describes her immense torment and shock that she suffered and was so overwhelmed by pain and fear that she could not recognize her own voice. Within seconds it was split over neck, chest and mouth when she asked for help. The attack was so painful and unbearable that she stopped sensing her own sense. She was not able to recognize her own voice. The acid got spread over her neck and chest disfiguring her face. It was really shocking and unexpected for her to believe that it was planned and executed by her ex-boyfriend Danny Lynch. Danny and Katie became friends through Facebook. He introduced himself as twenty-eight years old and living in Hammersmith. He was a tall, handsome, and smartly dressed man when he met Piper in a bar. Katie was impressed by his genuine behaviour towards herself. He gained Piper's trust not only through his external appearance but also made an emotional connection with her. Later, his possessiveness towards Piper not only tried to control her but also harmed her both physically and psychologically.

Piper narrates an incident when they were at a barber shop Danny repeatedly shouted at her every time the phone rang. He tracked her phone and questioned the individuals who sent her messages. His conduct was noticeable at the shop as he was not even concerned for the people around them who stared at them over his behaviour. This reflects his authoritative behaviour and disapproval of having more friends other than him. His domination over Piper everyday life made her more suspicious about him. She writes, "Why did he have to be so possessive? I told him, it was just my mates, but he insisted, I come over and sit in the seat beside him" (Piper 45). The annoyance and uneasiness at the barber shop shows that she was not comfortable in Danny's companionship. This was the beginning where the contrast between his abusive behaviour and controlling action had a devastating effect on Piper. His insecurity and childish behaviour of reacting on every little thing made Piper realise that he was not the right person. In a hotel, he not only attacked her but also raped her. His betrayal intensified her trauma and declined her security as someone she loved had attacked her so

vigorously. However, he did not truly love Piper. Instead, he acted as a cage for Piper who not only imprisoned her but also took away her freedom. He did not stop there but made a deadly plan which changed Piper's life. He hired a twenty years old boy named Stefan Sylvester to attack Piper with acid.

The Traumatic Battle and Experience

Acid Attack physically harmed her at the very first stance but later it inflicted on her mind. The physical injury she endured had damaged her eyes, nose, and portion of the left ear. Within two days after corrosive assault, she underwent an operation for her burns and grappled with third-degree torture. The physical agony was followed by mental breakdown and emotional devastation. She writes, "In the early days, it could erupt like a volcano and nurses were able to sedate me again. Even sleep was no comfort, Danny and Stefan stalked my nightmares, and I woke up screaming every night" (Piper 86). The comparison of her pain to volcano represents the crushing and destructive occurrence of mental anguish. This reflects the deep impact of violence on her inner world. Both the physical pain and psychological agony from which she cannot escape convey her helplessness and terror of frightening experience. Piper's unassimilated experience of uncontrolled emotions demonstrates haunted memories which harmed even in her sleep. Piper was in a coma after surgery but it actually gave her quite relief because of relentless soreness. It was such severe discomfort that she called the coma "a deep and peaceful sleep" (Piper 89). While she was in coma, she drifted into hallucinations where she saw herself as helpless and felt like a prisoner trapped in the clutches of Danny.

Acid Attack survivors suffer intrusive nightmares and hallucinations. Katie Piper experienced severe psychological distress. The emotional detachment and false perceptions brought fear and loneliness. Caruth mentions, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual past, but rather in a way that was precisely not known in the first instance- returns to haunt the survivor later in" (4). Even after the event was passed, it repeatedly intruded her consciousness through nightmares of her attackers. She writes, "At night, I would see giant reptiles and bugs slithering up the walls of my room, and when I looked through the window into the nurses' station, there were men in scary Halloween masks on the other side of mask" (Piper 93). Piper was filled with dread and confusion which depicts that she lost her control over mind and the threatening imagery of hospital and men in halloween masks symbolises her distorted reality. These false perceptions, overwhelming images, and disturbing illusions illustrate her fragmented traumatic experience and the way she pinpoints the threatening surroundings as real reflects the disoriented impact of trauma on mind.

Post trauma, depression, and loneliness occur due to which survivor lose their temper. This reflects when the noises of horns, buses, and pigeons seemed to disturb her more. As Piper narrates the story while she was in hospital, even after coming out of coma she thought that she was in prison and Danny would hurt her again. She was not able to differentiate between reality and dream. This shows that it has affected Piper so much that she lost control over thoughts and emotions. Piper says even in sleep she felt uncomfortable and perpetrators destroyed peace of mind when she woke up screaming every night. The sequelae can be evident in her behaviour when she believed that medical staff were trying to harm her although they were helping her. The doses of morphine, medical staff seemed to haunt her more. Every moment of life felt like hell and every action reminded her of harassment and attack. She describes hallucination, “Danny sneaking into my room and attacking me all over night; reliving the rape and the acid and the pain” (Piper 93). This reflects the distressed state of mind where Piper was troubled by traumatic memories and reexperienced past violence through nightmares. The attack left scars on her mind which disturb deeply. In this reference, Dutch psychiatrist Bessel Van der Kolk explains:

Traumatized people are often afraid of feeling. It is not so much the perpetrators but their own physical sensations that now are the enemy. Even though trauma is a thing of past, the emotional brain keeps generating sensations that make sufferer feel scared and helpless. (Kolk 210)

When Piper visited the hospital again for her treatment, she was drowned into flashbacks. She could not hold up her thoughts. It was so gruesome that hallucinations petrified her and became like real memories although it was due to the effect of morphine. As Judith Herman argues, “after a traumatic experience, the human system of self-preservation seems to go onto permanent alert as if the danger might return at any moment” which is evident in Piper’s behaviour when she sees any man coming in hoodie or looking over gives palpitations and restless heart which echoes her false alarm that she went through. The nightmares did not stop even when she was at home after medication. She could not drink coffee as it was hot which reminded her of acid and she even stopped her parents to have coffee. This elucidates fear and anxiety she suffered. Even during the day when everyone was around her, she was safe at home. It led her to freeze with terror any moment her mind revisited those catastrophic experiences and felt as if her perpetrators would harm her at any moment. Therefore, disrupted memories affected everyday action, even sparkling water on her face by a spray and even she could not touch and look at her own body. This reflects how scars left had deteriorated her state of mind.

Identity, Stigma and Acid Violence

Acid violence disfigures one's face which is considered as the primary identity to connect with society. The attack destroys one's physical appearance. Katie was very attractive and from childhood she wanted to be a model. She cherished every moment of life. She always loved to be at the centre. The attack distorted her face and dreams too. She was very sensitive about her identity after the attack. The reason was her altered appearance by which Piper felt quite uncomfortable. She kept telling people nearby her about past life and how beautiful a face she had which was now being snatched away by Danny. Her face represented her identity which she no longer possessed and did not see herself as fully human. She writes, "The face was red raw like a rotting meat. Eyelids were missing and head was shaved, but where was my tanned skin" (Piper 107). The sense of disbelief and comparison of her face with rotting meat conveys severity of damage and the shift to tanned skin reflects her inability to recognize her former self. This reflection of debunked identity where Piper was shocked when she got exposed to altered appearance highlights the painful experience of transformation. She underwent nine operations in six weeks after a few months of attack. She had to wear a mask and asserts that she looked like "the phantom of the flippin' Opera" (Piper 129) which reflects hidden sadness and facial disformity. The internal perception of face expresses her devastation. This also shows the emotional burden of hiding her face and self-deprecation. Disfigurement of the face not only causes damage to self but also brings inferiority complex, sensitivity and humiliation towards the victim. The transition of Katie's past to present demonstrates her crisis with identity and resulted in deprivation and alienation. The book highlights pain as she writes, "'it was all girls' reactions that hurt the most strangely. Pretty little things with blonde hair and blue eyes and trendy clothes, they reminded me of what I had lost, and the grief was so sharp it took my breath away" (Piper 139). This describes the complex emotion that evokes memories and suppressed pain. The nostalgic tone illustrates what she had lost and affects her everyday life. It gets harder to face the world with altered appearance. All physical beauty was gone and she was no longer the same Piper. She did not want to be part of it and isolated herself. Piper's confrontation of altered self and disfigurement that discredits her from which she cannot escape and emphasizes what Erving Goffman argues about tension between former and actual social identity. Individuals try to adjust to their virtual and actual social identity as stigma reduces them to a certain limitation and leads to isolation and seeing themselves as other beings. Stigma has a negative connotation towards individuals when people do not fit into standards of society which suppresses them to relive their life. This stigma is visible in Piper's case when the set standards of external beauty and the visible scars on her face are excluded from the group of beautiful women. Piper's former identity as a young, attractive, and fashionable girl was taken from her as it was evident

from the reaction of young girls. This sense of loss and grief emphasizes the emotional experience of stigma.

Acid victims face public humiliation and difficulty in connecting with society. When she began to relive her life, people began to judge her and did not offer moral support which destroyed her confidence. As Piper marks the incident when she along with her mother went to a pound shop and she was waiting for her mother, a worker suddenly walked up to her and removed her hat without any hesitation and the very next moment when he saw scars shouted on her to ‘get out’ twice. The aggressive behaviour towards Piper shows the cruelty and rejection of vulnerable people. She cried, “I didn’t want to exist anymore. I just wanted to disappear” (Piper 199) reflects psychological damage and fear of unworthiness. She was deeply hurt with the prejudices and humiliation. This incident shattered her completely. Piper wanted to face the world but the behaviour of the worker made her feel embarrassed. The desire to disappear and escape from the moment expresses shame and distress. This also suggests the influence of being judged on appearance. The social world influences trauma in both positive and negative ways. This not only intensified trauma but also brought deep despair of self-reproach and humiliation which Herman also explains:

Because traumatic life events invariably cause damage to relationships, people in the survivor’s social world would have the power to influence the eventual outcome of trauma. A supportive response from other people may mitigate the impact of the event, while hostile or negative response may compound the damage and aggravate the traumatic syndrome (61).

Often acid attack survivors are confronted in public and people are cruel to them. Piper says that many times people run away from her at the shop and stare at her disfigurement as if it is their public property. This reminds of being powerless and judged by everyone even though it was not her fault. When society does not respond with empathy, instead with disgust, it isolates and abandons them to rebegin their life. The response actually triggers more than the actual trauma. Lack of empathy leads to anxiety, fear and hostility. A very harsh judgement of people brings shame and guilt to survivors. This turns to self-blame and fair assessment cannot be done over conduct. A very harrowing moment for Piper and her mother which claims survivors’ vulnerability. The act did not only question moral judgement but also invasion into personal space which reinforces that acid victims are not welcomed easily. The abrupt shift from getting expected to shame and burst into tears demonstrates the psychological humiliation. The public acknowledgement of scars becomes a site of rejection and failing to restore connection with society results in despair and hopelessness which is evident when

Goffman says, “Lacking the salutary feedback of daily social intercourse with others, the self-isolate can become suspicious, depressed, hostile, anxious and bewildered”. (7)

The Healing Journey: Resilience and Recovery

A trauma survivor can recover only in the surrounding of a healthy relationship. Familial bond was the major support Katie got throughout her journey as a survivor. She discovered purpose in pain. Her family and close friends were always there to console and appreciate her courage and brevity she had shown during the most difficult phase of life. Kolk explains, “Recovery from trauma involves (re) connecting with our fellow human beings. This is why trauma that has occurred within relationship is generally more difficult to treat than trauma resulting traffic accidents or natural disaster” (Kolk 212). Piper could no longer trust any man other than her father, brother, and Dr. Jawad. This happened because of an abusive relationship with Danny. On one hand, her life drastically changed by the violent action of two men while on the other side, kindness and compassion shown by Dr. Jawad whom she met after nine days of attack to save Piper helped her to embrace new life. This also shows that the world has both brutality and humaneness which Piper also experienced in the last twelve months of struggle. She got selfless love and compassion which helped her to surmount challenges. For instance, Piper mentions that while her parents looked after her, they had sacrificed a lot so that they could look after their daughter. “Dad wasn’t working as often he used to, to care for me. Mum also had to compassionate leave from work” (Piper 154). Although for a woman, it is not easy to speak the unspeakable publicly, Piper faced the questions and opened up in court about her sexual assault. She was asked about her relationship with Danny. However, after a legal strife, the court’s verdict ensured Daniel Lynch and Stefan the punishment what they deserve and Piper could breathe a sign of relief. ““You are a survivor not the victim’, became my mantra” (Piper 197). The words show she was being ready to fight against the world. The shift from adversity to positive repetition made her more confident. She realised that burns can’t hurt her and beauty does not lie in the external appearance.

Through her book *Beautiful*, Piper goes beyond personal trauma. Herman remarks “the first recovery is the empowerment of survivors. She must be author and arbiter of her own recovery” (Herman 132). Reconnecting with people not only led her to set up Katie Piper Foundation in December 2009 for burn victims but also turned into social advocacy to endure themselves and reclaim their identity. Also, the documentary made on Piper named *Katie: My Beautiful Face* brought acceptance of Piper herself. She regained herself and meaningful steps of coming out and giving interviews and doing TV programmes like *BBC Breakfast* and *This Morning* without hiding her past sparked her progress and recognition. Katie Piper during a Christmas eve gave a message which thematizes self-acceptance and emphasizes on the worth of both people and moments. As her recording

appears on screen, it remarks, “Don’t wait until there is tragedy in your life. Don’t wait until you lose somebody. Don’t wait until it’s too late. Appreciate the beautiful things and beautiful people that you have in your life now...” (Piper 264). This depicts both the regret and appreciation Piper feels about her family and friends. The way she construed understanding of life and gratitude conveys that she had moved forward from past traumatic life and found a way out against adverse circumstances. Meanwhile, Katie emerged as a survivor. Her resilience came with acceptance of self and redefining conventional meaning of victimhood. At the end chapter of autobiography, she claims herself as a new Katie Piper who had survived through all nightmares, horror, terror and screams. She writes, “With Mum and Dad behind me, I opened the front door of my new home and stepped outside, into the world, I’d hidden away from so long” (Piper 307) which conveys that she was ready to step out into the world with marks on her face and depicts how she had transformed tragedy and learned to use it as a tool of resistance. Judith Herman points to the recovery in the third stage that survivors after long term trauma learn to overcome fear and face society. “It is at this point that survivors are ready to reveal their secrets, to challenge the difference or censure of bystanders, and to accuse those who have abused them” (Herman 200). Piper’s recovery from trauma not only challenged and broke the conventional norms of society which has made restricted to her room but also a sharp retort to offenders who were thought to have ruined her life.

Conclusion

The paper aimed to critically examine traumatic experiences of an acid attack survivor through the lens of trauma theory and findings show that Piper’s autobiography brings forth a deep understanding of psychological disadvantages she suffered aftermath attack. Her book as a testimony offers compelling account of realities of trauma and violence in which she does not act as victim but rather a resilient survivor. Also, the author demonstrates accounts of confusion, personal grief, denial and self-doubt which shaken her beyond physical pain. The paper makes contribution by offering insights into healing and resilience. From victim to triumph, her autobiography *Beautiful* offers a unique perspective to look towards the world. The acid attack interrupted her life but could not break inner strength. The harm caused by such violence results in social exclusion, thus becomes very challenging for survivors to overcome distress, however, her strong spirit of fighting strengthened her to rise above such painful journey. The book replenishes with themes of trauma, identity, loss and resilience and highlights Piper’s inner strength and determination to speak in public about her scars and attack. The autobiography provide voice to many voiceless who have been silent and traumatized for long time. Surviving a brutal attack, Katie challenges societal norms and shows what *Beautiful* means in true sense.

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