

## **Acting out and working through: Trauma and Recovery in Quiara Algoria Hudes's *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue***

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**Abstract:** *Quiara Algoria Hudes's Pulitzer Prize winning play, **Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue**, is filled with tragic experiences and survival. Such a study elucidates the two concepts of trauma, which are derived from trauma theory, acting out as well as working through as the main characters passed through in this play. Furthermore, the objectives of the study reveal how perpetrators suffer the symptoms of trauma after being influenced by war and genocides and the way to overcome their traumatic experience by passing through two stages of trauma acting out and working through. This study focuses on Dominick Lacapra's two concepts of acting out and working through. An in-depth reading of Hudes's play in light of trauma theory helps to cover the horror of trauma as a brutal experience. People ignore how trauma can influence perpetrators, unless they experience the same misery themselves. The theses conclude that though perpetrators can be traumatized and suffer the after war traumatic symptoms, but they can overcome them by finding suitable environmental supports and communicating with others. Furthermore, because trauma theory is linked to the medical field rather than the literary one, it views as a contemporary theory. Therefore, such study will be rather beneficial to students in medical field as well as other people who will do research in the same study field.*

**Keywords:** Perpetrators' trauma, Trauma theory, Dominick Lacapra, acting out, working through.

## 1.INTRODUCTION

Genocide and trauma are not new phenomenon within the literary as well as historical war issues. Instead, War, Genocide and trauma are interrelated. For old and modern, historical and literary studies, it is obvious that trauma has a wing everywhere, but it is spread widely in modern age due to war nature since the modern wars not only aim at defeating the opposite enemy but traumatizing the individuals as well (shaw, 2003). Nowadays, war and genocide do not influence victims only but perpetrators as well since of their direct contact with war. They witnessed and participated (in) war crimes. They are forced to do illegal crimes by the commanders. Therefore, they suffer traumatic experience of their own miseries. An American writer, Quiara Algeria Hudes, reflects perpetrator's trauma and the ways by which perpetrators can be healed from their traumatic experiences in her Pulitzer Prize winning play, *Elliot, A soldier's fugue*, Hudes has bachelor and master's degree in Music from Yale University (Hoban, 2006). The play is divided into preludes and fugue scenes in which four characters take turns speaking lyrical dialogue "(Aghoro, 2019: 4). It is obvious from the title that it is formed and constructed like a fugue that was produced at "Miracle Theatre in Portland, Oregon in September (2005)" (Lebron, 2017: 170). The title of the play is suggestive. Hudes intentionally uses the word *soldier* in the title. It is a clear indication that, she does not mean Elliot only, but all the family members, because they all served at war. Hudes also uses the word *soldier* instead of Marine in the title to encompass any member have military experience (Lebron, 2017). According to Hudes "Fugue" in a technical term means:

*A composition of music in which the main melody (or theme) is imitated by different instruments in to multiple parts. (These parts are modified, so much that they could function as different musical pieces). At the same time, these separate melodies are also dependent on each. (2015:23)*

psychologically, a Fugue can be defined as "strange and unexpected trip" (Hacking, 1998: 8). *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue* is "A poetic memory play, in which, four members of the Ortiz family speak about their military service and the ways in which it both unites them and isolates them from each other" (Lebron, 2017:168).

The play is "a meditation on war in his head (Elliot), as well as that of his ancestors as they enacted the routines of military life" (Ybarra, 2017:50). It goes around one main theme, which is the personal traumatic experience of war for three generations. It is based on real story of Hudes's own uncle (Elliot Ruiz) who was a member of the Marines who served in Iraq. He returned home with a horrific leg injury (Singer, 2016). The main character 'Elliot' is a "north Philadelphia native and high school graduate" (McNULTY, 2018: 2). He is a 19 years old,

Marine who returns from the Iraqi war with a Purple Heart and prepares himself to return back to 2003. Clearly, he is suffering from a traumatic experience since, he is haunted by a phantom of the Iraqi boy he killed. This incident is considered his first crime in the Iraqi genocide. So the play reflects a shift in Elliot's life from a teenager boy to a rigid military Marine (Leboron, 2017).

*The play contains four fugue sections in which all the four characters participate in retelling key events from each individual's war experiences (training, injury, etc.). These fugues are separated by prelude scenes, in which one or two characters narrate their own individual perspective via monologue, letter or interview(Lebron, 2017: 180).*

It also gathers the voices of the characters together: Elliot served in Iraq, Pop served in Vietnam, Grand pop served in Korea. Ginny, Elliot's mother worked as a nurse in Vietnamese war. It provides Pop (Elliot's father) with happiness. Music according to Hudes is an expressive means by which the characters show their psychological sufferings and since words cannot release what they experienced at war (Ibid).

## **2.Trauma and Recovery in *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue***

In *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue*, the title is representative as well as creative since it discusses what Elliot the main character was going through. The fugue is a symbolic -and a metaphorical representation for how soldiers have an internal struggles in dealing with their stuff and struggle to get a grip on what had done and managed their own thoughts. Elliot is a soldier who served in Iraq formerly in Tikrit. We meet him while he is preparing to return to Iraq. Trauma as a brutal impact of war is clearly encoded in his character especially if it is caused by perpetrating genocidal acts, committing crimes in Iraq by exterminating Iraqi innocent people, Elliot suffers a traumatic experience when he commits his first crime against an innocent Iraqi boy while he was on duty, and he saw a boy and opened fire on. This causes him to suffer brutal traumatic experience not at the exact time of its happening but only later on, he fails in adapting to his social life and feels alienated. His brutal experiences at the Iraqi genocide lead him to be traumatized. In the twentieth century, soldiers are exposed to PTSD not because of their psychological weakness, but they were thrown into a range of psychological

conditions which are closely connected with PTSD. (Aygan,2018). American soldiers suffer from PTSD in 2003 when they committed genocidal acts against the Iraqi civilians especially when they started to expose to "Iraqi suicidal bomber". As a consequence the US commanders gave clear orders to the American troops in Iraq that if they saw any Iraqi civilian passing near them, they should shoot him even if they saw him waving a stick. The United States have no problem in accepting more casualties only to win the war (Kiernan,2003). Elliot suffers the consequence of PTSD caused by Genocidal war because of the brutal commands of the authority. Such trauma will lead the perpetrator to be alienated from his own society since he is haunted by the bad memories of his criminal acts:

***POP: One instant .Their bodies were covered with dust .Tree bark .Their eyes.***

***ELLIOT: Even ripping them up, taping them back together .It was like the feeling from Puerto Rico, but not a peaceful feeling. (Hudes, 59)***

Therefore, these lines reflect how the dead bodies of the Iraqi victims are piled up a reference to their huge number. Hence, all the bad memories that both Elliot and his own father suffer from are an outcome of the brutal experience of the "Genocidal war" that they witnessed and participated in though they were ordered by the U.S.A authority to murder the innocent Iraqi civilians. Caruth in her trauma theory states that trauma "as a sound that cries out"(1996, 4). After all, we meet Elliot who is revealed by Hudes as a show off person since he is looking at the mirror and saying:

***Elliot: (To the mirror adversary): What? You want to step.***

***You are making Subway hoagies .I'm a Marine .Who are you? (Hudes, 9)***

Elliot is revealed as a Marine who is proud of himself and careless, but the matter is completely different when Pop reveals another truth by saying:

***Pop: ...He is nervous about something.***

***GRANDPOP: He will board the ship to Iraq at 0700 hours.*** (Hudes, 9)

So Pop; (Elliot's father) reveals the truth about Elliot that, he is not comfortable. A matter bothers him a lot. Right from the beginning, Hudes's technique in revealing it is not direct but gives hints about Elliot's traumatic experience. Although Elliot pretends to be quiet and happy, he is complaining about his father's refusal to mention any of his wartime stories at home. This clearly reveals Elliot's desire to have somebody to share him the same experience as well as understand him by finding a common ground with both his father and his grandfather to feel comfortable. In other words, he suffers from an inner torment and looking for an outlet to relieve him. It seems, Pop is reluctant to tell anyone about his war stories, since people refuse to talk about things that are secretive, bad or aching. Thus, Elliot is subjected to a traumatic process that it is termed as the "acting out" or what is called "melancholia" which is defined by Lacapra as "The tendency to repeat something compulsively" (Goldberg, 1998:2). It requires repetitive and compulsive re-living of traumatic experience (Lacapra, 2001). That is why, Elliot faces difficulty in distinguishing between his past, present as well as future, and because for him all is past. He is always haunted by his past crime. Socially speaking, Elliot alienates himself and lives a kind of restricted life. There is no one to listen to him. As consequence of "acting out" Elliot suffers nightmares and flashbacks. Ginny, (Elliot's mother) speaks about Elliot's traumatic symptoms, which are nightmares; Elliot in his dreams sees the action of his first crime when he killed an Iraqi person (Lebron, 2017).

***GINNY: Nightmares every night, he said***

***A dream about the first guy he saw that he killed.***

***A dream that does not let you forget a face.*** (Hudes, 27)

Elliot tries to keep himself away from traumatic incident by avoiding talking about it just like his own father. Although Elliot pretends to be normal in front of his family and his friends,

the truth is completely different .The trauma of war takes its way to him through many traumatic symptoms like being disturbed by dreams of the first person he killed in the Iraqi war. Therefore, the traumatized person does not forget his brutal experience, but the brutal memories haunt him belatedly (Barnaby, 2012).

It started when his friends began asking him if he has a gun or ever shot a person. This question reminds him of his first crime. Therefore, he starts suffering the nightmares. Elliot wanted to be a soldier only to be like his own father and grandfather, but he never took into consideration the difficulties of war until he experienced it. When he returned from Iraq home to Philadelphia, he never wanted to be considered or even treated as a soldier. His friends asked him if he ever shot somebody since they never got the real meaning of war .According to their perception of war, being a good soldier meant only to wear a uniform and have a gun to kill any member of the enemy. Elliot tries only to be a member of his own society, but he fails in adapting to it. Thus, he never wants his people to remind him or even treats him as a soldier. He asks his father a lot if he ever had nightmares like him by saying: ***Elliot: Did you have nightmares, too? Every Single night? Did you feel guilty, too? When you shot a guy?*** (Hudes, 57)

Coming to the incidents that cause trauma for both Elliot and his father both faced the same incident though in different places and different wars. Elliot experienced the same incident as his father. Elliot was forced to kill an Iraqi person; his father killed a Vietnamese person. Hence both Elliot and his father have the same traumatic experience and they both suffer traumatic symptoms belatedly. At the beginning he never mentioned anything but later on the memories haunt him in a form of nightmares that lead him to act out or what is called "Melancholia" but not "working through" or what is called "mourning" processes since Elliot at the beginning does not find anybody to speak with or share his bad memory with. It is the opposite: his father refuses to speak with him about war. This makes him unable to get rid of his brutal memories. The highest risk in acting out state is when the survivor hasnot been only a passive witness of the genocide but even a participator in the atrocity, death or violent.

That is why Elliot tries to share his experience of guilt with his father by finding a common ground with him to feel comfortable. Unfortunately, his father got angry when Elliot asked him:

**ELLIOT:** *Did you shoot anyone up close? Did you shoot a civilian? Anything* (Hudes, 57).

The reaction of his father is shocking. He threw the table and the bottle of beer at him. He does not want anybody to remind him of his wartime stories. Unfortunately, Elliot cannot ask his grandfather about his war experience because his grandfather got Alzheimer. Elliot's experience of war is similar to his father's experience. Both shot guys, both removed their victims' ID, both of them touched their victims' wallet and found picture inside, both looked at the photo's back, and both found a second photo at the wallet. Hudes tries to humanize war by revealing the three different generations as having the same suffering, and reveal that genocide will cause such suffering not only at one time and place, but a timeless suffering that is passed along the generations. After all, we conclude that, Elliot suffers from a psychological torment; he is traumatized because of his experience at genocidal time. As mentioned above Elliot does not suffer just from psychological trauma but also physical trauma during wartime. When Elliot was in "*A road outside Tikrit, A mile short of Saddam's hometown*"(Hudes, 40), he was attacked from an unknown car. When he shot at the car, his leg was injured since of "*The concertina slinked in to his legs*"(Hudes, 40). This injury caused Elliot to enter "*an euphoric state*"(Hudes, 43). what had happened to his father, who also experienced the same condition as his son, was not different. After Pop was injured; he entered a hospital and also suffered psychological and physical trauma. Ginny explains how he was suffering from nightmares at the hospital where she was working a nurse and treating soldiers.

**GINNY:** *Nightmares, Weird stuff; I kept seeing your legs. I thought should check up on you.* (Hudes, 44)

This demonstrates that pop also suffers a psychological trauma since he has nightmares of his brutal actions. As it is stated by Freud in describing nightmares, that "wake the dreamer up in another fright"(qut.in Caruth, 1996:92). Therefore, this clarifies why he refuses to discuss with Elliot all about his own wartime stories since they were worse and brutal. Hudes here depicts the American soldiers suffering in way that, American people will never feel. Elliot in his meeting with the Radio voice; was being asked by the radio voice about the idea of being excited and if you feel, excited for being a marine, Elliot answered him saying:

***ELLIOT: People say, oh, it's like a video game .oh, it's like the movies.Naw. Base is the most depressing place ever.*** (Hudes,49)

This reflects Elliot's opinion about being a Marine which is different from his earlier opinion in which he was so proud and showing off about being a Marine. However, by experiencing being a Marine at war and genocide, the matter is completely different. Only for Elliot to be a Marine is to be like his father and his grandfather. He expresses it in the text saying that:

***RADIO VOICE: Why do you enlist?***

***ELLIOT: I was like, Dad was a Marine. I want to be a Marine.***

***I really did it for him.*** (Hudes, 51)

As a consequence to his state of "Acting out" Elliot reached his higher degree of stress, he held his gun and decided to shoot his commander officer at night while his commander was sleeping. Those were the traumatic symptoms that Elliot experienced as described by Elliot:

***ELLIOT: ... one night, I don't know why, I was just going to kill my corporal. He was a sleep. I put my rifle to the corporal's head and I was going to kill him.*** (Hudes.54)

This event reflects two interpretations. Firstly, Elliot tries to get revenge of the commander because of his brutal commands and because Elliot considers him the main cause for his own



bad psychological state for killing the Iraqi person. Secondly, Elliot while he is passing through his bad mood, trying to practice his own control as a soldier over a person in a weaker situation than him, so he chose a time when his commander was sleeping and putting his weapon aside. Thus, the ultimate cause of choosing such a weak person is rather suggestive since he is only reminding him of the Iraqi victims on whom, he was practicing his own control and power. This is not a strange case since it is common for the American soldiers to choose the weak and innocent people to practice their power on like the case, when they broke into homes at night while people are sleeping and terrifies the Iraqi civilians to feel their power. Crawford describes how the Marines and US soldiers snapped the innocent Iraqi civilians and the way they violating the imposed laws by exposing that:

*US military personnel kill civilians, or they may rape, kidnap or torture them. They go berserk or in some instances, they have made plans to kill non-combatants. Intentionally killing non-combatants is considered an atrocity for which actors are morally responsible and legally culpable. These are war crimes* (Crawford, 2011: 11).

Another significant consequence of "acting out" is revealed by Sontag. In her essays collection *On Photography* (1997), she observes the effects that follow the "Second World War" and reveals how photographs raise people's tendencies. Taking photographs for Sontag is to encourage what is going on with the intention of keeping it happening. It works as a reminder for the perpetrators of their own crimes as well as a motivator to the perpetrators' trauma and symptoms. In the same sense, taking picture is an attempt to have or fix things as they are as a kind of possession for the person who photographed things. By having Elliot, taking the person's picture, is so suggestive. It does not represent Elliot's authority over this guy but reflects that it is an attempt to document such a scene of pain which leads him to suffer a state of "acting out". Because he owns the picture of the Iraqi victim, he will continue remembering such a painful act. Whenever, the perpetrator looks at the picture he will be triggered since "Acting out" requires "a compulsive and repetitive re-living of the trauma" (Schick, 2011: 6). As stated by Pop and Elliot:

***POP AND ELLIOT: ... Remove ID and Intel from dead hostiles.***

*(Pop kneels in front of the dead man's wallet .He reaches out his hand and touches the wallet. Elliot and Pop are in the same position, each of them touching a wallet. They move in unison.)*

***ELLIOT: The photo***

***The pictures ...***

***(Elliot and Pop each pull a little photo out of the wallets.)***(Hudes, 31)

In her article, "**What have we Done?**", that she wrote in 2004 as a reaction to Abu-Ghraib photos, Sontag states that "the horror of what is shown in the photographs cannot be separated from the horror of that the photographs were taken" (2004, 24). However, the fact that the crime that happened in Abu- Ghraib prison faced its end in 2004 when the prison was closed but there are many pictures that documented the horrendous crimes that happened there. Although Elliot never mentions all that had happened to him in Iraq, it is so clear that he is brutally traumatized by what he saw and experienced there. After all, Elliot is both a witness and participant in the genocide that happened in Iraq. Never ignoring the fact that, it was not only one single traumatic incident, but also a cluster of brutal memories that, were piled up in the memory of the victim over a period. Elliot witnessed and suffered not only the "physical" brutal reality of war but also the pictures or the images of the casualties of war torture him severely. The bad memories haunt him while he is outside the sphere of war. Even at home in his social life, he is haunted by nightmares of the Iraqi victims who evoke his traumatic symptoms.

Nevertheless, Hudes in *Elliot, A soldier's fugue* focuses on the terror of war and the reaction of the American civilians to it. After all, Elliot is the outcome of the genocidal war and the American authority that inflicted it. The lack of all kinds of social support leads to develop traumatic symptoms. Elliot lives in a society, which is indifferent to his misery. Never

ignoring the fact that a person who experienced traumatic experience needs to communicate with others to exceed the "acting out" process to "working through" or "mourning" to release all his suffering. For Lacapra both "acting out" and "working through" are interlacing processes of the mind since the former lead to the latter (Lacapra,1994). Kaplan calls it 'emphatic sharing' which means the exchange of memories between both the trauma survivor and the listener (2005,37). For Laub, the listener works as "the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time" and he insisted on the "imperative process of telling" (1992,57). Hence, it is the give and take process between the victim and the listener, that makes the victim feels he is not ever alone. Such process leads the traumatized person to confess all his misery to the listener and prepare him to reach the "working through" process. For Laub, "it's the encounter and the coming together between the survivor and the listener which makes possible something like a repossession of the act of witnessing" (1995,69). Elliot needs someone to support him and listen to him. Finally, his mother relieves him and supports him by giving him his father's letters that he wrote while he was at war to grand pop telling him all about his war stories. The letters give Elliot so much relieve as if his father is speaking with him about his miseries at war. Elliot finds out that his father suffered the same misery that he suffered. Therefore, he reaches a conclusion that war does not mercy anybody as it is stated in these lines:

***ELLIOT: Pop, we lived the same fucking life ...Its scary how much was the same.*** (Hudes, 59)

Finally, Elliot comes to figure out that "***It's a mentality. Kill or be killed***" (33). For both Laub and Felman, "testimony is the narrative's address to hearing; for only when the survivor knows he is being heard, will he stop to hear and listen to himself" (Feldman and Laub,1991:71). Finally, Elliot steps in to a state of "working through" in which the person attempts to reach a critical distance from his own brutal problems, a state by which he/she can distinguish between times past, present or even future. By having his mother who listens to him and his father's letters he reaches to a working through state. Working through, "is a kind

of countervailing forces" (Goldberg, 1998). Elliot is seen to prepare himself to join the military forces by returning to Iraq.

**ELLIOT:** (...) *where he will cross the border north into Iraq.*

*Again.* (Hudes, 63)

Now he is able to distinguish between his past, present, and future (Lacapra, 2001, 22). He looks rather capable of exceeding all his physical isolation that was caused by traumatic experience and steps forward in his own new life.

### 3. Conclusion

In *Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue*, we deal with perpetrators' traumatic experience at genocides. Perpetrators can be influenced by trauma. They also suffer the consequence of war and genocide when they returned to their homes. They feel alienated from their own societies since they witnessed and participated in the act of genocide. Traumatic experience cannot be expressed by words; therefore, perpetrators are unable to communicate with their own societies when they returned homes. Moreover, their psychological state leads them to suffer the traumatic symptoms belatedly, which are the hallucinations, flashbacks and intrusive thoughts. Thus, the first objective is executed.

Yet, this study does not tackle the perpetrators' traumatic symptoms only but even how they can be healed from. By depending on Lacapra's concepts of *acting out* and *working through* which are derived from trauma theory, we can know how perpetrators overcome trauma. Perpetrators cannot overcome trauma unless they find a support from the environmental like their families, friends and others. Communication is the best way by which a traumatized person can overcome the "acting out" state to "working through" state. Perpetrators passed through both states. Firstly, they experienced acting out state in which they suffer the traumatic symptoms then by the support of others they can exceed the acting out stage to working through to be healed from trauma. Hence, the second objective is fulfilled.

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