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The Predicament of a Human Rights Worker: Witnessing Trauma in Sarah Stone's *The True Sources of the Nile*

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Abstract
This paper analyzes the psychological and ethical dilemmas faced by Anne, a human rights worker in Sarah Stone's *The True Sources of the Nile*. Set against the backdrop of political unrest and genocide in Burundi, the novel follows Anne's struggle to navigate the personal trauma of loss, her growing attachment to Jean-Pierre, and the moral ambiguities of international aid work. The paper argues that Stone complicates the conventional image of a humanitarian by portraying Anne as a figure caught between empathy, guilt, and complicity. By tracing her journey, the novel questions the effectiveness of human rights discourse when confronted with the complexities of postcolonial violence and personal entanglement.

Keywords: survivor's guilt, trauma, ethical responsibility, global North–South relations, witnessing, neocolonialism, human rights discourse.

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Sarah Stone's novel *The True Sources of the Nile* explores the transference of trauma from victims to those who attempt to heal them. It highlights how individuals working in human rights organizations—often stationed in regions devastated by war, disease, or poverty—are not immune to the psychological toll of such environments. On the contrary, these workers frequently become

entangled in a web of dilemmas, emotional conflicts, and traumatic experiences as they witness harrowing events, which can leave lasting imprints on their identities and life choices.

The main character of the novel, Anne, is a human rights worker in an organization striving to establish democracy in Burundi. Her professional life becomes entangled with her romantic involvement with Jean-Pierre, a native Burundian of royal descent. In navigating the cultural, social, national, political, racial, ideological, and linguistic differences with her lover, Anne remains increasingly unaware of the implications of living in a politically unstable country. As the realities of life in Burundi gradually reveal themselves, she finds herself helpless and disoriented—not only by the atrocities she witnesses but also by the traumatic truths she uncovers about the man she loves.

The study focuses on Anne's encounter with different aspects of life in Burundi, her understanding of the Burundian world and her responses to it as an attempt to understand the complex psychological issues that arise after witnessing or participating in events of chaos and violence.

The novel is set in Burundi, portraying a world steeped in lies and deceit, where an air of mystery hangs over everyday life. This vague, shadowy atmosphere becomes the backdrop for the work of FreeAfrica, a human rights NGO where Anne is employed. Burundi—a place where no one seems to say what they truly mean, where, in Jean-Pierre's words, "we've learned to hide what we think and feel" (10)—emerges as an enigma that Anne struggles to decipher, despite her readings and her efforts to assimilate into Burundian society. Jean-Pierre reminds her repeatedly of this gap in understanding, "Ah-na, there is so much you don't know about Burundi" (46). Yet Anne remains somewhat complacent, failing to grasp the implications of her ignorance, even when

Christine, Jean-Pierre's sister, alludes to its dangers while recounting a dream to her:

> You were a little girl. We were in the market; you were trying to buy too much. Cloth, food, knives. More than you could carry and so much of it is so sharp. I wondered why no one helped you. (96)

Christine then recounts her experience in Paris, where she always felt like an outsider because she lacked knowledge of the world around her. At another point, she tells Anne about Jean-Pierre's childhood fascination with the Black Mamba (84). Through these subtle innuendos, Christine attempts to warn Anne of the danger she has placed herself in—by entering a country she barely understands, by involving herself in its complex power dynamics, and by becoming intimately entangled with her brother. Yet Anne, absorbed in the allure of the exotic, driven by ideals of romance, and consumed by her sexual fascination with Jean-Pierre, remains blind to these signals.

However, it may be argued that Anne's ignorance of Burundi is not merely a result of personal naiveté but stems from her lack of lived experience of the country's deeper realities. As Josie Billington (2016) observes, "Truth…proves intolerably frustrating precisely because it cannot be truly known except by experience or discovery." Wilfred R. Bion (1965) echoes this in his reflection on epistemology:

> Reality is not something which lends itself to being known. It is impossible to know reality for the same reason that makes it impossible to sing potatoes; they may be grown, or pulled, or eaten, but not sung. Reality has to be 'been': there should be a transitive verb 'to be' expressly for use with the term 'reality.' (148)

No matter how much Anne talks or reads about Burundi, experience or discovery remains the only way for her to truly grasp its reality. She must live the truth of Burundi to understand it. It may be argued that although she appears eager to know the country, she subconsciously resists it. Sigmund Freud (1911) writes that unconscious mental processes "draw back from any event which might arouse unpleasure" and "turn away from reality because it is found unbearable" (35–6). This withdrawal is visible in Anne's inner monologue, where she briefly acknowledges the country's traumatic past—"The saddest place in the world, this piece of central Africa, site of a terrible history—German and Belgian colonization, the breaking of Ruanda-Urundi into two countries: Rwanda and Burundi. Coup after coup and most of all the struggles between Tutsi and Hutu: Power grabs betrayal, death, people fleeing to Zaire"—only to retreat into sensual, comforting impressions, "But Burundi felt more and more like home to me. The leaves and blossoms shone jade, emerald, rose, vermilion against silver and ebony trunks. I inhaled the smells of wet earth, of diesel fuel, from the truck rumbling past, of Jean-Pierre beside me, sharp and familiar. He was sweating, and the smell of his skin aroused me uselessly" (3). Anne's turn from the political to the sensual signals an unconscious refusal to confront the full implications of the country's violent history.

This tension is already evident in the way Anne describes her surroundings—an internal split between registering the violence of Burundi's history and immersing herself in its sensual, comforting details. The earth is "unbearably red," yet she breathes in the smell of wet soil with quiet pleasure. The banana trees, jacaranda, and papaya—fruits dense with pulp and flesh—stand in contrast to the delicate blossoms glowing in ornamental hues of jade, emerald, rose, and vermilion. The chaos of coups, death, and betrayal briefly surfaces, only to be eclipsed by the arousing presence of Jean-Pierre beside her. This oscillation

between horror and desire, between the abject and the beautiful, can be read as symbolic of her retreat from a reality too difficult to fully absorb. As Adam Phillips (2006) suggests, "Freud assumes that the one thing the reader wants to do more than know, is not to know; that indeed, the very ways we go about knowing things is the form our greed for ignorance takes" (xii). Anne's refusal is not merely a psychological avoidance—it becomes a mode of perception, a form of not-knowing that structures her entire experience.

Anne's apparent desire for knowledge conceals a deeper fear that such knowledge might prove unbearable—and indeed, it becomes traumatic when she finally acquires it through lived experience in the latter half of the novel. She is caught in the dilemma of whether "to know or not to know," mirroring the ambivalence of Jean-Pierre and Christine, who simultaneously "wanted her to know/didn't want" her to know (147).

Anne's inability to construct coherent meaning from her earlier experiences may stem from what Phillips calls a subconscious "greed for ignorance." However, when she is abruptly immersed in the chaotic violence around her, this psychological defense collapses. Traumatized by the near-simultaneous experience of genocidal brutality and the revelation of Jean-Pierre's identity as a *génocidaire*, Anne enters a state of shock. The boundary between right and wrong, truth and falsehood, becomes blurred as she desperately searches for a stable sense of reality. The psychological consequences of this deprivation of truth are aptly described by Bion (1962), who notes that "the effect on the personality of deprivation [of truth] is analogous to the effect of physical starvation on the physique.… Failure to eat, drink or breathe properly has disastrous consequences for life itself. Failure to use the emotional experience produces a comparable disaster in the development of the personality" (56).

This psychological rupture—Anne's sudden and overwhelming encounter with truth—finds a theoretical echo in Cathy Caruth's conception of trauma. Caruth (1996) describes trauma not as a bodily injury but as "a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (3). Anne's experience of witnessing the genocide and uncovering Jean-Pierre's true identity inflicts such a wound on her psyche—one that occurs too suddenly and too unexpectedly for her to assimilate or comprehend in the moment. Caruth explains that "the wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that… is experienced too soon, 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" (3–4). Trauma, then, "is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). In Anne's case, this haunting takes the form of recurring memories and images that eventually enable her to begin processing her trauma and move toward making a decision.

The haunting image of the woman pleading for help as Anne drives through the bloody chaos—with Jack and Charles in the car—along with her compulsive showers, may be read as the mind's subconscious effort to process and 'know' what was previously unassimilable. For Anne, the trauma of Burundi does not end with her physical departure from the country; it continues to shape her long after, altering both her relationship to grief and her understanding of usefulness. Burundi becomes the lens through which she interprets everything she encounters upon returning to the United States. As she reflects, "I also wanted to say something about my mother, but her dying now seemed such a natural thing. I felt a mix of emotions, including anger at being robbed of the chance to feel the genuine weight

of her incipient death. Burundi had made all our lives irrelevant." Here, Anne's inability to grieve in conventional terms illustrates how trauma displaces emotional reference points, making even intimate personal loss feel muted in the shadow of collective catastrophe.

The value and gravity of Anne's personal grief diminishes in the face of the tragedy she witnesses in Burundi, leaving her suspended in an emotional vacuum. Even her own loss of purpose—an existential crisis that would otherwise be traumatic—seems to lose its weight when measured against the scale of collective suffering. The enormity of the Burundian tragedy robs her of the legitimacy to express distress. When she tries to articulate this to Jean-Pierre, her words are laced with guilt, "I know how trivial this problem is, one woman, in no danger, worrying about whether she is useful. And yet, that's part of the problem too, that nothing I do or feel seems to matter, not compared to their deaths" (207).

Anne's trauma is intricately bound to Jean-Pierre's—not only because of their intimacy, but also because they now share a painful knowledge of Burundi's reality. As Josie Billington (2016) observes, trauma patients often erect psychological defenses in order to distance themselves from conscious suffering, "The patients expressed optimistic ideas or feelings of hope, diverting attention to some future event, away from...the immediate present" (14). Anne's response to Jean-Pierre's marriage proposal reflects this very impulse. Rather than addressing the feasibility of the relationship in the shadow of shared trauma, she shifts her attention to an imagined future, picturing the details of her wedding in the family gazebo (202)—a fantasy that offers temporary escape from an unbearable present. When Jean-Pierre finally yields to Anne's pressure and confronts his buried emotions, the moment not only exposes the rawness of his inner life but also illuminates a disturbing dimension of Anne's own psyche. The intensity of his emotional release triggers in her a painful self-awareness, "In the morning we were

awakened together, not wanting to talk even about small things, unable to meet each other's eyes. His discomfort infected me, leaving me alone with my struggle with fear and self-hatred, my understanding that I loved him at least partially because of the raw violence in him. The dark creature in me had obliterated the righteous, clear-headed one" (219). Here, Anne acknowledges that her connection to Jean-Pierre is not rooted only in idealism or empathy but in a fascination with violence itself—a desire that destabilizes her moral boundaries.

Jean-Pierre's outburst, in which he lashes out at Anne's supposed pursuit of truth, forces her to confront the depth of this entanglement. "You think you care about honesty? You don't care. You want to know what intestines look like as they spill on the ground. Gray and slick like great snakes of brain." His words suggest that Anne's quest for understanding is not a pursuit of ethical clarity but an abject compulsion to witness and internalize horror. The confrontation reveals that her desire to "know" is not without consequence—it implicates her in the very violence she once sought to resist.

Anne's insistence on knowing becomes an ethically fraught pursuit. On one hand, it reflects her desire to do what is morally right—her attempt to make an informed judgment about Jean-Pierre. On the other, it exposes a more troubling fascination with the gruesome, positioning her as a kind of spectator to trauma. While ethical questions surround the possibility of deriving interest—or even a form of emotional stimulation—from hearing a victim's traumatic experience, the act of narration can nonetheless serve a therapeutic and epistemological function. As Rita Charon (2006) argues, "Narrative deals with experiences, not with propositions." Unlike scientific or epidemiological knowledge, which seeks universal truths, narrative understanding allows one individual to grasp the particularity of another's suffering—not as a generalizable event but as a singular, meaningful situation (9).

Jean-Pierre's narration of his post-traumatic stress—especially his nightmare about the boy he killed—evokes pain for both him and Anne, yet it enables a shift in Anne's perspective. Listening to him, she begins to imagine herself in his place, "What he had done could not be justified. But then I had no idea what I or anyone else would have done in his place with his background and upbringing. Feeling him against me, his innocent skin, I asked myself, Was I God, to judge him?" (233). Through the power of narrative, the singular nature of Jean-Pierre's trauma becomes accessible to Anne, enabling a reckoning she had previously been incapable of. The story functions not to absolve but to humanize, blurring the line between witness and participant, judgment and empathy.

The haunting image of the woman pleading with Anne for help, and the figure of the boy Jean-Pierre kills, function as more than just traumatic flashbacks—they also give voice to the "other" within each character's psychic landscape. These images signify not only the reenactment of past events but also a confrontation with the suffering of those marked by violence. As Cathy Caruth (1996) explains, "the experience that Freud will call 'traumatic neurosis'—emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" (2). Yet this reenactment is not solely a cognitive mechanism to process trauma; it is also an encounter with the trauma of the other—one that speaks through the wound.

To illustrate this, Caruth turns to Freud's reading of Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, in which the knight Tancred unknowingly kills his beloved Clorinda in battle. After the event, he is repeatedly haunted by the moment, and in the reenactments that follow, he finally hears her voice—something he had not heard during the original act of violence. Similarly, in Stone's novel, both Anne and Jean-Pierre are revisited by figures whose suffering they have witnessed or caused, and through these ghostly returns, they are compelled into ethical recognition. The

reenactment thus becomes not just a symptom of trauma but a medium through which the silenced other speaks back.

The recurring images of the woman's eyes (126) and the boy's eyes (233) represent the silent, accusatory gaze of the "other," calling out to Anne and Jean-Pierre from the depths of their wounds. These eyes are not merely remnants of memory; they symbolize the ethical weight of having been, intentionally or otherwise, agents in acts that resulted in irreversible harm. In witnessing a truth the victims could never speak for themselves, Anne and Jean-Pierre become complicit—not only in violence, but in the burden of its haunting aftermath. Their memories are not theirs alone; they carry the pain of those whose voices echo through these unrelenting images. As Caruth (1996) explains, "trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available.… This truth… cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (4).

In this way, trauma resists resolution. The truth it carries is not total or knowable—it remains fractured, deferred, and often inaccessible even to those who bear its imprint. Anne's quest for truth and moral clarity ultimately ends in disillusionment, as she relinquishes her aspirations of being "useful" or effecting change. The novel closes not with a redemptive understanding, but with the unsettling recognition that the known and the unknown remain inseparable within the logic of trauma. Anne's journey, like Jean-Pierre's, is marked not by closure, but by an ongoing reckoning with a past that continues to speak in the language of wounds.

Jean-Pierre's identification with the dead following the loss of his family, his guilt over surviving, and his desire to return to Burundi—with Anne

accompanying him—suggests an implicit demand for sacrifice. His grief is not solitary; it seeks to bind Anne, perhaps at the cost of her own emotional or physical survival. When Anne finally slips off her engagement ring, she experiences a moment of painful clarity, the realization that she has taken on far more than she can carry.

The cumulative trauma of witnessing genocide, confronting Jean-Pierre's truth, and ultimately withdrawing from the relationship leaves an enduring imprint on Anne's life. Although she tries to move forward, her experiences in Burundi cast a long shadow. Comfort and joy are invariably laced with guilt, "...there would be a time when being happy did not bring guilt, when I no longer felt, that the least I could give to the dead was my endless grief" (266). Like Jean-Pierre, she remains caught between the trauma of having survived and the burden of not having acted—of turning away from the woman who had pleaded for help. She now carries not only the wound of what she witnessed but also the ache of having refused Jean-Pierre's call, a silence that ensured her survival but now marks her with guilt. Even as she plans her departure to Malaysia, she confesses, "The grief and memory would keep chasing me" (281).

As Caruth (1996) writes, "The story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality—the escape from a death, or from its referential force—rather attests to its endless impact on a life" (7). Anne's decision to leave—ending her relationship with Jean-Pierre and abandoning the fantasy of usefulness—is not so much a resolution as a retreat. Malaysia becomes a possible space of refuge, where her friend Zoë may offer what no one else has: the chance to speak, to narrate her pain, and to be heard.

Yet Anne's own narrative is thwarted repeatedly. While she listens attentively and empathetically to Jean-Pierre's trauma, she struggles to find the same space for herself. Her family, preoccupied with their domestic concerns, fails

to take her trauma seriously. Even when Jean-Pierre seems willing to listen, Anne's own guilt—her sense of the disproportion between her pain and his—silences her.

Ultimately, Anne never finds a space in which to fully mourn or process her grief. Her condition parallels the dog in the Burundian folktale—a creature caught in a cycle of transmitted rage and suffering, who inherits the king's anger without understanding its weight. "A dog that gets itself mixed up in powers it doesn't understand, one that tries to handle powers that are too strong for it" (103). Like the dog, Anne is overtaken by forces she cannot fully comprehend—historical, political, emotional—and is left to carry them, without the capacity to resolve or articulate them. Her trauma, like the folktale, becomes a story without closure, endlessly circling in memory.

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