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RETELLING THE TRAUMA AND SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN LAURIE HALSE ANDERSON'S NOVEL SPEAK

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American literature has its beginnings about four hundred years earlier, with its oral myths and traditional stories of Native American culture. American Literature has seen different phases. Laurie Halse Anderson (October 23, 1961) was born in Potsdam, New York. Anderson is an American Young Adult Novelist and children's writer. She developed her interest for writing during her high school days. She began her career as a freelance journalist in the Philadelphia Inquirer and from there she started her writing. The most common themes of Anderson are conflict in teens in high school years; most of her protagonists are female and the way they face their battle on some serious issue is portrayed. Her notable works are *Speak* (1999), *Fever* (2000), *Catalyst* (2002), *Twisted* (2007), *Winter Girl* (2009), *Seeds of American Trilogy Chains* (2008), *Forge* (2010) and *Ashes* (2016). Anderson has been honoured with Margaret A. Edwards Award.

Speak is a problematic novel which was published in 1999. It has been New York Times Bestseller and it has also been adapted as a film too (2004). The novel was translated into sixteen different languages. The novel *Speak* tells the story of a young girl Melinda Sordino, as she enters her high school after the summer vacation. On the first day of the school she was silent, experiencing a sort of guilt within her and undergoing inner conflict. Melinda's middle school friends had neglected her from their clan, after the summer party where she ended up by calling the cops and ran away home because she was assaulted by Andy, another teenager. So they avoided her. Melinda detached herself from her family and friends after the traumatic event. The only interesting thing in her school is the art class and she felt safe in the art classroom. In her art class, she always tries to draw a tree, symbolizing her suffering Melinda falls back in her class and spends most of her time drawing. Except in art, she scored lower marks in all subjects and when she was cornered by her parents, principal and counselor, she was mute. When she asked to present her paper, she requested her friend David Petrakis to present it instead of her. Melinda's silence is her defense in an unsafe world. She called her antagonist as 'IT'. She could not even name her assailant. It is only when she sees another girl in the same danger that she speaks up. She tries to help Rachel from falling into Andy's trap. She goes and meets Rachelle directly and she speaks up about the traumatic event encountered by her in the party. Then she reveals the name of her seducer as Andy but Rachelle misunderstands that she is jealous of her popularity with Andy in school. Melinda feels some sort of relief from her inner suffering. Andy comes back to take revenge on Melinda as she had spoiled his relationship with Rachelle. He tries to attack her, but she voices out. She fought him by stuffing a piece of glass in his throat and she escape from him. Finally Melinda comes out with a complete real tree filled with emotion and feelings. Later she gained strength to share her traumatic event with everyone. Melinda spoke up for her own self and found her own identity.

The novel *Speak* can be analysed using the psychological approach, through the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) concept of Trimble. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) added PTSD to the third edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM-III). The keynote of understanding PTSD is the concept of "trauma". PTSD is a mental disorder that can develop after a person is exposed to a traumatic event. Any human can undergo ordinary events like divorce, failure, rejection, illness,

and financial reverses in their life. Events as war, torture, rape, human made disaster and natural disaster are reminding affecting events. It can create traumatic stress within the affected individual. Individual differs in their attitude, different people appear to have different traumas; some appear to be more protected but some are more vulnerable and they are exposed to extreme stressful states. PTSD is mostly undergone by women. Symptoms of the disorder are traumatic nightmares, anger, guilt, or shame and unable to experience positive feelings such as love, pleasure or enjoyment. The affected individual can be healed and taken on the path to recovery by avoiding thoughts, conversation or feeling about the event, avoiding people, activities or places associated with the event, sharing their traumatic event that they have gone through, medications, one-on-one or group format conversation.

Melinda, the protagonist of the novel *Speak* has been experiencing an inner agony because she cannot come to terms with her date rape and she was made to feel guilty for calling 'the cops' by her peers. Subsequently she was affected by the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Melinda ends up by exploring her own identity and frees herself from the disorder. The characteristics traits that lie within the protagonist after undergoing through the traumatic event are isolation, nightmare, heart pondering, difficult breathing, lack of interest in the social activity, speechlessness or silence, guilt, anger, refusing to acknowledge the traumatic event she had undergone and self harming herself;

"I hate you," she mouths
silently. She turns her back to me and laughs with her friends. A
I bite my lip. I am not going to think about it. It was ugly, but
it's over, and I'm not going to think about it. My lip bleeds a
little. It tastes like metal. I need to sit down. (LHA 5)

Melinda, who had endured sexual assault in the summer party by her senior Andy. She ends up ringing the cops and speechlessly runs back home. Later she steps into the high school; there she finds her middle school friends Rachel and other girls who looked on her as dirt. When she sees her friends, she is reminded about the event and harms herself and moves about silently. Self harming and being voiceless are the characteristics of PTSD seen in Melinda's character.

I don't want to be cool. I want to grab her by the neck and
shake her and scream at her to stop treating me like dirt. She
didn't even bother to find out the truth—what kind of friend
is that? My contact folds in half under my eyelid. Tears well in
my right eye. (LHA 21)

Melinda was speechless after the traumatic event. But still she had her own voice which can be heard only by her and was screaming silently within her. Her close friend lacked empathy and was not ready to uncover the truth. This made her feel depressed and isolated. Melinda's feelings for her friends and their memories transferred into tears. The individuals affected by PTSD are numb and detached from their surroundings. Here the protagonist detaches herself from her friends, perturbed by the way she was treated by her peers in her new high school:

It is getting harder to talk. My throat is always sore, my lips
raw. When I wake up in the morning, my jaws are clenched so
tight I have a headache. Sometimes my mouth relaxes around
Heather, if we're alone. Every time I try to talk to my parents
or a teacher, I sputter or freeze....
.....I want to confess
everything, hand over the guilt and mistake and anger to
someone else. There is a beast in my gut, I can hear it scraping
away at the inside of my ribs.....(LHA 50,51)

Melinda goes through the feelings of guilt and anger within her. Her inner voice portrays her inner struggle. Her throat was blocked by the metaphoric frozen ice ball that did not allow her to speak. Even though there is no mistake on her side, she was considered as an evildoer. Melinda has vibes of Andy's touch and his memories were scraping inside her ribs. She wants to be purified from all her memories lying deep within

her. Melinda struggles live a normal life. she does it through different ways, but art serves as a therapy to rid herself of her past memories:

I glue the bones to a block of wood, arranging the skeleton
like a museum exhibit.....
.....I rummage in the bin
again and find a half-melted palm tree from a Lego set.(63)
.....A broken dream,
perhaps? Plastic honeymoon, deserted island? Oh, if you
put it in a slice of pumpkin pie, it could be a deserted
island!" (LHA 64)

Art has the power to express an individual's feeling and emotion. Melinda was assigned to undertake a project on 'Tree'. Day by day Melinda tries to work at her project in better ways. One day she brings bones to build a tree. She used bones as a museum and places fork and knife at the edges of the museum. At last, she places a palm tree at the centre of the museum. But she could not get the picture of what she had done. Mr. Freeman her art teacher, being a sensitive teacher was able to recognize the emotion within it. His interpretation for her art was, a broken dream of a young girl, as she had encountered a sexual assault. Melinda had expressed her inner woe through her art which was the beginning of her attempts to outlive her traumatic event.

I wonder if Hester tried to say no. She's kind of quiet. We
would get along. I can see us, living in the woods, her wearing
that A, me with an S maybe, S for silent, for stupid, for
scared. S for silly. For shame. (LHA 101)

Hair woman is an English professor, who took class about *A Scarlet Letter* and its symbolism. Melinda visualizes herself as Hester and remembered her life changing incident in the woods. Hester had worn a letter 'A' which has reference to adultery. So, she imagines she too was wearing 'S' for her silence, stupidity, scared character and feeling ashamed to face the society. The fear and shame prompt her and push her into the Post traumatic stress disorder:

.....I knew I wouldn't get an invitation. I would be lucky
to get an invitation to my own funeral, with my reputation. (41)
.....
Nope. I don't do parties. No thanks. I trot out excuses: homework,
strict parents, tuba practice, late-night dentist appointment,
have to feed the warthogs. I don't have a good track
record with parties. (LHA 131)

Melinda's view about the party has changed in the aftermath of the traumatic event faced by her in the summer party. She considered herself a lucky was not being invited to the party. She tries to stay out of activities and places associated with the traumatic event. Instead of spending time in the party, she invested her time in reading books:

You don't understand, my head voice answers. Too bad she
can't hear it. My throat squeezes shut, as if two hands of black
fingernails are clamped on my windpipe. I have worked so
hard to forget every second of that stupid party, and here I am
in the middle of a hostile crowd that hates me for what I had
to do. (LHA 28)

Melinda was criticized for her strange behaviour by her middle school friends. She was insulted by her ex-peer group and others around them. Everyone in this society is ready, to find fault with the affected individuals but no one is ready to know the reason behind their strange behaviour. Melinda was forced to recollect all her bad memories, from which, she tries to come out. Avoiding the actions related to the traumatic event had created more problems within her:

....."This is childish, Melinda." "Say something."

"You are only hurting yourself by refusing to cooperate.".....
 Mother: "That's the point, she won't say anything! I can't get a word out of her. She's mute." (114)
 Dad: "Well, something is wrong. What have you done to her? I had a sweet, loving little girl last year, but as soon as she comes up here, she clams up, skips school, and flushes her grades down the toilet.....(114,115)

The father had lost his little loving girl who was so close to him. After the traumatic event she detaches herself from her parents and her surroundings. Melinda was scared to speak up about the summer party to her parents. Her parents and teachers have realized that Melinda was hurt and are not sure about what it is. They try to make her speak out about her problem. Fear of retelling the traumatic event faced by her was making her speechless and lead her to the disorder:

My lips mumble something about leaving, about a friend who needs me, about my parents worrying.....
I twist my head away. He is so heavy. There is a boulder on me. I open my mouth to breathe, to scream, and his hand covers it. In my head, my voice is as clear as a bell: "**NO I DON'T WANT TO!**" But I can't spit it out.....
I walked home to an empty house. Without a word. (LHA135)

Melinda's life collapsed after going through the sexual assault by her senior in the party. Fear within her, to face life has made her speechless. While undergoing the event she was fighting to escape from Andy but she could not and at the moment she worried about her parents. In the time of her assault she felt unable to cope with the situation. She wants to scream, 'No I Don't Want To,'but she couldn't. She was sure that she got hurt.

Mr. Freeman and Melinda's father had shown her the way to overcome her fear and to speak up about the traumatic event. The most common element that changed Melinda's life is the tree. She learnt to express her feelings and emotions through art and learns that nothing in this world is perfect. Even flaws are interesting; only by penetrating through flaws can an individual develop their strength.

Mr. Freeman: "You are getting better at this, but it's not good enough. This looks like a tree, but it is an average, ordinary, everyday, boring tree. Breathe life into it. Make it bend—trees are flexible, so they don't snap. Scar it, give it a twisted branch—perfect trees don't exist. Nothing is perfect. Flaws are interesting. Be the tree." (LHA 153)

Once Melinda asked her father regarding the chopping down of the tree which is near her house. Her father corrects her that he is saving the tree by cutting down the damaged and diseased branches or else it will end up damaging the whole tree. There she realised that the past is dead and the problem that happened to her was ruining her present life.

Dad: "He's not chopping it down. He's saving it. Those branches were long dead from disease. All plants are like that. By cutting off the damage, you make it possible for the tree to grow again. You watch—by the end of summer, this tree will be the strongest on the block."(LHA 187)

This realization made her strong and gave her the strength to face the reality. She is also able to fight back when she is attacked by Andy again. Earlier she had been the victim:

A sound explodes from me.
 "NNNOOO!!!"
 I follow the sound, pushing off the wall, pushing Andy Evans off-balance, stumbling into the broken sink. He curses and turns, his fist coming, coming. An explosion in my head

and blood in my mouth. He hit me. I scream, scream. (LHA 194)

Andy who ruined her life came back to assault her. But this time she voices out and repulses him by placing a piece of glass in his throat harming him. This time she came out as a strong young girl who has ability to protect herself:

There is no avoiding it, no forgetting. No running away, or flying, or burying, or hiding. Andy Evans raped me in August when I was drunk and too young to know what was happening. It wasn't my fault. He hurt me. It wasn't my fault. And I'm not going to let it kill me. I can grow.

Melinda realizes the truth that she could not avoid or forget or escape from her problem. Whatever happens she has to face the society and keep on moving in her life. When her tears rolled on she knows that nothing is perfect in her life but still she can grow higher and stronger than before. She overcomes the disorder by analysing herself, with the help of the words of her art teacher and her father. The tree has been used as a symbol of life, which helped her to envision the truth of life and finally she speaks.

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