

The Trauma of Ordinary People in Fortune Smiles

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Abstract: *Fortune Smiles* is a collection of six short stories written by American writer Adam Johnson in 2015. In these narrations, the author blends many cultural factors into the lives of ordinary people, such as high-tech, natural disasters, political conflicts, contradictions of human nature, and ethics. He tries to express the contradictions and complexities of humanity in the vast world, and reveals the global survival crisis. “Trauma” is a prominent theme of the collection, which has become the focus of literary creation and criticism since the 1990s when writers pay more attention to the traumatic experiences and survival situations of ordinary people after experiencing world wars, the threat of nuclear war, the growing violent crimes and natural disasters. From the perspective of trauma, the thesis analyzes the representations, the causes and the healing methods of the trauma in *Fortune Smiles* by means of intensive reading. In this way, we can highlight people's efforts to restore the confidence and dignity of life, to resolve the pain of reader, and to construct the meaning of life.

1. Introduction

Johnson creates his fiction in a similar way as an investigative reporter chases a story. He emphasizes the importance of observing and experiencing life in writing, and mentions his attention to the investigation, the new findings of which can surprise him and turns to be the key to his creation. After delivering hundreds of express parcels in the heat in Louisiana, he got aware of where the character could sleep at night. Only by visiting the corner in Stasi prison was he able to realize what *George Orwell is my friend* should show. As for the healing effect of Nirvana music in the story, Johnson recalled his firsthand experience after his college classmate committed suicide. Nirvana was the classmate's favorite band, and Johnson played its music at home repeatedly after friend's death. It made him forget the pain of losing the friend at one time and feel the friend's presence.

With abundant life experience, outstanding creative endowment and sharp insight, Johnson has successfully represented the contradiction of humanity in the real world. The collection *Fortune Smiles* includes six short stories: “Nirvana”, “Anonymous Hurricanes”, “Interesting Facts”, “George Orwell Was a Friend of Mine”, “Dark Meadow” and “Fortune Smiles”. In “Nirvana”, a software developer's wife, Charlotte, suffers from Guillain-Barré syndrome and can only seek comfort from the Nirvana band in a three-dimensional holographic projection. The second story “Anonymous Hurricane” happens in Louisiana, which has been destroyed by the Hurricane Katrina. The UPS truck driver Nonc drives his son in search of the son's mother, ending up with finding her being held in prison. The protagonist of “George Orwell is my friend” is a retired prison administrator. He refuses to confess what inhuman treatment he has done to the prisoners, denies his

complicity in a regime of ruthless totalitarian oppression and tries to find excuses. The fourth story “Dark Meadow” tells a computer master who has collected child pornographic pictures but also uses computer technology to help to protect girls. In “Interesting Facts”, the author describes a female writer who suffers from breast cancer and alienation. At the end of the book appears “Fortune Smiles”. It tells the story of two defectors, DJ and Sun-ho, struggling with homesickness and hardness of adapting to a modern society.

As a literary sleuth, Adam Johnson bents on uncovering the trauma in the 21st century in his bravura collection *Fortune Smiles*. In the six narrations, Johnson puts many cultural factors into the stories of the ordinary people, such as high-tech, natural disasters, political conflicts, contradictions of human nature and ethics. He paints a portrait of society of today's Americans. What all of Johnson's characters and readers encounter, is something previously unimaginable, but utterly convincing.

2. The Representation of Trauma in *Fortune Smiles*

The experience of trauma seems central in *Fortunes Smiles* and the unexpected traumatic narratives take very specific shapes: post-Katrina New Orleans, a former site of state-sponsored torture in Berlin, a near-future Silicon Valley in the wake of a President's assassination, and even the inner world of a man wrestling with monstrous urges. Following sections are the detailed analysis of the representation of trauma physically and psychologically.

2.1 The Physical Trauma in *Fortune Smiles*

Illness is the underside of life and a kind of troublesome citizenship. Everyone who comes into the world will experience health and disease. (Susan, 2003) Illness, an essential physical experience for everyone, is opposite to health. As a pathological definition, it has multiple meanings beyond medicine. It exists on human beings and gets related to many metaphysical propositions such as death, spirit, and life. In *Fortune Smiles*, Johnson has shaped the image of two sick wives in “Nirvana” and “Interesting facts” by a close approximation of his own wife in the real life, who has suffered from breast cancer and recovered.

In “Nirvana”, the fatal illness destroys life of the couple, making it dying and morbid. The wife Charlotte suffers from Guillain-Barré syndrome, which is damaging her immune system. The signals sent by her brain fail to arrive at the body, resulting in the paralysis below shoulder. She needs a ventilator to breathe and a Hoyer Lift to swing herself in and out of bed. It has been nine months and her body has been covered with bedsores. The last moment of her turning point is approaching, but nobody can guarantee her that she would be able to recover because not everyone does. It is tough for the wife to process. All she can do right now is to use her sound to adjust the height of the bed, receive her husband's daily massage, make use of a drone and AI glasses to look at roses out of the window, and smoke marijuana, which always makes her often “stoned”, to help the lungs full of “wind” “noise” or “storm”. (Johnson, 2015: 18) Listening to Kurt Cobain with headphones day and night is her only way to feel better.

It is less and less likely for Charlotte to get better, and the unfortunate woman is about to suicide amid despair and illness. “If she could somehow get her head between the bars of the safety rail, ‘incline’ is all she would say.” (Johnson, 2015: 13) The disoriented life leads to the disorder of the husband. He often suffers from insomnia. “It has been late but I still can't sleep. I raise a window for some spring Palo Alto air, but it doesn't help...My sleep problem is this: when I close my eyes, I keep visualizing my wife killing herself.” (Johnson, 2015: 13) Finally, the two make an agreement that the husband promises the wife that when it is time, he will help her do what she wants.

Stricken by illness and grief, the heroine goes downhill and she changes her idea about life, the

world, and her love. She becomes suspicious and lacks faith in her husband's loyalty. "Charlotte convinces herself that I will leave her for one of the nurses in the rehab ward. She screams at me to get a vasectomy so this nurse and I will suffer a barren future." (Johnson, 2015: 19) There are only "tests, tantrums and treatments" (Johnson, 2015: 19) in life.

2.2 The Psychological Trauma in *Fortune Smiles*

"Over-alertness" refers to a state of high alertness of victims who have experienced trauma. There are some symptoms observed among World War I veterans, such as startle response, over-alertness, alert on possible recurring dangers and nightmares.

In "Interesting Facts", the over-alertness is revealed by the fissures in the seemingly-solid structures of an ordinary life and marriage, and "the women around the husband" is a crucial image showing the heroine's over-alertness. Initially, she is a patient made misplaced, isolated, and alienated during the crisis, as she undergoes bilateral mastectomy because of breast cancer, and chemotherapy continues to devour her. Second, the psychological shadow caused by the disease depresses her so that she is entangled with various hallucinations and nightmares. The emotional alienation with people around her is the most unacceptable, as her husband and children gradually starts a new life, which makes her feel like a ghost. .

The narrator worries about the cancer and losing control of her family. At an ordinary reading session, a female writer reads her novel in which a husband losing his wife fell in love again sixteen months after ex's death. The plot upsets the heroine and she asks her husband repeatedly about how long after her death he would remarry. On the way home, she commands her husband to go around buying useless condoms, and requires him to ligate the vasectomy. After being rejected, she laments that "when love blossoms, it's all the richer when a man has discovered, firsthand, the painful fragility of life. Well, secondhand." (Johnson, 2015: 92)

Any woman with normal breasts around her husband will become her imaginary enemy. She imagines that her husband's female work partner is seducing him by talking on the meeting. In her mind, other women in her daughter's school pretend to care and invite her husband on purpose. Her neighbor Megumi is also the criminal suspect in her mind to have affairs with the husband because of frequent visits to their home. She describes that "The kanji for irrational, I learned, is a combination of the elements woman and death. The kanji for figure is a combination of the elements next and woman." (Johnson, 2015: 101)

3. The Causes of Trauma in *Fortune Smiles*

The purpose of narrating trauma is to analyze trauma symptoms, events and feelings in ways to delve into the personal and social factors and the root causes hidden inside. The causes of trauma and miserable experiences in *Fortune Smiles* are various, which can be summarized into internal and external ones.

3.1 Internal Causes of Trauma

Childhood is the beginning of life, while a traumatic childhood is the beginning of a lifetime of trauma. According to related research on trauma theory, the trauma in childhood can cast a shadow over a person's whole life.

In the "Anonymous Hurricane", Nonc is disoriented in his own life owing to the miserable childhood when he grows up in the environment without parental care. There is only little mention of Nonc's mother, but it is not hard to conclude the mother's absence in Nonc's childhood. So is his father. He stole Nonc's car and left town. The literal home is strange and weird to Nonc. In the story,

“Nonc enters to see his old TV on its stand, his couch blooming with mold, his table and chair dusted with broken glass. There is nothing belonging to him—the dishes on the floor, the broken picture frames, the bicycle on its back by the door. The mixture of his possessions with a stranger's isn't so weird.” (Johnson, 2015: 83) Nonc is estranged in the strange and abandoned place, and the childhood is an annihilation of fantasy and a time full of traumatic memories leading him to split, confuse, and lack of responsibility. His insecurity is showed everywhere. He refuses to talk about love, future, his misery and the action to abandon his son. He is trying to protect himself by alienating from others.

The lack of name symbolizes Nonc's miserable childhood. According to Milan Kundera (1980), a person's name witnesses his past. Only the person without a past has no name.” A name is a symbol of one's identity and the absence of name means that someone has disappeared in the family and the history. The name empowers someone to realize his position in his family and his identity from a linguistic perspective. In *Kajin*, Nonc is only a common Cajun term for “uncle”. Nonc can no longer remember when his father was called by him last time. Occasionally he can't recall who he is. So he calls himself Nonc, such a casual code. The trauma is demonstrated through Nonc's absence of name, and his segment with the whole family. He doesn't belong to any clan of his father or mother. On the contrary, he is an outsider.

3.2 External Causes of Trauma

The alienation of the interpersonal relationship makes people weak, unsustainable and unable to understand each other. Human beings with alienated interpersonal relationships are difficult to communicate heart to heart, and even stand oppositely. With the development of society, modernity has diversified people's thoughts, thus finding the confidants gets harder and harder on owing to the confusion of ideology. That is to say, people nowadays are facing incredible loneliness.

4. The Recovery from Trauma in *Fortune Smiles*

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman (2015) defines traumatic healing into four categories. The first one is the restoration of the autonomy. By means of expression, patients integrate broken memory into linear memory, establish a safe environment, and reshape the sense of security. Second, patients need to feel connected, restore trust, reconcile with themselves, and enable to distinguish who are hypocritical. Third, the patients review and exhibit the traumatic experience, and mourn while admitting the disgraceful traumatic experience. Finally, they find meaning in the traumatic experience and pursue the meaning of it. The healing process of the characters in *Fortune Smiles* is consistent with what Herman has written in his book. Most characters have completed all the steps and finally turn the trauma experience into the motivation for a happy life in the future.

4.1 Confronting the Traumatic Past in “Interesting Facts”

Expressing oneself is instinctive, that is, to outline who he really is through self-expression, in ways to determine the value and meaning of individual life. When people are traumatized, they need to talk about what have happened urgently. This is when the psychological defense mechanism starts for self-protection. In this condition, the victims are reluctant to rethink the past traumatic events, not mention to express themselves. The traumatic experience is flashing and lingering, but other details cannot be remembered because the traumatic memory is fragmented. Therefore, the first step in healing is to convert fragmented traumatic memories into linear narrative memories through verbal or non-verbal methods, and bravely face the gaps in traumatic memories, so that fragmented memories can be collected together. That is to say, the victims must face the fear

brought by the trauma and restore the integrity of the trauma experience. The more miserable the trauma is, the more people can overcome it. Expression, the first step in receiving and expressing the traumatic experience, can be miserable, but is the start of treatment.

In “Interesting Facts”, the husband confronts his trauma by writing down what he and his family have experienced from the perspective of his wife. In fact, he is tired of dealing with the sick wife's over-sensitivity and taking care of three young children. The traumatic feeling upsets him. As the pen tracks the mind, he can relax his vigilance, present the psychological problems at the unconscious level, and recognize his trauma through his own creation. By rethinking and tracing back to the story while writing, and reading the work again after writing, he can re-evaluate and review the traumatic events he has experienced. When he repeatedly talks about himself and writes himself, he creates another him. This is the beginning of restoration.

4.2 Reestablishing Human Connection in “Nirvana”

Trauma can be defined as the destruction of an intimate link, resulting in the distrust of others and loss of confidence in oneself, accompanied with loss of one's connection with others, self-dreaming and mental composition. (Kellerman, 2007)

When a person is disappointed with his current life and unable to recover, he usually desires to run away from the present life and seek relief. It is a typical evasion. The victims are easy to be overwhelmed by the reality and full of deep doubts about their relationships with those around them when a traumatic event occurs. Later, they will immerse in a sense of panic where they may lose control of their lives and feel insecure for a long time. Judith Herman (2015) points out that traumatic recovery is synonymous with sense of security establishment, embodying rebuilding connection with life and world, and more importantly, realizing the true meaning of life, during which the victims are likely to establish a sense of commonality, abandon the limitations of past trauma, and begin to embrace a new life.

Herman (2015) mentions that rehabilitation only occurs in interpersonal relationships and can't occur in isolated scenes. According to the traumatic theory, the victims are impossible to face the miserable memories by themselves, owing to the excessive loathing. So he longs for a helper, usually a therapist, and pays idealized strong expectation on him. The therapist is able to offer the victim an illusion to deal with the recurrence of horrible traumatic feeling.

In “Nirvana”, the husband chooses to write a “virtual president” program to make it his therapist. As a Silicon Valley programmer, he creates a virtual assassinated projection president that can communicate with people according to his image and language style. He confides his problems to the virtual president repeatedly, and the latter suggests him to return back to his wife and turn a new life. Communicating with the virtual president allows him to regain his confidence in life. He helps his wife do rehabilitation exercises actively and talk about the future with her, becoming the “Mr. Optimistic” in the eyes of her wife. Then, He creates Kurt Cobain, to help his wife reconnect with life. Tens of thousands of people who download the “virtual president” program in the novel also have an opportunity to release their stress.

4.3 Reconstructing Meaning after Trauma in “Anonymous Hurricane”

According to Herman (2015), trauma response can also be interpreted as “mourning”. There is no maturity without trauma and we will not truly grow up without the ability to understand trauma. In traumatic theory, people can overcome the trauma and achieve self-sublime after defeating wounds. The reconstruction of traumatic events is to mourn, in ways to seal memories, reconnect with daily life, and regain the ability to love in ways to start a new life.

In “Anonymous Hurricane”, Nonc used to live in a rental house which was “covered with dust

and glass slag, leftovers with cold and broken frames on the floor”. (Johnson, 2015: 83) The bridge he crosses every day to delivery packages is full of pig squeal. His father who had deceived him connects with him before death and his ex-girlfriend suddenly gives him a two-year-old son, with whom Nonc settles in an abandoned building every night. He represents the most marginal figure in American society, even more unfortunate. However, before the death, his father apologizes to him. Staying with his son, Nonc establishes a deep relationship with him. Knowing that the son will be raised by him for a long time in the future, he decides to change his life, “Raising my son in the back of a van, this has got to end.”

For once, instead of things happening to Nonc, Nonc is making things happen, and that is a good new feeling. The plan is going to take his best, he knows that. It’s going to take everything he’s got. Finally, he goes to L.A. to start a new life.

“Nonc looks out on the city. It looks like one of those end-times Bible paintings where everything is large and impressive, but when you look close, in all the corners, some major shit is befalling people. Nonc shifts into fourth, and even doing that feels like a development, and this the first big step in a plot you can’t imagine. The smallest thing now feels like a development, a turn signal.” (Johnson, 2015: 89)

In the final stage of trauma healing, without being dissatisfied with why the trauma experience falls to him, Nonc finds out the meaning of the trauma. Luckily, he goes beyond it, and then embraces a wider world.

5. Conclusion

In *Fortune Smiles*, some characters suffer from physical trauma and others are immersed in the pain of psychological trauma. Because of the unforgettable experience, Johnson creates teenage characters who have suffered from violence and female figures tortured by breast cancer. Then the psychological trauma is demonstrated in the form of over alertness and memory intrusion. Writing from the perspective of individuals, Adam Johnson probes into the personal confusion and dislocation towards life and the whole world. He tries to search for the humanity in the spiritual crisis of the bewildering world.

Johnson tries to explore the causes of trauma in his writing, which comes from people’s inner world, partner, family and the society. This reflects Johnson's ultimate inquiry into the value of existence and the meaning of life in the bewildering and complex world. Fortunately, the protagonists in the collections refuse to look to the past. They have courage to face the trauma straightly, rebuilt the connection and ultimately achieve transcendence and redemption. In this way, Johnson inspires readers to chart meaningful courses and build a positive attitude towards life.

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