

Art and Surviving Trauma in Times of Crisis

Ms. Hidaya ATTAR, Prof. Ilhem SERIR

Abou Bakr Belkaid University - Tlemcen, attarhidaya7@gmail.com

Abou Bakr Belkaid University – Tlemcen, seririlhem@gmail.com

Received: 01june2022

Accepted: 06june2022

Abstract	Article info
<i>Crisis and trauma are believed to be driving forces to the creation of art and the shaping of human character. This research work targets the ways by which a Covid-like virus leads the protagonist female artist in Sarah Hall's <i>Burntcoat</i> to sculpt a national memorial in memory of the million dead; and forge her character as a woman to become a renowned artist. The artistic symbols are prevalent throughout the novel from the experience of the trauma of loss, and the catastrophic damage which help the artist to move forward to maturity and creativity. Throughout the novel, the images of struggle and gender oppression are described in the violent squabbles over life resources, and social horrors of Britain under the grip of the virus.</i>	Received 01./06../2020 Accepted 06/06./2020 Keywords: ✓ Burntcoat ✓ Art ✓ Trauma ✓ Loss ✓ Oppression ✓ Gender

1. Introduction

Art is the representation of our feelings and experiences; it speaks for the vulnerable and the powerful, the free and the oppressed, women and men. It is a means of salvation in times of crisis and devastation bringing comfort and hope to all the people.

The world has witnessed one of the most dangerous and fatal pandemics in history; the Covid-19 invaded the globe and clenched its fist on the human existence, in this respect, many artistic works attempted to describe the ways through which this pandemic has changed our lives and our psychological attitudes amid such a disaster. *Burntcoat* by Sarah Hall is a novel informed by our collective experience of Covid-19, written as an elegy to her lover who died by a fictional Covid-like virus. Throughout the novel, Hall tries to express how a crisis can forge and frame an artist and immortalize his creation through the depiction of the psychological aspects of human behavior in chaotic situations such as a health crisis.

2. The Plot in *Burntcoat*

Sarah Hall is a British novelist who was born in 1974 in Cumbria. Her writing career started early at the age of twenty, first as a poet, then as a fiction writer. She started writing *Burntcoat* during the first year of lockdown and the novel was published in 2021. The novel follows the life of the female protagonist Edith Harkness from childhood till adulthood as she feels she is dying of the virus.

Edith's mother, Naomi, was an acclaimed writer who suffered a serious brain hemorrhage when Edith was only eight years old, and her father abandoned them because he could not stand it. Edith and her mother isolated themselves in a cottage at the end of a valley where she discovered her artistic skill as a sculptor of wooden objects. She sharpened her skill under the instruction of Shun in Japan where she learnt to master the use of fire in sculpting. Then, she decided to buy a large studio, Burntcoat, where she used to craft her art and became renowned.

After a toxic and devastating relationship with Ali, Edith met a Turkish man called Halit, a chef, and both went through romance, love, and then chaos and loss. They took refuge together in Burntcoat during lockdown because of the virus which had taken over the country. They were very happy and fulfilled until he caught the virus as he went out for food and unfortunately, Edith had to watch him fade and die.

As the virus was fainting, Edith woke up from her horrifying nightmare and was commissioned to sculpt a monument in memory of the dead before she departed her life as well.

3. Characters and Symbols

Burntcoat is set during a time of crisis and devastation, thus all the characters in the novel have something chaotic to reveal; either from their past or their present, their attitudes and reactions, what is more are the symbolic elements that give different dimensions to the crisis. Hall used many words and events in a symbolic way to refer to certain aspects of life; the trauma of loss and the way women are treated throughout the novel reveals something about the attitudes of certain people in times of crisis in a non-linear sequence of events which requires good attention from the part of the reader not to miss any relevant information.

3.1 The Relationship Between Female and Male Characters

This section examines the gendered human relationships in *Burntcoat*. The novel is full of complex relationships between men and women which identify the nature of the human reasoning during a crisis.

When Naomi, Edith's mother, fell sick, her husband seemed indifferent and less moved than her daughter. He even made sarcastic and inappropriate remarks about her state after her surgery; *"It's like Frankenstein, he said. It's absolutely horrendous"*. (p.11) Edith, the narrator, was aware of the situation and observed the way her father was treating his wife saying; *"He was not looking at my mother and hadn't said hello to her"*. (p.11) after that, we have to go through other events before we come back to their relationship where Edith said: *"In the year of Naomi's rehabilitation, my parents' relationship deteriorated"*. (p.26) We may argue that the trauma of loss; the loss of his wife as he knew her before her illness, made him anxious and furious at the same time that he could not manage the situation and made the choice of leaving and starting a new life away from the woman who; according to doctors, does not remember him anymore and has no feelings for him; *"She had no recollection of ever loving him"*. (p.28) He expected his wife to recover quickly so they could get back to their normal life, however, that was not possible and it was only after the father had left that she began to feel better; *"released from my father's expectations her progression was noticeable"* (p.29).

In this way, both women learnt to live by themselves and support each other in their own isolated world experiencing love and pride. Edith made her first sculpture; an eighteen-foot ship that her mother called *"our safe ship"*. Edith recalled the abandoning of her father and thought she could do the same when Halit fell sick with the virus, however, she did not and she considered that as a *"selfish desire"* (p.165) In fact, selfishness is an inevitable quality that may surge out of a crisis for the sake of surviving.

Edith started a relationship with Ali who mistreated her and degraded both her and her mother. This toxic relationship reveals a mentality of oppression and an attitude of superiority. He used to call her "E" instead of Edith and neither she nor her mother was comfortable with this; *"He called me E. he knew how to gently undermine and make himself seem heroic"* (p.108) and her mother hated him and intentionally called Edith by her full name right after Ali had called her E and she deliberately forgot to set the bowl and the spoon for him at the table. Edith experienced a feeling of guilt and confusion; she was unsure whether it is Ali or Naomi who is oppressing her; *"For years she and I had protected ourselves, but I let him in"* (p.112). Moreover, Ali betrayed Edith as she caught him cheating on her with another woman, consequently, she fell sick and has been through a rupturing pregnancy; *"The fallopian tube was irreparable and had been removed"* (p.115). Once again, Edith went through another kind of trauma and loss which made her seek refuge in her mother's cottage, this last showed a high level of maternal strength as she stood against him and freed her daughter from his grip. Once again, isolation seems to be the first solution that people run to in times of crisis and trauma in order to protect themselves and save what could be saved.

Hall demonstrates throughout the novel how the love relationship between Edith and Halit begins, matures until reaching a point of intimate familiarity, and finally fades away with the death of Halit. Unlike Ali, Halit loved and respected her and she was fond of him as well and was able to express it in an artistic way addressing him in person; *"There's blindness to new lovers... Other worlds cease. I know I felt something as it began, an understanding,*

foreboding, ordinance, even. Love is never the oldest story. It grows in the rich darkness” (p.50)

During lockdown, the two lovers started to feel and experience love in its most extreme dimensions while growing in a parallel world with the one existing outside; *“Outside, the danger, the fear, made what was happening inside purer”* (p.63) As many people during crisis tend to get busy and distracted from the outer world in an unconscious attempt to spare their souls the suffering and the trauma. Having said that, it becomes clear how humans prove their ability to deal with crises; differently though, many of them resort to art and love to represent their trauma and painful experiences. Edith; as an artist, swings between the piece of art she was working on and her love for Halit. Once again, she remembered her childhood and how she was facing the world alone with her disturbed mother, and found a certain relief in *Burntcoat* with the company of her lover, and she even expressed an artistic admiration for the virus as if she felt gratitude and enjoyment; *“I liked it. Part of me enjoyed the crisis, I admit ... I think that being two, as we were, so dependent on each other and against the world, was like my upbringing”* (p. 146).

It could be asserted that the relationship between Edith and Halit matured as they both felt that the virus had sneaked in; *“Now we were truly a couple. Everything before seemed like an introduction, a first dance”*. (p.150) The couple even imagined they had a daughter and they named her Hulya Nasil in a delusional attempt to survive and lead a normal life.

After that, the symptoms started bringing down the body of Halit while Edith kept watching in sorrow and despair; knowing she was helpless and abandoned by the world. It was at that point that the young artist started developing her own philosophy of the crisis that was drowning the world; *“We are figures briefly drawn in space; given temporary form in exchange for consciousness, sense, a chance. We are ready-mades, disposables”*. (p.155) After all, what is this but the inevitable denouement of a crisis scenario; we may keep hope and pray for relief before we submit to fate and admit our vulnerability and helplessness.

3.2 The Artistic Symbols in the Novel

Sarah Hall chose Edith as the filter *“through which the world of the novel is to be seen”* (Miligan 1983, 159). She not only expressed her own artistic vision of the world in crisis but also made use of some elements that we might consider as symbols relevant to the background of the novel; mainly the fire and The Scotch Corner Witch.

3.2.1 The Fire

According to Miligan: *“Novelists may use patterns of repeated motifs, or imagery, to bring their novels under the power of one controlling metaphor which, indirectly but insistently, suggests a way of grasping the novel as a whole”*. (p.160) In the light of this, the word *fire* has been repeated twenty three times in the novel. Edith was able to make *fire* when she was very young as a sign of independence and freedom. She was the first Western apprentice of Shun in Japan; Shun was a renowned artist and was selling sculptures all around the world.

Shun was using *fire* in his art and Edith had to learn how to master *fire* in order to create an artistic figure appropriately; *“Too much heat and the piece was ruined, too little and the wood wasn’t sealed ... The wood is experiencing fire now. It will be improved”*. (p.43)

That artistic experience paralleled the human one; as if people need to go through hardships and suffering in order to be improved and have their characters forged and strengthened. When Edith had learnt how to use fire, she started crafting her sculptures to perfection. Hall also used the word *fire* to describe the chaotic situation in which the world was going through: *“The world had caught fire; not even the sea’s tonic would put it out”*. (p.65)

The *fire* was used again to describe the high fever Halit was suffering from when he caught the virus; *“your body was on fire. Red patches formed deep in your skin”*. (p.164) It even left marks on his body due to its intensity. Here again, Edith experienced *fire* and admitted its power as well as that of life. Despite the difficulties she faced and the sufferings she went through, she did not submit to despair nor did she try to cope in an unhealthy way. In the end of the novel, she said: *“I’m the wood in the fire. I’ve experienced, altered in nature. I am burnt, damaged, more resilient”*. (p.197) even though that *fire* left permanent marks in her life.

3.2.2 The Witch

The last sculpture of Edith may be considered as her finest masterpiece in terms of significance and worth; *“I was asked to create a national memorial. For the million who had died”*. (p.191) The Witch is, in fact, “The Scotch Corner Witch” nicknamed “Hecky” and sculpted by Edith as a national memorial of the million dead in the pandemic. “Hecky”, Edith recalls;

“is the masterwork. A half burnt assemblage lofting highly as a church tower, containing all the unrealistic belligerence and boldness of early ambition”. (p.76) this monument might well symbolize the intensity and the strength of the pandemic as it has been described as genuine and dangerous; *“it was the largest project either of us had undertaken ... She’d been over-engineered and comprehensively insured, a forty-foot structure, dangerously close to traffic”*. (P.37)

As aforementioned, Edith has been through fire to forge herself and become more resilient and strong, similarly, “Hecky” endured fire to stand massive and controversial over the motorway traffic at Scotch Corner; *“the blackened timbers of her skirt seemed to be bleeding evilly in the rain”* (p.37) in a metaphor to hardships and struggle.

3.2.3 The Wolf and the Crane

In the studio of Edith, there was a sculpture under construction, and that sculpture was very symbolic in the novel featuring Aesop’s fable about a greedy wolf whose throat got blocked by a bone of a prey he was devouring. The wolf was suffering for he could not eat so he asked for the help of the crane whose beak was long enough to penetrate into its throat and take the bone away and promised her a nice reward in return. After the crane had released

the bone from the wolf's throat he started walking away and told her that she should be grateful as he let her live and did not eat her.

The sculpture of Edith represents the image of the crane trying to save the wolf with its long beak deep into the wolf's throat; *"the bird's long, narrow beak was entering the throat as precisely as a surgical instrument, its head surrounded by teeth. The wolf's claws were lying next to the crane's foot, interlinking"*. (p.188)

It may be argued that the sculpture symbolizes the risk that she was undertaking by trying to save Halit from the virus. Moreover, it may work well in describing the pandemic situation that invaded the world full of danger, wrong promises and uncertainties; *"what if it's a trick? What if there's no bone? The crane won't know until its head is inside, past the teeth"*. (p.55) The sculpture of the Wolf and the Crane speaks for a time where nothing is certain, no one is reliable, and no issue is available when the wolf decides to bring down its prey; that is, there is no way out when the pandemic decides to take control and bring down lives and hopes destroying everything in its way.

4. The Crisis and Gender Oppression

The time of crisis may drive people to act insane and irrational out of fear and frustration, makes them lose their emotional balance, and dive deep into chaos and darkness. The female protagonist represents the muted voices of women during the pandemic. She stood against a man as he mistreated another woman in a queue in front of a bakery, the way her mother stood for her against Ali. One may wonder if the man would do the same thing to another man. Hall describes the scene and the struggle between the man and the Asian woman in this way: *"The young woman flinched away, tried to walk round him, but he caught and held her shoulders"*. (p.126) Edith was struggling with herself and was deeply moved by that immoral act;

"I could feel something coming. My heart was thudding and there was a cold trickling feeling from my spleen. I took several steps forward, then stopped ... he was not being rough but had her held firm by the coat, authoritatively, as a parent would a naughty child ... I moved in, pushed him hard on the chest ... he'd given himself permission in this ugly new world. I hit him. My fist landed with force". (p.128)

Hall does not only try to describe the way a woman could stand for another woman against oppression but rather utilizes this resistance to speak for the vulnerable people overtaken by the crisis and their struggle for freedom and life, though she tends to justify the act of that man as an inevitable consequence of forced seclusion driving people to act uncivilized; *"Weeks of isolation had taken their toll; people were angry and afraid, the social norms had disappeared"*. (p.126)

Resistance against oppression symbolizes, in its turn, the oppression of the pandemic and the resistance of the vulnerable people who only grow stronger after the pandemic is gone albeit the scars they may bear for the rest of their lives.

5. Surviving Trauma

The trauma in the human experience is not merely the result of a crisis but rather a precursor of human reactions to certain events. It is cultural evidence in the human life and it reflects the psychological aspect of people and helps to understand their behavior. In this sense, it could be stated that trauma meets many needs. In literature, trauma is said to be *“the event that generates narratives”*; (Bényei and Stara, 2014, p.2) that is to say, the driving force of the events and the main motif behind climax. Similarly, Swift argues that *“history begins only at the point where the things go wrong, history is born only with trouble, with perplexity, with regret”* (quoted in Bényei and Stara, 2014, p.2) without trauma, the story is just a number of linear events, one after the other, missing a heart and blood that tend to motivate characters to act in certain ways and help us understand and interpret their decisions and behaviors. It is not evident to survive a traumatic experience, in this sense, Bennett and Royle argue that: *“literature and art more generally is often seen as a place of refuge”*. (2016, p. 134) This is reflected also in the words of Naomi at the beginning of the novel when she said to her daughter that: *“Those who tell stories survive”*. (p.01)

In *Burntcoat*, Edith has been through two major traumas in her life; the first as she was young and the second as an adult. Though they may look different, they helped shaping her character as well as her art. When her mother fell sick, Edith had to bear the consequences for the rest of her life; *“who she was, who she no longer was, defined our lives”*. (p. 13) Edith sought refuge in art as she crafted her first sculpture; the boat, that her mother named *“our safe ship”*.

During lockdown, Halit went out to fetch food from his restaurant when he was surprised by strangers who attacked him, beat him to death and stole all the provisions he had in there. Both Edith and Halit sensed the virus had found his way in and started getting ready to face it together; *“Neither of us said what we were thinking – that you’d been badly exposed ... - So, I’ll just get better, then I’ll look after you if we need to, Deal?”* (p.p.143 - 150)

However, the symptoms emerged and the pain increased, Edith described the process of falling sick until death in a tragic way and, every time, admitting her helplessness and her mental struggle to resist and fight for their survival; *“I wondered what it would be like, once we were released from confinement. What kind of couple would we be? Forged, I thought, and strong”*. (p.124)

She went back to her childhood and tried to assure herself that she could go through that once again and be safe as she did with her mother; *“I’d seen frightening things, my mother’s stapled skull; I thought, I can tend to him, manage”*. (p.159) However, the virus was stronger and took over every member in Halit’s body; *“There was nothing I could do but watch you burn, listen to you mumbling and shouting out”* (p.164). As Halit was dying, Edith sensed it and she was deeply tormented by his death. She attempted to console herself thinking out loud: *“When this is done it will all be over. When this is done it will all be*

over”. (p.168) Later on, she discovered the body of Halit and was able to feel “*the entire energy of the room had reversed*” (p.169). To her grief and despair she said: “*Halit had gone and you had come. I let you hold me*” (p.169). She knew she had the virus as well and she accepted that as she believed they would never be apart.

Edith; as all the survivors of the pandemic who lost their loved ones, was angry and in grief, her psyche wounded and no compensation would suffice to cure her soul. Once again, she found refuge in art and made Hecky wherein the traumatic experience is melted down and incorporated with wood and fire;

“*She’s prehistoric oak, tannicly preserved, unearthed from the wetlands in the east. She has a lover with two faces behind her. One is impossible, scorched and tarred, made of rotoring blades that will funnel the wind and rain towards its twin, hastening first his decay, then hers. The other is the face of a man I loved briefly, for ever*”. (p.195)

The memory of Edith and her lover in addition to the million dead in the pandemic has been preserved in the memorial made by her, their names being engraved on its steps, standing as an evidence of a time of crisis and traumatic experiences.

6. CONCLUSION

Burntcoat is a novel set in the middle of crisis and chaos, and stands as a blazing witness to our time; it highlights many powerful and artistic themes including resistance and surviving traumatic events. Sarah Hall elucidated gender and artistic struggle in response to a pressing concern in our time; the pandemic, that speak to all of us in reality. The notion of art and artists forged by crises along with love and resistance to chaos are reinforced in *Burntcoat*. In this novel, Sarah Hall is able to enthrall us though she does not take the virus away nor does she bring back the dead, Sarah Hall stated: “*Like Burntcoat protagonist, I know art can’t really offer a cure...but I had to write this book*”. It is promising indeed to write and read about crises because art can elevate us even if it cannot save us.

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