

COMING UNDONE, REMAINING INVINCIBLE: MEMORY, TRAUMA AND REDEMPTION IN *UNBROKEN*

ANNIE GEORGE

Assistant Professor, PG and Research Department of English
St. Thomas College, Kozhencherry, Pathanamthitta, Kerala

Abstract

The article is directed at understanding the concept of memory within the theoretical framework of trauma, concentrating on the work, *Unbroken* by Laura Hillenbrand, which traces the journey of Louis Zamperini and his wartime experiences, specifically centering on his confinement and torture within the walls of a prison camp in Japan at the time of World War II. The article will aim to identify the presence and play of memory in this war narrative and the effects it has on the central character. However, Zamperini's story does not end there. It goes on to describe how finally he was able to make peace with his past, especially with his tormentor. Examining the work through the lens of logotherapy as propagated by Viktor E. Frankl in his work *Man's Search for Meaning*, the paper arrives at the conclusion that, Louis Zamperini was finally able to find meaning in his suffering, leading to his redemption.

Keywords: war narrative, trauma, memory, logotherapy, meaning of life, redemption.

Introduction

Literature has often been attracted to the darker and painful aspects of human experience, with trauma being a recurring theme in the works of ancient writers to contemporary works of literature. One of the principal genres that depicts traumatic experiences is War Literature. Marilyn Wesley has stated, that for soldiers, "Narrative rendition is an integral component of war" because it not only creates a sense of unity and togetherness but also serves as an "exposition of a special kind of violence" (1-2). The fragmented, chaotic experiences of war often lead soldiers and veterans to try and assimilate their feelings of pain and suffering through the act of writing. Writing of their experiences has allowed survivors, be it soldiers or civilians, to not only reflect on and make sense of their experiences, but to also resist the shunning of trauma voices.

"I'll be an easier subject than Seabiscuit, because I can talk" (410), says Louis Zamperini to the writer of his war memoir, *Unbroken*, Laura Hillenbrand. This remark started off Hillenbrand's

seven-year journey through Zamperini's wartime encounters in her quest to write this book. Zamperini's experiences as a soldier fighting for the U.S. during World War II, spanned across months and had consequences that extended far beyond liminal spaces, and left an indelible and traumatic mark on Zamperini. *Unbroken* is a tale unlike any other, rife with trauma, memory, resistance, resilience and redemption.

Literature has often served as an apt locale for embodying the pain, fear and suffering brought on by war, serving as a painful reminder of the extreme trauma experienced by individuals as a result of conflicts. Nigel Hunt has observed, "The use of literature (novels, poetry) can both support the psychological evidence we obtain regarding the impact of war, and in some circumstances help to develop our understanding. [...] It provides an opportunity to explore responses to war trauma in other times and cultures... (161). This analysis of the book, *Unbroken* attempts to bring forth how the war narrative in Laura Hillenbrand's text portrays and

dives into the trauma of war and the aftermath of these experiences on the psyche of the individual with due attention to memory, in specific traumatic memory.

Trauma, Memory and Redemption

Cathy Caruth in her influential book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, has defined trauma as "... a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (3). In "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History", she has described it as "... an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (181). Shoshana Felman similarly states that trauma is "A shock that creates a psychological split or rupture" (171). Thus, trauma is unequivocally a painful event, either physical, emotional or mental that results in serious psychological effects, after the fact. Louie Zamperini's story as detailed by Laura Hillenbrand in *Unbroken*, is very similar to the literatures that have emerged out of the experiences of war and succeeds at presenting the exact nature of trauma as conveyed by Caruth. The book does not end with a mere narration of the experiences of Zamperini, but also dwells on the aftermath that war had on Zamperini even after his rescue and return to normal life.

For those who have fought in wars and have experienced its different aspects, it becomes a constant, that remains with them forever. Even after the war has physically ended, it lingers on in the mental realm, ravaging the minds of these individuals in the form of memories accumulated throughout the ordeal, embedded in their minds like a festering wound. Memories generated from trauma, lying dormant in the subconscious, may unexpectedly and involuntarily appear in the conscious causing the individual to respond automatically and without

forethought. These may include psychological symptoms in the form of nightmares, flashbacks or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and emotional symptoms like feelings of alienation and seclusion. Hillenbrand has noted, "As bad as were the physical consequences of captivity, the emotional injuries were much more insidious, widespread and enduring" (354). It has been observed and noted that individuals who have partaken in war and its trauma carry many unforgettable and painful memories within. The agony, degradation and vulnerability that war veterans experience remain as a constant reminder of the dehumanizing effects of war. These men and women, even when they return home, where they are supposed to feel secure and loved, still feel threatened and alone. Laura Hillenbrand has noted in relation to this, "Coming home was an experience of profound, perilous aloneness" (357).

The protagonist Louie Zamperini, a World War II veteran is continually hounded by the darkening shadows that hover over him in relation to his experiences as a POW in a Japanese prisoner camp. Though the bildungsroman narrative traces the life of Zamperini from his birth, through his teenage years into the years of his young adulthood, including his dream and training to be a participant in the upcoming Olympics, the unbroken element of the narrative lies in his experiences as a POW in a prison camp in Japan. For some reason or other, he was the target of most of the hatred and violence of the main officer, a Japanese by the name of Mitsuhiro Watanabe, more popularly known among the POWs as the Bird. Though the men were eventually saved and returned home, they were haunted by the memories of their tribulations in the form of flashbacks, dreams, nightmares, with sometimes even the minutest event or object triggering them into a state of hysteria.

Zamperini is rescued and does finally return home, but unfortunately not as his old self. He carries within him the burden of his experiences in the form of memories that often resurface and disturb his normal existence. Though he tries to adjust with and reorient himself into society, it takes more time and effort than expected. War time memories keeps him too fastened to the past, that he feels detached and disconnected from the present moment and place. For the victims, the trials and hardships that they encountered in the midst of war and captivity, become an integral part of their lives, both in states of consciousness and unconsciousness. They feel haunted and hounded by these memories in the form of flashbacks and nightmares and these recollections can be triggered by even the most trivial and ordinary instances, objects or words. According to Judith Herman, "Thus, even normally safe environments may come to feel dangerous, for the survivor can never be assured that she will not encounter some reminder of the trauma. (27)

When Zamperini awakes, screaming in utter horror, haunted by the face of the Bird hovering menacingly over him, he fails to comprehend his nightmarish trauma. It is not only Zamperini who is thrown into utter confusion, Cynthia, his wife, too fails to understand his struggle and the depth and horror of the memories and dreams that trouble him. He is ignorant of the fact that his traumatic memories are gradually undoing him as well as his marital life. Wolfreys has pointed out in relation to this, "The subject of trauma is rendered immobile, unable to move beyond the haunting effects left by trauma, and can only experience in a damaging, repetitive fashion, the disjunctive specters, remains of what is 'nonsymbolizable' (134). It is as if the traumatized victim has become frozen in time, rendering them inadequate and incapable of involving with the present moment or current surroundings. Louie too,

experiences the same many times after his return home. Everyday sounds, movements, objects, sometimes unexpectedly transported him back to the horrors and terrors of his time in Japan, inundating him with the memories of his fearful and terrifying ordeal. The memories are so vivid, that soon, they no longer seem to be mere memories but a reality. Zamperini is thrown into utter confusion between what is real and what is not.

The memories of the torment undergone by war veterans is often so entrenched in their unconscious that they are, at times, rendered incapable of reacting and responding normally to very usual and commonplace events. The experiences have resulted in an injury to the individual's psyche often prompting unnatural and abnormal reactions in very normal and natural situations. To illustrate, Zamperini recounts an incident in which he met a group of friends, all prisoners at the POW camp with him, at a dinner club. They were all sitting together and having a gala time when a waiter placed a plate of white rice before them, "That was all it took. Fred was suddenly raving, furious, hysterical, berating the waiter and shouting with such force that his face turned purple" (354). White rice had become a stark reminder of their time at the POW camp. Nothing would be the same for these men, not even a plate of white rice. Every day, ordinary things rise up as stark reminders of the hurt, torment, and pain endured by these individuals. The ordinary is rendered extraordinary, bringing forth painful memories of their plight. The psychological wounds lying dormant within the soldiers is their pitiful reality. Their emotional pain is heightened by the fact that amidst the comfort and familiarity of their hometowns and families, objects, words, incidents may suddenly lurk out at them, reminding them of the nightmare they had lived through. Zamperini even begins to lose touch with reality, "While sitting at a bar, he heard a sudden loud

sound, perhaps a car backfiring. Before he knew it, he was on the floor, cringing, as the bar fell silent and the patrons stared" (360).

For Zamperini, his traumatic memories are also considerably embodied within his dream that repeatedly haunt him. One dream is linked to his pathological sense of vengeance that gradually begins to build in him. "Murdering the Bird had become his secret, fevered obsession and he had given his life over to it" (370). This became his goal and dream which replaced the goal and dream he had been denied, "Louie had found a quest to replace his lost Olympics. He was going to kill the Bird" (361). Zamperini believed, killing the Bird would free him from the menacing darkness that had filled his life, not realizing that this vengeance had only further enslaved him in darkness.

One night in late 1948, Louie lay in bed with Cynthia beside him. He descended into a dream, and the Bird rose up over him. The belt unfurled, and Louie felt the buckle cracking into his head, pain like lightning over his temple.... Louie raised his hands to the Bird's throat, his hands clenching around it... There was a scream, perhaps Louie's, perhaps the Bird's... Then everything began to alter. Louie, on his knees and with the Bird under him, looked down. The Bird's shape shifted. Louie was straddling Cynthia's chest, his hands locked around her neck. (373)

This dream symbolizes the internal agony that Zamperini carries with him as a result of his exposure to extreme violence and torture at the hands of the Bird. His rage was so great that he began to act out his anger and retribution in real time.

However, Zamperini's story did not end in desperation and futility. Viktor E. Frankl's work titled *Man's Search for Meaning* is a survival literature very much like *Unbroken*, where, in the former, the

protagonist chronicles his experiences as a Holocaust survivor and the latter details the protagonist's experiences as a World War II survivor. Both speak about the horrors of being imprisoned and having to face the severe wrath and violence of merciless oppressors. Beyond these similarities, the two books share a more endearing resemblance, namely that both of these narratives have concluded on a positive note. Frankl was a man who found meaning amid his suffering and has termed this search and discovery for meaning and purpose as logotherapy. He may have had to search the depths for it, but finally he was able to plough it out. Zamperini too experienced the same when he, like Frankl, found meaning and purpose in his suffering. Dr. Frankl in his work proposes that meaning exists only when there is a purpose, stating that, "If there is meaning in life at all, then there must be meaning in suffering" (76).

Dr. Frankl, in the Preface to his book, *Man's Search for Meaning* has noted that many of his patients on the verge of suicide have disclosed to him, that it is often a memory that gives them the will to live on. Frankl refers to these life-saving reminiscences as "... lingering memories worth preserving", as they provided these individuals with a reason to carry on. This ideology contains the central assignment of logotherapy which Frankl has defined as, "... assisting the patient to find meaning in his life" (108). This observation is significant to Zamperini's story, because, though the majority of his memories were turbulent, dissonant and disheartening, he also carried with him a memory that later gave his life a purpose and meaning.

Zamperini's memories are mostly harrowing ones: the 40 plus days at sea without food, the unquenchable thirst for water, the very meagre chance of rescue, the immense torture he was put through at the prison camp and so on. Yet, buried deep beneath all these painful memories, that

endlessly tormented him, there lay one particular memory, that would eventually eradicate all the others, and provide meaning and purpose to his life. He recalls how, as he lay dying on the raft that had been floating through the endless, boundless ocean for days, he had prayed, "If you will save me, I will serve you forever" (Hillenbrand 382). One day, amid all his woes, this particular memory came to the surface. Zamperini, in a moment of desperation and near death had made a declaration, a vow, which he had unwittingly forgotten to keep. However, the enduring and never-ending trauma allowed this memory to eventually come to the forefront, providing him with direction and a goal.

While in the past, countless memories had savagely tormented Zamperini, threatening his very existence, this particular memory gave meaning to his suffering and a reason to live. It was this memory, suddenly awakened in Zamperini, that enabled him to enact what Dr Victor Frankl describes in his book, "We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life when confronted with a hopeless situation..." (116). This memory of Zamperini's hopeless situation and the actions that followed, brought his task into focus, a task that he himself had proposed, specifically to live in the service of God, since God had been faithful to him in his most trying times, giving him a sense of purpose and meaning. Frankl has emphasized the need for such purpose and meaning, "There is nothing in the world, I venture to say, that would so effectively help one to survive even the worst conditions as the knowledge that there is a meaning in one's life" (109). When Zamperini realized he had a task to fulfill, his will to live and survive emerged fiercer than ever. Additionally, though Zamperini may have expected differently from life; he may have envisioned himself as an Olympic runner or a war hero, life seemed to have expected otherwise from him. Life had intended

him to be lost at sea, experience extreme thirst and hunger, suffer the rage of the Bird and be imprisoned in a torturous Japanese prison camp for months. Here we see an instance where the words of Dr. Frankl ring true again, "It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us" (77). Life had given Zamperini a series of experiences, and these experiences in turn shaped the course of his life.

Conclusion

Throughout the work, memory, predominantly traumatic memory, plays a significant role in Louie Zamperini's story, reexamining and reshaping the history of his war experiences. These memories tormented Zamperini for weeks, months and years, even after he returned from the war. However, along with these turbulent memories, there existed a long-forgotten memory that enabled Zamperini to find meaning in his suffering, in turn leading him on to the path of forgiveness and redemption. The memory of his proclamation to God as he lay dying on the life raft provided him with a reason and purpose to continue on. Zamperini had undoubtedly desired much differently from what he actually had to endure, yet, it is these very same unwelcome experiences that enabled him to partake in his specific destiny. Frankl has noted, "Thus, everyone's task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it" (113). For Louis Zamperini, his realization that he must forgive the Bird and live out the rest of his days serving his Saviour, allowed him to achieve a tranquility and serenity long lost from him. "For the first time in five years, the Bird hadn't come into his dreams. The Bird would never come again" (382).

Works Cited

1. Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016.

2. ---."Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History". *Yale French Studies*, no. 79, 1991, pp. 181–192. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930251>
3. Felman, Shoshanna, and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Routledge, 1992.
4. Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Rider, 2008.
5. Hunt, Nigel C. *Memory, War and Trauma*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.
6. Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 2022.
7. Hillenbrand, Laura. *Unbroken*. Harper Collins, 2014.
8. Wesley, Marilyn. "Truth and Fiction in Tim O'Brien's 'If I Die in a Combat Zone' and 'The Things They Carried'". *College Literature*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2002, pp. 1–18. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25112634>. Accessed 22 Aug. 2024.
9. Wolfreys, J. *Introducing Criticism at the Twenty-first Century*. Edinburgh University Press, 2002.