

Dealing with Trauma: A study on Vendela Vida's *The Lovers*

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Abstract

Literature teaches people to cope with the complexities of life by portraying how the characters overcome their traumas. This paper is an attempt to study the novel *The Lovers* by Vendela Vida, primarily focusing on the mental agony of the protagonist, Yvonne. She is a newly widowed old woman who redefines her identity in the aftermath of distressing events that happened in her life. This paper aims to focus not only on the pain of traumatic experiences but also on the ongoing journey of healing and self-discovery. This critical study intends to provide cathartic relief by highlighting human resilience in the face of adversity through the protagonist, Yvonne. Her emotions mirror the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. This study also tries to substantiate that transformation is indispensable to regain a sense of control over one's life after a traumatic loss.

Keywords

Vendela Vida, trauma, healing, cathartic relief, resilience, memory, transformation.

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Vendela Vida, a renowned contemporary American novelist is praised for her intense psychological narratives, which showcase the emotional depth of the characters. Her novel, *The Lovers* (2010) reflects global perspectives by emphasizing the inner lives of the characters through the complexities of human emotions. The protagonist, Yvonne embarks on a lonely trip that she visited during her honeymoon after her husband's demise. In one of her interviews, the author, Vendela Vida shares how she has created such a prominent character, Yvonne by imagining what happens if her life moves astray;

I was finishing this book just after the birth of my second child and the notion that this newborn could one day be estranged and the source of pain for me was also something I feared—and so I made Yvonne's relationship with her daughter an especially fraught and challenging one. Even the vague idea of my husband dying is something that devastates me. So I was tapping into that fear when creating Yvonne, who's fifty-three and a widow, and trying to imagine what it would be like to lose someone after spending half your life with them. (Loughran)

Yvonne is grappling with grief and a sense of emptiness because of her series of traumas. She feels, "The grief fell in on her like a house collapsing" (41). Her thoughts regarding how her husband, Peter was killed resonate on her mental health which is the reason behind her emotional distress. By repeatedly brooding over her traumatic memory hinders her healing process and stops her from moving forward in life. Hence, she tries to overcome it through her resilient attitude by revisiting the same city where she went for honeymoon. In order to find solace she tries to recreate her memories in the cities of Turkey, especially in the cities of Datca and Knidos. In Knidos, she experiences hope after two years of

experiencing trauma;

Now, as she started down the length of the promenade, hope swelled in Yvonne's chest. Hope that this would be the reward for her trip: she would feel the way she felt during their honeymoon, she would remember every conversation, every joke, every breeze, every laugh and silence... She felt she was tracing an unravelled ball of string to its source. (28)

Yvonne feels optimistic about revisiting her memories but it soon fades as she needs time for healing. She is even more confused about how her children have easily moved on, unlike her. She has a ray of hope by sensing that her husband, Peter is still alive in those places. Nevertheless, her inner consciousness hits her, which creates a vacuum in her life. Even the places she revisits are not lovely without him. She feels, "Here with Peter, everything had been lovely. The promenade was lovely....The rain, the feral cats, the keys to their hotel that they'd lost and looked for all day- it was all lovely. But this place, now, was not lovely. She had expected more of her Datca, their Datca" (30). She feels that she becomes old not gradually but immediately because of the people around her and their pointless advice. She lacks her personal space, as if everything in her life is transparent. She is forced to tell unwanted lies, as she is not alone and someone always accompanies her. She carries an aura of negativity and disapproving demeanour all around, even though she is not as such. She fakes herself for the expectations of society and so in this lonely journey, she tries to redefine her identity by letting go of her lamentation. Her traumas remain small around the mountains of Knidos and she finds a trace of herself in this world. She intends to regain her own self by expecting nothing but kindness. As a result, she is exhilarated by her new friendship with Deniz, who along with her husband, Captain

Galip invites her to visit Cleopatra Island. Thus, she desires to be adventurous again and their eagerness to share Yvonne's company resonates with the human spirit of embracing one another. This makes her understand that she is left with a beautiful life even in the face of loss.

She shares with them that her children are doing exceptionally well and they admire her for being a teacher. It instils her to look at the positive aspects of life and realise that her life still holds purpose even after she loses someone with whom she shared her soul. For Yvonne, "Deniz's kindness, her eagerness to share Yvonne's company, was reassuring to her. It felt like a proof that this trip had been a good idea, and that Yvonne needed only to shed her cloak of mourning in order to be who she once was" (61).

Shakespeare's ideology is a testimony to the understanding of the way of life, as it still holds value by transcending the test of time. He comments about the compounding nature of troubles in life by edifying moral values that one should remember in all walks of life. The phrase, "When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions" (Shakespeare 4.5.163). It is undeniably applicable to Yvonne, as she has a cluster of traumas to overcome. She is triggered emotionally whenever she thinks of her daughter, Aurelia. Throughout her life, she treats her two children equally, without any disparity. Her son, Matthew leads a well-accomplished life and earns appreciation for all his endeavours. She feels Matthew is self-sufficient but Aurelia needs her more because of her dipsomaniac nature. She has experienced motherly envy towards other women of her daughter's age. Her urging desire expects her daughter to return from any educational institution or a professional woman who returns home for a vacation, like the expectations of ordinary mothers but she comes from different rehabilitation centres narrating what she has learnt from each. Aurelia comes, "Home from six months in India convinced she had healing powers" (140). She steps, "Off the plane wearing an outfit of yellow silk (which she told them, prevented her from absorbing the negative energy of others) and she wanted to make amends" (140).

She recalls how her husband Peter takes credit for Matthew alone and ignores Aurelia as she brings disgrace to her family's reputation. Instead of distancing herself from her daughter, she maintains an intimate bond after she comes from rehab centres. She seems to be accountable for anything to do with Aurelia. Her hope swells when Aurelia promises her that she has turned sober effectively. Yvonne feels extremely disheartened when she learns about her daughter's deception and transgression, as she sacrifices her morale by stooping too low for material benefits. Nevertheless, she continues to lie in order to protect her from being judged by others.

Yvonne's marriage life coincides with the life of Anna Karenina, who is one of the epoch-making characters in literary history. The quote, "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" (Tolstoy 1). It epitomizes Yvonne's traumas, are diverse and she experiences unhappiness in her own ways. Yvonne's adversities based on

the complexities of her struggles are individualized, which pushes her to fight beyond the horizon to overcome her mental agony.

Yvonne firmly believes that there is a cyclical relationship between grief and lies, as both are intertwined and one is responsible for the other. She doubts whether she leads a meaningful life, which makes her question whether she failed as a mother. She becomes aggravated by brooding over her daughter's situation, which makes her unravel the relationship between the success of marriage life and the success of the children's ethical standards. Her mind swirls in a whirlwind of thoughts, and she tries to decipher the mystery through her conscience by asking; "If a child was not strong, was not happy, did that mean the marriage was not happy? Did the struggles of the child prove the failure of the marriage? Could the two threads ever be entangled?" (139). Even though Aurelia has relapsed from sobriety, Yvonne deliberately condones her prior mistakes because of her unconditional love for her. It is true that distancing from one's mental trauma for a short period of time and taking a break from routine revamps one's mental health. As a result, one can find a solution to the problem with clearer vision, which also quickens the healing process.

Throughout her lonely journey in Turkey, she finds traces of Aurelia through the expressions of her new friends in various situations. This makes her to recall how supportive her daughter was when the family collapsed due to her husband's death. She alone manages everything without stumbling on sorrow by unequivocally supporting her family. She plays a pivotal role by gripping the peace of her family before it falls is evident through the following lines.

And yet it was Aurelia who had been calm. Who could have known that in the face of real tragedy Aurelia would thrive? It was as though now that everyone else was finally living in the realm of passion and intensity with which she had conducted her life, she was at peace. Matthew and Yvonne turned to Aurelia for solace. (222) Yvonne realizes Aurelia has relinquished her identity by shedding her web of deceit. Aurelia has actually turned to sobriety, not after her father's funeral but even before that. Only Yvonne failed to comprehend earlier because of a series of traumas that clung to her. She feels, "Her daughter had changed a long time ago... It was only Yvonne's idea of her that had remained unaltered. She had not opened her eyes to her daughter in years. Aurelia was no longer a broken thing to be tinkered with. She was a woman, a person, and Yvonne needed her" (222-223).

It is certainly true that time heals everything, as it brings forth an opportunity to rectify one's wounds. Yvonne also realises that human connection is significant in the process of healing her trauma, which is why she unintentionally befriends most of the people whom she meets in her new environment. Hence, Yvonne's way of overcoming trauma teaches a life lesson that healing is an ongoing journey, which is not a destination that individuals can reach immediately.

References

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