International Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal, Open Access Journal
ISSN: 2320-4842 (Print) ISSN: 3049-2688 (Online)

ARIMAA NOKKU
ISSN: 2320 - 4842 (P)
ISSN: 3049-2688 (O)

20 ▪ 4 October ▪ December 2026

Published on 14, Jul - Sep 2026 ISSN:2320-4842 (P) 3049-2688 (O)

Trauma and Resurgence: An Assessment of Autonomy in Blaine Harden's Escape from Camp 14

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Abstract

Trauma is a part of human psyche which equips the scars from miseries, mistreatment and failure endured by individuals in different stages of life. Studies on trauma and its victims represent the psychological disruption and its impact on the behavioural pattern. Blaine Harden's *Escape from Camp 14* deals with the life of Shin Dong Hyuk in the labour camp of North Korea. This work precisely records the incidents instigating trauma among people for the political profit. Servitude, famine and economical fluctuation in North Korea derails its residents from a typical life and compels them to travel in the trajectories of trauma. The paper titled "Trauma and Resurgence: An Assessment of Autonomy in Blaine Harden's Escape from Camp 14" is a study on the healing process of trauma victims and thus leads them towards the journey of self-liberation. This study infuses Judith Herman's three stages of Trauma and Recovery to assess the character development in Shin amidst his psychological slip.

Keywords: Trauma, Recovery, Safety, Remembrance and mourning, Reconnection.

Trauma is a collection of physical and psychological distress existing in a person after severe abuse emerging from all spheres of life. It further creates humongous impact in the behaviour of a person, ceases their freedom and cages them into a world of fear, perplexity and pain. This emotional distress destabilises the proper functioning of mind and in turn impacts their pattern of living. The outcome of trauma which inhibits in a person varies in multiple level and each level holds maximum to minimum intensity of emotional outburst. So, mind is significant in instigating trauma in a person, as it holds all the traumatic experiences. The victim revisits or recollects their traumatic experience through dream, flashback or memory. The reason for the emotional outburst may take more time to realise as some trauma is hidden in the unconscious parts. On the basis of trauma and its impacts it is categorised into many types like acute trauma, chronic trauma and complex trauma. But before scientific advancement the open acknowledgement of trauma is referred as a taboo which violates the patriarchal or societal construction and

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hence it is kept hidden. This denial by the society maximises victims in ample amount and keeps the trauma process alive for generation to generation.

Literature in its many productive works discusses the aspects, causes and effects of trauma. Cathy Karuth in *Unclaimed Experiences* accentuates that "trauma is an overwhelming experience that is best represented in a literary text because of the text's ordered and symbolic narrative." Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* discusses about the psychological disruption in shell shock soldiers and presents the realistic portrayal of war trauma through the character of Septimus Warren Smith. Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple* records the consequence of domestic trauma experienced by Celie and further recounts the influence of trauma in her life. Freud terms these experiences as Post – Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which acts as a pathway to examine the multiple facets of trauma. He highlights the psychological anguish in a trauma victim and connects past events as a source for their character development. Literature, thus in all forms of art records the impact of trauma in all domains of life ranging from political to domestic.

The traumatic events in a victim's life leave an eternal scar which forever stuck them in the loop of healing. Healing or recovery from trauma is a tedious task for the victims as the process draws them back to the memory lane which recounts the traumatic events. As the world is striving and developing in the advanced technological era, Blaine Harden in his non fictional narrative, *Escape from Camp 14* takes the readers to the world of servitude, oppression and despotism in North Korea. This work chronicles the realistic experiences of Shin Dong Hyuk, who survives the inhumane deeds of North Korean government under a totalitarian reign. His life in South Korea and America is filled with his existential ponderings and becomes an eternal rigmarole of trauma. This Trauma occupies the happy space of Shin and clutches him from recovery. Revival from his existing trauma is limited by the scars, which emerge from his pain of enduring unbearable victimhood. Political force, parental betrayal and excessive hard labour instigate trauma in Shin and restricts him from his exploratory life.

The solution for trauma is sowed by Judith Herman in her work *Trauma and Recovery*. Judith Herman is a psychiatrist, researcher and teacher, and renders her service to uplift the life of trauma victims. Her research aims to solve the post traumatic disorder in trauma victims and explores the abuses endured in domestic and public spheres. Herman's research work concentrates on the history of trauma, type of traumas and recovery from trauma. She yields a hope for revival and confers motion to the passiveness in all trauma victims. This paper examines three stages of recovery by Herman which she offers in her work *Trauma and Recovery*. Safety, Remembrance and mourning and Reconnection are the three stages in a recovery process formulated by Herman to eradicate traumatic wounds. It evaluates the intensity of trauma which eliminates hope, autonomy, love, harmony and familial bond. The paper unwraps the prominence of trauma in assessing the survival competency of a trauma victim.

The first stage of Herman's recovery process emphasises Safety in all trauma victims. She states that "for no other therapeutic work can possibly succeed if safety has not been adequately secured" (159). The assurance of safety in any forms of protection creates a space for a trauma victim to enter into the process of healing. The protection a victim obtains from the new environment assures their survival rate in a post traumatic era. Shin after his escape steps into the process of healing during his stay in South Korea but faces tremendous setbacks in this journey due to the invasion of his past traumatic events. This dilemma of Shin is precisely evident from the following lines of Harden as, "'Sometimes Shin sees himself through the eyes of his new self, and sometimes he sees himself through the eyes of the guards in the camp', said Andy. 'He is kind of here and kind of there"' (Escape from Camp 14 209). His initial days of freedom in South Korea and America is filled with post traumatic stress which hinders him to survive in a new competitive world which is very much different from his caged mother land.

Family is the first place to assure safety to every child as it nurtures a child with all values, provides a protective shelter and brings them up with compassion and love. Shin, the protagonist of *Escape from Camp 14* endures pain and sufferings inside the labour camp till his escape. The generational error pushes him and his family to reside in the cruel and brutal milieu of North Korea. The bond between Shin and his mother stands exceptional from

other conventional motherhood as harden enumerates as, "When she came back at midday and found nothing to eat, she would become furious and beat her son with a hoe, a shovel, anything that was close at hand. Some of the beatings were as violent as those he later received from the guards" (22). The motherly care and touch are void in his childhood days which is essential to uplift Shin from all traumatic experiences. This further pave way for the construction of vicious and nefarious instincts in him. The safety which is empty in his family creates major influence in the character development of Shin. Dr Stephen Porges explains prominence of safety in a trauma victim in his interview for *The Guardian* as,

Creating a sense of safety is essential for helping trauma survivors shifting from these states back to the ventral vagal state, where healing can occur. When people feel safe their nervous system can relax, allowing them to access the part of their brain responsible for higher – order thinking, emotional regulation and social connection. This is crucial for processing traumatic memories and integrating them in a way that reduces their emotional charge.

Shin and fellow inmates inside the camp have no assurance on safety and are constantly punished by their dear leader and his followers. On the contrary his life in America ignites the healing process as safety, protection and more significantly motherly care cures his trauma. "Soon after Shin arrived in California, Kyung Soo Chung, a pastor's wife born in Seoul, began cooking for him, mothering him and monitoring his adjustment to American life" (Harden 210). The void space in Shin's life and the lacking affection from motherhood triggers his trait to follow the footsteps of vices. His transformative journey begins with Kyung and her family, as Shin, for the first time encounters motherly care. This new bond ensures safety and assists him to heal from his traumatic past.

Remembrance and mourning, the next stage in the recovery process permits the victim to revisit their traumatic past. This assists the victims to confront a problem and further imbibes courage to acknowledge the traumatic events as a means to revive hope for a better future. The significance of this stage is stated by Herman as follows, "Avoiding the traumatic memories leads to stagnation in the recovery process" (176). This step instils courage to face and overcome the incidents which instigates trauma in a person. Initially Shin in his labour camp live in the dearth of liberty to express his thoughts as a consequence of the tough laws of the country and it prevents people from mourning or worrying about their miseries. Survival instincts take a prime role in the mind of every inmate and thus excludes them from realising and identifying their traumatic traits. This lack of space turns people's concentration from recovery to survival. Harden expresses it as,

His blinkered existence kept him focused on finding food and avoiding beatings. He was indifferent to the outside world, to his parents and to the history of his family. As much as he believed in anything, he believed the guards' preaching about original sin. As the offspring of traitors, his one chance at redemption – and his only way of averting starvation - was hard work. (84)

The continuous yearning for food occupies major space of Shin's mind by making freedom and rebelliousness hidden in a corner. Rather than assessing their traumatic state the main purpose of their life revolves around acquiring more food and obeying the self – oriented norms of their authoritarian government.

Herman's coping mechanism emphasises the expression of emotion in trauma victims to speed up the recovery process. But Shin in the labour camp lacks the space to explore and recover from his trauma. As emotion is the base factor in determining the stretch of trauma in an individual it must be transformed into an expression to assure the feeling of protection and validation. This open acknowledgment prevents trauma victims from substance abuse, compulsive behaviour and emotional dysregulation. After his escape from North Korea Shin undergoes severe behavioural change due to his experience from painful traumas He mourns about his traumatic past and refuses to relieve from his traumatic events. His stay in America and South Korea provides him ample chances to revisit his past and to relieve from it. Shin in the beginning refuses to acknowledge the traumas experienced in his mother land. But his new place creates an amicable environment to remember and mourn his trauma. As a result of this revisit, the hope for recovery increases in the life of Shin. The proper validation which Shin gives to his bitter past permits the gentle breeze of freedom in his life.

Reconnection, the final step in the recovery

process of Herman stresses the need to build new relationship and a better future. This stage emulates a path of hope and enforces the victim to march towards a fruitful future. After revisiting and mourning the traumatic past of victims they reclaim a world of their desire different from their traumatic world. The intrinsic and extrinsic traits of the victims undergo a transformation and reconnects them with real and better environment. Herman accentuates the prominence of this stage as, "By the third stage of recovery the survivor has regained some capacity for appropriate trust … She has also regained the ability to feel autonomous while remaining connected to others; she can maintain her own point of view and her own boundaries while respecting those of others" (205). Shin after acknowledging his past events encounters many genuine relationships during his stay in America. The base for his future is laid on by his connection with many people from LiNK, an organisation supporting North Korean defectors. Shin's romantic relationship with Harim Lee shows sign of reconnection and trust developing in him. Still trauma overshadows Shin's new life as he refuses to discuss about his traumatic past. But the new environment relentlessly supports him in creating a hopeful future.

Shin after many years in the recovery process, sets himself free from the choking clutches of his trauma. He prepares himself to face the competent world and destroys all his horrendous memories. Herman's third stage is visible through the alterations which Shin makes in his life. He transmutes his life to enjoy the basic delights kept forbidden in North Korea. Shin's speech in the Korean American Pentecostal church marks the outcome of the recovery process. Harden presents his live observation on Shin in *Escape from Camp 14* as, "Shin's speech astonished me. Compared to the diffident, incoherent speaker I had seen six months earlier in Southern California, he was unrecognizable. He had harnessed his self – loathing and used it to indict the state that had poisoned his heart and killed his family" (222). The safe environment, remembrance and mourning drag a trauma victim to the process of reconnection with real world and enables the will power to cross the sea of distress. A new path of rebirth is evident in Shin's life after facing myriad miseries and torments. He sets a control from his traumatic past and fights with it to survive in a new world void of severe authoritarianism and slavery.

Trauma in a person causes an everlasting scar and latibulates them from tasting the richness prevailing in the world. The cornucopia of worldly pleasures remains in a cage while trauma invents a black hole and sinks people into miseries. The significance of recovery from trauma is emphasised through Herman's concept as she creates a world of hope for trauma survivors to shuffle their life from pain to ecstasy. The findings of the paper uphold the idea of restoring power and control through the process of recovery. Rather than dwelling in the past Herman's three stages transmutes the brutal scars of trauma into an evolutionary path of rejuvenation. Shin after his defection from North Korea gradually enters himself into the recovery process with the help of new good people in his life. This process of repossession overpowers trauma and sculpts him into a competent individual.

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