



Research Paper

Communicating Disability through Art in Mosteghanemi's Memory in the Flesh and Chaos of the Senses

Amel Said Houari

Department of English. Faculty of Foreign Languages. Abu Bakr Bel Kaid University. Tlemcen.

SUMMARY: While there is a diligent research pertaining to the phenomenon of using art to heal certain psychological disorders, healing physical disability through art received less academic attention. This paper considers the importance of using art therapy to communicate the experience of physical disability. With reference to Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh and Chaos of the Senses*, it is argued that artistic production is used as a means of coping with the traumatic memories of war disability. Through applying Aaron Beck's theory of art therapy to post-colonial literature, the paper aims to assess the way artistic creation is used by the war disabled characters in both narratives to create a new type of ability out of physical disability. The paper first constructs a theoretical framework by providing a brief history of depicting physical disability through art. Then, it focuses on painting and photography as expressive methods used by the disabled characters in both narratives to overcome and narrate disability. The paper comes to the conclusion that artistic production by physically disabled characters is a compensation mechanism for the mutilated part of the body. It is a call for giving more academic attention to the theory of art therapy in reading and analyzing the contemporary Algerian novel.

KEYWORDS: Disability ; Art therapy ; Memory ; Trauma.

Received 28 March, 2019; Accepted 08 April, 2019 © the Author(S) 2019.

Published With Open Access At www.Questjournals.Org

I. INTRODUCTION

War disability is an inevitable consequence of revolutions. Besides death and massive destruction, war leaves painful scars on the bodies of those who take part in it. In the aftermath of the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962), disability stood as one of the most ravaging traces of war. Yet, despite of its pervasive presence in life, it occupies an insignificant place in literature. This paper addresses the portrayal of war disability in Algerian literature. It aims at revealing the way art therapy is used as a therapeutic method to heal the psychological impact of war disability. Ahlam Mosteghanemi was the first Algerian female novelist to place the war-imputed and disfigured body at the center of her works. Both *Memory in the Flesh* (1985) and *Chaos of the Senses* (1998) interweave the themes of war disability and the use of artistic creation to overcome their personal deceptions and national failures.

Memory in the Flesh is the story of Khalid; an orphan, one-armed, ex-militant Algerian freedom fighter who becomes an exiled well-known painter after independence. In *Chaos of the Senses*, Mosteghanemi continues the story using a female narrative voice and extends the narrative to the beginnings of the Algerian civil war. Zian is a journalist who receives a random bullet in the riots of October 1991. The bullet causes a serious injury which results in paralysis. Consequently, Zian faces a fate similar to Khalid's. This thematic association between the two narratives emphasizes the damaging physical and psychological impact of disability.

The paper starts with a brief historical context of depicting disability through art. It provides an overview of the field of art therapy and its application in treating physical disability. Then, it examines the realization of physical impairment as a source of inspiration in *Memory in the Flesh* and *Chaos of the Senses* can be situated within the larger historical and cultural changes in attitudes towards disabled people. Using Cathy Malchiodi's account of art therapy, the paper demonstrates the way disabled characters seek refuge in artistic production to cope with the traumatic memories of amputation. The paper also explains the process of recovery through art.

II. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF DEPICTING DISABILITY THROUGH ART

Disability puts into question the role the impaired person can play in life after the traumatic incident of amputation or paralysis. Surprisingly, both Khalid and Zian opt for artistic creation as a way to express and cope

with disability. Art in the two narratives is a powerful healing tool. Cathy Malchiodi states that it is “widely acknowledged that art expression is a way to visually communicate thoughts that are too painful to put into words”. Art therapy is based on the idea that non-verbal communication is more effective in some cases of psychic disorders. This paper accordingly argues that non-verbal artistic forms permit a healthier co-existence with physical impairment and help healing the traumatized memory.

The use of art as a therapeutic tool is not a recent phenomenon. Illness has consistently been part of life throughout the history of mankind. Man therefore sought different methods of healing. Since ancient times, art was used both as a preventive and reparative strategy to cure different mental health problems. Accounts of art therapy often trace its origins back to the 1930s and 1940s. Yet, it actually goes back to the ancient Greek and Egyptian civilizations. The mid twentieth century is the time when art therapy started to be regarded as serious clinical work having scientific bases. But as a practice, its roots go deeper in history.

Art therapy has various and sometimes conflicting definitions. It describes the therapeutic application of image-making. Adrian Hill explains the psychic process involved in using art as a therapeutic method. He says that “The value of art therapy is completely engrossing the mind ... and in releasing the creative energy of the frequently inhibited patient, enabling (him) to build strong defenses against (his) misfortune”. Margaret Naumberg points out that art therapy relies on “releasing the unconscious by means of spontaneous art expression ... the images produced are a form of communication between the patient and the therapist”. Both Hill and Naumberg emphasized the healing potential of art. Their approaches to art therapy had been enforced by later developments in the field.

These recent developments include the work of other psychiatrists and art therapists. Malchiodi provides a comprehensive definition of art therapy. She says that:

Art therapy is the application of the visual arts and the creative process within a therapeutic relationship, to support, maintain and improve the psychological, physical, cognitive and spiritual health of the individuals of all ages. Art therapy is based on current and emerging research that art making is a health-enhancing practice that positively impacts the quality of life.

Malchiodi's approach to art therapy is based on the positive changes that art may bring to the lives of psychologically distressed individuals. Malchiodi is a pioneer in emphasizing that art can be used as a therapeutic method to cure physical and spiritual troubles not only cognitive and psychological distress.

The aims of art therapy vary according to the patient's psychic condition and the intentions of the therapist. Regardless of the sophistication of the artistic product, the act of painting or drawing serves in releasing negative energy. Creating images gives insight to the intrinsic impulses and drives of the distressed individual. As such, it strengthens the aspects of exploring the distress and sharing the experience of living with it. This helps enduring the painful psychological effects of illness and disability. Besides, art therapy provides an opportunity for a deeper understanding of the self. Davis Edwards says that “Creativity provides the means of coming to terms with, or finding symbolic solutions for the internal tensions from which all human beings suffer with varying degrees”. Thus, the process of using art for therapeutic ends differs from one individual to another, depending on their medical and emotional needs.

Because most forms of communication are verbal, non-verbal art assumes an almost invisible place in human exchange of ideas and information. Words are the most useful means of communicating with the world. Yet, some emotional experiences are beyond the communicative power of words. Most of the time, disabled people face difficulties in verbally expressing the feelings resulting from their physical condition such as terror, trauma, frustration, neglect, despair and powerlessness. In this case, art therapy offers an alternative medium of sharing emotional experiences. It integrates the communicative function and the therapeutic effect and takes the patient beyond the realm of words to other vaster and more expressive worlds. This new perception of the art produced by disabled people paved the way to a new conception of the relationship between art and health. Therefore, the portrayal of the art of disabled people in literature assumed more importance as a means of narrating disability.

Colin Barnes claims that “For centuries, impairment and suffering have been seen as a necessary prerequisite for creativity and artistic endeavor”. Barnes theorizes disability from an interdisciplinary perspective. Situating the disabled person within a cultural rather than a merely medical context creates new possibilities of identification. Thus, the implementation of art as a therapeutic method facilitates the socialization of disabled individuals by allowing them to participate in the formation of society's cultural identity.

Art therapy may also help to change societal attitudes towards disabled people. It increases not only their self-awareness but even social acceptance. People tend to prefer productive social categories and regard the dependent ones with an eye of hostility and even rejection. Art accordingly, provides disabled people with the means to social integration as it implies exchange of ideas, viewpoints and aspirations. On the individual level, art helps the disabled person to overcome depression and find a sense of well-being. Creativity leads to shame-reduction and generates feelings of self-worth.

III. DISABILITY AS AN INSPIRATIONAL DIVERGENCE IN MEMORY IN THE FLESH AND CHAOS OF THE SENSES

The realization of physical impairment as a source of inspiration in *Memory in the Flesh and Chaos of the Senses* can be situated within the larger historical and cultural changes in attitudes towards disabled people. The dynamic development of both art therapy and disability studies in the late twentieth century gave rise to many initiatives of artistic and cultural production by disabled individuals. Khalid's experience in *Memory in the Flesh* and Zian's interest in art in *Chaos of the Senses* can be situated within this context. After the amputation of his left arm, Khalid devotes the right one to painting, Zian however opts for art as a resistance mechanism to challenge the political system as this latter had a hand in his disability. Art in both narratives becomes a way to challenge disability and achieve a better understanding of the self.

Memory in the Flesh portrays the way painting and drawing could strengthen Khalid's communication through artistic creation. Enhancing his motor activity played a significant psychological role as it helped releasing negative emotions. At a therapeutic formative level, Khalid's fine-art activity served to release his creative potential leading to a feeling of independence and self-worth. Painting helped shaping new personality features such as depth, strength and emotional maturity.

Khalid's first attempts to paint were in fact attempts to regain the feeling of self-worth. He started his first painting "Nostalgia" to regain self-confidence and rebuild a healthy relationship with memory. Overcoming feelings of helplessness, worthlessness and weakness after amputation was the primary aim of Khalid. In fact, Khalid never dreamt of becoming a celebrity or an "artistic phenomenon" as he admits:

I want to see Dr. Kapotski once again. He was the only doctor who advised me to opt for art. I want to tell him that his prophecy came true as I really no longer need him. I want to show him what I could do with my single right arm, he who never showed me what he did with my left. He is the only one absent in this auditorium where no Arab artist has exhibited his art works before.

This reflects feelings of pride and re-gained self-confidence. Art could heal the psychological wounds caused by physical disability. Khalid's journey to art started with an advice from his doctor after the end of medical treatment and physical rehabilitation sessions. The doctor was aware of the feelings of hopelessness and diffidence that accompany amputation surgeries. With an expert's eye, he diagnosed Khalid psychological suffering and gave him a ready-made recipe not only to recovery but to success as well.

Healing disability through art in Khalid's case takes place via re-exposure to the traumatic event. This confrontation makes the externalization of disability's inner impact possible. Drawing and painting are non-verbal forms of trauma narratives. After amputation, brushes and white canvas became Khalid's vehicle for a cognitive reframing of his past experiences. William Steel proposes that "externalizing the story into a visual representation of the elements of the traumatic experience promotes safety and contributes to a successful psychiatric intervention". This healing process for Khalid took three forms:

First, re-exposure to past memories helps bringing the experience of losing an arm into consciousness. Constant recalling of the amputation experience facilitates the normalization of this event through making it similar to the memories of every day experiences. Khalid describes the process of painting as both sickness and recovery: "Colors were suddenly taking the colour of my memory, turning to a bleeding which was difficult to stop". He becomes familiar with his wounds through painting. When putting colors on the canvas he is in fact bleeding his memory. Painting in *Memory in the Flesh* is a process of learning how to confront disability and triumph over it.

Steel states that drawing is one way to "provide a link between traumatic memories and their retrieval into consciousness". After that, the experience of disability is translated into a painting which reintegrates the past memories of normalcy and the present state of disability and pain. Khalid declares: "I felt happy and excited when painting 'Nostalgia'. As a beginner, my ambitions were limited to impressing my doctor, or impressing myself on the first place, and winning the challenge with a single arm". More than a physical condition, disability is a challenge. This visible projection of the self gives comfort to the disabled artist. For instance, Khalid's unconscious preoccupation with bridges is both a form of compensation for his lost arm and connection with his lost city. He declares that when painting bridges, he was in fact painting himself.

Similarly, Zian in *Chaos of the Senses* unconsciously attempts to heal his traumatized memory through artistic creation. The trauma of paralysis was experienced through the body. Thus, he believes that healing should take place through the body. Involving his disabled body in the production of artistic beauty reduces the feelings of shame and embarrassment resulting from having a disfigured body. When Zian meets Hayat for the first time, he introduces himself by saying "I am a painter and a photographer. I love my job because it allows me to use the only arm I still have to do the things I still admire." Zian justifies his passion for painting and photography by their ability to bring his traumatic experiences back to life. The memories of violence create a desire to capture the scenes of oppression, injustice and massive killing. Zian's camera becomes his instrument of self-realization and means to avenge the loss of his arm.

Because his paralyzed arm was always hidden in his jacket, the reader gets informed of Zian's disability only when he reveals his secret to Hayat. Reactivating traumatic memories through narrating them to Hayat serves at modifying them. As this happens in an emotional context, fear and anxiety are decreased and Zian is able to relive the traumatic events in a safe uncontrolled atmosphere. This gives the narrative a strong healing aspect.

Narrating disability helps Zian to join the fragments of his story and give them a new coherent meaning. This helps to diminish negative psychological responses. Talking about the trauma of becoming disabled is a process of reconciliation with the self and the world. It creates a kind of inner order and places disability in a generalized context of everyday life. Through narration, Zian realizes that avoidance of the disturbing memories of disability and its devastating impact is no longer possible. He feels the necessity of confronting the past to resolute its unsolved mystery. Two years later, Hayat publishes a novel in which she collects the fragments of Zian's story. The publication of the story means that he is no longer a victim of disability but a survivor.

Besides, Zian plays an active role in his recovery. The use of the camera and the self-conscious application of colors and shapes are a form of visual language through which emotions are conveyed. He communicates with the world via capturing vivid scenes and representing emotions on photos rather than words. He does so with a journalist's instinct and a nationalist's desire to participate in writing the history of his country, especially as Algeria was transcending one of the darkest periods in its history; the civil war era.

Accordingly, visualization reactivates Zian's negative emotions. The confusion he feels before taking photos and the hesitation he shows before telling his story to Hayat reflect the absence of a clear vision. Art thus awakens memory. Narration and visualization are two therapeutic means that help the disabled artist to find a way of managing traumatic memories. Once manageable, the victim of trauma is in control of the painful memories rather than being just in a reactive position. This process of recovery through writing, Steel argues, is based on a cognitive transformation from the belief that disability has ruined the victim and left him no choices to the alternative idea of removing those emotions and experiences through art. Steel calls this process cognitive reframing.

Similarly, story-telling in *Memory in the Flesh* is also used as a kind of psychotherapy. In trauma theory, suffering raises again when confronted with traumatic memories. Daily confrontation with past experiences through writing serves the ends of exposure and reconciliation. Malchiodi employs the term 'scriptotherapy' to describe the healing power of narration. Verbal art forms enable the disabled artist to obtain the power to shape reality. Telling the story from his own perspective gives him an equal position to non-disabled people.

Complete spontaneous artistic expression enables Khalid and Zian to transcend trauma. Dhaur Taragi maintains that "During the process of creation itself, the healing can occur. There is a range of benefits and outcomes of creative production, predominantly the ability to facilitate letting go the repressed emotions and feelings that are stored in the disabled body."

Both Khalid and Zian suffer from perpetual images of emotional shock and physical impairment since childhood. Re-exposure to these images through writing helps to re-activate the left side of the brain leading to a vivid emotional involvement with them. Khalid calls this process of seeking cure in writing about painful memories "A state of waiting for few words to come back to life, to transcend silence to narration, oblivion to remembrance, and death to life."

IV. THE PROCESS OF RECOVERY THROUGH ART

In *Witness to Violence*, Richard Pynoos explains the process of recovery through art. He says that "Drawing provides an externalization of negative emotional experiences through the motor actions which help the victim move from a passive (internal) involvement with trauma to an active (external) control of those experiences." Khalid in *Memory in the Flesh* and Zian in *Chaos of the Senses* are the embodiment of this externalization process. Khalid admits to Hayat that 'Apology'; the painting in which he represents Catherine's face, was no more than an attempt to overcome the old complexes of the past. As such, energy is no longer spent to avoid remembering the experience of disability and its negative effects but rather to co-exist with it and turn it into another kind of ability.

As to the choice of a non-verbal art form, Steel explains this by saying that "The traumatic experience of losing an arm is encoded in images because it is a sensory experience rather than a solely cognitive one." When narrating disability, Khalid describes the traumatic experience in the form of a set of scenes. His vivid descriptions of the battlefield, Si Tahar's unsteady voice, the two bullets that targeted his arm, and the dead and injured soldiers all contribute to convey the intensity and difficulty of the day that constituted a turning point in his life. The visual recollections automatically lead to a visual artistic production.

Yet, Khalid does not produce exact copies of those scenes in his paintings. However, photography enables Zian to capture the exact image with all its details. This difference between the two art forms entails a difference in the process of recovery. Healing in the two cases occurs differently. Khalid explains this saying

that "A painter is not a photographer capturing images from reality. A painter's camera is rather an inner one, hidden inside him in a place that he himself might ignore. That's why painters never paint with their eyes but with their imagination and memory.

Khalid finds in Constantine's bridges enough symbolism to embody all the painful scenes engraved in his memory. However, Zian's interest in politics directs him towards an art form that constitutes a form of political resistance. Bridges witness Khalid as a child, an orphan, a freedom-fighter, and a disabled artist. However, Zian targets the scenes of violence both to accomplish his mission as a journalist and to prove his ability to challenge disability and capture high-quality photos using a single hand.

Encounter with art represents a turning point in the disabled characters' lives. Mosteghanemi describes Khalid's last visit to his doctor as a moment of divine revelation. It constituted Khalid's first step to transcend the trauma of becoming disabled to start a new life as an exiled disabled artist. Zian similarly sees photography as "an act of rebirth" not just a means to make a living.

Concern with details reveals a process of artistic and personal maturity. Malchiodi states that "Drawing and painting provide a visual focus on details that encourages the victim to give the story a 'language' which helps diminishing reactivity and anxiety to those memories". When producing a detailed painting of Constantine's bridges, Khalid becomes less reactive on an emotional level. Zian approves the same feelings of relaxation through externalization when his photos turn to be prize winners. Zian says that "The ages of chivalry went away. Knights betrayed us in life. That's why we try to create our heroes today on paper". Artistic creation for Zian creates a match between the past and the present. It makes daily deceptions more conceivable and acceptable. This may be explained by a process of normalization that occurred as a result of frequent violent encounters.

The visual focus on details in both painting and photography allows the disabled artist to reduce the impact of the psychologically disturbing memories. For this reason, at the beginning Khalid was painting just to overcome the feelings of powerlessness and depression that accompanied amputation. Art was his escape and sole refuge. With the realization of many works of art, he could regain his psychological balance and positive self-esteem. The consequent feelings of pride and self-confidence initiated the second phase of the disabled artist's career.

Socialization through art is one of the basic objectives of disability art therapy. Barbara Knill refers to the objective fact that "Artistic production by disabled individuals becomes an effective tool of social inclusion". For Khalid, reintegration in society is achieved through the success of his art exhibition in Paris. She describes that day as he says:

Now, after all those long years, I no longer care about proving anything to anyone. I just want to live for my secret dreams, to spend the rest of my life in asking the questions that seemed a luxury in the past, not allowed for the youth, and for the disabled freedom-fighter I were, may be because that past was not the right time for details. It was a collective time and we had to spend it together. It was the time of great issues, great slogans, and great sacrifices, a time at which no one cared about discussing details and marginal issues.

Caring about details and marginal issues is the result of feminine presence in Khalid's life. His attention is no longer focused just on his physical disability. Finding a new object of emotional engagement rather than the disabled body adds more colors to the picture that was in the past a mere representation of an ex-freedom fighter's wounds, exile and physical impairment.

Khalid's love for Hayat initiates not only a new phase in his artistic career but also a phase of reconciliation with the past. That strong emotional bond changes Khalid's self-image as a victim. Consequently, the aim of Khalid's continuous attempts to capture the essence of Constantine changes. The memories of violence, injustice and oppression that lurk around every corner of Constantine are conquered by feelings of longing and love. As such, Khalid ceases to contemplate and retreats to bitter reflections. As he meets Hayat, his art takes a more personal dimension. Art has the ability to heal some of his deep wounds and restore balance to his life after the damaging impact of disability.

In Neurolinguistic terms, painting and writing enable Khalid to use both sides of the brain. Neurolinguists propose that the right side is spatial and visual and the left is verbal. This left side can be constrained by logical and rational order of words. The right side offers different complexities of expression, often in the preconscious. Neurolinguistics offers the explanation as to why art is the only expressive tool available for Khalid to transcend the trauma of becoming disabled. Malchiodi explains in cognitive terms how art facilitates the healing process:

The way memory is stored is also shedding light on why art therapy may be helpful to those who are traumatized. There are two types of memory: Explicit memory is conscious and is composed of facts, concepts and ideas and implicit memory is sensory and emotional and is related to the body's memories.

Khalid's and Zian's liberation of their sensory memory through painting and photography allows them to be relieved from the emotional burden of being disabled. The painful impact of disability is often communicated symbolically. Thus, bridges are Khalid's meditative tool and photos are Zian's gate to reveal the

truth to the world. The cognitive and narrative approaches to art therapy reveal that engagement in painting is an important modality in trauma intervention. Through art, Khalid and Zian become actively involved in their own healing. Artistic production serves as a container of all the pain, anger and worries that trouble them.

V. CONCLUSION

The tools used in artistic production are vehicles of emotional expression. Art in the case of physical impairment is a compensation for the lost arm. It is the way the disabled body releases a voice that testifies the traumatic experience of disability. Reacting with an act of creativity is a reproduction and reconciliation with painful realities. It permits the disabled artist to overcome disability and trauma with art. The ability to turn painful memories into a narrative empowers the disabled person's self-esteem. Within the framework of art, Khalid and Zian develop an aesthetic capacity to retrieve painful memories as a means to probe deeper into the self and achieve a higher sense of self-awareness. Within their auto-treatment, Khalid and Zian apply their notion in art therapy to their healing journey.

Through representing the positive impact of artistic expression on healing the wounds of physical disability, *Memory in the Flesh and Chaos of the Senses* open the door for new debates in both art and disability studies. Khalid and Zian become the embodiment of the prophetic disabled artist. They create masterpieces using a single hand and narrate disability as no other artist has done before.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Barns, Colin. *Effecting Change: Disability, Culture and Art*. Liverpool UP, 2003.
- [2]. Edwards, Davis. *Art Therapy*. Harvard UP, 2004.
- [3]. Hill, Adrian. *What is Art Therapy*. Elsevier, 2004.
- [4]. Knill, Barbara. *Minstrels of the Soul*. Palmerston Press, 1995.
- [5]. Pynoos, Richard. *Witness to Violence*. Routledge, 2001.
- [6]. Steel, William. *Using Drawing in Short Term Trauma Resolution*. Pergamon P, 2005.
- [7]. Malchiodi, Cathy. *A Handbook of Art Therapy*. Guilford P, 2003.
- [8]. Malchiodi, Cathy. *Expressive Therapies: History, Theory and Practice*. Routledge, 1996.
- [9]. Malchiodi, Cathy. *Expressive Therapies: History, Theory and Practice*. Routledge, 1996.
- [10]. Mosteghanemi, Ahlam. *Chaos of the Senses*. Dar Al Adab, 1998.
- [11]. Mosteghanemi, Ahlam. *Memory in the Flesh*. trans, Baria Ahmar. The American University in Cairo P, 1998.
- [12]. Naumberg, Margaret. *An Introduction to Art Therapy*. Routledge, 2002.
- [13]. Taragi, Dhau. *Expressive Art Therapy: The Power of Creative art expression*. PACEA P, 2013.

Amel Said Houari" *Communicating Disability through Art in Mosteghanemi's Memory in the Flesh and Chaos of the Senses*" *Quest Journals Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science* , vol. 07, no. 3, 2019, pp. 42-47