

Memory, Trauma, and Self-Reconciliation in Neil Simon's *Jake's Women*

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Abstract: *Departing from the conventions of the realistic theater, Jake's Women is an expressionistic drama focusing on the inner world of a middle-aged writer—a man who is especially dependant on the women in his life: his sister, his deceased wife, his current wife, his daughter, and his psychoanalyst. (Susan Koprince)*

America's one of the most celebrated and successful playwrights, Marvin Neil Simon's play *Jake's women* on the surface level, is a humouristic play. However, its true subject is the psychological process of emotional recovery and self-reconcilement attained through humour. Simon presents Jake, the protagonist of the play, as a writer who faces conflicts between realities versus delusions. Jake uses his career as a means of escape from acknowledging the fact that his marriage is falling apart. He summons seven significant women of his life in his imaginations to cope with the mournful reality. Jake is clung to the past, haunted by the memories and paralyzed in moving forward. Humour is one of the tools that can be used to counter trauma. Humour was the cure for Jake's mental struggles and the pathway to lead a conflict-free life. It restores sanity, helping people to make peace with painful recollections, to recover from the trauma and to reunite with happiness not through others but through one's own real self. This article explores how memory, which often results in trauma, is associated with rationality of an individual and demonstrates how humour serves as a path for self-reconciliation.

Keywords: Marital estrangement, Dramatic dialogue, Psychological, Symbolic significance, Complexities of human grief.

I. INTRODUCTION

Neil Simon was born on 4th July, 1927, at The Bronx, New York. He was raised in a Jewish household which according to the critics, was reflected in some of his works like *Barefoot in the Park*, and *The Odd Couple*, yet his works were universally appealing. His parents

faced financial struggles due to The Great Depression. Simon, in one of his interviews, revealed that his parents had a troubled marriage which is why he incorporated a lot of humorous dialogues and farce into his works, as he wanted people to laugh. His notable works are *Come Blow Your Horn*, *The Odd Couple*, and *Brighton Beach Memoirs*. He has won four Tony Awards, Mark Twain Prize for American humour and a Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Many of his plays were made into successful movies which reflect his tremendous talent in writing. Between 1965 and 1980, his plays hit more than 9000 performances. Published in the year 1992, *Jake's Women* is known for its blend of humour with deep emotions. The play was also adapted into a movie in 1996. The play is set in New York in the 1980s. It centres on the character Jake, a writer who struggles with psychosis. Jake creates his own world, filled with imaginative conversations with the women of his life, such as his deceased wife, his distancing current wife, his sister, his daughter, and even his therapist. The play was an immense success as *Los Angeles Times* remarks "Jake's Women remains one of Simon's most mature and enjoyable works." (Sylvie Drake)

II. MEMORY IN LITERATURE

Memory plays a significant role in literature which provides narratives, shapes identity of an individual and connects past recollections with the present. The book *Reconciliation Through Humour in Neil Simon's Plays* illustrates, "When an individual's bitter past is revisited, analysed critically, and combined with that of the opponent, it becomes a collective memory. When such a combination is attempted, a new dialogue emerges, though such a narrative is insufficient for peace due to accumulation of afflictions." (P.9) Kazuo Ishiguro's "*The Remains of the Day*", published in

1989, displays how memory serves as a “referent bin” (P. 9) which allows the mind to archive and store every event selectively according to our preferences. S.J. Watson’s *“Before I Go to Sleep”* depicts a protagonist with a questionable fight to survive when Memory, the one thing that shapes our whole existence is lost due to amnesia, showcasing memory as the bedrock of identity. In Haruki Murakami’s *“Kafka on the Shore”*, Memory is portrayed as a central, active force that shapes one’s identity, destiny and recovery from trauma. Yoko Ogawa’s *The Memory Police*, a dystopian science fiction which showcases memory as a powerful tool that helps to resist oppression in a surrounding where preserving memories, the very thing that shapes who we are is considered as an act of rebellion. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison portrays memory as a horrific burden where reminder of those painful pasts can impact us both physically and mentally, allowing characters to process trauma and to reconnect with their histories. It also showcases how, even though the memories are traumatic and haunting, they are the only journey to healing. Thus, in Literature, memory is not just a recalling the past events and happenings, but also a source of both trauma and joy, a feel of nostalgia, and a reminiscing of the past.

III. ROLE OF MEMORY IN *JAKE’S WOMEN*

Steven Pinker observes, “Cognitive Psychology tells us that the unaided human kind is vulnerable to many fallacies and illusions because of its reliance on its memory for vivid anecdotes rather than systematic statistics.” (Interview with John Naughton) Relatively, Jake becomes a victim of his illusions. In order to escape the sorrowful reality, he makes up imaginary scenarios with the women of his life. This reveals his helplessness and his reliability on the past to get on with the present. He replays the first encounter with his wife Maggie as he currently faces marital issues with her. His mind laments about the grief that his diseased wife Julie left behind. He also makes up emotional scene where Julie gets to meet Molly, their daughter displaying the eternal impossibility of witnessing a mother-daughter relationship. He also interacts with his sister Karen and his therapist Edith, the two people he runs off to while facing a crisis. His delusions are so realistic that even the audience doubts whether the scenes they are witnessing are real conversation or just another episode of Jake’s delusions. His memories are slowly generated into

heavy trauma which scars him emotionally, blurring the lines between reality and illusions. These depictions of one’s past influencing the present reveals the close tie between memory and trauma.

IV. TRAUMA IN LITERATURE

Trauma is defined as a mental condition caused by severe shock, stress or fear, especially when the harmful effects last for a long time. A bitter memory during childhood generates trauma as one grows up; it is repetitive and inevitable until it is confronted and healed. Acclaim psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk in his book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, gives a description of how traumatized people feel as, “Traumatized people chronically feel unsafe inside their bodies: The past is alive in the form of gnawing interior discomfort. Their bodies are constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs, and, in an attempt to control these processes, they often become expert at ignoring their gut feelings and in numbing awareness of what is played out inside. They learn to hide from their selves.” (P. 97) People who have been through trauma may also experience flashbacks, during which they relive the traumatic incidents in their minds.

Trauma in literature provides emotional depth, challenges traditional storytelling and explores intricate themes such as fear, sorrow, anger, and grief. Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* uses a broken timeline to represent the psychological aftermath of war. Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* recounts horrific experiences of Holocaust and the trauma resulted from it. It also explains about collective trauma, stating that trauma is not just limited to individuals. Anne Whitehead’s *Trauma Fiction* focuses on the deep understanding of trauma as a literary subject. Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* explores generational trauma, stating that trauma isn’t just self-built, rather passed down to generations from their parents. Cathy Caruth in her work, *Unclaimed Experience* describes how trauma and literature are closely associated with each other, “If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing, and it is at this specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience and the language of literature meet.” (P. 3)

V. ROLE OF TRAUMA IN *JAKE'S WOMEN*

Trauma is the root cause for Jake's mental struggles as he states in the play, "Freudian mother abandonment trauma" (203) displaying the exact time when his trauma and his distrust with women began. Though it happened in the past, Jake is still struggling to move on from the trauma, the failure to do so causes him to hallucinate scenes where Julie, his dead wife demands answers about her death but it is not Julie demanding, but Jake himself, who is unable to make peace with her sudden disappearance. This mental conflict causes trouble in his present life, restricting him from leading a happy life with Maggie. Jake uses these incidents as a coping mechanism, displaying his yearning to go back to the past. These trauma causes him to live in an imaginative world where he controls what happens, every conversation, the timeline of his women, even the way they dress and these imaginations are filled with humorous dialogues that make his sufferings fade. Thus, Jake's memory and trauma are bound together, resulting in repetition of illusions.

VI. CONCLUSION

Traumatized by the memories of his past, Jake seeks comfort in humour, instead of running from his illusions. Usually, a traumatic memory causes distress, but in *Jake's Women*, Neil Simon uses humour as a tool to control them, so that he can generate them into conversations that provide solace rather than serving as depressing reminder. Renowned psychiatrist and neurologist Viktor Emil Frankl, in his work *Man's search for meaning* says, "Humour was another of the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation. It is well known that humour, more than anything else in the human make-up, can afford aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation, even if only for a few seconds." (P.54) He presented humour as a coping mechanism that helps one deprive of hopelessness rather than a mere form of escapism from our true, fragmented and miserable self. Though Jake's character is visibly broken, devastated and grief-stricken, he remains optimistic throughout the play and tries to find laughter in every event of his life. At the end of Act-2, Jake is fed up with his illusions where the women are refusing to leave his mind, so he makes up a scenario where he forgives his mother who left a painful scar in him. This act is significant as he turned

his pain into strength, the strength to finally confront himself. This move makes all the women in his head to disappear. Thus, he uses self-reconciliation as a tool to confront his resentment and to make peace with it in an effort to reunite with Maggie and to finally leave his tragic past behind.

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