

Trauma in Washington Black's Character as Seen in Esi Edugyan's *Washington Black*

Reynaldi Alexander Agung, Nur Saktiningrum*
English Department, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: saktiningrum@ugm.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This research analyzes the effect of trauma on Washington Black, the main character in Esi Edugyan's *Washington Black*. Joy DeGruy's theory of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome is applied in order to understand how Black's past experiences, trauma, and slavery affect his life. The primary data used in this research are taken from the novel *Washington Black* by Esi Edugyan, which includes characterization and description of the character Washington Black found in sentences and paragraphs in the novel. This research shows that Washington Black's traumatic experiences are the main driving force of his actions which indicates the inability to separate his past from his decisions. The character Washington Black is a perfect model of someone who possesses Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome.

Keywords: *character development, post-traumatic slave syndrome, trauma, Washington Black.*

INTRODUCTION

The struggles of slaves who lived under colonial rules and how the rules affect the former slaves later in their lives is always a challenging topic to discuss. Although colonialism is a common theme in literature, its effects are seldom told from the perspective of someone who is physically free but mentally bound by chains of slavery and colonialism. Due to the points mentioned above, *Washington Black* by Esi Edugyan is truly a unique novel that narrates the story of a person living during and after his time of slavery when he had gained freedom for many years.

The impact of trauma caused by slavery experienced by Washington Black is the topic discussed in this research. Washington Black experiences various painful moments in his past as a

slave, and many of them still haunt him every day of his life. When he was born, he was separated from his mother because personal attachments are not encouraged in slaves to dissuade rebellion. The story also implies that the day Washington was born, the slave owners refused to shelter him, not allowing fellow slaves to bring him into a shelter and instead left him in the fields until it was no longer time to work. His mother, who had just given birth, was forced to work immediately and not given any time to care for the baby. Among many other traumatic experiences that Washington deals with, the scar that is slavery haunts him throughout his life. Washington struggles to do various things because he was discouraged from practically experiencing anything during his childhood. Being attached to other people, having talent, speaking to another person, and feeling accomplishment— everything is

denied throughout his life under British colonial rule and slavery.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the book is a relatively recent publication, there has not been any research on *Washington Black*. On the other hand, many studies cover the impact of trauma and slavery. Visser (2011) mentions the inadequacy of contemporary trauma theory and its conjunction with postcolonial literary studies. She stated that trauma theory, mainly Freudian in its foundation, was too Eurocentric to be used effectively in a postcolonial literary work. Trauma theory often deals with the abstract that caters to Eurocentric beliefs, whereas trauma is usually more of a solid experience in a postcolonial work. Another critical point is that the level of connectedness for the trauma victim, whether the person is an audience or the actual victim of a traumatic event, can be of imperative importance in connecting trauma theory and postcolonial literary works.

Another publication relevant to the research is Cuder-Dominguez's article (2017) that discusses how Esi Edugyan's signature style leads readers to reposition their view of what "blackness" is. Cuder-Dominguez indicates that Edugyan challenges her readers by contesting the status quo in her novels. Edugyan does not present the stereotypical portrayal of racism and discrimination in her works. Instead, she prefers to use new and often unobserved experiences of "blackness". In Edugyan's previous novel, *Half-Blood Blues*, she uses an Afro-German character as the centerpiece in her narrative. Even more unique, the novel is set in Nazi Germany and revolves around the themes of music, specifically Jazz. Her inclinations of wielding unique and different backgrounds while still portraying powerful imagery of racism and discrimination sets Edugyan apart from the other novelists that depict racism.

Considering all the previously mentioned research, Edugyan's latest work, *Washington Black*, is yet another novel worth reading and analyzing. While posing itself as a neo-slave narrative, which is a contemporary novel that implements the conventions of the antebellum slave narrative

(Rushdy, 1999, p. 3), the novel only uses the themes of slavery as masking of its true theme. *Washington Black* is a novel about the intricacies of relationships, trauma, and abandonment. Still, the element of slavery is not used as an afterthought; it is still a compelling point in the story, and it completes the novel.

The research analyzes and investigates Washington Black's traumatic experiences and how those experiences affect his life after being freed from bondage. These two questions are essential because of the nature of trauma that imposes itself upon Washington Black. For most of his life, Washington is a slave. After experiencing all of the horrors of slavery, it is interesting that Washington is still traumatized by something that is not as tangible as violence and slavery.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The premise of the novel interconnects with the theory of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) by DeGruy (2005), who argued that slavery leaves a legacy and impact that is reflected in a person's behavior and beliefs, which once were necessary to adopt for a slave to survive but would ultimately serve as a hindrance in their life (p. 222). DeGruy believed that PTSS is essentially boiled down to a). Vacant Esteem, which is the belief of oneself having little to no worth, b). Ever Present Anger, which is the inheriting of the anger and violence of the slave masters that would cause frustration and fear of failure. and c). Racist Socialization, which is the adoption of a slave master's values. e.g., idealization of lighter skin, straight hair, black inferiority, and white superiority. DeGruy's theory of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome is what the research bases its dispositions on.

Heidarizadeh (2015) defines trauma as "a traumatic event which involves a single event or experience" (p. 789). Understanding trauma is critical to this research since Washington lives a very traumatic childhood as a slave. A key concept here is Attachment Trauma, which Allen (2013) explains as the overwhelming experience of feeling alone in the midst of an unbearable emotional state or realizing that the person attached to is the cause of the distress

(p. 8). By definition above, when the very source of the trauma comes from an unexpected place—a place an individual thought to provide a have—the stress that came to is often multiple times more traumatic than when it comes from an external party. The trauma can be very intense, comes in a great amount, and overwhelming. Considering that attachment can only come when trust and dependence had developed between individuals, a loss of trust with oneself and other people often stems from it. The unwillingness to believe in anything anymore is frequently the very core of attachment trauma in a person.

METHODS

The method used in this study is library research. Data are obtained from written materials relevant to the study, with *Washington Black* by Esi Edugyan as the primary source. To collect the data, the researcher begins with a close reading of the book to gain a profound understanding and interpretation of Washington Black's traumas and their origins. Primary data include the characterization and description of Washington Black in sentences, phrases, and paragraphs found in the novel's narrations and conversations. They are then examined closely to see the aftereffect of those experience to Washington Black's character, how it affects him and his decisions in life, especially how the traumatic experiences molds and embodies in Washington Black. The secondary data are retrieved from books, journals, articles, and theses relevant to the study and are used to support and develop the analysis.

The analytical process in this study is conducted in two steps. The first is collecting and categorizing Washington's trauma. Second, the researcher then connects and interprets what the traumas mean to his character development and concludes how trauma and slavery affect Washington Black's character development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After analyzing the traumatic experiences of Washington Black and its effect on the character, the discussion can be categorized into two points:

Washington Black's Traumas

The first thing that should be accounted for is the kinds of traumas that Washington Black acquires after his experience with traumatic events in life. This is necessary because his traumas should be well noted and considered to understand and interpret his character development.

Fear of Strangers

Fear of strangers is the very first trauma that affects Washington's life. He can vividly remember the very first physical assault by fellow slaves whom he cannot recognize. The abuse that other slaves had done to him becomes the basis of his fear of strangers. Washington are also violated by strangers later in his life. The next time it is by a white man; he is assaulted by a random white person in the middle of the busy street because he mistook Washington for a runaway slave. Washington never really has any positive experiences with strangers. It instigates his reluctance to separate from Titch, the person he deeply trusts, He denies the opportunity to escape to Upper Canada with two fellow slaves he is not familiar with due to this fear. While his fear of strangers has its basis, it also heavily debilitates Washington's decision-making.

Fear of Violence

As a former slave, Washington is a victim who witnesses horrible acts done under the name of slavery. Washington often sees masters mutilating their slaves for disobedience. At one point, desecration of a person's corpse is done as a form of punishment by the masters for slave suicides. In Washington's life, there is no shortage of violence. The fear of violence is always within him; it is why Washington fears every single possibility of anything

that can hurt him. He grows an aversion towards violence, and when faced with violence, he is often paralyzed, unable to move or think rationally.

Attachment Trauma

Attachment trauma is deeply rooted in Washington's life. Throughout his life, he has only been truly close with two people. The first is Big Kit, an older slave who acts as a mother figure to him, and Christopher "Titch" Wilde, a scientist who helps him escape from bondage and the most important person in his life.

Washington's relationship with Big Kit is complex. Washington believes that he abandons Big Kit as he left her behind in Faith plantation, but at the same time, he also feels abandoned by her when Big Kit replaces him with another boy. Washington's first significant attachment trauma comes with realizing that he unintentionally abandons Big Kit when taken in as Titch's assistant. It is important to note that Washington has nobody in his life except Big Kit up until that point. She is the one who protects him from other slaves' beatings, and she is also the only parental figure for him as a child. Therefore, when Big Kit takes in another unknown boy to care for, it absolutely confuses Washington. For Washington, his attachment trauma arises due to the fact that the person he is attached to the most is the one causing him distress. On the other hand, Washington also realizes that he inadvertently abandons Big Kit. He feels terrible that amid all the excitement from the new experiences he receives as Titch's assistant, he forgets about his past life, specifically about Big Kit, the only person that had mattered to him.

His relationship with Titch, on the other hand, starts later during his escape period. Titch grows particularly close to Washington because of his aptness for science and sketching. Titch really appreciates Washington's skills and defies his brother's order to return Washington back. The relationship between Washington and Titch gets exceptionally close to the point that Titch voluntarily helps Washington escape from Faith plantation. At that point in life, his relationship with Titch is the most meaningful for Washington. Therefore, when Titch abandons him in the middle of nowhere between strangers, it feels like he receives a fatal blow.

Washington Black is greatly scarred by his previous connections with people he cherishes. Consequently, he constantly teeters between longing for a real connection and wanting to be alone and safe from another heartbreak.

Emotional Trauma

Among all of Washington's trauma, perhaps the most difficult to define is the emotional ones. Other than facing abandonment and violence, the emotional abuse that Washington endures is abundant. In addition to the abuse for his skin color, he also endures the abuse for his disfigurement. He is often ridiculed because of his scarred face. Since the accident, his self-confidence, which was slowly building up from his time with Titch, erodes. The burn marks are a huge reason for his deteriorating self-assurance. Washington's disfigurement is a significant reason for his emotional traumas. He suffers much physical abuse, but the emotional trauma that comes from the belittlement of his person should also be considered when discussing his traumas.

Impact of Trauma on Washington Black's Character Development

Now that all of Washington's Trauma have been discussed in detail, it is possible to interpret how the traumas listed can affect a character. Washington's character development can be observed in conjunction with how past fears and traumas evolve alongside him throughout the story. Only by closely scrutinizing and contrasting his traumas and Washington's decisions can this research understand the significance of trauma and its impact on Washington Black.

Trust Issues

Washington takes the next step in his life when he starts thinking deeply about his past relationships and attachments. Tanna is the first to suggest to Washington that his relationship with Titch is more parasitic than mutually beneficial. She mentions that stowing him away from Faith is more of Titch's agenda as an abolitionist. His intention to take him away from Faith is more for "science" purposes than "humanitarian" or goodwill. Washington reflects on

this and the many suspicious affairs that Titch revealed in the past, which Washington never really dwelled on before.

Washington's trust issues also bring him much pain in regard to his future relationships. When he finally meets someone new, a woman named Tanna, he approaches her with suspicions. His fear of interacting with strangers causes a strain on his budding relationship with Tanna. He is suspicious of Tanna's mysterious appearance in Nova Scotia. Her interest in Washington appears unusual for him. Washington finds it suspicious that a woman in her position and status pays a special attention at him. He believes that there is no possible way a disfigured black boy such as himself would attract any woman ever in his life. His trust issues heavily impact Washington's decisions and choices.

Vacant Esteem

DeGruy (2005) defined Vacant Esteem as “the state of believing oneself to have little or no worth, exacerbated by the group and societal pronouncement of inferiority” (pp. 234-5). Washington's vacant esteem stems from his experience with emotional trauma and physical scar. Washington is constantly subjected to public shaming and, as a slave, is not privileged to many things. Until his adulthood, he is unable to read nor write well—a source of constant embarrassment for him. His mutilated face is also something that the world often reminds him of. His self-esteem never really grows as a result, and he always feels inadequate and ashamed of himself.

Washington is highly self-conscious of his face. He cannot grasp the possibility that people can get past his exterior and see him beyond the scar. He has often trapped within the perspective that his scars define him, that he has no value outside of his physical appearance as a black, damaged ex-slave. On an emotional level, Washington is even more traumatized by his own appearance than the violence he continuously experiences in life, which is a testament to the severity of his emotional burden—considering he was once a slave. Washington is also ashamed of his past life as a slave. He sincerely believes that he will never fit in anywhere, never be recognized as a man of science, and never will his relationship with a woman of status such as Tanna

Goff be accepted. His past as a slave constantly bothers him so much that he sees arguments where there is none. He picks fights with Tanna because of his past as a slave; he feels that he will never be enough and that the anger within him will swallow him. He is no longer a slave, yet he continuously believes that the world will always view him as one.

Racist Socialization

Shortly after gaining freedom, Washington faces harsh realities again after Titch abandons him. Abandonment means that Washington is once again on his own with no one to depend on. The fact that he is left in the middle of the Arctic, a place he is unfamiliar with and with no way to survive on his own, means that Washington becomes desperate for his survival. He fears that he will be useless all on his own, unable to survive. He takes into consideration the notion of returning—such is his feelings of inadequacy. At this point, Washington starts to develop guilt for surviving many things in his life that he believes he should not. In his mind, escaping Faith means that he abandons Big Kit, the most important person in his life. She was all that Washington had, and he left her without second thoughts. At the time of his escape, his priority is survival and his safety. Washington is surrounded by shame; he laments his past decision of abandoning others and looking the other way for his self-preservation. It is his biggest regret that he had become opportunistic when the chance arrived.

Washington also considers his existence as unworthy. Washington often questions his worth as a human being. After all, he is a regular spectator to morally corrupt acts done under slavery, which also skews his understanding of human worth. It is in line with DeGruy's observations that ex-slaves usually “have a unique socialization experience due to having centuries of systematic and traumatic programming of inferiority” (2005, p. 259). What makes it worse for Washington is that eventually, his beliefs of relationships and self-worth are also worsened by the people he respected. Tanna's father, G.M. Goff—who is a white man, is one such person. Washington respects Goff because he accepts Washington as an able man of science, while Goff respects Washington's opinion and values his skill in artistry. They both are essential to each other's

scientific progress, and together they create the first live aquarium called “The Ocean House” from the ground up. Nevertheless, that respect does not extend to Washington’s experience as a human being.

Ever Present Anger

Washington being accustomed to violence is a primary reason behind the anger that lies within him. DeGruy (2005) stated that “slavery was an inherently angry and violent process... Africans learned that anger and violence were key ingredients necessary to ensuring that their needs were met” (p. 250). Likewise, Washington learns early in his life that the answer to almost everything is violence and cruelty. It causes Washington, who is not confrontational in nature, to be argumentative when faced with problems. For example, he once gets into an argument with Tanna because she compliments him. His fragile self-esteem takes Tanna’s compliment of his character as a slight to his past. He is angry when Tanna talks about how resilient he is, how he manages to survive life’s hardships all on his own. When Tanna is complimenting his strength and character, Washington interprets it as Tanna insinuating that being a slave is a choice, that it is a question of characteristics: that some people are born slaves, and some are slaves by mistake.

His shame and anger are forever ingrained within him, and it subconsciously dictates many of his actions. Although he is quick-tempered, Washington is not violent. He admits that his personal problems with anger often influence him. He often feels that there is a force inside him that makes his decisions and puts words he did not conjure. Now that Washington has identified what is missing—an absence of connection, he acknowledges that intimacy, or lack thereof, is also a factor to his inherent customary to violence. The fact that Titch discarded him so easily infuriates Washington. He despises that he was casually tossed aside, and he never receives an apology. He accepts that he will forever be pulled around by this. Anger, after all, “can be both a response to the frustration of blocked goals and the fear of failure” (DeGruy, 2005, p. 245).

CONCLUSION

Washington Black by Esi Edugyan discusses many issues, from prejudice, slavery, to attachment and abandonment. The novel is fascinating because of its fundamental difference in settings and additional themes, which set it apart from other novels in its genre. As a work inspired by old slave narratives, this modern fiction successfully retells and reimagines slavery, complements it with provocative elements, but without turning the encompassing slavery into an afterthought. Whilst still using slavery as its foreground theme, the appealing point of this novel is the theme of trauma, abandonment, and coming of age. The novel vividly portrays the horrors of slavery while still retaining compelling character dynamics and relationships.

The research concludes that *Washington Black* goes through many traumatic experiences in his past. Washington has a fear of strangers because of injustice done to him by strangers. He is abused as a child by fellow black slaves and assaulted by an unknown white man in the middle of a busy street. Moreover, he also experiences many violent encounters as a slave: punishment for disobedience, senseless maiming without reason, and he is also witness to atrocities done to other slaves. In addition, he also possesses a deep attachment trauma due to his complicated relationship with Titch and Big Kit. Titch saves him only to abandon him, and Washington inadvertently abandons Big Kit while she also easily replaces him with another boy. Last, Washington exhibits a deep emotional trauma caused by derogatory remarks uttered towards him. He is treated with discontents due to his status as a black man and former slave, while his mutilated face makes it much worse.

This research uncovers that *Washington Black*’s traumatic experience overwhelms him. It controls his every being, making his decisions for him. His traumas often become the very core of his personality; it is guiding him through life. All his pain and suffering incorporate into himself. The research concludes that *Washington Black* matches the characteristics of someone who has Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. Physically, he is no

longer bound to any form of bondage. However, mentally, Washington Black never feels free in his own body. He does not feel adequate at anything, as society and other people constantly dictate who he is, resulting in anger within himself that is directed towards both society and himself. Washington Black perfectly matches the signs of having Vacant Esteem, Ever Present Anger, and Racist Socialization. His traumatic experience with slavery and abandonment continuously dictates his decisions.

REFERENCES

- Allen, J. (2013). *Mentalizing in the development and treatment of attachment trauma*. Karnac Books.
- Cuder-Dominguez, P. (2017). Oblique kinds of blackness in Esi Edugyan's *Half Blood Blues*. *Atlantis: Journal of The Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies*, 39(02), 89-104. <https://doi.org/10.28914/atlantis-2017-39.2.05>.
- DeGruy, J. (2005). *Post traumatic slave syndrome*. Uptone Press.
- Edugyan, Esi. (2018). *Washington Black*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Heidarizadeh, N. (2015). The significant role of trauma in literature and psychoanalysis. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 192, 788-795. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.06.093>.
- Rushdy, A. (1999). *Neo-slave narratives: studies in the social logic of literary form*. Oxford University Press.
- Visser, I. (2011). Trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 47(3), 270-282. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2011.56937>.