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The Cycle of Reliving and Escaping Trauma in “The Race of My Life”

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Abstract

Sports plays an important role in shaping the lives of the players both physically and emotionally, especially of those who deal with trauma. On one hand, it serves as a mechanism for revisiting and reliving painful memories as well as a way of escape from the same. The study explores the complex interplay between reliving and escaping trauma through sports, focusing on Milkha Singh's relationship with running as depicted in his autobiography, "The Race of My Life" as it offers an in-depth view on the trauma of partition and personal loss which alternately shaped his personal life and his athletic career. By examining Milkha Singh's life, the study sheds light on the dual role of sports in processing trauma. His repeated experience on the field forced him to confront the emotional scars of his past, simultaneously providing him with a means to transcend these memories to achieve personal growth. By evaluating this duality, the research attempts to contribute to the broader discourse on trauma in sport literature, offering insights into how sports personalities navigate the fine line between reliving and escaping their past through their engagement in sport.

Keywords: Milkha Singh, Trauma, Sports, Coping Mechanism, Revisiting and Escape

Introduction

Sports have long been recognized not only as a physical pursuit but also as a psychological and emotional journey, particularly for individuals who have experienced trauma. The intense discipline, competition, and personal stakes involved in sports can both trigger and heal emotional wounds. For many athletes, sports become crucial means of processing, confronting, and overcoming their traumatic past, serving as both a mirror and a refuge from their psychological struggles.

Milkha Singh, famously known as “The Flying Sikh,” is one of India’s most celebrated athletes, renowned for his extraordinary achievements in track and field. A survivor of the partition of India, Singh rose from an unstable and bitter childhood to become a national hero, representing India at the 1956, 1960, and 1964 Olympic Games. Among his many accolades, Singh’s most notable achievement was his fourth place in the 400 meters at the 1960 Rome Olympics, a record that stood for many years. Apart from this, he served as an administrative officer, initiating activities that upheld the country’s name in global sports. He was awarded the Padma Shri, India’s fourth civilian honor, for his contributions to sports.

Milkha Singh's autobiography, "The Race of My Life," co-authored by Milkha Singh and Sonia Sanwalka, was published in 2013, offering an intimate glimpse into Singh's life, from his traumatic experiences during the partition to his rise as a great athlete. The autobiography does not only recount his athletic accomplishments; it also delves into the emotional and psychological challenges that shaped his journey. Singh uses many techniques to narrate his life, exploring poverty, partition, loss, resilience, and triumph.

The paper aims to analyze the cycle of reliving and escaping the past memories as a way to cope with trauma through sports. The study focuses on analyzing the complex relationship between trauma and sport, using Milkha Singh's autobiography, "The Race of My Life," as the primary text. His unique life story expressed through various narrative techniques has the dual role of sports as both a medium for reliving trauma and a means of escaping it. By delving into the book, the study seeks to explore how his running career forced him to confront his traumatic past, importantly the horrors of the partition, and providing him a way to transcend these past experiences. The exploration of this book as well as his life offers valuable insights into the discussion on sport as a way to experience the cycle of reliving and escaping trauma, contributing to a larger discourse on the scope for memory in sports literature. Based on these ideas, let us understand the selected resources that are relevant to the study in the following chapter.

Review of Literature

The chapter attempts to understand the existing scholarship that are relevant to the study. By examining the primary and selected secondary sources, the review contextualizes the study within the broader discourse on trauma, memory, and sports. The theoretical framework and other secondary sources including Singh's biopic would contribute to our understanding of the cyclical role of trauma in his life. To begin with, "The Race of My Life" is a powerful narrative that intertwines the personal and historical trauma of the partition of India with the redemptive power of sports. Singh's.

Recounting of his life is not just a story of athletic triumph but a deeply personal journey through pain, loss, and resilience. As Singh reflects on his early experiences, he writes, "The partition had snatched away everything I had held dear" (Singh and Sanwalka 22), highlighting the impact of these events on his psyche. Running, for him, became both a metaphor and a literal escape from these memories, offering him a way to express his pain into something productive. His assertion, "Running was my way to block out the horror of my past" (Singh and Sanwalka 33), encapsulates the dual role of sports in his life as both a revisitation of trauma and a means of overcoming it. The autobiography serves as a case study in how athletes use sports to navigate personal trauma, making it a crucial text for this research.

To understand the idea through the theoretical framework, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, particularly her concept of the "belated experience," is crucial for understanding the repetitive nature of traumatic memory. Caruth argues that trauma is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" and thus returns in the form of intrusive memories that force the survivor to relive the event (Caruth 4). The theory explains how trauma disrupts the linear progression of time, causing the past to intrude upon the present. Caruth's idea that trauma is "the story of a wound that cries out" provides a framework to analyze individuals' continual confrontation with their traumatic past through repeated experiences and memories (Caruth 4).

Adding on, post-traumatic growth theory, developed by Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun, explores how individuals can experience positive psychological changes following trauma. The theory posits that struggling with traumatic events can lead to Significant growth in areas such as personal strength, appreciation of life, and a renewed sense of purpose. The theory

states, “People develop in ways that leave them better off after the trauma, even though they would never wish for the trauma to occur” (Tedeschi and Calhoun 5). The theory is relevant to understand how people use something to escape the effects of trauma.

More importantly, the biopic, “Bhaag Milkha Bhaag” (2013), directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, portrays the life of Milkha Singh, capturing his journey from a traumatic childhood to a legendary athlete. The film highlights his running as both an escape from the horrors of the partition and a path to healing. The repeated command, “Bhaag Milkha, bhaag!” symbolizes his continuous drive to outrun his past. The biopic complements his autobiography, providing a visual and emotional depth to his story.

Further, Kamal Mehta’s article, “Running against the Odds: Analyzing Milkha Singh’s Autobiography ‘The Race of my Life,’” provides an analysis of Singh’s autobiography as an interconnection between personal trauma and athletic achievement. Mehta argues that Singh’s running career serves as a “metaphor for his life-long struggle against the trauma of partition” (Mehta 127). The article emphasizes Singh’s success as an athlete as a form of resistance against the memories that haunted him, and his narrative demonstrates the healing power of sports. The article, on the whole, contributes to the broader discourse on the role of sports in processing and overcoming personal and historical trauma.

To deliberate upon, Pankaj Sharma’s article, “Trauma and Triumph: Milkha Singh’s Journey in ‘The Race of my Life,’” highlights Singh’s athletic journey both as a revisiting of his traumatic past and an escape from it. Sharma notes, “Singh’s running is depicted as both a confrontation with and an escape from his traumatic memories” (Sharma 136). The article explores the dual role of sports in Singh’s narrative as a means of coping with and overcoming trauma. The analysis offers an interpretation of Singh’s life story emphasizing the redeeming power of sport in dealing with trauma.

Putting all of it together, the chapter has provided a brief yet comprehensive review of various perspectives on Milkha Singh’s book, complementing his life and emphasizing the role of trauma in shaping his life and athletic career. Scholars like Mehta and Sharma highlighted the role of sports in Singh’s life in confronting trauma. However, there is a gap in research allowing us to examine the co-existence of reliving and escaping trauma as a cyclical process through sports in a single narrative. The research is grounded upon the theoretical framework and well supported by the other secondary sources which are elaborated in the following chapter.

Methodology

After an understanding about the research and the existing scholarship in the previous chapter, the current chapter attempts to draw a methodology to the research. The research adopts qualitative method of analysis to provide an analytical interpretation of the work chosen for study. Having the autobiographical text, “The Race of my Life” as the primary source, the research attempts to analyze the pivotal role played by trauma throughout the life of Milkha Singh as featured in his writing. The research also involves comparative analysis as it analyzes the text “The Race of my Life” with Singh’s biopic. In order to provide an in-depth analysis of the trauma present in the text, the research also uses some theoretical concepts as a part of the theoretical framework. Cathy Caruth’s trauma theory is a significant theory in the study of trauma, which is used to understand the ways in which trauma is experienced. The study particularly uses Caruth’s concept of “Belated Experience” expressed in this theory. In addition to this, the research also uses “Post-Traumatic Growth Theory” developed by Richard G. Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun, to understand the positive psychological change experienced by individuals after trauma. Finally, the research is well supported by a few articles for substantiation. Furthermore, the findings may or may not be applicable in different contexts as the research is qualitative and there is no universal experience.

The Role of Trauma: An Analysis

In Milkha Singh's autobiography, "The Race of my Life," the impact of trauma is a recurring theme that shapes the narrative of his life. The traumatic events of the 1947 partition of India, during which Singh lost his family, home, and sense of security, left deep psychological scars that repeatedly haunt him throughout his athletic career. Singh's journey is not only one of athletic success but also a continual confrontation with and escape from his traumatic memories. Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma, along with the Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) theory developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun, provides a framework for analyzing how Singh's life and running career illustrate the cyclical nature of trauma. In this framework, trauma is not a singular event but a repetitive process of reliving and escaping, where sport plays an important but dual role in facilitating both.

To begin with, Milkha Singh's experiences during the partition are central to his trauma. His autobiography reflects the deep impact of the event, with his recollection of that time serving as a recurring theme. One of the most important statements in the autobiography is, "The partition had snatched away everything I had dear" (Singh and Sanwalka 22). This line not only conveys the loss that he experienced but also introduces the central trauma that would continue to shape his life and career. According to Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, "Trauma is not fully comprehended in the moment of the event but returns later as an intrusive memory that disrupts the survivor's present" (Caruth 4). The violence of the partition for Singh is not a past event but an ongoing emotional reality that invades his current life.

Running, which Singh initially pursues as a means of escape, paradoxically becomes a way for him to relive the trauma. He admits, "Running was my way to block out the horror of my past" (Singh and Sanwalka 33). This statement illustrates the dual role that running plays in Singh's life; while it provides temporary relief from his painful memories, it also acts as a trigger that brings those memories back to the surface. Caruth's theory of trauma posits that "Traumatic experiences disrupt the linear progression of time, causing the past to intrude upon the present in unexpected ways" (Caruth 7). The physical exertion and mental focus required in running competitions mirror the psychological toll of reliving the emotional wounds inflicted by partition.

The cyclical nature of trauma in Singh's life is further exemplified by the role of sports as both a refuge from and a confrontation with his traumatic memories. Running serves as both a form of redemption and a reenactment of his trauma. Singh reflects, "I ran to forget the screams of my family" (Singh and Sanwalka 47). The connection between his athletic success and trauma is highlighted in this statement. Rather than being merely an achievement, Singh's running career becomes a way to channel his pain into something productive. However, as Caruth explains, "Trauma often returns in ways that force the individual to continually confront it" (Caruth 9). Singh's success in running provides a temporary escape, keeping him close to the trauma, as running repeatedly reminds him of the past.

The biopic "Bhaag Milkha Bhaag" visually represents the cyclical nature of Singh's trauma by alternating between scenes of his athletic triumphs and flashbacks to the horrors of partition. The repeated command "Bhaag Milkha, Bhaag!" encapsulates Singh's attempts to outrun his past, simultaneously acknowledging that the past continues to catch up with him. The film, much like the autobiography, highlights the inescapability of Singh's trauma, regardless of his achievements.

Running. Through this visual and narrative juxtaposition, both the book and the biopic highlight the cyclical nature of trauma, as he is continuously forced to relive his past while striving to escape. Moving on, Cathy Caruth's trauma theory emphasizes the repetitive nature of traumatic memory, while the Post-Traumatic Growth Theory (PTG) developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun provides additional understanding regarding Singh's journey. This theory posits that "individuals who

experience significant trauma can undergo positive psychological changes, such as increased personal strength and a renewed sense of purpose, through their struggle with adversity” (Tedeschi and Calhoun 5). In Singh’s case, his athletic career represents not only a confrontation with his trauma but also an opportunity for growth and resilience.

Singh’s international fame as an athlete, particularly his performance in the 1960 Rome Olympics, can be understood through this lens. Although he missed winning a medal, Singh’s journey from a traumatized child during partition to one of India’s greatest athletes highlights the psychological growth described by PTG. His assertion that “I ran not for glory but to prove to myself that I could rise above the devastation of partition” (Singh and Sanwalka 67) reflects how he transformed his trauma into a source of personal strength and determination. While the trauma of partition continued to haunt him, his running career allowed him to find a sense of purpose and accomplishment that helped him navigate his emotional wounds.

Additionally, Pankaj Sharma’s article, “Trauma and Triumph: Milkha Singh’s Journey in ‘The Race of My Life,’” offers further insight into the dual nature of Singh’s running as both a confrontation with and escape from his trauma. Sharma argues that “Singh’s running is depicted as both a confrontation with and an escape from his traumatic memories” (Sharma 136), reinforcing the idea that sports serve a dual function in Singh’s life. While running helps him process trauma, it also provides him with the opportunity to grow stronger. This aligns with the principles of PTG, which suggest that “individuals can develop resilience and psychological strength through their struggle with trauma.”

Role of Narrative Techniques in Representing Trauma

Milkha Singh’s autobiography, “The Race of My Life,” employs various narrative techniques and literary devices to represent the cyclical nature of trauma. and the process of post-traumatic growth. One of the key narrative techniques used in the text is the nonlinear structure, which reflects the disrupted sense of time that is a characteristic of trauma. Singh’s narrative frequently shifts between past and present, illustrating the intrusion of past memories of partition into his current life. This technique aligns with Caruth’s theory that “Trauma disrupts the linear experience of time, causing the past to be relived in the present” (Caruth 8). This structure also allows the readers to experience Singh’s trauma in a manner that mimics his psychological experience. The readers are constantly brought back to the past regardless of the narration in the present. Alongside the nonlinear structure, repetition plays a key role in representing the repetitive nature of traumatic memory. Throughout the book, Singh returns to the image of the death of his family during the partition, particularly the sounds and screams that have stayed with him. He frequently reflects, “I ran not for medals but to forget the screams of my family” (Singh and Sanwalka 47). This repeated image underlines the impact of trauma in him. The use of repetition reflects Caruth’s idea that “Trauma is experienced belatedly and returns in intrusive, repetitive memories” (Caruth 4). These repetitive past memories remind the readers that his memories are not confined to one moment but intersect his present in many instances.

Moreover, Singh’s auto biography employs vivid imagery to convey the emotional impact of his trauma. His descriptions of partition are graphic and evocative, with passages that describe the “Rivers of blood” and “Mountains of corpses” (Singh and Sanwalka 29) left in the wake of the violence. These images emphasize the horror of Singh’s experiences and psychological impacts they left behind. The vividness of these descriptions brings the reader into Singh’s memories, making it their own real experience in the present.

More importantly, running is used as a metaphor for Singh’s broader struggles in life, particularly his efforts to over come the trauma of partition and his personal challenges. He compares his athletic career to his battle against the emotional scars of his past.

He reflects, “I ran not just to win, but to rise above the darkness of my past” (Singh and Sanwalka 88). Here, running is not just about achieving athletic success; it represents his struggle to overcome the figurative “darkness” that partition had on his life. The meta phoral so symbolises resilience, persistence, and the desire to move forward despite his past. For Singh, every race is notonly a physical competition but a metaphorical battle against the trauma that haunts him.

Finally, Singh directly addresses the readers in many instances which helps him to bring the readers directly into his emotional world. Singh writes, “You might wonder why I kep trunning despite the pain. The answer is simple: I had no choice” (Singh and Sanwalka 58). This interactive tone allows Singh to convey his emotions making his experience more relatable and allowing the reader to empathise with his journey. These direct addresses also transform Singh’s personal experiences into the collective ones that are shared by the readers too.

On the whole, Singh uses many techniques like fragmented narrative, repetition, imagery, and metaphors enriching the literary appeal as well as highlighting the cyclical nature of trauma and its deep impact on him.

Conclusion In conclusion, the cyclical nature of trauma through running acts as both an escape and a confrontation. Techniques like symbolism, repetition, and direct address emphasize his continuous engagement with the traumatic past. Through running, he experiences both the burden of reliving trauma and the potential for post-traumatic growth. These techniques allow the reader to empathise with his journey, highlighting the connection between his trauma and triumph. The study finds that Singh’s autobiography uses sport as both a literal and a metaphor means of reliving and escaping trauma. Through literary devices, Singh’s trauma is portrayed as a cyclical process, with running symbolizing his ongoing battle with the emotional scars of partition. Ultimately, the study reveals the coexistence of trauma and personal growth in Singh’s life, depicting the relationship between pain, resilience, and success. The future study can explore the area by comparing different contexts and representations like literature and media allowing a scope for the interdisciplinary study.

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