



Rewriting Women and Trauma: Zinnie Harris's *This Restless House*

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to argue that Zinnie Harris's *This Restless House*, which is a rewriting of Aeschylus' *The Oresteia*, is an attempt to give voice to Clytemnestra's and Electra's disregarded wounds, claiming that overlooked and/or suppressed traumas demand to be communicated on stage, seeking justice and solace. The act of rewriting by women is also interpreted as an act of reckoning for the trauma of the negation/misrepresentation of the female voice in the canon. Thus, rewriting a classical play functions on two levels, it helps moving female characters and their traumas centre stage, and with the attendance of the live audience the play experiments with the experience of bearing witness to and transmission of women's traumatic stories. In the light of trauma theory, acting-out & working-through, hauntology, bearing witness and testimony, this article explores staging uncommunicable traumas and the transmission of traumatic experience through retelling and re-enacting.

Keywords: Zinnie Harris, *This Restless House*, trauma, acting-out and working-through, rewriting



1. Introduction

Elie Wiesel suggests that “[i]f the Greeks invented tragedy [...] our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony”¹; in her feminist and distinctive rewriting of Aeschylus’ *The Oresteia*, Zinnie Harris is able to synthesize Greek tragedy with our literature of testimony. In *This Restless House*, she relocates the play to the present time and decentres the male characters to give voice to Clytemnestra and Electra as traumatized characters who are haunted by the past.

In the Attic tragedy of Aeschylus, Clytemnestra and Electra are important characters, yet they are not central to the play, their stories and traumas are ignored to depict them as the counterimages to the idea of the ideal woman in patriarchal Greek society. Clytemnestra’s challenging power and sexuality, whose last lines in the first play of the tragedy are “[y]ou and I, / Joint rulers, will enforce due reverence for our throne,”² or Electra’s aggressive melancholy are all depicted from a prejudiced, hostile, and even misogynistic male point of view. As Rachel M. E. Wolfe also suggests “*Clytemnestra combines her masculine political power with her destructive feminine sexuality*”³ and is abhorred for her actions that destruct the gender roles introduced by the patriarchal system, and while Electra is siding with her (dead) father and the patriarchal order, she is depicted as a hysterical female figure and ignored, even omitted from the play while Orestes is proven right, justified, and freed by the gods. Therefore, these women are not only depicted as evil or mad but are also denied a more realistic representation of their stories, as Petros Vrachiotis also underlines, “[t]here is no place for tragic heroines, in a patriarchal society. Their acts needed to be devalued and these women had to be presented as crazy witches, prostitutes, or murderesses of their relatives. [...] In order to marginalize women, the newly established man-dominated society tried to suspend these figures [...]”⁴ It can be suggested that specifically Clytemnestra and all the other female characters are victims of being represented by male authors who choose to depict women either as evil or docile beings. Sarah Wood Anderson in *Readings of Trauma, Madness, and the Body*, draws attention to the way male and female authors differ in writing about “*the mental condition of women*.”⁵ While male authors tend to depict women as child-like, destructive, “*dangerous*,” and “*hysterical*,”⁶ female authors focus more on the “*repression [...] of trauma*,” being “*made useless and unproductive*.”⁷ Thus, it can be suggested that female authors strive to present a

1 Elie Wiesel, “The Holocaust as a Literary Inspiration,” in *Dimensions of the Holocaust*, ed. E. Wiesel & L. S. Dawidowitz, et. al. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1977), 9.

2 Aeschylus, *The Oresteian Trilogy*, trans. Philip Vellacott (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1974), 100.

3 Rachel M. E. Wolfe, “Woman, Tyrant, Mother, Murderess: An Exploration of the Mythic Character of Clytemnestra in All Her Forms,” *Women’s Studies* 38, no. 6, (2009): 700.

4 Petros Vrachiotis, “Medea, Clytemnestra and Antigone: A Psychological Approach According to the Tragedies and the Myths under the Frame of the Patriarchal Society,” in *Tragic Heroines on Ancient and Modern Stage*, ed. M. de F. Silva & S. H. Marques (Coimbra: University of Coimbra, 2010), 27.

5 Sarah Wood Anderson, *Readings of Trauma, Madness, and the Body* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 113.

6 *Ibid.*, 114.

7 *Ibid.*, 114.

more insightful and realistic picture of women suffering from trauma by eluding the patriarchal prejudices one encounters in male author's works. The same problem can be traced in the history of playwriting, specifically in tragedy as a sub-genre that remains predominantly male. Elaine Aston suggests that "*feminists have been critical of tragedy 'as a genre preoccupied with the heroics of masculine overreaching,'*"⁸ and she thinks about the "*feminist uses of tragic conventions: to examine how women playwrights might be moving 'complex, flawed female characters' centre stage.*"⁹ Zinnie Harris, by deconstructing and rewriting the *Oresteian Trilogy* by "*moving complex*"¹⁰ Clytemnestra and Electra centre stage, gives voice to women's disregarded wounds claiming that their traumas demand to be voiced, seeking justice and solace. Thus, the act of rewriting by women can also be interpreted as a reckoning for the trauma of the negation/misrepresentation of the female voice in the canon.

2. Trauma Theory and Representing (Women's) Trauma

In her attempt to define trauma, Cathy Caruth chooses to retell the story of Tancred's "*wounding his beloved in a battle and then, unknowingly, seemingly by chance, wounding her again*"¹¹ as Freud uses this story to define "*traumatic neurosis,*" the "*reenactment*"¹² (1996, 2) of a traumatic event. Caruth, building her definition of trauma on Freud's ideas, underlines the importance of terms such as wound, repetition, and belated responses to trauma. Moving from the word trauma which means "wound" in ancient Greek, she explains the term as follows:

*In its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud's text, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. [...] the wound of the mind [...] is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that [...] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.*¹³

As Caruth's influential book's title also suggests, the traumatic experience is an unclaimed one due to its imperceptible and obscure nature. However, it is not only an experience that eludes the victim/witness but also one that is consciously or unconsciously buried deep inside as an act of the mind's defence mechanism. Judith Herman opens her *Trauma and Recovery* by saying that "*the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of*

8 Elaine Aston, "Moving Women Centre Stage: Structures of Feminist-Tragic Feeling," *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English* 5, no. 2, (2017): 294.

9 Ibid., 294.

10 Aston, "Moving Women Centre Stage," 294.

11 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 2.

12 Ibid., 2.

13 Ibid., 3-4.

the word unspeakable. Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried."¹⁴ Thus, the traumatic event is not acknowledged properly and as a result of the mind's self-preservation, knowing the traumatic event and the proper reaction to it are suspended by the victim/witness. Yet, at the same time, the uncommunicable trauma seeks its own voice to speak out, thus, as Caruth also suggests, it revisits or haunts the survivor in the forms of "*repetitive actions,*" "*nightmares,*"¹⁵ "*hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.*"¹⁶ Because, as Dori Laub suggests, the victim/witness feels the need to tell their own story, "*[t]he survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive. There is in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself.*"¹⁷ Telling one's own story becomes crucial to recovery and survival, yet the victim/witness is caught in a double bind due to the "*impossibility of telling,*"¹⁸ trauma wants to be claimed and needs to be narrated, however, remembering is either difficult or painful, therefore the survivor refrains from remembering and (re-)telling which may eventually lead to more symptoms as well as self-doubt, as Laub indicates "*[t]he longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor's conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events.*"¹⁹ This idea of self-doubt, which leads to the victim/witness's questioning of the veracity of the traumatic event, is one version of the denial of trauma. Doubt also works in an opposite way, as the outsiders, the public opinion question the veracity of the victim/witness's story which leads to the retraumatization of the survivor due to "*the absence of an empathic listener (...) an addressable other.*"²⁰

This is a condition that specifically affects traumatized women or children as the patriarchal society is preconditioned to disregard and deny their traumatic experiences and testimonies. Judith Herman indicates that "*[T]he study of psychological trauma must constantly contend with this tendency to discredit the victim or to render her invisible,*" because "*the more powerful the perpetrator; the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality.*"²¹ Thus, representations of women's trauma are either misconstrued or misrepresented by the dominant discourse and the victims are not given the right to be heard which is crucial for their recovery and survival. As Herman underlines, "*[W]hen the victim is already devalued (A woman, a child), she may find that the most traumatic events of her life take place outside the realm of socially*

14 Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 1.

15 *Ibid.*, 2.

16 *Ibid.*, 11.

17 Dori Laub, "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. S. Felman & D. Laub (London: Routledge, 1992), 78.

18 *Ibid.*, 79.

19 *Ibid.*, 79.

20 *Ibid.*, 68.

21 Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 8.

validated reality. Her experience becomes unspeakable."²² Therefore, trauma, specifically women's trauma, does not only call for acknowledgment but also for a voice of its own that will be heard by "*an addressable other*"²³ who will bear witness to the trauma victim/witness.

Theatre, as a space that enables the staging and representing of stories and actions of human beings, provides a place for the representation of trauma with its intrinsically re-enacting-based and audience-based nature. Thus, the stage provides a fertile ground for the exploration of trauma through/in performance. The audience of any performance that deals with trauma inevitably becomes the voluntary yet "*involuntary witness*"²⁴ to a trauma narrative or the re-enactment of a traumatic action; Patrick Duggan and Mick Wallis argue that "*witnessing in the context of performance is typically second-order: we bear witness to on-stage witnessing.*"²⁵ This second-order witnessing to trauma functions on many different levels, first of all, witnessing trauma narratives/performances prepares the audience for similar catastrophic experiences. This preliminary function of performance, which is related to the idea of child's play, helps the audience/witness to familiarize themselves with traumatic experiences through acting out and/or spectatorship. Bearing witness as a member of the audience also poses the threat of transmission as trauma is considered to be contagious, seeing trauma in action or listening to trauma narratives may contaminate the audience who will be a part of the performance and may even trigger the audience's own traumas, as Laub suggests "*[f]or the listener who enters the contract of the testimony, a journey fraught with dangers lies ahead. There are hazards to the listening to trauma. Trauma – and its impact on the hearer – leaves, indeed, no hiding place intact.*"²⁶ However, this uncanny encounter may be curative for the audience, performing or representing trauma may offer these second-order witnesses an alternative way to face and deal with their own unclaimed experiences. As Duggan and Wallis argue, "*the theatron suggested by the idea of trauma [...] may be a tool with which we can read, contemplate and reflect on a structure of feeling and potentially thus progress from it, as well as rehearse for or work through our own traumata.*"²⁷ From the playwright's standpoint, predominantly in contemporary female playwrights' works, "*the theatron*" is a fitting space to excavate and deal with the traumas of women, including the "*discredited*"²⁸ victims of the past, as well as making these unseen or unacknowledged traumas visible with the participation of the audience, the "*[in]voluntary witnesses.*"²⁹

22 Ibid., 8.

23 Laub, "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival," 68.

24 Shoshana Felman, "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching," in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. S. Felman & D. Laub (London: Routledge, 1992), 4.

25 Patrick Duggan and Mick Wallis, "Trauma and Performance," *Performance Research* 16, no. 1, (2011): 7.

26 Laub, "An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival," 68.

27 Duggan and Wallis, "Trauma and Performance," 8.

28 Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 8.

29 Felman, "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching," 4.

3. Clytemnestra and Electra Reimagined

In her rewriting, Harris changes the play by diverting it from Aeschylus's celebration of matricide and devaluation of women, and although she focuses on the female characters and their traumatization, she equally treats Agamemnon and Orestes by showing the audience their sufferings as well. To be precise, she depicts these tragic characters firstly as human beings, thus she eludes promoting the historical gender bias. *This Restless House*, the title, which replaces *the Oresteian Trilogy*, rejects the reclamation of patriarchal authority and the celebration of masculinity and diverts the attention to the house as a space that has its own memory which bears witness to the generational vicious cycle of violence and trauma.

3.1 "Agamemnon's Return"

The first play is named "Agamemnon's Return" rather than "Agamemnon," and shifts the focus from Agamemnon to his "return." The play opens in a city that has been under the rule of a female ruler, Clytemnestra, for ten years, but the city is in a neglected state as if to reflect the Queen's mental state. Similar to the original text, the Chorus undertakes an important responsibility of bearing witness to the traumatic events and recounting the backstory to the audience, specifically the story of Agamemnon's sacrificing his daughter, Iphigenia. However, this "*Chorus of old and dishevelled men*"³⁰ is in no way similar to the seemingly respectable, influential yet prejudiced chorus of the elders in the Attic tragedy. They are a group of old and invalid men paralleling the state of the city and are friendly towards the Queen until bearing witness to her crime. Contrary to the original text they recount the death of Iphigenia with all the tiny and grotesque details without being able to make their minds up about Agamemnon's justifiability:

*but the knife was in her back and now watching how
she flailed
he put it in and in and in
and again
a frenzy now
a thin line of sweat on his upper lip from all his work
and in and in
until she –
Pause
then lifeless and limp
And covered in blood, he put her on the sand
[...]
oh the mother should have buried but the father was
alright to slaughter her? It's the mother's fault that
she can't rest?!*

30 Zinnie Harris, "Agamemnon's Return," in *This Restless House* (London: Faber and Faber, 2016), 19.

*the gods asked it, of course he was right
we saw him anguish, didn't we?*³¹

As the Chorus retells the scene of sacrifice, the audience sees the event being re-enacted on the stage hearing the screams of Iphigenia who will appear again as a ghost only visible to Clytemnestra, and then Electra. While Harris gives Iphigenia, who was non-existent in the original text, a chance for ghostly appearance, she also investigates the waters of bearing witness through the narrative of the Chorus and the witnessing of the Chorus and the spectators. These “outsider-witnesses”³² to the event say that they have “watched it every night for ten years”³³, reminding the audience of the heaviness of this burden. Thus, the very beginning of the play not only introduces Iphigenia as a child who is struck by betrayal trauma but also performs the never-ending process of traumatization through witnessing.

Clytemnestra is the main character of the first play who is suffering from repressed trauma. She spends her days “singing a song as she drinks too much”³⁴ and is caught up in time, suffering from *aporia* in a state of melancholy. As Herman suggests “Traumatized people feel and act as though their nervous systems have been disconnected from the present,”³⁵ thus, it can be suggested that, rather than anger or denial, Clytemnestra is stuck in the depression stage of the grief cycle after the loss of Iphigenia and her ties are cut with the present, her drinking is a sign of her desire to forget the traumatic past whereas her singing is a form of incomplete trauma narrative. Laub suggests that “[T]rauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure,”³⁶ and van der Kolk and van der Hart argue that, “[A]s the trauma is fixed at a certain moment in a person's life, people live out their existences in two different stages of the life cycle, the traumatic past, and the bleached present. The traumatized, fixated, inflexible part of the personality has stopped developing.”³⁷ Moving from these ideas, it can be suggested that Clytemnestra is also caught between the past and present, as a mother who witnessed the sacrificing of her daughter by her husband she is a witness to and a victim of a catastrophic event, and until the return of Agamemnon, she is in Limbo as she has not been able to go through a healthy mourning and healing process due to the unfathomable nature of the traumatic loss.

31 Ibid., 28, 29, 31.

32 Laub, “An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival,” 30.

33 Harris, “Agamemnon's Return,” 30.

34 Ibid., 36.

35 Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 35.

36 Dori Laub, “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening.” in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. S. Felman & D. Laub (London: Routledge, 1992), 69.

37 Bessel A. van der Kolk, “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 177.

Dominick LaCapra stresses the “*distinction between absence and loss*”³⁸ as well as the interaction between the two. According to his line of thought, absence can be seen as something that is never possessed or obtained whereas loss is losing something that existed before. As he suggests, absence is “*the absence of an absolute*,”³⁹ and loss which is related to the past is “*correlated with lack*” and related to “*the present and future*.”⁴⁰ It will not be wrong to suggest that Clytemnestra is still suffering from the loss which happened ten years ago but still very much existent in the present, in the shape of Iphigenia’s ghost. Iphigenia, who was non-existent in Aeschylus’ play, appears as a ghost in a cadmium yellow dress with a red ribbon and a blue suitcase and triggers Clytemnestra’s traumatic memory. Her ghost, to borrow a term from Derrida, can be interpreted under “*hauntology*,”⁴¹ something visible yet invisible that comes from the past to point out a problem: “*In this mourning work in process, in this interminable task, the ghost remains that which gives one the most to think about- and to do. Let us insist and spell things out: to do and to make come about, as well as to let come (about)*.”⁴²

Kate Shaw, in *Hauntology*, indicates that “[r]eceiving the specter is not a passive act—the ‘performativity’ of the specter is not a signal to sit and watch but a call for responsibility.”⁴³ Thus “[t]he first rule of hauntology does not focus on the specter at all, but rather underscores the responsibility of the haunted subject to welcome, and speak to, the specter.”⁴⁴ In the first play, the ghost of Iphigenia haunts Clytemnestra as if asking her to take action; however, the seeing of a ghost, as Herman also suggests, is a way of traumatic memory’s rejection to be “*buried*.”⁴⁵ The traumatic memory of Iphigenia’s death appears as a ghost as “[t]raumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images.”⁴⁶ In the beginning, Clytemnestra tries to avoid the ghost saying “*I can’t do it*” but then calls her back: “*I am spineless, a spent force. Any power I had I lost*.”⁴⁷ These lines parallel the ideas posed by Derrida and Shaw, and Gordon’s argument that “*it is an animated state*”:

Haunting is not the same as being exploited, traumatized, or oppressed, although it usually involves these experiences or is produced by them. What’s distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known [...] I used the term haunting to describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home

38 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 48.

39 Ibid., 50.

40 Ibid., 53.

41 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 10.

42 Ibid., 122.

43 Kate Shaw, *Hauntology: The Presence of the Past in Twenty-First Century English Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 11.

44 Ibid., 9.

45 Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 1.

46 Ibid., 38.

47 Harris, “Agamemnon’s Return,” 46.

*becomes unfamiliar, [...] These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. The ghost [...] has a real presence and demands its due, your attention. [...] Haunting [...] always registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or in the present. But haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done.*⁴⁸

Although Gordon's interpretation of revenants suggests the reappearance of the past asking for compensation or redemption without being limited to trauma, it is also important to note that, in this context, Harris is using the ghost as a reminder, a very lively image of the repressed traumatic memory as well. Thus, the demanding of taking action is applicable to the ghosts that haunt Clytemnestra and also Electra as they are reminders of the past as well as traumatic memories. Near the end of the second Act, Iphigenia "*climbs on her mother's back,*"⁴⁹ and in Act Three Clytemnestra is crushed under the weight of the ghost, her "*back goes again. She falls down on to hands and knees. / She has to crawl up.*"⁵⁰ These references to the ghost as a burden strengthens the idea that Iphigenia is a vision of the Queen's trauma that lies heavy on her shoulders or spine, at first, she feels powerful yet when she is testing Agamemnon it starts to hurt her as if to remind her to act or not to act in a certain way.

This scene in which Agamemnon is put to the test is influential as Harris tries to pay tribute to a wronged woman or an unjust depiction of women, she does not depict Clytemnestra as a woman who is plotting the death of Agamemnon from the very beginning. She is depicted more as a woman who questions the possibility of forgiving and moving on. When the impossibility of forgiving and forgetting is doubled up by suspicion, Clytemnestra cannot believe that he suffers at all, this pushes her to test his loyalty to the gods. When Agamemnon walks on the purple cloths that are exclusive to gods, Clytemnestra decides that he sacrificed their daughter in vain and this decision leads to the act of killing, an act she thinks she is pushed by Iphigenia's ghost. As we do not see Clytemnestra claiming her traumatic experience or openly talking about it at all, killing Agamemnon looks like her only solution to heal her wound. Stabbing him multiple times is a re-enactment of the murder of Iphigenia, in terms of trauma studies, this act can be read as the repetition compulsion as well as "*acting out*" defined by LaCapra. He defines acting out and working-through as two processes of dealing with trauma while acting out means being "*caught up in in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes-scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked or fatalistically caught up in a melancholic feedback loop*"⁵¹ working-through is "*an articulatory practice: to the extent one works through*

48 Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.

49 Harris, "Agamemnon's Return," 94.

50 Ibid., 109.

51 LaCapra, *Writing History Writing Trauma*, 21.

trauma.”⁵² He also underlines that due to “*fidelity to trauma*”⁵³ or as Laub suggests due to a “*feeling of belonging to a ‘secret order’ that is sworn to silence*,”⁵⁴ traumatized people may show resistance to working-through.⁵⁵ LaCapra also adds that “*mourning might be seen as a form of working-through, and melancholia as a form of acting out*.”⁵⁶ Following this definition, it can be suggested that Clytemnestra is acting out as she is stuck in the moment of the event which comes back in the shape of the ghost and reliving the experience, something that she tries to repress by numbing her senses and memory with the use of alcohol. However, her inability to work through her trauma and killing Agamemnon, when doubled with the unintentional murder of Cassandra, makes her realize that violence is recursing thus retraumatizing rather than freeing her of her burden. The death of Cassandra, the Trojan princess who is also a trauma victim, serves as evidence of the impossibility of ending this vicious circle. The same goes for Clytemnestra’s desire to keep Electra in her room on the day of the celebrations:

*I told you to keep her inside
[...]
now close your eyes my darling
sweet Electra
turn your head
[...]
shut your eyes I said
this I don't want you to see
[...]
The ghost of Iphigenia [...] puts her hand over her eyes.*⁵⁷

Clytemnestra does not want Electra to see the scene of the murder, because she wants to protect her from bearing witness to the death of her father, she does not want to traumatize her. However, the first play ends with the witnessing and re-traumatization of the Chorus as well as Electra. In the play, most of the characters are involuntary witnesses to traumatic events, Felman suggests that “[t]he contemporary writer often dramatizes the predicament [...] of a voluntary or of an unwitting, inadvertent, and sometimes involuntary witness: witness to trauma, to a crime or to an outrage; witness to a horror or an illness whose effects explode any capacity for explanation or rationalization.”⁵⁸ Electra cradles the dead body of her father and Iphigenia’s ghost stays with her hugging her and smoothing her hair, which clearly show that Electra’s is also contaminated by the trauma of loss (the loss of the father) like her mother.

52 Ibid., 22.

53 Ibid., 22.

54 Laub, “An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival,” 82.

55 LaCapra, *Writing History Writing Trauma*, 22.

56 Ibid., 65.

57 Harris, “Agamemnon’s Return,” 123-125.

58 Felman, “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching,” 4.

3.2 “The Bough Breaks”

In the second play “the Bough Breaks” (not “Libation Bearers”), Electra is depicted as the exact opposite of Aeschylus’ Electra, she says she loves her mother, needs her and is anxious about her death-like sleep.⁵⁹ Clytemnestra is not able to wake up from her unexplainable sleep which can be interpreted as an aftereffect of her part in the violent act of killing Agamemnon and Cassandra, thus, as a sign of the perpetrator’s trauma. Electra thinks that it is a haunting,⁶⁰ and the Butcher, her best friend and the man who carried her to bed on the night of the catastrophic event, reminds her that the “*talk of ghosts is outlawed.*”⁶¹ The mentions of haunting and ghosts become clear tokens of the repression of trauma. However, Electra becomes the libation bearer and wants to visit her father’s grave to be able to break the curse that puts her mother to sleep. The father is dead, buried after being cut into pieces as Orestes recounts, his grave is unmarked, and in a place where only thieves and murderers are buried. This does not only recall Agamemnon’s murderous/criminal past, but the unmarked grave which is impossible to find is also important in terms of mourning and working-through, as Derrida indicates “[n]othing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: one has to know who is buried where-and it is necessary (to know-to make certain) that, in what remains of him, he remains there. Let him stay there and move no more!”⁶² However, finding the father’s grave is mostly important for Electra to save her mother from this haunting. In the ancient play, Electra, as Jill Scott also suggests, “*chooses anger over sorrow and stops at nothing to ensure that her mother pays*” and she both encourages and supports her brother in murdering their mother “*and her reward is the restitution of her father’s good name.*”⁶³ Although the undertone of the ancient tragedy is about power and obtaining the throne as the rightful heir, “*Electra’s story is not obsessed with power*”⁶⁴ even in this new context. Harris’s Electra has a bond with her mother rather than being stuck in anger and hatred towards her because of the death of her father, and she openly and honestly utters that she does not know him at all, a truth that is overlooked for the sake of strengthening the patriarchal bonds in Aeschylus. On her second visit to the grave, she meets Orestes for the first time, he says that he loves his mother, but he has to do something as he slowly turns into his father:

*I hardly sleep now because
of the itches
[...]
he was always itchy
he had scabs on his feet*

59 Zinnie Harris, “the Bough Breaks,” in *This Restless House* (London: Faber and Faber, 2016), 146.

60 Ibid., 146.

61 Ibid., 146.

62 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 9.

63 J. Scott, *Electra after Freud: Myth and Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 1.

64 Ibid., 2.

it used to drive him crazy
[...]
if it was just the itches well okay but
he had a scar on his side where they took his appendix
out
[...] my appendix has not been taken out but look –
He lifts up his top.
He has a scar.⁶⁵

The itch, and the scar of a wound that is not inflicted on him are all physical symptoms of trauma that are suffered mutually by Orestes and Electra. These symptoms can also be interpreted as the signs of intergenerational trauma or postmemory which is another form of transmission. In Marianne Hirsch's words, "*postmemory*" is "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before – to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up."⁶⁶ In Harris's rewriting, Electra and Orestes are not only inflicted by bearing witness to traumatic events as outside witnesses (and later as perpetrators), but also are infected by the traumatic background of the house of Atreus as well as the traumas experienced by their parents; as Sinem Yazıcıoğlu suggests "[t]he problem of generational transmission in postmemory also demands a return to familial structures."⁶⁷ Electra and Orestes have to bear the burden of the entangled traumatic memories of their familial history, and as they are not yet first hand victims/perpetrators in the experience, they are actually contaminated by witnessing as well as postmemory, as Duggan and Wallis suggest "*Bearing close witness to a perpetually unresolved trauma can install second-hand memories that are so powerful as to become traumatic in their own right. Moreover, such 'collective traumatic memory' can become installed across a culture.*"⁶⁸ However, although these visions and symptoms turn into signs of "*collective traumatic memory*" and demand that Electra and Orestes claim these unacknowledged traumatic memories of their ancestor, they fail to recognize the signs and claim their traumatic background. Orestes is also haunted by the ghost of the father and confesses to Electra that they must kill Clytemnestra to avenge the death of their father which will eventually cure him/them, so he seeks a cure that will heal the wound. The revenge plot, in this context, is a faulty way of liberating themselves from the trauma of witnessing and/or loss and postmemory.

In Harris's version, it is Orestes, rather than Electra, who tries to persuade his sister to kill the mother, similar to the Queen's actions in the first play, they decide to test her first.

65 Harris, "the Bough Breaks," 196-197.

66 Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 5.

67 Sinem Yazıcıoğlu, "Intergenerational Transmission in the Age of Postmemory: Rebecca Makkai's Music for Wartime," *Litera* 31, no. 1, (2021): 77.

68 Duggan and Wallis, "Trauma and Performance," 7.

Although Clytemnestra wakes up from her long sleep, she starts smelling a terrible smell, seeing flies, and other hallucinations which are of course reminders of her repressed trauma. She does not only suffer from the loss of her daughter but now also suffers from perpetrator trauma. To keep the flies away she wants to close the windows and does not want anyone to go out, a symptom which will also be visited upon Electra in the last play. She tries to stop anything that recalls the memory of the event. Her sleep, hallucinations, and the flies the others cannot see are like the symptoms of Lady Macbeth, they are signs of her guilty conscience and suppressed memories trying to make their way out. This is also represented in her fear of knives after waking up and her fear of her own son who turns into a snake that bites her in her dream. As Caruth indicates “*trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.*”⁶⁹ Therefore, these fearful visions, hallucinations, dreams are all seen as the forces of the supernatural, yet they are belated responses to trauma that calls the victim/witness/perpetrator to face her traumatic experience.

Electra’s transformation in this second play is also significant. It can be suggested that as she does not remember anything about the day of the death of her father, she forgot her witnessing and repressed her memories as a common reaction/response to trauma. To use Caruth’s description, she carries “*an impossible history within*”⁷⁰ her. Orestes’ return and his retelling of the traumatic events of that night trigger her trauma, she is, in a sense, contaminated as a listener to trauma, as well. After testing Clytemnestra, Orestes is not sure about moving forward with his plan yet this time Electra, whose trauma is triggered by the narrative of Orestes and Clytemnestra’s inability to cry when she is told that her son is dead, encourages him to kill the mother. Although Clytemnestra shows a loving and caring reaction when she sees Orestes and he realizes that he cannot stab his mother, “*the bough breaks*” with Electra taking the knife and killing Clytemnestra in a moment of impulse, which destroys the last chance for reconciliation and working through trauma. As the audience learns later in the last play, this act will lead to Orestes’ suicide and the bough, which stands for the bond between mother and daughter, peace and reconciliation⁷¹ and a branch of the family tree, is broken, symbolizing the end of the house of Atreus. Yet, it also leads the way to the re-traumatization of Electra who not only becomes a perpetrator but also a witness/victim as she loses all her family.

69 Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 11.

70 Cathy Caruth, “Trauma and Experience: Introduction,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 5.

71 J. Chevalier and A. Gheerbrant, *The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols*, translated by John Buchanan-Brown (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 117.

3.3 “Electra and Her Shadow”

“Electra and Her Shadow,” the last play of Harris’s trilogy, contrary to the original play, centralizes Electra’s story after the death of Clytemnestra, rather than Orestes’ story. As Jill Scott also underlines Electra is an important figure in the “Attic tragedy” yet “*was largely ignored by authors in subsequent periods. And when she did make an appearance [...] it was in the guise of Orestes’ helper or Agamemnon’s daughter rather than as a heroine in her own right.*”⁷² Scott also suggests that she becomes a central figure in the twentieth century and Harris’s twenty-first-century play reimagines Electra not only as a “*heroine in her own right*” but also as a character not driven by hysteria and anger, in a sense this reimagining of Electra challenges both Aeschylus and Freud and even Jungian Electra Complex as she is not hysterical or melancholic about the loss of the beloved father. Harris abstains from recreating the female character that supports the patriarchal order with her hatred for the mother and yearning for the father figure, she depicts her as a more realistic character that suffers from trauma.

While in the Attic tragedy this third play is about Orestes being driven crazy by the Furies, and the judgement scene in which Apollo and Athena vote for him to reimburse the patriarchal order by trespassing the maternal rights, Harris turns this part into a play happening in a psychiatric ward where Electra is hospitalized for a mental illness that made her kill her mother⁷³ and suffers from hallucinations, such as seeing the ghosts of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and Orestes and hearing the screeching voices of the Furies. She is afraid of open windows and doors, and in a way, she repeats the patterns of her traumatized witness/perpetrator mother. In this play, Electra is not able to communicate her trauma yet obsessively repeats her fears concerning the coming of the creatures of hell and underlines the fact that they are sent by her murdered mother.⁷⁴ These references inevitably point out Electra’s traumatized self, for that matter, her inability to communicate her trauma which reveals itself through ghosts and voices without bodies.

This part also introduces Audrey, a therapist who aims to cure Electra before leaving for another hospital in the United States of America. The inclusion of a relationship between a patient who is the victim and perpetrator of a traumatic event, and a therapist/listener to trauma enables us to talk about the possibility of healing and further contagion. As Audrey strives to remain scientific, medical, and distanced at first, her distance makes it impossible for Electra to open herself as no one believes her story. As Laub suggests “*[t]he absence of an empathic listener; or more radically, the absence of an addressable other; an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story.*”⁷⁵

72 Scott, *Electra after Freud*, 7.

73 Harris, “Electra and her Shadow,” 261.

74 *Ibid.*, 259.

75 Laub, “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” 68.

However, after a while, Audrey inevitably forms a bond with her patient on the ground that they share a similar background. Yet, this time, Electra's recounting of her hauntings by the ghosts and the voices of the Furies starts showing its effects on Audrey, slowly taking her over and transforming her into Electra's shadow. Audrey is also traumatized as a child and has been through treatment⁷⁶, however, her trauma is not cured but suppressed as she was not able to reveal and claim the truths about her traumatic background. Electra, as a patient who lost her siblings and father and killed her mother, triggers Audrey's own trauma of losing a sibling, being a witness to the death of her victimizer father, saying that "*he's sent them [the Furies] to you like my mother sent them to me.*"⁷⁷ Audrey not only denies the similarity between their cases but also sees this as a very natural act of projection by her victimized patient.⁷⁸ Although it may be true in the sense that Electra tries to protect herself from further suffering through projection, Audrey is also forced to face her trauma as she also starts suffering from similar hallucinations. In Laub's terms "[t]he listener" becomes "*a witness to the trauma witness and a witness to herself.*"⁷⁹

The Furies, who are not seen but heard and felt only by the traumatized women, visit Electra and then Audrey repeatedly, as Iphigenia visits Clytemnestra, and Clytemnestra visits Electra. As Derrida also indicates while discussing hauntology, these visits turn into "*visitare,*" "*[V]isit upon visit, since it returns to see us and since visitare, frequentative of visere (to see, examine, contemplate), translates well the recurrence or returning, the frequency of a visitation. The latter does not always mark the moment of a generous apparition or a friendly vision; it can signify strict inspection or violent search, consequent persecution, implacable concatenation.*"⁸⁰ In the case of Electra and Audrey, these frequent visitations are not friendly but more sinister as these audial and visual hallucinations are symptoms of trauma seeking recognition as well as justice.

The third play of Harris's trilogy also stages a trial scene between Electra and the ghost of Clytemnestra, while the Chorus serves as the judge and Audrey as an outsider witness. As Aydoğmuş suggests, in "Eumenides," "*[a]fter the trial, the generations of curse and revenge ends. The case of Orestes is considered as the first court of justice in the Athenian democracy. [...] the decision of Athena gives men superiority over women. In conclusion, Clytemnestra doesn't become successful. Giving more credit to Orestes represents the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy.*"⁸¹ However, the judgement in Harris's play differs from the one presented in Aeschylus. The deciding vote in the trial is given by the ghost of Iphigenia who reveals that

76 Harris, "Electra and her Shadow," 269.

77 Ibid., 269.

78 Ibid., 270.

79 Laub, "Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening," 58.

80 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 126.

81 Azime Aydoğmuş, "Clytemnestra as a nightmare to patriarchy in Aeschylus tragedy, the Oresteian trilogy," *Tiyatro Eleştirmenliği ve Dramaturji Bölümü Dergisi* 27, no 2 (2015): 27.

she is not the vengeful spirit, it has been their traumas haunting them all along, rather than her ghost, and her verdict is reconciliation rather than picking sides. Iphigenia, who replaces the masculine goddess Athena in this play, votes for peace and shows the possibility of a different future. Thus, Harris introduces an alternative ending to this tragedy, however, the outcome of the trial is followed by Electra's suicide. Electra commits suicide as she cannot escape or heal her trauma because she cannot succeed in putting it in words and finding an empathic listener who would understand her. It can be suggested that she sees this as the only way out of this vicious cycle of trauma. The curse/trauma can be said to come to an end, however, with the fall of the house of Atreus and not with the cleansing of Orestes and his line. Audrey, who similarly is on the verge of committing suicide during the trial scene is able to free herself from this shadow as she is saved from the rope:

Jordan

They said

*a patient died and if the nurse hadn't been there,
you would have to*

Audrey

I know

Beat.

I'm glad she was there

that she found me in time

I watched my father die, and I didn't help him

I'll always have to live with that

but I can live

I can live with it

*and look, the window is open.*⁸²

Learning to live with the ghosts is offered as the cure to the haunting, and at the end of the play Audrey not only claims her traumatic experience but also acknowledges her ghosts, and seemingly overcomes her fear of windows, something Electra was not able to achieve. However, the very last stage directions of the play, “[S]he looks out. / She leans right out,”⁸³ leave the interpretation to the director/audience as her action is ambivalent, when she leans out of the open window it is possible to see it as a courageous act of overcoming her fear or as another attempt at suicide. If it is a suicide attempt, then it means that Audrey also fails to achieve coming to terms with her trauma. It can be said that Harris, eventually represents the difficulty of healing trauma as well as living with its burden which mostly lies heavily upon women.

82 Harris, “Electra and her Shadow,” 318-19.

83 Ibid., 319.

4. Conclusion

Harris, contrary to the patriarchal propaganda of Aeschylus, focuses on women's trauma, yet she is not picking sides or treating her characters unequally. She not only gives an insight into the misjudged and misrepresented characters of the past but also shows all the characters in a different light with their weaknesses which comes as a female playwright's approach to violence and trauma; rather than focusing on power and patriarchal expectations she tries to see and represent her characters as human beings who suffer and seek justice and redemption. Everyone is traumatized in the play in different ways, including Iphigenia and her betrayal trauma, and Aegisthus who is a living witness to the murder of his brothers. Harris carefully conveys their traumas in her text. Each has her or his own case, although it physically appears in the form of a bag in the play that holds the personal belongings of Iphigenia, and is later mentioned individually by all the other ghosts, it refers to their individual psychiatric cases that contain their case histories.

Harris's rewriting is influential in the sense that it comes as a counter-narrative that moves women and a variety of marginalized mental states centre stage, as Aston suggests “[c]ountering the gender bias that militates against women-centred narratives moving centre stage is important to feminism's renewal of ‘progressive over-coming’ or ‘becoming’.”⁸⁴ Rewriting is not only an act of overcoming but also an act of deconstructing the past and can be seen as a way of communicating with the ghosts of the past. Shaw indicates that “[d]econstruction raises the specter of doubt as its central tenant: nothing is fixed, firm or stable in the hands of deconstructionists. [...] Deconstructionists are concerned with moving concepts from the margins to the centre—as in the privileging of writing over speech, for example—in order to examine the creation of power and meaning.”⁸⁵ Moving from Shaw's ideas, it can be suggested that deconstruction is also a form of raising spectres, ghosts that demand to be heard and need to communicate a message from the past. In the context of Harris's rewriting, these spectres need to communicate their own traumas as well as the traumas of the haunted living beings. It can be said that Harris as a twenty-first-century playwright is communicating with the ghosts of Clytemnestra and Electra who seek the help of a female playwright to retell their story as theatre is a medium that helps them to be heard/seen by a large group of witnesses, who carry the potential to be contaminated, haunted or cured by these stories because “[t]raumatic narrations both heal and plague not only the narrator and listener characters but also the audience in the theatre, stemming from the interactive nature of enacted staged drama.”⁸⁶ Therefore, Harris's use of theatre for this purpose, which remains predominantly male, functions uniquely as it both challenges the authority of a classical playwright and calls for a live audience to bear witness to the trauma narratives of women.

84 Aston, “Moving Women Centre Stage: Structures of Feminist-Tragic Feeling,” 308.

85 Shaw, *Hauntology*, 4.

86 Özlem Karadağ, “Trauma on the Contemporary English Stage: Kane, Ravenhill, Ridley” (PhD diss., Istanbul University, 2013), 58.

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