

Trauma and Healing: A Reading of Stephen Alter's *Becoming a Mountain*

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Article History: Submitted-31/07/2020, Revised-22/08/2020, Accepted-24/08/2020, Published-31/08/2020.

Abstract:

Stephen Alter's travelogue, *Becoming a Mountain* (2014), relates a series of treks the author took in the high Himalayas—Bandarpunch, Nanda Devi, and Mount Kailash in Tibet—following a violent incident in his life. A metaphor for his quest for the sacred and transcendent, his physical journey helped him overcome the physical and psychological trauma that debilitated his life. Intended to create an interdisciplinary space to enable productive dialogue about psychological trauma and its representation in literary texts, the article reflects on the issues of trauma and healing, which may be valuable to psychotherapists, rehabilitation workers, and students and interns entering the fields of mental health and trauma treatment. Furthermore, the narrative suggests that there are possible modes of healing beyond the Eurocentric models of trauma therapy still rooted in Freudian vocabulary.

Keywords: hallucination, flashback, survival, resilience, spirituality, silence.

Healing is a journey like any other, a slow, solitary quest leading towards a distant, unattainable summit. — Stephen Alter

From time immemorial people have been drawn towards mountains because of a primal sense of spiritual longing. Sacred to four religions—Hinduism, Bon (a pre-Buddhist Tibetan creed), Buddhism, and Jainism—the Himalayas for centuries has enticed countless pilgrims. The Rig Veda sees the Himalayas as a deity; the ancient Sanskrit poet Kalidasa has called it the “soul of the gods, emperor of the mountains”—the standard by which the human world is measured (qtd. in Kalelkar 61). The present article, however, is intended to explore how Stephen Alter, in his travelogue, *Becoming a Mountain* (2014), attributes his journeys in the Himalayas to a violent incident in his life that took place years earlier. Although his ancestry is traceable to America, the author was born and brought up in the hill station of Mussoorie, in the foothills of the Himalayas, where he and his wife, Ameeta, lived. Their

peaceful existence was shattered when four armed men invaded their home and cruelly attacked them, leaving them almost dead. Given the hypothesis that Alter's present work is a trauma text besides being a travel narrative, the article primarily draws on American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders*, 5th ed. (DSM-V) that defines Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) of adults as "[a]n exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence" (271). It also draws on Cathy Caruth, Sandra L. Bloom and Michael Reichert, Judith L. Herman, et al. Indeed, discussing a literary text can create a space for reflecting on clinical encounters in a way that is often not possible in a clinical context itself (Crawford, et al.; Klugman and Lamb; DeTora and Hilger; Bleakley). The article also attempts to show how the author in a way critiques the Eurocentric models of psychiatric interventions and trauma therapy.

"In its more general definition, trauma," as Cathy Caruth puts it, "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" (11). Commenting on the rationale for studying psychological trauma, Judith L. Herman notes:

To study psychological trauma is to come to face to face both with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature. To study psychological trauma means to bear witness to horrible events. When the events are natural disasters or "acts of God," those who bear witness sympathize readily with the victim. But when the traumatic events are of human design, those who bear witness are caught in the conflict between victim and perpetrator. It is morally impossible to remain neutral in this conflict. The bystander is forced to take sides. (7)

As per American Psychiatric Association's DSM-V, trauma involves such intrusion symptoms associated with the traumatic event as recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic event; recurrent distressing dreams; dissociative reactions (e.g., flashbacks) in which the individual feels or acts as if the traumatic event was recurring; persistent negative emotional state (e.g., fear, horror, anger, guilt, or shame); problems with concentration; sleep disturbance (e.g., difficulty in falling or staying asleep or restless sleep). The disturbance causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning (272).

The violent incident that happened at Oakville, Mussoorie years earlier left Alter questioning assumptions he had lived by since childhood. For the first time, he encountered the gruesome face of evil and the terror of the unknown. He felt like a foreigner in his native place. As Sandra L. Bloom and Michael Reichert observe, “the experience of trauma shatters—often irrevocably—some very basic assumptions about our world, our relationship to others, and our basic sense of identity and place in the world. A sense of meaning and purpose for being alive is shaken” (144). The author here wanted to forget the “brutal memories” but they haunted him years after the incident and made his life unbearable. As he writes, “The indelible experience of our attack still evokes a sense of violation and loss . . . as if I have become a stranger within the sheltering mountains of my birth” (7). He re-experienced the violence again and again in the form a flashback—“a flashback of gesticulating arms like shadow puppets” (8). Besides, his wife Ameeta’s cries and his frantic curses that still reverberate his mind are, needless to say, auditory hallucinations, which are regarded as significant factors in trauma pathology. The entire scene of the brutal attack that involuntarily returns to the consciousness is “indelibly tattooed upon [his] brain” (Alter 8). These traumatic memories get narrativized as he recounts them dozens of time for police, for journalists, for friends, for strangers, but still the violent scene remains embedded in his mind like a shrapnel.

An instinctual need to get up on his feet again and feel the weight of gravity, the undulated incline of the mountain path, rather than a heroic impulse or some sort of spiritual urge to relate a testimonial of healing, made him write this narrative. Pushing him forward was another impulsive conviction that, somehow, his journey to Bandarpunch (one of the peaks in the Himalayas) would heal him. When he reached the summit, his anxiety dissipated, and he no longer felt the immediate danger. The vast panorama of snow-capped mountains punctuated with the hovering clouds and the Buddhist prayer flags soothed his soul; he felt “a sense of oneness with the mountains” (34). Commenting on the inescapability of spiritual dimension in the life of a trauma victim, Bloom and Reichert have subscribed to Judith Herman’s notion of sublimating the negative impact of violence: “Confrontation with the spiritual, philosophical, and /or religious context—and conflicts—of human experience is impossible to avoid if recovery is to be assured” (147). Indeed, the triangular pattern created by Bandarpunch, Nanda Devi and Mount Kailash in the Himalayas formed “an inner cartography” that the author must follow. For him these mountains represent three different aspects of the Himalayas. As he writes, “Bandarpunch offers healing and solace, while

Nanda Devi promises ananda or happiness that releases us from anger, fear and doubt. And Mount Kailash, beyond my line of sight, marks an elusive threshold of transcendence” (35). His journey helps him attain “the mountain’s lofty demeanour, its resilience and dominating stature,” often metaphorically represented by the *tadasana*, or mountain pose, in Hatha Yoga (Alter 48).

Several months after his first attempt to climb Bandarpunch, he turned his attention to Nanda Devi. Since he knew that he could never reach the summit of the mountain, he approached Nanda Devi from different directions and took *darshan* of the mountain, seeking release from the discord in his mind rather than evoking euphoria. His quest for Nanda Devi began at the Kuari Pass, where the Curzon Trail crosses over into the Dhauliganga Valley above Joshimath. While he shared the mountaineer’s vision, charting invisible lines, he found himself observing Nanda Devi through a pilgrim’s eyes. Thus, his search for Nanda Devi turned himself into a devotee—a mountain worshipper. In the following excerpt he inimitably expresses his admiration for this sacred landscape:

Topography and myth converge in a mysterious, multi-layered landscape of narratives where nature takes on many different forms, such as rock and ice, lichens and moss, air and sunlight, just as the gods assume their various permutations—Shiva, Bhairava, Rudra and Mahasu—consorting with feminine aspects of Uma, Maya, Parvati or Nanda, all of them being one and the same. (58)

Further seeking Nanda Devi’s *darshan*, he followed another path, east of the Kuari Pass. This trek began along the Curzon Trail but led in a different direction, towards a small, high-altitude lake called Roopkund, which is a glacial pond at 5,029 metres above sea level. Although he intended to undertake the journey to Nanda Devi alone, he hired two young men—Titu and Akshay—from Mussoorie as his companions as he still experienced “a residual fear” from the past attack, an unknown and uneasy feeling of being vulnerable and defenseless (Alter 94-95). For years he was haunted by a recurring dream of walking or running in the mountains along a narrow trail through a pine forest where a carpet of needles cushioned the ground. Although not attributable to any specific event of life, this recurring dream might have been aggravated by the recent attack. His search for happiness led him to Taktsang, the Tiger’s Nest, in Bhutan and he preferred to experience the mountains there on foot. For him, the act of walking itself becomes a form of meditation. In fact, Tibetan

mystics, both Buddhist and Bonpo, are known for their meditative exercise called *lung-gom* or “trance walking.” Like the poet Rimbaud, who suffered melancholia and turned to walking as a cure, Alter travelled in the Himalayas to overcome stress and anxiety. Quoting Rimbaud, the author here writes: “I was forced to travel, to ward off the apparitions assembled in my mind” (129). For him, travelling in the mountains is a means to get released from anger, fear and sadness in life.

His next destination was the holy Mount Kailash in Tibet. He travelled for two weeks with a group of forty Hindu pilgrims from Gujarat and Maharashtra, driving ten to twelve hours a day over unpaved, dust-smothered road. On his way he also visited other frontiers of faith in the Himalayas such as Kathmandu and Nyalam in Nepal. He made his rounds of Kathmandu’s major shrines, beginning with the Pashupatinath temple, circumambulated the Boudhanath stupa in the Tibetan quarter of the city, and took darshan of the Maitreya Buddha at another shrine. Finally, he entered the *mandala*—the mystical geography of Kailash and Manasarovar—“the axis mundi of several faiths,” in his own words (140). For Hindus, Mount Kailash is the legendary home of Lord Shiva, the supreme creator and destroyer. Buddhists call it Mount Meru, the sacred summit of the gods where the world originated. Jains know the mountain by two names—Ashthapada and Padma Harada—where the founder of their religion attained enlightenment. Alter’s traumatic experience also caused clinically significant distress or impairment in social and occupational areas of functioning. He left his full-time administrative job that made him restless and decided out of impulse and desperation to travel to Mount Kailash—he felt the urge to come to terms with “those violent memories and raw veins of fear” (Alter 142). Although his wounds had healed, the scars continued to erode his physical and mental confidence like ravines in the mountains scoured by corrosive storms. Perhaps that was why he was going on this yatra, to escape “[his] own immediate cycle of suffering and rebirth,” to find comfort and redemption in the sacred land of Kailash (Alter 142). Along with other Hindu pilgrims he took a dip in the clear waters of Manasarovar and scrubbed his body, imagining the scars wash away. Although he was aware of the fact that none of his sins sloughed off, he felt cleansed by these sacred waters, purged of a lifetime of transgressions. Some five kilometres above Darchen, they then had a close view of Kailash and this transcendent *darshan* resulted in “a sense of having arrived” (Alter 178)—a sense of release at having accomplished the simple goal of being in the presence of Kailash. But he stayed away from the *pradakshina*, or the devotional walk around the holy peak, which is a part of Hindu pilgrimage to the Himalayas.

Far from being a devotional temple tour or religious pilgrimage, his journey to the Himalayas was an occasion to understand the spiritual anatomy of the sacred landscape. It was an opportunity to demystify ancient inherited traditions and examine their underlying significance. Alter's journey to Mount Kailash was followed by his second attempt to climb Bandarpunch two years later. Although aware of geological, biological and physical explanations of mountains, he failed to resist the lure of mountains— "their healing depths and resonant stories" (Alter 210). Despite his doubts and disbelief, he surrendered himself to the Himalayan mountains with humility and compassion, accepting his place among them. And the healing light of the Himalayas touched his wounded body and mind. His second attempt to reach the summit failed due to the adversities of nature, but he asserted that his encounters with the Himalayas would continue in the lower altitudes and under less extreme conditions. His resilience and optimism ultimately surmounted his sense of defeat following his unfortunate descent. Unlike explorers who travel to conquer and colonize high places or to lay claim to precarious territories, he becomes like the mountains instead.

To conclude, Stephen Alter's encounter with the Himalayan mountains and a renewed understanding of their magnitude, the beauty and grandeur of their sublime countenance taught him to forget such acts of violence as experienced by him in the past, to forgive the perpetrators for a peaceful habitation in the society. All the treasures of his Himalayan expedition—friendship, photographs, stories, new names for flora and fauna—compensated the loss incurred in the family tragedy. His treks are part of a healing process—mentally and physically, a way to walk away from trauma and a resolute attempt to regain control of his life and emotions. He set himself this goal to prove that he had healed mentally as well as physically and to restore his connection to his homeland. Undertaken out of sorrow, the journeys become a touching personal quest, a way to rediscover mountains in his inner landscape. The general intent of Alter's travelling to the Himalayas has been spiritual in nature, not religious. During the journey he experiences the purity of life and intends to continue that life even after returning home. His travel characteristically leads him towards the centre of his belief, whereas the tourist is in quest of the authentic, but vicarious, experiences in other places, times and cultures. Far from seeking revenge, the author seems to be merciful and compassionate to his perpetrators. One might argue well that it is unfair and unjust to allow a perpetrator to have the ability to move on with their life after committing violent crimes, or to have the chance to acknowledge and work through their past deeds. Dominick LaCapra, however, has subscribed to "a viable measure of

reconciliation” between a former victim and a former perpetrator for peaceful habitation. He argues that, to put an end to “the cycle of revenge,” the working through of the trauma of the perpetrator is not undesirable (*Writing* 215). He further writes that “the repressed or disavowed will recur once the occasion arises” unless the trauma of the perpetrators is worked through (*History and its Limits* 77). This may be seen as an alternative way of putting a check on the perpetuation of evil in society. Furthermore, Alter’s narrative suggests that there are possible modes of healing beyond the Eurocentric models of trauma therapy still rooted in Freudian vocabulary. Western models of psychiatry and trauma therapy, as Stef Craps has rightly pointed out, are based on the premise of verbalizing or narrativizing the patient’s trauma (55). Alter instead uses silence and spirituality as legitimate and viable survival strategies. He has rendered his physical journey in the Himalayas as a form of spiritual quest—a unique mode that helps him overcome fear, terror and helplessness following the act of violence he experienced. In a way his unique mode of healing negates, or rather goes beyond, the Freudian model of talking cure. Intended, to create a cross-disciplinary space to enable productive dialogue about psychological trauma and its representation in literary texts, the article thus reflects on the issues of trauma and healing, which may be valuable to psychiatrists, psychotherapists, rehabilitation workers, and students and interns entering the fields of mental health and trauma treatment.

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