

# A Study on the Trauma Theme in *A Horse Walks into a Bar*

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**Abstract:** Most of Grossman's works focus on the suffering of the Jewish people and their current living conditions. He reveals his thoughts on the construction of Israel's national identity in the description of absurd and cruel traumatic events. In *A Horse Walks into a Bar*, Grossman shows his personal trauma through Dov Greenstein's talk show performance. Under these wounds, he reveals the collective wounds of Israel nation and reveals the deprivation and attack of individual life freedom by the collective will since the founding of Israel.

**Keywords:** David Grossman, The Holocaust, Trauma, Collective will.

David Grossman, a young Israeli writer, is regarded as the rightful heir to the Hebrew literature of the 1960s. Together with Amos Oz and Abraham B. Yehoshua, he is called "the powerful iron triangle in the camp of left-wing writers" and "the three Israeli heroes". In his early days, Grossman wrote from a distinct political standpoint. He is keenly concerned with the reality of Israel and the existential dilemma and fate of the Jewish people, showing the same strong sense of social participation as the "new wave writers". David Grossman won the 2017 Man Booker International Prize on June 14 for "*A Horse Walks into a Bar*." The novel transcends the traditional genre and paradigm of fiction. It takes place in a small, anonymous bar in Netanya and takes the form of a two-hour stand-up show in which the characters of the novel and the acting characters cross over. On such a night, Dov, a comedian, stands in the middle of the author's elaborate stage and gives the audience an elaborate performance. Through laughter and tears, he tore open the deep wounds of the Israelite nation by showing his multiple wounds.

## 1. Individual trauma suffered in silence

Through Dov's playful language in the talk show, we can see that his traumatic experience mainly comes from three aspects. First, his short stature forced him to play the role of "the bullied" as he grew up. Second, the unconscious intergenerational transmission of trauma brought about by the mothers of Holocaust survivors. The third is the most immediate and deeply traumatic event for Dov -- the death of his mother. These three parts do not exist in isolation; they are interwoven throughout the early life of the middle-aged Dov. The bullying of the younger Dov took place at two of his main venues: the Romema community and the Gardner training camp. As Dov recounted the story with feisty glee in Netanya's small bar in the middle of the year, Grossman carefully placed witnesses to young Dov's bullying in the audience of the talk show -- Azoulay, a neighbor from Romema's neighborhood, and Avishai, a partner from Gardner's training camp. He recreates the bullying of the young Dov through direct or potential confrontation between the narrator and the witness. "I've never told anyone about this before, not even my classmates, not even my best friend," he said. It was a choice made by young Dov's sense of self-preservation. This arrangement reflects the premeditated revelation and tearing up of middle-age Dov in telling personal trauma through the known and unknown side of the young Dov's trauma by these two witnesses. Bullying is the trauma that Dov puts on the surface, but the trauma that touches the heart is the part of the trauma related to his mother that no one around him knows.

The mother, the most central part of Dov's personal trauma. Dov's motherhood is unique, as she suffered deep historical trauma as a Holocaust survivor. Her traumatic experiences as a mother had left her "carrying a lot of baggage from there that I can't get rid of," constantly alert to a state of panic, overly eager to erase her own existence. She did not play the role of lubricating the relationship between father and son in the family, which led to the alienation of family relations and the formation of a family atmosphere "like the Bermuda Delta". In the contact between little Dov and his mother's life,

the mother will inevitably pass on her trauma to little Dov unconsciously. For one thing, the younger Dov inherited from his mother the status of "Holocaust Survivor II" and her experience of the concentration camp, which allowed him to form his own unique perspective on the Holocaust. Second, because little Dov has such an unusual mother who is looked upon in a different way, it is natural that he will experience the same. Finally, in order to make his mother happy as if she had never been happy, Dov adopted a handstand walking to divert the prying eyes of the people around him. The young Dov always faces the bullying and the strong oppression of his father with a submissive attitude. So the active behavior in protecting his mother once again indicates the important position of his mother in the young Dov. All this sets the stage for the great trauma that his mother's death has brought to young Dov. The mother's funeral is the climax of the whole novel, and it is the most traumatic part. Such a traumatic event triggers the trauma mechanism of young Dov. Freud summed up the development pattern of trauma neurosis: "Early trauma - defense - latency - onset of neurosis - partial reproduction of repressed material: this is our formula for the development of neurosis." From the time Dov was picked up by the women at Gardner's camp to the time he finally arrived at the funeral place, no one told him exactly who was being buried and what had happened. At this time, he showed a delayed reaction to the meaning of the funeral. "There was no thought in my mind, I felt numb, and my thoughts were shattered into countless fragments and a chaotic mass". Later, after the military training officer and the driver repeatedly called him "orphan", the young Dov finally connected the linguistic symbol "orphan" with the meaning that one of his parents had died. Then his father and mother both entered his mind. "I took half a second to polish up his question...Then my father popped out with the noodles... "and" I saw her, my mother!" Memories of his parents and images of them are constantly interwoven and mixed in the form of hallucinations, which together invade and re-emerge uncontrollably in the "mashed, batter brain" of the young Dov. As Cathy Caruth puts it:"the inescapable experience of a sudden, catastrophic event in which the response is often delayed, uncontrollable, and repeated through hallucinations or other intrusive means". Meanwhile, this mental confusion was accompanied by a physical reaction from the young Dov. "It's just that my eyes, which are always on the verge of breaking down, are not going to shed tears, there are no tears, they are going to feel pain, the kind of deadly pain that presses on the eyes." "I jumped out of the car and vomited my guts right next to the front tire". It is evident that throughout the journey to Dov's first funeral, his state and thoughts were in the disorder of a neurosis. The bullying suffered before the funeral and the intergenerational trauma of his mother constituted the early traumas of young Dov. During the uneventful incubation period, playing unique games of chess and walking on his hands were his defensive behaviors. The funeral of his mother leads to the seizure of his neurosis, and parts of the repressed material are revived. By this time, the younger Dov had completed Freud's traditional neurosis model of development, forming a typical image of the traditional casualty on the way to the funeral.

## 2. The unspeakable collective trauma

In the middle-aged Dov's absurd performance, the collective trauma of the Jewish nation's thousands of years of migration and genocide is buried in his own, and his parents', trauma. In a posture of supplication, he carefully and step by step used his own way to evoke the traumatic memories shared by the Jewish audience of different ages, identities and backgrounds.

The national history of the Jews can also be called the history of migration and suffering. In the two thousand years of wandering journey, the Jews have experienced three times of mass diaspora and three massacres. They were expelled from their homeland in the wars of the ancient empire and experienced three great uprisings and three holocausts in their last diaspora. During this period, the death toll of the Jews amounted to more than 1.5 million, and almost all the survivors fled and were expelled from Palestine, thus ending the history of the existence of the main Jewish nation in Palestine. In the diaspora of more than two thousand years, the wandering Jews suffered humiliation and persecution. They were regarded as heathen by the European Christianity and separated. They suffered from religious persecution, racial discrimination, personal insults and physical injuries. The ethnic cleansing of Nazi Germany during World War II pushed the suffering of the Jewish nation to a climax. In this atrocity, nearly 6 million Jews died tragically, which became the most profound and indelible part in the collective memory of the Jewish nation.

In *A Horse Walks into a Bar*, Grossman reflects the collective trauma brought to the diaspora by Dov and his father through the collective characteristics of the diaspora Jews for thousands of years. On Dov's father's side, there was a "sudden cessation of male growth at the peak of the bar mitzvah".

He has a family heritage of short stature and claims to have suffered from "postpartum depression" since birth. The middle-aged Dov was sickly, old and thin. "His stomach was sunken with a long scar, his chest narrow, his ribs horribly protruding, his skin wrinkled and spotted with sores." "He rolled up his trouser legs to reveal bony, parchment-like skin and bones". The deformed body characteristic of Dov with hereditary nature reflects the diaspora image and collective characteristics solidified in the suffering of the Jewish nation for thousands of years. Grossman implies the trauma brought by the past humiliation to the Jewish nation collective through the body metaphor. Dov's father was a typical small-business man, who "from the moment he opened his eyes in the morning until he went to bed, was nothing more than loitering about in warehouses, light rides, parts, rags, zippers, all sorts of things." Even his way of showing his love was by showing her the little notebook he had used to record the reselling of jeans and "showing her how much money he could make". This is a characteristic formed by Dov's father in order to earn a living "by no means". It is also the special skill that the Jewish nation, which is good at business, evolved for survival in the long time of diaspora and discrimination and oppression. Beneath these collective national characteristics lies the deepest imprint on the people of this nation's history of suffering.

Her mother, a concentration camp survivor, represents the collective trauma that the Jewish nation most fears to uncover -- the Holocaust -- as trauma, as shame, as fear. This unprecedented holocaust not only cost the Jewish nation more than six million people, but also killed the character and dignity of the Jewish people, which became an unspeakable pain to the Jewish nation. Dov's mother was a well-to-do young lady who studied well and played the piano. But when she was 20, during the Holocaust, she was assaulted for six months by three Polish train technicians. After coming out of the concentration camp alive, she was scarred, lost the ability to communicate with the society normally, and became the object that was not accepted by the mainstream society of the country. She was "always making a scene, screaming at night, crying at the window until all the neighbors woke up". When she was awake during the day she always covered her face with a rag, always worried that the neighbors would be watching and whispering behind her back. All of her actions isolate her from the society, and more specifically from the Jewish community. She denies the meaning of her own existence to the society and the Jewish community. She tries to erase the form of her own existence in order to obtain a sense of security to continue to exist. Therefore, it is inevitable that mothers in the state of social death will eventually die. What happened to Dov's mother during the Holocaust is also what happened to the survivors. The trauma brought by the Holocaust will inevitably affect them in their daily life, and will always be like the nightmare that hangs over their lives. To extend to the whole nation, the Holocaust is the biggest existential crisis they have ever experienced. The trauma it brought to this nation has been buried deep in everyone's heart. Even though it has passed, the Jewish people still live in fear and anxiety all day long.

### **3. The deprivation and invasion of individual life freedom by collective will**

The individual trauma and collective trauma conveyed by Dov can be regarded as the trauma of two generations. Due to the age gap, the political space between the two generations is staggered. The two generations are in a common space and time in the narrative of the old Dov, but Grossman deliberately places their respective traumas in front of each other. This arrangement allows Dov to feel not only his own wounds but also his mother's. In the last performance, he can reflect the collective will of Israel under different state policies in the 1950s and 1960s to deprive and attack the freedom of life of two generations of individuals.

In 1948, Israel declared its state under the auspices of the United Nations, and as it was just rebuilding itself, it received declarations of war from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. Moreover, the international community's sympathy for the Holocaust did not eliminate discrimination against Jews, and even a new wave of anti-Semitism emerged. The new anti-Semitism, under the cloak of rationality, "does not discriminate against the Jews from the perspective of religion, but makes new accusations against the Jews from the perspective of secularism and nationalism". The irony and absurdity of the new anti-Semitism is fully demonstrated by the old Dov's joke that an Israeli scientist has invented a cure for cancer in his performance. In the joke, the discovery of a cure for cancer is met with protests and marches by neo-anti-Semites who say: "Why do we have to hurt cancer?" "Why can't we consider his feelings from the standpoint of cancer?" For the sake of anti-Semitism, even cancer became an existence that needed to be maintained by humanitarianism. It can be seen that under such a background, the Jews after the founding of the People's Republic were still faced with various threats and tests, and the establishment of national identity was particularly important for them. If Israel wants

to build a new national identity, it must deal with how the mainstream ideology of the country treats the history of Jewish suffering, especially the Holocaust history of Nazi ethnic cleansing. In the 1950s, Israel tried to separate the suffering history of the Jewish nation to create the myth of national heroism, tried to dilute the memory of the Holocaust. The Israeli government's avoidance of the memory of the Holocaust has made it an unspeakable taboo. Dov's mother was part of a society dominated by a collective will to remain silent about the Holocaust. So she was afraid to go out of her house, afraid of the judgment of her neighbors, and locked up in a small, dark room to bear the trauma of the memory of the Holocaust alone. The mother, who was originally a victim, became an inappropriate "monster" in the eyes of people in the context of national discourse in the 1950s. This led to a greater trauma, as if she had been abandoned by the state, and she herself denied her own existence. She used silence and isolation to separate herself from the new Jewish community after the creation of Israel, and then died in self-denial. Through his mother, Dov conveys to the audience the damage caused to the Holocaust survivors and their relatives by the way of forgetting the memory of the Holocaust in the 1950s, as well as the deprivation of their right to live and the invasion of their life space

In the 1960s, this practice changed. The international support and sympathy that Israel has received because of its Holocaust history provides an important condition for its statehood. The Eichmann trial in 1961 had a great impact on the Israeli society. The Israeli government realized that downplaying the memory of the Holocaust was useless for the construction of national identity, and the history of the Holocaust was of great significance for the shaping of the new national identity of Israel. Zionism derives right wing and left wing, and the radical Zionist right wing intensifies the existential crisis of Jews in the name of "the need of national political interests". They played up the memory of the Holocaust to the masses and use it exclusively with a tendency to privatize it. All this had contributed to a sickly, self-centered nationalism in Israel. Among them, right-wing radicals used utilitarian Holocaust education, such as the junior Dov's schooling and Gardner's training camp experience. They trained the children in a harsh living environment, and made the Jewish teenagers feel the hardship of survival in the thousands of years of Jewish massacres through deliberate suffering, so as to shape the future soldiers of Israel -- "young, tall and strong" idealized new Hebrews. This was imposed on children by the will of the state in the 1960s. The young Dov was beaten, teased, insulted and "bullied a lot" at Gardner's training camp. These were the wounds inflicted on young Dov by the Gardner camp, and Israel's national will, with a strong gesture, denied him the right to live and be free. It thought that it could make the young Jewish boys of the little Dov generation strong through suffering, full of national confidence, but instead made them all day in a state of more fear and fear, become even more unbearable. In the family, Dov's father, a hard-line revisionist who worshipped Yabotinsky, represented the Zionist right. He has a narrow sense of democracy, such as referring to teams from all over the world except Germany and Spain. With his mantra that "eventually everyone will look over their shoulder", he has created a crisis of global hostility and vigilance against the Israeli nation. He had always set high standards for the family's genetic shortness and tried to change it by ridiculously impractical means, such as buying shorts four times the size. At the same time, the relationship between the father and the young Dov is always accompanied by violence and strong repression. The father occupies the voice of the whole family and represses the young Dov. The handstand serves as the young Dov's way of pleasing his traumatized mother and his alienated behavior of escaping bullying. This is his mobilization of the self - mechanism to protect the injured mother and his own performance. But Dov's father thought it was shameful to stand on his head, and without thinking about it he gave him a good beating. Due to his father's violence, the young Dov had to abandon this self-protection mechanism and turn to the more secretive game of chess. It wasn't until he finally reached his mother's funeral that he was so traumatized that he walked handstand in front of his father again. The "monotheistic rule" of the father in the small family reflects the central discourse position of the Zionist right wing in the state power. His paranoid violence and narrow and radical nationalism entangled every individual Jewish nation, which made the individual's existence in a panic under the emphasis and rendering of the crisis consciousness.

#### 4. Conclusion

Trauma is an unavoidable topic in a suffering nation. When the historical trauma and structural trauma were intertwined, Dov was chosen as the most typical casualty of this nation.

Grossman expresses the pain and depression of his subject spirit through Dov's self-narration of traumatic events, thus triggering the suffering history of the Israeli nation and the memory of the Holocaust. And he realized the criticism of some policies of Zionism through the innuendo of political consciousness. Throughout the novel, Grossman, using Dov's words, is eager to awaken the numbness

of the current Israeli people, to take a firm left-wing position, and to call for respecting the memory of the Holocaust and forming a more inclusive and open national identity.

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