

The Human Traumas in Fazal Sheikh's Photography

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Abstract

Trauma is the physical injury, the human wound, or the emotional shock and pain caused by an extremely upsetting experience. Metaphorically we use the term to speak of natural disasters. Fazal Sheikh is the American photographer who saw these human wounds within the humanity, within the human face of the other while suffering. His unique glance towards otherness and the marginalized people through his documentary photography, gave a new perception both in photography and society. This aspect of trauma concerns Orthodox theology too in a way that pain becomes an opportunity for revelation, transformation, and holiness. Human's everyday wear is the one that awakens man to be creative. The man is invited to transform his pain to creativity, and the best way to be creative is the dynamics of love. Love becomes the only exodus for man to find a new perception of life. Fazal Sheikh's photographs are a revelation of humanity and love for humanity. This aesthetical way can awaken creatively the masses and transform the human consciousness. This paper is a synthesis of the photography and the aesthetical theology. It is an attempt to enlighten new ways to speak of the things that theology would like to say differently in today's contemporary world. It is deemed necessary to find new directions of expression of the theological terms in new grounds such as the photography.

Keywords: Portraits, Theology, Doctrine, Flash, Glance

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1. Introduction

“Supply is the traumas” is the title of the Greek poet Kiki’s Dimoula poem.¹ This short but comprehensive title makes sense of what this paper is going to deal with. We have two dynamic fields that can address this reality of human trauma: the Orthodox theology and aesthetics and, Fazal Sheikh’s documentary photography. Human trauma is connected to the emotional state, to personal experience. It is a universal experience that concerns the face of every person.

Orthodox theology and aesthetics is the field that studies the expression of the doctrine in every aesthetical result, in every form of art that can shape the same reality in different way. The doctrine cannot be limited in the terminology. The doctrine must go further to the everyday life. The aesthetical theology is the way that can reach the beauty of the holiness, the beauty of the incarnated Christ.² But what could we say about the function of the trauma in the Orthodox creed? Does Christ's paradigm reveal a new perception of the suffering? A holy model that can offer a new life attitude and a renewal of the way we see.

Documentary photography is a trace of truth, a piece of reality that can depict moments of life within life. It is not all about recording facts, but it is also about the personal glance of the photographer. It is his glance to the everyday life. Fazal Sheikh dedicated his life work to the human face in suffer. His portraits became symbols and social statement for the people in need, for the children’s voices, for women’s rights, for the marginalized, for the weak. Fazal Sheikh is a photographer with strong humanistic personality that transformed his values to photographic statement and aesthetical result at the same time. A life work that could be the vehicle to express honestly realities we to find theological terms and a common ground to enlighten it, to heal -as possible- the traumas.

2. The Trauma in Theology

All the creation has its traumas during its way to perfection. In this way to the perfection man must face the trauma of creation. The only way for somebody to compensate his trauma is to be close to God, the real source of life and creativity.³ God is the cause of any power and even more, God is the cause of every self-power as the actual cause over every created reality.⁴ The trauma is connected to human’s created nature. The only way for human to reverse this trauma is to be alike to God’s creativity, in the degree that this is possible because of his created nature. The passions that imprison man in slavery become a compass for him to find a new path to true life. Passions help man to seek perfection. Man’s free will is the one that can lead him to God.⁵

We can find the aspect of the human suffering being expressed in the Old Testament’s psalms. A representative example is the psalm number *six* which is an individual prayer:

¹ Kiki Dimoula. (2005) 2006. *Greenhouse grass*. 2nd ed. Athens: Ikaros.

² Chr. A. Stamoulis (2022). *Holy beauty, Prolegomena to an Orthodox Philokalic Aesthetics*. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. p. 13

³ N. Matsoukas. (2009). *The problem of evil*. 3rd ed. Thessaloniki: Pournaras, pp. 186-187.

⁴ Dionysius the Areopagite, *Chapters, about the ecclesiastical hierarchy* 8, *About power, justice, salvation, redemption, and about inequality*, PG 3, 889-892.

⁵ N. Matsoukas (2014). *World, man, society according to Maximus the Confessor*. Athens: Gregory, p. 126.

¹To the Chief Musician. With stringed instruments. On an eight-stringed harp.

A Psalm of David.

²Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger
or discipline me in your wrath.

³Have mercy on me, Lord, for I am faint;
heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony.

⁴My soul is in deep anguish.
How long, Lord, how long?

⁵Turn, Lord, and deliver me;
save me because of your unfailing love.

⁶Among the dead no one proclaims your name.
Who praises you from the grave?

⁷I am worn out from my groaning.
All night long I flood my bed with weeping
and drench my couch with tears.

⁸My eyes grow weak with sorrow;
they fail because of all my foes.

⁹Away from me, all you who do evil,
for the Lord has heard my weeping.

¹⁰The Lord has heard my cry for mercy;
the Lord accepts my prayer.

¹¹All my enemies will be overwhelmed with shame and anguish;
they will turn back and suddenly be put to shame.

In this psalm the man asks redemption from God, as result of the God's love. The believer narrates all his suffering that led him to the limit of non-existence and into a deathly situation. Illness, enemies, and the absence of God affects the believer emotionally (2). By suffering and deep pain until his bones, man asks from God for mercy (3). Man is unable to find his balance and feels lost in a chaos (3-5). The ill man feels very close to death and refers to life after death. It is a mention to Sheol, a mysterious, subterranean place where, according to Jewish tradition, all the dead were going after their death. This life was not pleasant for everyone because they were apart from the presence of God. Death is the end of the relationship with God (6). The ill believer is exhausted and weak, and he takes refuge in tears and repentance (7-8). In the next lyrics the believer finds courage and optimism, it seems like he is rebirthed. Maybe his prayers and repentance guided him to healing. He says that the Lord heard his prayers (9-10). The psalm closes with the certainty that God heard and accepted the honest prayer and all the enemies disappeared. The sin faded with the presence of God (11).⁶

In the New Testament the son of God came to the world to heal every wound in humanity. Jesus Christ is the Godman that suffered in real. From the beginning of His life, he was chased from Herod, his eloquent speech provoked the Pharisees and scribes while he objected every close and introverted system and policy of His time. Jesus Christ suffered, blooded, and tortured. His pain was real. His wounds were real. His traumas are real and a proof of his sacrificing love for humanity. Christ's sacrifice is a model love that can awaken the history and the societies. His loud voice was a scream of sacrifice, a scream for awakening, a scream for the great love that crucified Him:

⁶ See D. Kaimakis (2001). *I sing to my God*. Thessaloniki: Simbo, pp. 143-150.

³⁴ And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”).⁷

According to evangelist John, Jesus completed His mission:

³⁰ When he had received the drink, Jesus said, “It is finished.” With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.⁸

For theology and the believer trauma is an experience that is closely connected with life living.⁹ The open wounds that stop the continuity of the human skin, are filled with the grace of God. The emptiness fulfils with the presence of God, with the resurrected body of Christ that is glorified.¹⁰ This sacrifice of pain can be pedagogical for human, can be the arrow that can show him a new direction where the pain becomes a chance for renewal.¹¹ “The pain is the sensitizer of life” and if we avoid it, we might lose our liveness and the ability to feel.¹² A new meaning of life through difficulties, pain, tears, despair that can be transformed to a new life perception, to a new transformative beginning, to a new life being that is sensed by God’s memory.¹³ If the man does not give positive meaning to his suffer, he will continue to walk to the non-existence, to death, to the absolute nihil.

3. Capturing the Human Traumas

“The photographed body touches me with its own rays and not with a superadded light”¹⁴

The photographed body has its own light, a light that can be revealing without the flash of camera. Trauma can have a close conjunction to the terms chance and trace and photography can be its revealing place. Trauma can create a relationship between opposite terms such as inside-outside, self-other.¹⁵ The camera’s flash of light can reveal the reality behind the humans. The portrait can be the image of suffer, the image of pain, the image of truth, the image of human.

Fazal Sheikh (1965) is a humanist photographer. His photography embraced every unfamiliar face he met during his travels (Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, 1990–1994, Afghanistan, 1995–1998, Somalia, 2000–2002, Latin America (Mexico, Cuba, Brazil), 2001–2003, India, 2003–2013). The photographer of the displaced and marginalized people photographed with honesty and respect their traumas. His black and white portraits are the documentary fingerprints of his artistic and humanistic way. He has worked with human rights

⁷ Mk 15, 34

⁸ Jn 19, 30

⁹ O’Donnell, K. (2023). *Trauma Theology*. In: B. N. Wolfe et al., eds. St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology. University of St Andrews. Available at: <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/TraumaTheology> (Accessed 16 December 2023).

¹⁰ Father Charalampos Libyos Papadopoulos (2021). *Miracles made from traumas*. 8th ed. Athens: Armos, pp. 37-40

¹¹ It is of great interest the collective work about the trauma and theatre as therapy of trauma. See Joseph Vivilakis (2023). *Theatre-Trauma-Therapy*. Athens: Armos: “the personal pain is linked to collective trauma and is effectively transformed by social actors into a driving force for change”, p. 23.

¹² Father Filotheos Faros (2017). *Walk in good health*. Athens: Armos, p.29.

¹³ N. Matsoukas (2005). *Dogmatic and Symbolic Theology C*. Thessaloniki: Pourmaras, p. 302.

¹⁴ R. Barthes (1979). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 81

¹⁵ Margaret Iversen. (2017). *Photography, Trace, and Trauma*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 3-5

organizations, and his work is known worldwide. He has published and exhibited his projects internationally in galleries and museums.

The *Human Archipelago* (2018) is a selection of his photographs that were taken in countries including Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, Mexico, the Middle East, and the American Southwest, in dialogue with Teju Cole's texts. This project is a testimony of humanity. The portraits of the unknown faces enliven through these depictions of life while suffering because of political, racial, and religious division. In these pictures, names do not matter. The captions of the portraits are in the end of the book. This choice must not had been random. Every person, every face in suffer, is an ecumenical face the face of the otherness that man has just to simply recognize him by the sense of the common human nature.

Fazal Sheikh has taken pictures of abused children and women, pictures of old people in suffer, pictures of humanity that seeks for a shelter. The photographer focuses on their glances. All of them are real, all of them speak without voice. The photograph becomes evidence of truth and a revelation of the weak, of the people of the margin. If we see these faces changing the one to another fast, the perception that will remain to us is the face of humanity. We will not be able to remember a specific face, but the common photographic result: the black and white that can balance death and life to the resurrection of the photograph.¹⁶ A piece of history that is documented to eternity as a social statement that can awaken the mases. The trauma that can be healed is if man change his perception of life and realize the sense of the common ground, the gift of life that -although bleeding- is remains on the move.¹⁷



Figure 1. Abshiro Aden Mohammed, women's leader, Somali refugee camp, Degahaley, Kenya, 2000

¹⁶ R. Barthes. (1979). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, p. 82. See also David Levi Strauss. (2020). *Photography and Belief*. New York: David Zwirner Books. p.35: "The essence of photography is the certain belief that its referent had really existed, the "that-has-been"".

¹⁷ Teju Cole, Fazal Sheikh. (2018). *Human Archipelago*, Göttingen: Steidl, p. 64.



Figure 2. Bibi Mah, Afghan refugee village, Khairabad, North Pakistan, 1998

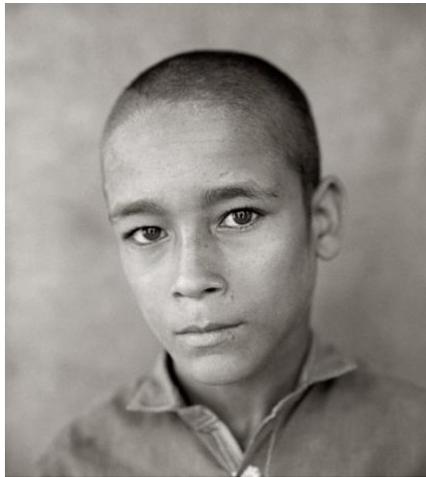


Figure 3. Muradi, Afghan refugee village, Nasir Bagh, North West Frontier Province, Pakistan, 1996



Figure 4. Simran, homeless shelter, Delhi, India 2008



Figure 5. Rekha, Shakti Vahini shelter for trafficked girls, Haryana, India, 2008

4. The Trauma as a Chance for Transformation

The common ground of the two fields, theology and Fazal Sheikh's photography is the transformative, actual, sacrificial love for the other. The trauma becomes a chance for man to fill it with love and grace. According to the holy fathers the human is dressed up with Christ's glory, the holy beauty that embraces all creation thanks to God's mercy and love for human.¹⁸ There is no such perfection of love if it is not wounded. Love transforms man and this love enables him to see the energies of God and experience new realities. The wound cause pain if man only see it by this way, if he only sees the emptiness. But if man fills this emptiness he will delight with life and grace. Every love is sacrificial and carries a cross, a cross that can change the things we know and transform them to new realities.¹⁹

Fazal Sheikh's photos embrace every unfamiliar reality of foreigner people and foreigner lands. The unfamiliar comes closer and the eyes of the xenos can meet every human glance. Teju Cole uses a philosophical reference:

"I perceive something. I feel something. I imagine something. I want something. I sense something. I think something. The life of a human being does not consist merely of all this and its like. All this and its like is the basis of the realm of It. But the realm of You has another basis."²⁰

The other becomes the realm of our reality. A realm that can fit the sense, the imagination, the expectation, the human thoughts. Everything comes back transformed with new life-depictions.

¹⁸ John Chrysostom, *Discourse 25*, PG 60, 198. See also Chr. A. Stamoulis. (2022). *Holy beauty, Prolegomena to an Orthodox Philokalic Aesthetics*. Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. p. 110: "The clothing of the naked human being is Christ himself. When the faithful are clothed not in 'natural' apparel, which is the 'property of irrational beings', nor, of 'preoccupation' and 'concern', but in Christ himself. They are clothed in the beauty that is holy, which in their own flesh has abrogated the consequences of the fall of human nature, which are corruption and death, and has rendered it free of every bond of sin".

¹⁹ Father Charalampos Libyos Papadopoulos. (2021). *Miracles made from traumas*. 8th ed. Athens: Armos, pp. 37-39.

²⁰ Martin Buber. (2002). "I and Thou" in *The Martin Buber Reader: Essential writings*. Basinstoke: Palgrave Macillan, p. 183. See also *Human Archipelago* (2018). p. 139.

The face of the Other is the face of God, the care of the body of the Other is sacred. At the opposite end of the scale to that is torture, which has everything to do with humiliation and almost nothing to do with collecting information.²¹

In every human face we should recognize God. Every torture reminds to humans the sanctity of the body. The trauma is the human gap that -although it is not obvious- it will be revealed from the photography evidence. Photography can be the social comment for a change and transformation from the documentary depiction to the aesthetical result and -finally- to the transformation. The common transformative ground of love to theology and photography, the love for the other, the love for all wounded humanity that does not exclude nobody.

This transformation is a transformation to the standards of the transformed Christ. It is a personal meeting of the man with Christ. Christ's resurrected body resurrects all the creation, and everything is glorified with His transformative glory of the eschaton.²²

5. Conclusions

During our life journey we fall, and we rise, we get traumatized, we bleed, and sometimes our wounds leave scars. But the scars can be a sign, a sign that can reveal new ways to walk. The theme of human metamorphosis is encountered both in theology and Fazal Sheikh's photography.

In theology the human trauma appears in the Old Testament's psalms as a prayer and as part of human's everyday life. It is about a sad moment in man's life. It is a reality of despair and non-existence, away from the source of life-God. In the New Testament Christ is the great example of suffering and pain that transformed for all the humanity.

In Fazal Sheikh's photography the value of the human face is obvious and clear. The human trauma becomes a photographical, aesthetical, and social statement for a change of glance. The repeat of the portraits underlines the value of the ecumenical human face that suffers in anonymity, on the margins.

Traumas are pieces of our lives that leave space to the uncertainties, leave space to fit the miracle of transformation and love. The flash of light from the camera resembles with the ray of light that every human being can reveal. It is the opportunity for metamorphosis and the hope for new meanings through the traumas. Traumas remind us of what Kiki Dimoula says in her poem:

Uncertainly live.
Honor your origins.

Understand, we come from one
transitory uncertainty of death.²³

Trauma can be the emblem of a new human face that has no certainties and seeks the daily miracle.

²¹ Teju Cole, Fazal Sheikh. (2018). *Human Archipelago*, Göttingen: Steidl, p. 178.

²² Stavros Giagazoglou (2023). *Theology and modernity*. Athens: Armos. pp. 492-493.

²³ Kiki Dimoula. (2005) 2006. *Greenhouse grass*. 2nd ed. Athens: Ikaros.

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