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Causes of Trauma in Individuals: A Study of Cyber Culture Works

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Abstract

This paper investigates the traumatic living of characters in the cyberculture. Cyberculture is a result of scientific progress made by man. Especially, the inventions of the computer and the internet have changed the outlook of culture. There is not a single department of human life left that has not been revolutionized the human life by machines. On the other hand, this scientific revolution has already posed many problems and threatened human beings. Living in Cyber Culture has become a challenge. People face many traumas since they come across blurred realities, cyborgs, transformed genders, and memories based on images instead of their personal experiences. Humans face anxieties, agonies, and conflict. Cavallaro's book "Cyber Punk and Cyber Culture" and William Gibson's works have explored the causes of trauma in the individuals of cyberculture. According to him, trauma is caused by the virtual reality that blurs the image and reality, haunting fears of hybrid body, new roles of transformed gender, and the memory provided to the individuals through images. In this paper, I will explore the cyberculture works of Sterling and Westerfeld to investigate the trauma in the individuals of these works. I will try to point out how



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virtual reality, hybrid body, gender transformation, and prosthetic memory play their role in creating traumatic situations for individuals. This paper will also explore how individuals try to come out of these traumatic sufferings.

Keywords: Cyber Culture, Trauma, Anxiety, Virtual Reality, Hybrid body, Transformed Gender, Blur Realities, Prosthetic Memory.

1. Introduction

It is the best of times; it is the worst of times. It is time to embrace diversity. It is time to celebrate the achievements of science. It is time to sense the threats posed by advanced technology and science. It is time when people fear others. It is the time that offers optimistic hope for human happiness, but it is time that haunts the people about the strict surveillance, controlled freedom, and the dominance of machines. This era is the era of complexities, anxieties, and fears. The dreams that science fiction writers of the sixties and seventies saw, now have been realized in the form of cyberculture, where the cyberculture is providing scientific advancement, rapid growth in agriculture, cure of diseases. It has been a constant source of anxieties, mental torture, internal and external conflict resulting in collective social and cultural trauma. The thoughts of people are controlled through different kinds of gadgets. Since men are becoming cyborgs, they are unable to bring balance between their bodies and soul. Their identities are challenged. They are being controlled by different political and capitalistic power. So, they feel insecure and face different traumas as Alexander observes:

People spoke continually about being traumatized by an experience, by an event, by an act of violence or harassment, or even, simply, by an abrupt and unexpected, and sometimes not even particularly malevolent, the experience of social transformation and change. People also have continually employed the language of trauma to explain what happens, not only to themselves, but to the collectivities to which they belong as well (Alexander, 2012, p. 7).

He further argues that the trauma occurs among the individuals when an organization compels them to leave their thinking, freedom, and diversity. In the cyberculture works, the arbiters have presented such characters who are the victim of trauma because these characters cannot cope with their hybrid bodies. They cannot differentiate the virtual reality and reality. Similarly, the gender transformations also create anxiety for them. In the presence of Prosthetic memory, these characters suffer from anxieties. On the one hand, they feel and wish to feel the emotions and sentiments, but on the other hand, their hybrid body does not find any sensation for these emotions. Their independent thinking is snatched so to keep their real alive, they

frequently faced traumatic sufferings as Alexander points out “For trauma is not something naturally existing; it is something constructed by society.” According to Lay theory, “Trauma” occurs when something clashes and confronts human nature. “Human beings need security, order, love, and connection. If something happens that sharply undermines these needs, it hardly seems surprising, according to the lay theory, that people will be traumatized as a result” (Alexander, 2012, p. 8).

It is hard to define science fiction and to determine its theme and objectives. Since science fiction is not new. It is generally known that science fiction is a phenomenon of the 20th Century that resulted from a predominantly western experience of scientific growth and advancement. According to Cavallaro, Lucian of Samosata made experiments of interplanetary travel and warfare in his book, *Vera Historia*, in 150 AD. According to Calvino, Cyrano is a forerunner of science fiction in the 17th Century. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* 1818 has been considered the predecessor of modern science fiction. Shelley (2012), in this novel, discusses how science can become a monster when it challenges the fundamental laws of nature. It results in the traumatic suffering of human beings.

G. H. Wells (2005) is also a science fiction writer of the late 19th Century. His novel *Time Machine* has the theme of the encounter between human and alien resulting anxieties also provides the future science fiction writer’s different course. These novels, “actually articulate in uncompromising ways deep-seated anxieties about cultural degeneration, the confusion of traditional boundaries the potentially destructive consequences of technological progress and above all the erosion of Victorian certitude in a declining imperial cultural.” (Cavallaro, 2000, p. 3). In the second half of 20th Century, science fiction writers started writing about the impacts of science on the daily life and the culture. They started writing how science would affect individual lives, their relations with one another and how hybrid bodies would long for new requirements. For instance, *New Waves* (1974), a phase associated with authors such as Brian Aldiss and J. G. Ballard and with the British publication 1946-70 focused on the topic such as “environmental depletion, urban overcrowding and the relationship between the crime, drug addiction, and sexuality.” (Cavallaro, 2000, p. 5). In other words, *The New Wave* predicts those traumas that can be caused in the cyberculture. It can be said that science fiction through its fantasy does not escape from the reality rather it introduces us to threats and challenges that human will face in the presence of hybrid bodies and virtual realities. Science fiction, in the last quarter of the 20th century, turned into cyberpunk that discussed and focused on cyberculture challenges. William Gibson, Bruce Sterling, and Scott Westerfeld are among those novelists who have presented cyberculture in their works. In their novels, the differences between humans and machines have been removed. The human body parts can easily be removed and replaced with new ones. Human thoughts can be controlled by transplanting the small chips in their brains. A human can live for more than 200

hundred years. Genetic engineering can enable them to modify their bodies to control their sex, to transform themselves according to the diver's environment. Sterling's *Schismatrix* (1985) Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1991) and Westerfeld's *Uglies* (2006) depict the cyberculture and its depressions. In these novels, one can find characters struggling for their identities, having conflicts between emotional feelings which they possessed before turning into a cyborg and the emotionless mechanical identity that they possess. Their thinking pattern has changed. Their eating habits, their aesthetic pleasure, and their sexual manners confront their past. They are continuously haunted by the fears of their survival. So, they face different trauma. Mostly they are facing collective trauma. This kind of trauma is turned into cultural trauma as mentioned by Alexander (2012) in his book "*Trauma- A Social Theory*".

Cavallaro, in his book, "*Cyberpunk and Cyberculture: Science Fiction and the Work of William Gibson*" (2000) has figured out those key factors of cyberculture that are causing traumatic suffering among the transformed human of cyberculture. According to him, virtual reality, hybrid body, transformed gender, and prosthetic memory are those factors that confuse, create conflicts, anxieties, and insecurity among the post-human in cyberculture. In this article, I will explore the role of these factors in creating traumatic suffering for the characters in *Schismatrix* (1985) and the *Uglies* (2006).

A computer scientist, Jaron Lanier, coined the phrase *Virtual Reality* in the late 1980s (Krueger 1991). According to him, it is an environment in which reality is simulated through computers in which one can experience artificially-generated data as though they are real. Through virtual reality, people can feel the real experience of living in that environment which is presented through virtual reality. People can feel inhabiting that world before they move in it. For instance, in a computer-generated house, one can feel living in it before it can actually be built. According to Cavallaro "The user of virtual reality receives images and impressions from various mechanical devices attached to the user's body to provide the impressions of sight, sound, and touch." (Cavallaro, 2000, p. 20). Sterling and Westerfeld have gone one step further in virtual technology by making it possible to connect human brain directly with a computer. This connection is made possible by electrodes or sockets situated behind the ear that can receive small chips. This enables them to reach digital memory and virtual space directly. So, the power structure uses this direct relationship in making narratives. Through these virtual images, humans plunged into the domain of hybrid body. Thus, it creates ambivalence between organic and inorganic. For Kroker and Weinstein (1945), Hyper-Texted body is:

a wired nervous system embedded in living (dedicated) flesh'. In cyberculture, our bodies are not simply 'interfaced to the net through modems and external software'. In fact, they become nets in their own right, for in cruising cyberspace we are physically involved with oceans

of data and images that impact directly on our sensorium (Cavallaro, 2000, p. 26-29).

Cavallaro asserts that Virtual Reality has a direct impact on the traditional notions of community. He quotes some critics to tell how virtual reality challenges individual freedom and how it traumatizes the entire community.

These critics blame technology-saturated environments for alienating the individual on two levels. First, computerized work-life increasingly fashions the worker as a workstation and an entry in a database. Second, the Internet reduces the user to an anonymous cell in a homogenized system, where pluralism really amounts to the erasure of differences and hence of the possibility of progressive politics (Cavallaro, 2000, p. 29).

Almost all the major characters in *Schismatrix* by Sterling are the victims of trauma caused by narratives formed through images of virtual reality. At the very outset, we have introduced two kinds of post-human. Both are afraid of each other. One group is called Shapers. They have been transformed through genetic engineering and the other group is called Mechanists who are transformed through electronic bodies and machines. At the beginning of the novel, Mechanists are ruling over the earth. So, the Shapers are forced to live under the domination of Mechanists. Lindsay and Philip Constantine are political allies. They are Shapers. Lindsay is caught up and imprisoned in his own house. Their plan fails, so Lindsay has to leave the earth. Lindsay feels alienated. His wife leaves him since he does not leave his political activities. His wife adopts the lifestyle of Mechanistic. Lindsay works for a group of youth who still wants to preserve past values. Lindsay's family wanted Lindsay to be shifted to the museum but Lindsay refused and tried to escape. During his efforts to escape, he came across Vera, the mutual friend of Lindsay and Constantine. She was killed in an air crash. Lindsay could not forget her throughout his life. She sacrificed her life since she could not want to live the life of Machinists. She is the victim of trauma.

Lindsay brushed a moth from her face and pressed his lips to hers. The pulse stopped in her throat. She was dead. "Vera," he groaned. "Sweetheart, you're burned..." A wave of grief and exultation hit him. He fell into the sun-warmed grass, holding his sides. (Sterling, 1996, p. 4).

Lindsay wanted to kill himself but his uncle stopped him since it was illegal to commit suicide. It is the conflicts between the Shaper and Mechanists that have made the lives of individuals insecure full of guilt so Lindsay was sent in Sundog Zones. He was exiled in Zaibatsu. It is a mechanistic state. Here Lindsay feels insecure. He is under strict surveillance. On one hand, he faces the guilt of Vera, on the other hand, he finds

himself misfit among the mechanists. Mechanists want him to follow them. As soon as he reaches Zaibatsu. He undergoes an operation and he is asked.

The camera spoke. "You are Abelard Malcolm Tyler Lindsay? From the Mare Serenitatis Cir-cumlunar Corporate Republic? You are seeking political asylum? You have no biologically active materials in your baggage or implanted on your person? You are not carrying explosives or software attack systems? Your intestinal flora has been sterilized and replaced with Zaibatsu standard microbes? (Sterling, 1996, p. 6).

The control over an individual can also be noted when Zaibatsu informed Lindsay about their rules and regulations. "If you physically threaten the habitat, you will be killed. If you interfere with our monitoring devices, you will be killed. If you cross the sterilized zone, you will be killed. You will also be killed for crimes against humanity" (Sterling, 1996, p. 7).

Constantine follows Lindsay. He believes that Lindsay has cheated him. So, he wants to kill Lindsay to take revenge for the death of Vera. Lindsay cannot escape from the memories of Vera. Being Shaper, he is feeling suffocated and insecure in Zaibatsu. Lindsay escaped from Zaibatsu and goes to another zone. Where ever Lindsay goes, he finds himself in a conflict with Mechanists. Capitalists use him. When Lindsay succeeded in creating the state of Shaper, even then, he feels insecure and he has to leave. Thus, throughout the novel, Shapers are haunted by the fear of dominance of Mechanists. Big powers use them by creating such narratives in their minds. They keep Mechanists and Shapers indulging in enmity. So, both the Shapers and Mechanists remain in trauma until they decide to accept each other as at the end of the novel Lindsay Forgives his wife Alexandrina. In the state of Cicada Queen, Virtual reality causes trauma for Gomas, when he comes to know about the plan of Lindsay. However, Lindsay helps Gomas in reconciling with Mechanists and Lindsay succeeds in making *Schismatrix*.

Virtual reality also plays an important role in shaping the characters of the *Uglies* by Scott Westerfeld. In the *Uglies*, teenagers at the age of sixteen undergo an operation that makes them pretty so they begin to live in the pretty towns. All the pretties are equally beautiful. After becoming pretty, they just enjoy the parties. They don't think anything new. They relish life. The boys and girls who do not turn sixteen wish to go to the town as earlier as possible. The image of a pretty town is so attractive that no one wishes to leave the pretty town. Those who cannot go become pretty, they become the victim of traumatic sufferings. Tally, the heroine of the novel, in the beginning, undergoes traumatic sufferings. Tally's friend goes sixteen some months earlier than Tally so he leaves her and Tally wishes to join him. She secretly visits the pretty town with the help of her hoverboard.

Tally had no idea what would happen if she got caught. This wasn't like being busted for "forgetting" her ring, skipping classes, or tricking the house into playing her music louder than allowed. Everyone did that kind of stuff, and everyone got busted for it. But she and Peris had always been very careful about not getting caught on these expeditions. Crossing the river was serious business (Westerfeld, 2005, p. 10).

Tally receives a shock when on her operation day, she is told that authorities have decided that Tally will not be operated upon. Tally, by chance, meets Shay in Pretty Town when the warden of the pretty town was chasing him. They become friends. Shay is one of those *Uglies* who do not want to be pretty. They do not become the prey of the narrative of the pretty town. So, they leave the city before they are operated upon. Since they know the actual reality of pretties. Shay tries to convince Tally to run with them but Tally refuses. However, Shay leaves a letter in code words for Tally. So that she may join them if she wishes. The Special Circumstances are the authorities. They don't want that the people refuse to become pretty. During the operation, the brains of the people are controlled by the doctors. The doctors destroy the free-thinking of the pretties. They paralyze their thoughts. However, the pretties do not know these secrets. The authorities want to arrest the rebels therefore they use Tally to reach them. They asked Tally to help them and Tally is conflicted. Her morality does not allow her to work as a spy but the image of a pretty town persuade her to help special circumstance. Tally's condition is miserable.

Tally blinked away the after image of the flash, trying to force her exhausted brain to think. She realized now that this had never been simply a matter of answering questions. They had always wanted her as a spy, an infiltrator. She wondered just how long this had been planned. How many times had Special Circumstances tried to get an ugly to work for them before? (Westerfeld, 2005, p.134).

When Tally reaches The Smoke and meets David, she further gets caught in conflicts. They all treat her in a friendly manner. However, they suspect her as well. Tally is still haunted by the image of ideal pretty land. But when David's parents tell Tally about the secrets of Special Circumstances, Tally realizes the fake image of pretties. Now she decides to stay with David.

Tally nodded. Cities worked very hard to stay independent of one another, but the Pretty Committee was a global institution that made sure pretties were all more or less the same. It would ruin the whole point of the operation if the

people from one city wound up prettier than everyone else (Westerfeld, 2005, p. 265).

Thus, the people in the Smoke face collective trauma since they are not allowed to live according to their own traditions. Their traumatic sufferings increase when they think that their free-thinking would be restricted if they are operated upon. This insecurity causes anxiety for them. Their trauma or traumatic sufferings are lessened. When special circumstances leave David, his mother, and other fellows to live according to their own will. When Tally decides to be cured by the medicine of David's mother after being operated upon. This hope provides them security against their traumatic fears.

The concept of body in the cyberculture is also different. The body of a post-human being is a combination of biology and technology. That's why it is called a hybrid body. In such bodies, human organs can be replaced with electronic organs. This combination of bio and technology, on the one hand, enables the post-human being to live longer and to live a disease-less life. On the other hand, this hybrid body has conflicting demands. As Cavallaro quoted Stone, "this merging is based on a 'phantasmatic social interaction' wherein the 'boundaries between the living and the non-living' keep shifting, and identity is pluralized as a 'model of multiplicity outside a unitary physical body'" (Cavallaro, 2000, p. 72). According to Cavallaro, the Body is a product of biotechnology. The rapid change in the body needs to incorporate with its emotions. Sometimes artificial parts do not incorporate with the emotions of the organic body. Thus, it leaves post-human in trauma. Such kind of trauma can easily be observed in the characters of *Schismatrix*, whether they are Shapers or Mechanists.

In Part 2, Chapter 5 of the novel *Schismatrix*, one can find the hybrid body of post-human. This chapter reveals how the Shapers are frequently at war with the investors. In this chapter, genetic engineering is at its best. Through it, the characters have returned their youth. However, they are in constant anxiety, when their current body condition cannot respond to their previous emotions and feelings. They are frequently at risk since the medicine that they take can disturb not only their body but also their thinking. They are in a war of gens. The authorities or the people belonging to the upper class do not allow to be mixed with others. So, they are in constant fear that some investors may control them. In this chapter, Lindsay marries Nora. She belongs to Mavrides. They are enjoying themselves with their kids. But Constantine wants to manipulate Shapers, arrives there, and begins to threaten Mavrides. Lindsay shares his fears. "Constantine could denounce me. But what if he does? We'd still have the aliens. The Investors don't give a damn about my genetics, my training.... The aliens could be our refuge." (Sterling, 1996, p. 79). At the same time, Lindsay is well aware of his rapidly growing age. He has to take some medicines to regain his youth. But there lies a risk that Lindsay does not want to take. So, Lindsay is haunted by the fear

that he may lose his family and his home. So, on the one hand, there is Constantine and on the other hand, Lindsay on the hybrid body creating trauma for him. Lindsay is also not permitted to add his gens to the line of Veterline though he has married Nora. This thing also has made him insecure and traumatic. A genetic engineer Ross tries to convince Lindsay that he should choose the treatment to regain his youth and Lindsay shares his convictions.

Listen, Mavrides. It hasn't escaped me the way you've been looking these past few years. Frankly, you're in decay." Lindsay touched his graying hair. "You're not the first to say so." "It's not a money problem?" "No." He sighed. "I don't want my genetics inspected. There are too many Security groups watching, and frankly I'm not all I seem (Sterling, 1996, p.86).

Ross tries to convince him but Lindsay says it is risky. Nora also advises Lindsay to be rejuvenated. Keeping all the fears and possible problems that can happen with him. Lindsay thinks when Nora also wishes for his rejuvenation.

Lindsay was silent a moment. He sat up in bed, propping himself up with his untiring prosthetic arm. "It's my mortality," he said. "It meant so much to me once. It's all I have left of my old life, my old convictions...." "But you're not staying the same by letting yourself age. You should stay young if you want to preserve your old feelings (Sterling, 1996, p. 88).

Similarly, another character undergoes traumatic suffering when being poor, He has to use an untested medicine. This thing has not only made his skin rough and leathery but also his temperament has changed. He begins to behave intolerantly. The absence of tolerance in him has made him suffer in society. The characters in *Uglies* are not ready to be operated upon. Since they know their hybrid body would have some lesion of cancer on their bodies as David's Mother tells Tally that being a doctor, they have seen many people suffering from the lesion. She also tells them that in the process of making the uglies into pretties. Their free-thinking is damaged by Special Circumstances. Therefore, David's parents left the Special Circumstances and inhabited the Smoke. All those people who are traumatized because of the possible fears of their hybrid bodies have chosen to live in smoke. David's mother tells Tally why they escaped from Special Circumstances "We had no choice," Maddy said. "Not long after our discovery, Special Circumstances paid a visit. They took our Scott Westerfeld data and told us not to look any further or we'd lose our licenses. It was either run away or forget everything we'd found." (Westerfeld, 2005, p. 267). They further tell Tally that after knowing the reality of brain damage, they are suffering from guilt. They want to do something to aware the people about these conspiracies of the rulers. Thus, their hybrid bodies create traumatic suffering for them. Bundle of

thoughts started pinching the memory of Tally. she begins to think why common pretties were so submissive, obedient, and naïve.

Tally took a deep breath, remembering Sol and Ellie's visit. Her parents had been so sure of themselves, and yet in a way so clueless. But they'd always seemed that way: wise and confident, and at the same time disconnected from whatever ugly, real-life problems Tally was having. Was that pretty brain damage? (ibid).

Thus, hybrid bodies are used to manipulate the authorities. And they can be made think in the way authority wants. This creates uncertainty and anxiety even in the post-human being. Therefore, post-human cannot escape from trauma.

Memory and identity are other important factors in cyberculture. In cyberculture, memory appears in the prosthetic form. As constant mass information provides us the images instead of our personal experience. According to Gibson computers are the metaphor for human memory. So, memory can easily be subject to revision. So, the memory that characters receive through the images provided by a computer, the internet, etc. forms the thinking of individuals. When individuals want to achieve the images, they find it hard to get those implanted images. So, the constant loss of images causes traumatic suffering among the characters. Capitalists, on the one hand, provide individuals with certain kinds of images, on the other hand, the capitalistic forces make it hard for these characters to achieve these images. So prosthetic memory creates anxiety among individuals. The same thing happens in the *Uglies*. The powerful forces who wish to control the brain of the citizens, form powerful and ideal images of the luxurious and peaceful life of pretties in the minds of their citizens. So, they anxiously wait to turn sixteen. This is the age when they can be turned into pretties through an operation. The image of pretty is so powerful in the mind of Tally that she secretly visits the pretty town before she reaches the age of sixteen. But the trauma of Tally starts when despite reaching the age of sixteen, authorities refuse to operate upon her. It is a shock for her. They want to reach a group of rebels with the help of Tally. "Then I'll make you a promise too, Tally Youngblood. Until you do help us, to the very best of your ability, you will never be pretty." Dr. Cable turned away. "You can die ugly, for all I care" (Westerfeld, 2005, p. 110).

Everything happened so suddenly that Tally does not adjust. She is in the grip of fear that she may not enjoy the life of pretty. The image of pretty in her memory is highly idealized. "Tally sat down on the bed, too stunned to cry. She knew she would start bawling soon, probably losing it at the worst possible time and place." (Westerfeld, 2005, p. 112) "There was nothing left to sustain her. Her stuff was gone, her future was gone, only the view out the window remained" (ibid). On one hand, Tally wishes to become pretty as quickly as possible but on the other hand, she does not want to

betray her friends. So, she is caught in traumatic anxiety. When she reaches the Smoke and begins to live with David and company. The prosthetic memory keeps on haunting him. She cannot decide to stay with David or to signal the Special Circumstances. Thus in the war between the authorities and humanists, individuals face severe traumas. Tally cannot escape from the memory of pretties until David's Parents remove the image of the pretties from her mind. Her prosthetic memory keeps her in a traumatic state. She does not enjoy the food even the love and the care of David.

In the cyberculture, gender transformation is another common activity. Cosmetic surgeries, implantation of electronic organs in the human body are normal routines. This transformation of gender may also become the cause of suffering. Due to transformation, the concept of beauty, sexual intercourses, and pleasure are also changed. Sometimes, one cannot stand by after the change. Irvine points out the traumatic feelings in one of her patients who undergoes facelift surgery "My face does not belong to me. I used to feel young and look old. Now I look young and feel old." (Botting, 1996, 157). In *Schismatrix*, Kitsune undergoes a transformation that appears very attractive and ridicule.

They gave me to the surgeon, Kitsune recalls they took my womb out, and they put in brain tissues. Grafts from the pleasure center Darling. I am wired to the ass and the spine and the throat, and it's better than being God. When I am hot I sweet perfume. I am cleaner than a fresh needle and nothing leaves my body that you cannot drink like wine or eat like candy (p. 155).

However, she fails to attract Lindsay. Their sexual intercourse does not satisfy both since Lindsay is not the modern Shaper. This gender transformation becomes traumatic when a Shaper man falls in love with Mechanist. They cannot make a union. Similarly, thou Nora marries Lindsay. But their transformed bodies cannot satisfy each other so Nora has to suggest Lindsay go for rejuvenation. When Constantine succeeds in creating a new woman with the help of the genes of Vera. The younger Vera cannot adjust herself in the present time. Her thinking is also not independent. She feels for her individuality which Constantin does not give her. So, she is in constant trauma.

2. Conclusion

Bruce Sterlings and Scott Westerfeld through their works have disillusioned the cyberculture. They have figured out the different anxieties, fears, and depressions that posthuman have to face despite scientific progress. They are right in pointing out that wars cannot leave human beings but the wars in the cyberculture are the wars of the economy. The wars will directly affect human psychology. The authority will try to manipulate the thoughts of their subject. They will use virtual reality and prosthetic

memories to check the freedom so the individuals will be confronted with these authorities. They will find insecurity, uncertainty and will feel traumatic suffering.

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