



Trauma, memory and Identity in contemporary Indian English fiction: A critical study of selected narratives

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Abstract

The contemporary Indian English novel has emerged as a significant medium for expressing the enduring effects of trauma caused by caste discrimination, sexual harassment, forced migration, family disputes, community memories and the post-colonial legacy of society. The present study explores the connection among trauma, memory and identity with respect to Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and her portrayal of the long-term impact of childhood trauma, caste, gender, family dynamics and marginalization. Using Cathy Caruth's idea of deferred trauma, Dominick LaCapra's differentiation between acting out and working through, Marianne Hirsch's idea of post-memory and post-colonial trauma studies, this study explores how the survival of traumatic experience depends upon memory, silence, recurrence and/or fragmentation of narrative. It suggests that, in the Indian context, trauma cannot always be viewed as one traumatic event that occurred once. Instead, trauma can be produced continuously by ongoing structural inequalities (e.g., caste), patriarchal systems, exclusion, and historically violent traditions. Memory therefore serves both to perpetuate suffering by repeatedly returning to unresolved experiences, and to provide opportunities for witnessing/testifying, resisting and rebuilding. Contemporary Indian English Fiction uses narrative fragmentation as a major formal method to represent the unstable nature of traumatic consciousness. This paper concludes that the construction of identity in contemporary Indian English fiction is not stable and cannot be fully recovered from the effects of trauma; instead it is constantly being re-constructed by personal memories, social histories and cultural experiences.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, Identity, Indian English Fiction, Postmemory, Postcolonial Trauma, Narrative Fragmentation

Introduction

Trauma has developed into a major area of study in modern literary and cultural criticism since literature offers unique ways to depict experiences which do not easily fit into conventional historical or psychological accounts. The effects of violence, displacement, caste oppression, gender discrimination, family disruption and social exclusion may continue to impact individuals long after the initial experience. Literary narratives often portray these effects through fragmented memories, repetitions, silences, disruptions in chronological order, and instability in identity. There is a close relationship between trauma and memory. Trauma does not always become a typical autobiography memory that can be consciously accessed and coherently described. Instead, the experience may return unexpectedly, blurring the line between past and present. According to Caruth (1996) ^[2], the delay or "belatedness" associated with traumatic experiences are key components of such experiences. When an experience occurs, it may not be completely absorbed and only becomes available for access through later repetitions. The process described above is particularly evident in contemporary Indian English fiction. The complexities of Indian history include colonialism, Partition, caste hierarchy, communal violence, gender inequality, migration, displacement, and changes in family structures which create a complex relationship between individual suffering and collective history. In such narratives, it is difficult to separate the traumatic experience from the cultural and social environment where the characters exist. Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is an excellent example of this. The book portrays

the impact of childhood memories, caste, forbidden sexuality, family violence, loss, and social exclusion on individuals. It illustrates how individual suffering relates to larger social structures of power. Scholarship has also placed the novel's depiction of trauma within South Indian histories of caste-based atrocities, rather than reducing individual suffering to psychological issues.

Thus, this article will discuss trauma, memory, and identity as interrelated processes. The main thesis of this article is that memory acts as an intermediary between traumatic experience and identity; memory continually brings the disruption of the self caused by trauma into the present.

Additionally, this article challenges the direct use of Western models of trauma to analyze Indian literary contexts. Postcolonial scholarship regarding trauma has questioned the Eurocentric assumptions of fundamental trauma theory and highlighted ongoing, cumulative and oppression-based forms of trauma. This type of analysis is particularly relevant when considering caste, patriarchy and structural violence.

Trauma, Memory and Identity: Theoretical Perspectives

Trauma theory has evolved from a variety of sources including psychoanalysis, and various academic disciplines that have examined issues related to violence, memory, testimony and representation. Psychoanalytic theory, specifically Freud's theories regarding repetition and repression, were among the first explanations of why individuals might continue to experience traumatic events long after they occurred.

Cathy Caruth later emerged as a leading theorist in literary trauma studies. According to Caruth (1996) ^[2], one of the defining characteristics of trauma is its "belatedness." A person may not be able to fully comprehend what happened during the actual occurrence of the traumatic experience. Instead, the individual experiences the event again through nightmares, repetitive actions, flashbacks, etc.

Caruth's idea of belatedness offers a helpful way of understanding how the past can constantly disrupt the present in many works of literature. In *The God of Small Things*, for example, the author reconstructs the main character's childhood experiences using fragments of memory as opposed to creating a single linear historical account.

As a result, the narrative structure itself illustrates how difficult it can be for an individual to distinguish between memories of traumatic experiences and current perceptions. Dominick LaCapra (2001) ^[11] builds upon Caruth's ideas regarding belatedness with his distinction between acting out and working through. An individual who acts out repeatedly re-creates the traumatic experience, thereby remaining trapped within the experience. Working through, however, allows an individual to develop enough critical distance to realize that the traumatic experience took place in the past even though the emotional impact continues.

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory extends the scope of trauma studies beyond the realm of personal experience. Hirsch states that traumatic histories may have a profound effect on succeeding generations who did not directly experience the catastrophic event. Cultural practices, family customs, photographs, stories, objects, silences and inherited emotional patterns serve to transfer the effects of traumatic histories.

Therefore, Hirsch considers postmemory an intergenerational relationship to catastrophic histories conveyed through cultural and familial forms.

In relation to Indian English literature, the above-mentioned theories provide a framework for analyzing how trauma manifests itself in literature when combined with postcolonial criticism. Stef Craps (2013) ^[3] asserts that trauma studies should expand beyond Western perspectives and acknowledge the forms of suffering produced by colonialism and ongoing oppression. Craps' assertion is relevant since trauma in postcolonial societies may be continuous or cumulative rather than stemming from one extraordinary event.

Therefore, this study views trauma as simultaneously psychological, cultural, historical and political.

Trauma, Memory and Fragmented Identity

Continuity from one's past to one's present is a necessary component for identity. Trauma creates discontinuities in the form of experiences that do not lend themselves to inclusion in an individual's coherent narrative of self. The individual experiencing trauma may thus create a division between who he/she was prior to being traumatized and who he/she is now. Silence, guilt, alienation, repetition, and unstable relationships are ways in which individuals' manifest divisions caused by trauma. The relationship between trauma and continuity is best illustrated in *The God of Small Things* with regard to the experiences of Estha and Rahel. Estha's and Rahel's childhoods cannot simply be put behind them because they remember loss, fear, guilt, separation, and family disruption as components of their

identity today. Memory does not exist only as something to be recalled; it continues to influence present day events. Roy's formal representation of this condition is her refusal to use linear time. Instead, past and present continually interact and key events are revealed through repetition and incomplete recall. Roy's use of non-linear time is similar to Whitehead's (2004) ^[16] description of the formal characteristics of contemporary trauma fiction: contemporary literary works can incorporate the formal structures of trauma into their own narrative forms. Trauma therefore functions on two levels: as part of the experiences of the characters and as part of the formal structure through which the characters' experiences are presented.

Gender, Caste and Social Trauma

Trauma in Indian English fiction is often a result of inequalities in society, as opposed to simply being caused by an individual's psychological state. Trauma can arise due to gender disparities.

For example, women may suffer trauma through domestic abuse, sexual restrictions, the stigma associated with being a woman in society, the patriarchal nature of families, limited access to power, and the pressures of maintaining family honor. Ammu, in *"The God of Small Things,"* is a prime example of how structural inequality can lead to trauma. Ammu's decisions are limited by the expectations placed upon her as a wife, mother, and woman who is expected to maintain her respectability. Her relationship with Velutha not only crosses the lines of gender and caste, but also challenges the social norms that dictate what is acceptable and what is not. This challenge leads to violence which clearly shows that trauma cannot be viewed solely as an issue of individual psychology. Caste is a second type of structural trauma. Velutha's situation demonstrates how social hierarchies regulate intimacy, movement, recognition, and ultimately survival.

Thus, Velutha's trauma is linked directly to the institutionalization of caste inequalities. Herrick (2017) ^[9] argues for a culturally relevant understanding of trauma and recovery when discussing *"The God of Small Things"* and South Indian caste-based atrocities.

In addition, caste complicates traditional trauma theory's focus on a single catastrophic event. Socially marginalized people may face repeated humiliations and exclusions on a regular basis.

Trauma can therefore be cumulative rather than singular.

One of the greatest ways in which post-colonial literature may contribute to the field of Trauma Studies is by helping us to see how trauma is experienced in different ways. According to Craps (2013) ^[3], Trauma Theory must take into account additional forms of trauma – i.e., ongoing, accumulated, and oppression-driven trauma – in order to move beyond the notion of a single universal model of trauma based upon the West.

Intergenerational Trauma and Postmemory

Traumatic histories do not necessarily stop with the generations who experienced them. Families pass down the past to their children via stories, silence, behaviors, photos, inherited anxiety, cultural practices, and geographic displacements.

Therefore, the next generation can be significantly affected by events they did not experience first-hand. Hirsch's concept of postmemory offers an excellent theoretical language to describe this phenomenon. She emphasizes how descendants encounter catastrophic histories through mediating forms rather than direct recall. Postmemory is particularly applicable to Indian literary narratives about Partition, communal violence, migration/displacement. These historical events are incorporated into family memory and shape later relationships with home, religion, language, and national identity. The process blurs the lines between individual and collective memory. A person may possess memories which are not exclusively their own yet have become part of their identity.

Thus, the family acts as a critical mechanism for the transmission of trauma. One generation may not be able to articulate certain aspects of its past; however, those same aspects may manifest themselves in a subsequent generation via anxiety, silence, inherited stories/fragmented recollections.

Therefore, postmemory shows that identity is created not only by a person's individual experiences but also by their inherited relationship to history.

Narrative Fragmentation and the Representation of Trauma

Trauma creates a basic representational challenge for literature; i.e., how does one represent an event that resists recall (in a coherent way), in a narrative form? Conventional realist fiction usually relies on chronological development and cause-effect logic to create its narrative.

Therefore, trauma fiction uses many techniques to reflect trauma's structural characteristics including repeating themes or episodes; discontinuous time; silent gaps; nonlinear time; fragmented viewpoint(s); and/or recurring images. Whitehead's work specifically explores how contemporary writers use trauma's structural elements in their work. Roy's use of narrative technique illustrates this relationship very well. The *God of Small Things* continually goes back and forth through time to present the experiences of childhood and adulthood as a continuum rather than as two distinct chronological periods. The reader builds up the traumatic events by piecing together fragments. Repetition similarly takes on new meaning when viewed from a psychological perspective. Trauma that cannot be completely integrated will return again in modified forms. Silence is equally significant. In an Indian social/cultural context, silence can represent more than just internal repression. Silence can also be externally imposed. Factors such as gender, caste, family honor, social authority determine who is allowed to speak and whose experiences remain unheard.

Thus, narrative fragmentation should not simply be considered an experimental literary device. Narrative fragmentation serves as a formal illustration of traumatic consciousness and social silencing.

From Private Memory to Collective History

In today's India, a key characteristic of the way trauma is represented in literature is that it moves from the realm of personal pain to the larger social history.

For example, a family's tragedy could illustrate how caste works. The private suffering of a woman could illustrate how patriarchy operates. The trauma experienced by children could illustrate how different forms of social exclusion work. Displacement could illustrate unresolved issues related to community violence. Literature therefore blurs the lines between private pain and public pain. Memory plays an important role in enabling this shift. The memory of an individual provides a record of an experience that has been suppressed by the dominant institution or community. Literature, in turn, converts the experience remembered into a narrative and makes it culturally visible. The traumatized individual remembers because he/she/they cannot readily incorporate what happened into his/her/their life; marginal communities remember because forgetting perpetuates the historical suppression of their experiences.

Remembering, Resistance and Identity Reconstruction

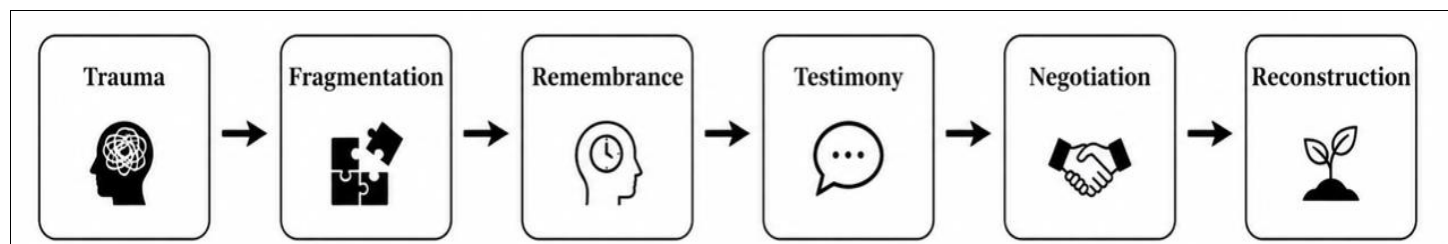
Memory cannot solely exist as a symptom of trauma.

While the act of remembering may bring an individual back to unresolved suffering, the act of remembering can also serve as the basis for testimony and resistance. The act of recounting repressed experiences transforms private memory into publicly accessible knowledge.

The presence of a listener/reader creates a relationship of ethics between testimony and witness. For those who are marginalizing their experiences, the recovery of their capacity to recount those experiences can therefore serve as an assertion of agency. It should be noted that the act of recounting does not necessarily lead to psychological recovery.

Many trauma narratives reject this simple resolution. LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" is especially helpful in understanding why. Working through does not necessitate the obliteration of the traumatic past. Rather, working through necessitates a connection with memory whereby the past is recognized but does not totally define the present.

Identity reconstruction can therefore be understood through the following conceptual movement:



Source: Author's conceptualization based on Caruth (1996)^[2] and LaCapra (2001)^[11].

This movement is not necessarily linear.

The reason that some literary narratives end without resolution is that these endings reflect a reality where the

structural and historical violence that has occurred continues to exist. Therefore, identity after experiencing trauma is not about going back to who you were before; it is about finding

a way to understand your experiences as they relate to your current understanding of yourself.

Discussion

The analysis shows that trauma, memory and identity are related in a way that creates a unified framework for understanding how trauma affects the individual in Indian English fiction. Trauma breaks down continuity. Memory takes that break in continuity and extends it over time. Identity develops by trying to come to terms with the past being remembered. The relationships between these three elements are even more complicated in the context of Indian literature, since psychological suffering exists with the influence of caste, gender, family, colonialism, communal identity, etc. The study also identifies a major problem with limiting the definition of trauma to only those events that cause extreme devastation. Caste discrimination and patriarchal oppression show that traumatic experience may be caused by long-standing societal problems rather than by a single catastrophic event.

Therefore, postcolonial trauma theory is crucial. Craps' work specifically critiques the eurocentric and monocultural biases in typical trauma studies and calls for increased awareness of trauma experiences in non-western cultures.

An additional significant finding relates to narrative forms. Fragmentation, repetition, silence and nonlinear chronologies are not simply stylistic devices. They represent the instability of traumatic recall. Whitehead's discussion of the relationship between traumatic content and literary form supports this point.

Lastly, memory functions in an contradictory manner.

While it perpetuates suffering through repetition, it can also act as resistance against being forgotten by history. Testimonies enable previously excluded memories to enter into cultural dialogue.

Finally, identity emerges as fluid rather than static.

Although traumatic experiences affect the relationship between the past and present, they do not necessarily eliminate the ability to exercise free will.

Therefore, contemporary Indian English trauma narratives can be viewed as both psychological narratives, memory narratives, identity narratives and political actions of bearing witness.

Conclusion

Trauma, Memory, and Identity in Indian English Fiction Today Contemporary Indian English fiction reflects the significance of trauma, memory, and identity for several reasons. First, trauma is often represented in literature as the intersection of individual psychological experience with larger historical contexts of social and political violence.

Secondly, literary representations of trauma illustrate that the past does not exist solely in terms of linear history. Rather, the past is experienced in a variety of ways including: memory; silence; repetition; body-based experiences; family dynamics; and inherited stories. Memory is the primary conduit through which the traumatic experience and one's identity are connected. Memory also mediates between one's traumatic experience and one's ability to maintain a sense of continuity.

However, traumatic experiences disrupt continuity. Memory continually reintroduces the ramifications of such disruption into the present.

Thus, individuals whose identities have been fractured due to traumatic experiences will negotiate their identities through remembering and forgetting. Moreover, the Indian experience illustrates the inadequacy of conceptualizing trauma exclusively based on catastrophic event-centered models.

For example, caste-based inequality, patriarchal oppression, social exclusion, communal histories, displacement and colonial legacies produce cumulative and structural forms of trauma. Therefore, postcolonial approaches are needed to supplement fundamental theories of trauma. Arundhati Roy's "The God of Small Things" exemplifies the aforementioned intersections. The suffering that occurred during childhood (loss, gender inequality, and caste violence) cannot be disconnected from the social structures in which these events took place. Roy uses a fragmented timeline, repetition, silence, and disruption of conventional narrative sequencing to represent the psychological and cultural instability produced by traumatic memory.

Nevertheless, memory also has a productive aspect. Remembering can convert suppressed experience into testimony and prevent social or historical erasure.

Therefore, storytelling is a crucial method by which marginal experiences are included in cultural memory. Therefore, identity after trauma should not be viewed as a return to a pre-traumatized state, nor as an unavoidable state of fragmentation. Instead, identity after trauma is an ongoing process of negotiation among what happened, what is remembered, what can be told, and what can be recreated. Contemporary Indian English fiction translates this process into literary forms. In doing so, it illustrates that literature does more than merely depict trauma -- it contributes to the battle regarding how suffering is remembered, whose experiences are acknowledged, and how identities are reconstructed in relation to the past.

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