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Psychological Trauma Across Time: English Literature from Victorian Fiction to Contemporary Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the conception of psychological trauma as presented in the select English novels from the Victorian age to the present. Hence, the paper employs primary works of leading women authors: Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, Virginia Woolf, Margaret Atwood, and Hanya Yanagihara, to analyse the changes in the portrayal of trauma in literature as a result of the evolution in the societal, cultural and psychological perception. In the light of the close textual analysis and of the comparative method preferred by the authors, the social and psychological interactions between individual and collective trauma are combined with the changes in narrative techniques, and the interactions and influence of the historical contexts. In this respect, the present study also emphasises the importance of literature in understanding and discussing the nature of psychological trauma.

Keywords: Psychological Trauma, Narratives, Evolution, Comparative Analysis, Periodical Study, Victorian Era.

Introduction

Psychological trauma has been one of the most multifaceted and inherent investigations in English literature overtly and covertly for a long time. Different literary works depict the predicament and suffering of human soul in the gothic visions of the Victorian age till the postmodernist stories. The paper investigates how psychological trauma has developed and been portrayed in English literature from the Victorian era to the present time with reference to the relationship between literature and culture.

The narratives of trauma have engaged and transformed the social worldview and scrutinises the use of literature as a means of grappling with, as well as issuing forth the devastating consequences of trauma on individuals and their societies. The continuities and divergences in how trauma has been treated in literature across historical periods need to be analysed comparatively. The reliance of

contemporary works on fragmented narratives contrasts with Victorian literature which depends on the gothic symbolism and moral paradigms. But both periods share a common commitment to uncover the profound impact of trauma on individuals and communities. The study traces these literary developments to shed light on how changing cultural, psychological, and historical contexts have shaped the representation of trauma in literature.

The narrative strategies make readers understand the subtlety of trauma. The complexity of psychological trauma has continually been rearticulated in literature within the Victorian gothic, modernist broken structures and postmodern intersectional frameworks. The effect of these narratives is twofold; they contribute not only towards another level of reader engagement but also towards another level of capturing the ways these issues are coming to be thought about, more generally, with changing cultural context.

The study demonstrates the enduring significance of literature which will remain an avenue to explore and articulate the psychological trauma. The research helps advance a larger discussion of mental health, social justice and the capacity of the human spirit to recover from psychological trauma through storytelling. The study shows how narrative form, cultural context and the human psyche are in dynamic play by analysing key works across periods and genres.

Methodology

This research paper attempts to employ a comparative method of literary analysis and close textual reading based on a multidisciplinary approach to analyse the development of psychological trauma in English literature. It looks specifically at the key works and focuses on the changes in how trauma is represented from Victorian times up to the present time within different cultural and historical contexts. Analysis of narrative techniques, thematic content, and historical significance has been conducted on the texts. This analysis has been supported by critical theories derived from trauma studies, and in particular those of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman and Elaine Showalter's feminism versions of narrative and trauma, historical and cultural framing of trauma, and gendered mental illness in literature respectively. This theoretical foundation enables the discussion on how literature illustrates the responses of humans regarding trauma.

Review and Discussion

English literature has portrayed a marked shift and change in the comprehension of psychological trauma vis a vis cultural, historical and psychological spheres. Literature has also been an evolving art form, following the limitations of the human condition and the versatility of psychological trauma. Through its narratives, literature makes the readers acquainted with the interaction between personal experiences, sociopolitical structures, and the cultural context. English literature has long been a mirror, representing and reflecting shifting perceptions of trauma as a psychological, cultural and historical phenomenon.

In the literature review, the critical frameworks of trauma in literature will be reviewed from Victorian fiction to contemporary narratives, as well as utilise theoretical frameworks and textual analyses to show how trauma has been dynamically represented. It simultaneously serves as a carrier of the main substance of the paper because the topic seeks an evolutionary study of literature as well.

On the issue of trauma, there is a vast body of literature and critics have noted its ability to address the unrepresentable. The Victorian era is the most pivotal time in literature that critically examines the trauma infliction and exposes the usage of the narratives taking on the imprints of societal norms and religious paradigms. In *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Wuthering Heights* (1847) the Bronte sisters used psychological trauma as an extension of moral endurance and societal constraints. Charlotte Brontë's depiction of the life of Jane at Gateshead and Lowood is an example of individual suffering and systematic oppression. A symbol of the internal struggle to which the "red room" corresponds is the

gothic element which reflect the era of the eighteenth century's tendency to encode trauma through morality and religion (Gilbert and Gubar 201). In Victorian literature, trauma often occurs in interpersonal and moral contexts, for example, Heathcliff's obsessive nature and Cathy's existential despair in *Wuthering Heights*. This novel is similar to other gothic novels in that it uses gothic symbolism to share the generational pain and psychological turmoil present in the strained relationships of its characters (Eagleton 135).

In general, the Victorian literary tradition often understood trauma in deplorable moral structures, but there came a paradigm shift with the coming of Modernism in the early twentieth century. As a result of the influence of the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud and the disillusionment of World War I, modernist authors began to experiment with what trauma meant, in a fragmented and introspective manner. A seminal example in the shift was Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), where she practices innovative narrative techniques (like stream of consciousness) to depict the fragmented nature of traumatic memory and picture out the distorted effects of trauma and counteract the conventional linear reading allowing the readers to become fully engaged with the complexity of the psychological processes. Clarissa Dalloway's existential musings stand alongside the case of Septimus Warren Smith, a war veteran with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which displays the interaction between individual and collective trauma (Hussey 98). Woolf's attempts to write about trauma using experimental techniques connect with Laurie Halse Anderson's (writer of the 1999 novel *Speak*) ability to present an accessible narrative which articulates the ambivalence of trauma.

Cathy Caruth's foundational work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) differentiates between trauma and narrative arguing that literature exemplifies the identity of the trauma itself. Similarly, Judith Herman's work *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) contextualises this in a much more historical and cultural manner. Elaine Showalter's *The Female Malady* (1985) focuses on gender aspects of mental disorders and gives a perspective of trauma that women's mental disorders were ignored as hysteria in Victorian society. Therefore, this gendered framing reveals the mode in which trauma was framed in this era in a moralistic way and needed a re-evaluation through contemporary lenses to understand its complexities (Showalter 45).

The more recent works, like Roger Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question* (2008), investigate the postmodern, shattered and dissolving nature of the traumatic narrative in contemporary literature. Roger Luckhurst notes that modernist literature often exhibits the "shattered subjectivity" of survivors of trauma which reflects a produced condition of historical upheavals on individual and communal identities (156). These critical perspectives guide this study's comparative strategy, that contextualises literary works within historical and cultural frameworks. Another prime example of trauma as a modernist phenomenon is T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) which uses fragmented structure and intertextual references to express the collective disillusionment of a post war generation. This era signals way ahead of Victorian moralism which emphasises the psychological depth and innovative narrative constructions as ways to discover the distinctive dimensions of trauma.

Contemporary literature has continued to open boundaries of representation of trauma expanding it through the use of systemic and intersectional critiques. Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996) and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) highlight the psychological difficulties because of gendered violence and systematic oppression. The reader's disorientation due to trauma and the way trauma destroys any logical temporal sequence of events can be seen in Atwood's choice of using unreliable narrators and nonlinear timelines where she also critiques the social structures which perpetuate it.

Marie-Thérèse Blanc in her article, "Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* and the Construction of a Trial Narrative" contends that the novel *Alias Grace* explores Grace Marks's mental state and the complexity of her identity. Blanc writes that the work of Atwood challenges the distinction between fact and fiction divide, undermining any claims to absolute truth and knowledge. The novel presents

Grace's fractured memories, the uncertainty of her guilt or innocence, and both as indicative of psychological trauma. Atwood touches upon Grace's psyche to show how trauma can make the line between victim and perpetrator so very thin that neither is fully distinguishable from the other. Blanc argues how Atwood combines postmodernist and contemporary literary conventions with nineteenth century to critique historical narratives. This method offers a detailed analysis of the character of Grace, who might be psychologically damaged in connection with those constructs of society and law which seek to define her. Blanc's article recognises that it is the novel's frequent and closely mixed narrative techniques that represent the complexities of identity and mental state of Grace Mark (150-160). Although, there are differences in the stories, a consensus to discover how trauma has affected individuals and communities remains a shared notion.

Significance and Scope

This research is important to understand how literature serves as a means of representing psychological trauma in the context of the building of society and culture. This study draws on a broad range of works from disparate historical periods to sketch authors' responses to and formation of cultural context, making a key contribution to the study of literature, the psychology of culture, and cultural scholarship. Importantly, in its insistence that it can demonstrate in a living manner how trauma passes, how it is articulated, how it is put into words, it can also illuminate the definition of trauma in literature as well as at a more general level of society and self.

Jane Eyre and *Wuthering Heights* rarely externalised trauma outside of moral or religious paradigms, and it is because of the cultural anxieties of that period. In contrast, modern authors of the twentieth century such as Virginia Woolf shifted toward fragmented traumatic memory as a parallel for the fragmentation of the psychological depths and emphasise the employment of experimental methods. Contemporary literature speaks of gendered violence and systemic oppression with intersectional lenses. Authors like Margaret Atwood and Hanya Yanagihara dismantle traditional narrative structures bringing readers from one side of the texture to the other offering them the rawness of unflinching portrayal of trauma.

Chronic trauma and its psychological long-term consequences is viewed confrontationally in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015) which depicts the horror of chronic trauma blended with an absolute lack of flinching and focuses on long-term psychological consequences. The novel's protagonist, Jude St. Francis, is a man who endured the scars of traumas from which no reader will find escape, and these scars compel readers to examine trauma's ethical and emotional implications (Rothschild 12).

Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* (1999) is an iconic work of young adults which talks about sexual assault through the lens of a teenage protagonist facing the aftermath. Anderson reinforces the power of storytelling by using first person narration and symbolic imagery in processing trauma (LaCapra 28).

The comparative analysis also reveals, however, the persistence of historical and cultural contexts. For example, Brontës differed in prioritizing the theory of domestic and relational trauma which contrasts with systemic and intersectional oppression found in Atwood and Yanagihara. Parallely, Woolf's modernist experimentations with form echo Anderson's consumption of accessible narrative methods to narrate reminiscent and indefinable traumas signifying various possibilities to represent trauma in literature.

Conclusion

The evolution of psychological trauma in literature has become a dynamic textual expression showing the dynamics between cultural forces, historical development and the development of the human psyche. Authors have adjusted to learn how to account for the multifaceted, intertextual, affect

driven processes of psychological trauma in the Victorian moralistic frame, or in the fragmented and intersectional narratives of the contemporary literature. This study emphasises the enduring significance of literature in depicting the human condition which provides valuable insights into how trauma is an impetus for constructing individual and collective identity. The research explores the power of storytelling by analysing works from different authors throughout time and genre to illuminate the transforming ability of storytelling as a means to comprehend psychological trauma.

This research has an interdisciplinary component, making its relevance beyond literary studies because it contributes as a significant tool to illustrate the discourse of mental health by proposing how storytelling can be a therapy to process trauma. Beyond this, it grounds trauma in the gendered and systemic dimensions, enriching sociocultural discussion and becoming an important source for psychologists, sociologists, feminist theorists, and many others. This paper concludes that literature testifies to the continuing force of literary influence on the human condition, and suggests a connection between narrative, memory and trauma in a variety of contexts and times.

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