



Echoes of the unspoken: A Caruth-Felman analysis of trauma in Anita Desai's novels

Spoorthy S. Fernandes

Assistant Professor, Mahatma Gandhi Memorial College, Udupi-576102, India
Research Scholar, Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Srinivas University, Mangalore, India

Dr. Kusum Thantry Dsa

Research Professor, Department of Social Sciences and Humanities, Srinivas University, Mangalore, India

Abstract: This study uses trauma theories by Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman to analyze psychological trauma in Anita Desai's novels *Cry*, *the Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), and *Clear Light of Day* (1980). The study examines how Desai's characters exhibit trauma through mental breakdown, silence, and withdrawal using a qualitative methodology. According to the study, trauma in Desai's books is not caused by a single, startling incident, but rather by emotional neglect, family issues, and unpleasant memories. Maya in *Cry*, the Peacock displays signs of psychological breakdown and obsessive thinking, reflecting the lingering effects of unresolved trauma. Monisha uses her diary to express pain that she is unable to discuss, in *Voices in the City*, while her brother Nirode is unable to write because of emotional numbness. In *Clear Light of Day*, Bim bears the responsibility of looking after her brother with a disability, illustrating the generational transmission of trauma. Through fragmented storytelling and symbolic language, Desai's writing style mirrors the fractured mental states of her characters. The characters find it difficult to communicate their pain, which is consistent with Cathy Caruth's theory that trauma is difficult to comprehend and Shoshana Felman's belief that sharing one's story is crucial for healing. This study advances our knowledge of trauma in Indian English literature.

Keywords: Psychological trauma, Anita Desai, Trauma theory, Narrative fragmentation

Design/Methodology/Approach: The researcher studies research articles, books, authored by Anita Desai. Additionally, the researcher consults, peer reviewed journals, original research papers, National and International Publications. For the analyses of the research paper, the researcher refers to and follows the APA Manual.

Findings/Result: The results demonstrate how trauma affects people differently depending on their gender and culture, and how Desai's novels reveal hidden psychological wounds. Her works are significant illustrations of how literature can give voice to unsaid suffering and highlight the enduring consequences of emotional distress.

Originality of the Research: The originality of the research lies in applying Western trauma theories (Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman) to Indian English literature, bridging psychoanalytic frameworks with Indian cultural contexts while giving voice to women's psychological suffering and advances understanding of culture-specific trauma manifestations in postcolonial literature.

Paper Type: Analytical research.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The idea of trauma in literature and psychology provides a compelling viewpoint for analyzing the complex workings of the human mind in narrative. Anita Desai, known for her deep psychological portrayals and characters that think a lot, writes stories that are full of pain, existential problems, and mental breakdowns. She examines the silent but severe trauma that her characters go through in her books *Cry*, *the Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965) and *Clear Light of Day* (1980). This trauma frequently results from tense relationships, fractured identities, and eerie memories. The paper examines these traumatic occurrences using Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman's theoretical frameworks. To comprehend Desai's characters, one must grasp Caruth's theory of trauma as a suppressed experience that resurfaces

in unsettling ways and Felman's emphasis on trauma necessitating acknowledgment and narration. By using these frameworks, we are able to view her protagonists as trauma survivors in addition to emotionally complex people. Withdrawal, hallucinations, silence, and self-harm are some of their symptoms that point to deeper wounds related to social pressures, grief, and family disintegration.

2. OBJECTIVES:

- The purpose of this study is to analyze the representations of psychological trauma in the works of Anita Desai
- To apply Cathy Caruth's and Shoshana Felman's trauma theories to comprehend the disjointed psychological states of the protagonists
- To examine the ways in which trauma affects the memory, identity, and communication in the narratives
- To demonstrate how the fragmentation associated with traumatic experiences is reflected in Desai's storytelling technique
- To analyse psychological trauma in Anita Desai's novels through Caruth and Felman's theoretical frameworks, contributing to the underexplored intersection of trauma theory and Indian English literature.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study combines trauma theory and literary analysis in a qualitative and interpretive manner. Character behavior and psychological characteristics that correspond with trauma survivors as defined by Caruth and Felman are the main focus of the psychoanalytic trauma lens used to read the novels.

4. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY:

- (i) This study is limited to an in-depth analysis of three selected novels by Anita Desai, and does not encompass her entire body of work.
- (ii) The research centers specifically on representations of emotional and psychological trauma, with minimal engagement with political, historical, or postcolonial forms of trauma.
- (iii) The analysis is primarily grounded in the trauma theories of Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman, and does not incorporate alternative trauma models or perspectives from other prominent trauma theorists.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Anita Desai is widely recognized for her introspective and psychologically nuanced narratives, which probe the complexities of human relationships, identity, and cultural conflict. Early critical studies, such as *The Novels of Anita Desai: A Critical Study* by Manmohan Krishna Bhatnagar and Mittapalli Rajeshwar, highlight Desai's unique blending of Indian and Western literary traditions. These scholars emphasize her protagonists' struggles with socio-cultural expectations and the modern quest for self-fulfillment, often analyzed through sociological, psychoanalytic, and structural approaches. The anthology explores Desai's use of images, symbols, and diverse narrative strategies, positioning her as a significant figure in Indian English.

Desai's prose is frequently described as reflective and introspective, mirroring her characters' internal struggles. As noted in "An Overview of the Novels by Anita Desai," her use of symbolism and metaphor is integral to capturing the emotional isolation and cultural dislocation experienced by her protagonists, particularly in the context of expatriate life and the clash between Eastern and Western values.

Feminist and Psychological Readings

Much of the scholarship on Desai focuses on feminist themes, particularly the suffering and emancipation of women in patriarchal societies. Studies such as "A Study on Feminism in the Novels of Anita Desai" by Priti Kumari and Dr. Carlus Toppo, highlight Desai's exploration of women's internal struggles, identity crises, and quests for autonomy. Her subtle depictions of female subjectivity, emotional isolation, and the psychological effects of gendered expectations are highlighted in these pieces. Desai's protagonists often resist or negotiate traditional roles, with silence and suppressed voices symbolizing emotional repression within domestic spaces.

Usha Bande (1988) and Jasbir Jain (1987) have further examined Desai's existential themes, urban alienation, and the crisis of modern identity. Bande's analysis points to the self-reflective and emotionally confused nature of Desai's characters, while Jain scrutinizes the depiction of alienation in metropolitan settings. However, these studies primarily adopt existentialist and feminist frameworks, with limited engagement in trauma theory.

Psychoanalytical Approaches

Beginning around the year 2000, and particularly strengthening thereafter, comprehensive psychoanalytical frameworks have increasingly been adopted to interpret Desai's novels. In "Psychoanalytical Study of Anita Desai's Novels," Patel

Darshanaben Mahendrabhai and Dr. K. R. Prasad employ Freudian and Jungian perspectives to unravel the subconscious motivations, desires, and fears of Desai's characters. This research highlights how Desai's narrative techniques and character development reflect the psychological impact of societal expectations and cultural conflict. The study also emphasizes the symbolic use of language and the emotional resilience of her protagonists.

Trauma Theory and the Unexplored Terrain

Despite the psychological focus in much of Desai's criticism, trauma theory remains a comparatively underexplored lens. The article *Psycho Acoustical Trauma in Select Novels of Anita Desai* (2004) marks a significant step in this direction by analyzing the psychological trauma experienced by Desai's protagonists, particularly women, who suffer from abusive relationships, rejection, and co-dependence. The study underscores the abnormal psychological states and personality disturbances resulting from trauma, but it does not systematically apply contemporary trauma theory frameworks such as those developed by Cathy Caruth or Shoshana Felman.

5.1 The Gap in Trauma Theory Application

While previous research has established Desai's reputation for psychological realism, feminist introspection, and existential inquiry, there is a noticeable gap in the application of trauma theory to her work. Most existing studies focus on internal conflict, alienation, and identity crises, but do not explicitly engage with the dynamics of psychological trauma, its impact on memory, identity, and narrative structure, or the fragmentation it produces. This gap underscores the need for a study that systematically applies trauma theory, particularly the frameworks of Caruth and Felman—to Desai's novels, thereby enriching our understanding of her protagonists' disjointed psychological states and the narrative techniques that mirror their traumatic experiences.

International scholarship on trauma literature has largely focused on holocaust narratives, war literature, and postcolonial trauma, with limited attention to domestic and familial trauma in Indian English fiction. This study addresses this lacuna by applying established trauma theories to Desai's intimate portrayals of psychological suffering.

5.2 Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory

Cathy Caruth presented her seminal work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), which explores the delayed recognition of trauma and how it resurfaces through dreams, flashbacks, and disrupted daily patterns. She terms this an "unclaimed experience" that doesn't immediately enter one's conscious awareness, but instead appears as a disruptive force that intrudes upon and fragments normal psychological functioning.

Caruth's latency theory suggests that traumatic experiences aren't completely understood at the moment they happen, instead revealing their impact later through different patterns of repetition. She explains that trauma occupies an ambiguous territory between awareness and ignorance, challenging our ability to tell stories about it or remember it clearly. This disruption in time is what she calls "the enigma of survival", the mystery of how people continue living after enduring experiences that seemed life-threatening. In her approach to analysing literature, she argues that traumatic experiences are not just described in texts but are actually made to feel real and immediate for the reader. She achieves this by breaking up time sequences and fragmenting the narrative structure to show how psychological dissociation works. Desai's characters have broken or scattered thoughts and consciousness, and this is reflected in her storytelling method, which does not follow a straight timeline. This technique puts her theoretical approach into actual practice.

5.3 Shoshana Felman's Testimony Theory

Crises of Testimony in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History (1992) reports on how narrative and testimony play out in the issue of trauma. In her work, Felman introduces the concept of a "break in bearing witness," which occurs as a consequence of trauma. Those who have endured traumatic experiences struggle to articulate or verbalize what they have lived through. Despite the significant challenges involved in expressing pain through language, storytelling is presented as a fundamental component in the processes of acknowledgment and healing.

Felman's idea of testimony is not limited to legal or historical bearing of witness but also includes literary and psychological expression. She puts forth that literature which is a form of testimony in itself gives voice to what is hard to put into words. This process of literary testimony produces what she terms "the imperative to tell and the impossibility of telling" a paradox which in turn produces innovative narrative techniques. Her theory which in turn applies to how Desai's characters use, what may seem like passive forms of expression dreams, symbols, not speaking and disjointed communication to put forward what they can't fully express through straight out narrative.

Felman's theory highlights the universal difficulty of expressing trauma. However, to fully understand these "crises of testimony" in Anita Desai's characters, we must consider the specific cultural and gender contexts. The way trauma is

expressed, or repressed, isn't just about individual psychology; it's deeply shaped by societal norms and cultural expectations that often silence particular voices and experiences.

5.4 Cultural and Gender Dimensions of Trauma

These theories provide new perspectives that highlight the cultural subtleties of trauma, when applied to Desai's books. Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) offers additional context for understanding how trauma manifests differently across gender lines, with women more likely to experience domestic and familial trauma that remains hidden within private spheres.

The intersection of trauma theory with postcolonial and feminist criticism reveals how Desai's characters navigate multiple layers of oppression i.e cultural displacement, gender subordination, and family dysfunction, that compound their psychological vulnerabilities. This multifaceted approach to trauma analysis allows for a more nuanced understanding of how individual psychological wounds reflect broader patterns of social and cultural trauma.

5.5 Methodological Framework

The application of Caruth and Felman's theories to Indian English literature represents a methodological innovation that bridges Western trauma theory with non-Western cultural contexts. This cross-cultural application requires sensitivity to how trauma manifests within specific social and cultural frameworks while recognizing universal patterns of psychological response to overwhelming experience.

6. OBSERVATIONS

6.1 *Cry, the Peacock*

The protagonist, Maya, is plagued by a prophecy that she or her spouse will perish within four years of her marriage. Her emotional instability is triggered early but never resolved, which makes her psychological breakdown consistent with Caruth's theory of delayed trauma. It keeps coming back as obsessive thoughts, hypersensitivity, and visions. In addition to the prophecy, Maya is traumatized by her husband Gautama's emotional distance. She feels even more alone and invisible because of his icy manner in his treatment towards her. The story concludes with, her killing Gautama and mentally failing as she withdraws into fantasy and terror. Caruth says that Maya's mental health problems show how trauma isn't always linear. Maya's internal breakdown results from her inability to communicate her pain, which is another example of Felman's theory regarding the difficulty of expressing trauma.

6.2 *Voices in the City*

In this novel, siblings Monisha and Nirode are impacted by trauma. Monisha lacks love and authority over her life because she lives in a restrictive joint family. She uses her private journal as a place to testify silently. Her suicide represents the terrible result of unrecognized trauma, her suffering goes unnoticed.

Aspiring author Nirode experiences emotional detachment and creative blockage. His sense of purposelessness and guilt over Monisha's passing, reveal a masculine viewpoint on trauma that is rarely examined. He uses avoidance and escapism as coping mechanisms, which is consistent with Felman's theory of narrative failure in trauma survivors and Caruth's theory of dissociation.

Trauma, according to Desai, is gendered and socially influenced. Although her characters hardly ever express their suffering, it is evident from their acts of numbness, withdrawal, and suicide.

6.3 *Clear Light of Day*

Bim (short for Bimla) faces multiple sources of stress: she must care for her autistic brother, lives in a deteriorating house, and carries painful memories of being abandoned. Her trauma comes from past experiences that she cannot fully talk about but also cannot completely forget—she exists in that difficult middle ground between speaking and silence. Desai uses a storytelling technique that jumps around in time rather than following a straight timeline. This scattered narrative style mirrors how trauma actually feels—fragmented and disconnected rather than organized and clear. When Bim later tries to reconnect with her brothers, this reflects Felman's theory that telling stories can be part of the healing process. However, Desai presents a realistic view: she suggests that while trauma can be recognized and acknowledged through storytelling, it may never be completely healed or erased. The trauma becomes something that can be understood and managed, but it remains a permanent part of the person's experience.

7. FINDINGS:

7.1 Character-Specific Trauma Manifestations

The analysis reveals distinct trauma responses across Desai's protagonists. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* exhibits symptoms consistent with delayed trauma, experiencing obsessive thoughts, hypersensitivity, and visions triggered by both prophetic anxiety and emotional neglect. Her psychological breakdown demonstrates how trauma operates in non-linear patterns, ultimately resulting in her complete withdrawal into fantasy and violence.

Monisha in *Voices in the City* represents the gendered nature of trauma within restrictive patriarchal structures. Her use of private journaling as silent testimony and her eventual suicide illustrate the devastating consequences of unrecognized trauma. Her brother Nirode's emotional detachment and creative blockage reveal masculine perspectives on trauma, characterized by avoidance and escapism as primary coping mechanisms.

Bim in *Clear Light of Day* embodies the complex relationship between memory and trauma. Her fragmented consciousness, reflected in the novel's non-linear narrative structure, demonstrates how past abandonment creates ongoing psychological fragmentation that can be acknowledged but never fully resolved.

7.2 Narrative Technique as Trauma Representation

Desai's innovative narrative techniques directly correspond to theoretical frameworks of trauma representation. Her use of temporal disruption, shifting perspectives, and symbolic storytelling mirrors the fragmented nature of traumatic consciousness described by Caruth. The non-linear storytelling particularly reflects how traumatic memory operates outside conventional temporal boundaries.

7.3 Cultural and Gender Dimensions

The study reveals that trauma in Desai's works is deeply influenced by cultural and gender factors. Characters experience trauma not only from individual psychological wounds but also from broader patterns of social oppression, including cultural displacement, gender subordination, and familial dysfunction. This multifaceted trauma compounds psychological vulnerabilities while simultaneously limiting access to traditional forms of testimony.

7.4 Silence as Form of Testimony

Consistent with Felman's theory, Desai's characters employ what appear to be passive forms of expression- dreams, symbols, silence, and fragmented communication, as alternative modes of testimony. These indirect expressions become necessary adaptations to cultural constraints that deny direct voice to traumatic experience.

7.5 Literary Contribution to Trauma Studies

The analysis demonstrates how Indian English literature provides unique insights into trauma representation, revealing both universal psychological patterns and culturally specific manifestations of traumatic experience. Desai's works serve as literary laboratories for exploring trauma theory within postcolonial contexts, contributing to the broader understanding of how trauma intersects with cultural identity and social positioning.

8. CONCLUSION:

This study applies Cathy Caruth's and Shoshana Felman's trauma theories as analytical frameworks to examine the psychological representations in Anita Desai's selected novels. Caruth's concept of delayed trauma and the non-linear nature of traumatic experience provides a lens for understanding how Desai's protagonists experience psychological fragmentation that manifests across time rather than in immediate response to events. Felman's theory of "the imperative to tell and the impossibility of telling" proves particularly relevant in analyzing how Desai's characters struggle with articulating their pain, often resorting to indirect forms of expression such as silence, withdrawal, and symbolic communication.

The application of these theoretical frameworks reveals that Desai's narrative techniques including temporal disruption, fragmented storytelling, and non-linear structure, serve not merely as stylistic choices but as deliberate representations of traumatic consciousness. The study demonstrated how trauma theory can illuminate both universal and culturally specific dimensions of psychological suffering in Indian English literature, establishing new pathways for understanding the intersection of trauma studies and postcolonial literary expression. Through this theoretical application, Desai's

novels emerge as significant literary testimonies that give voice to experiences that exist in the liminal spaces between speech and silence, contributing to the broader discourse on trauma representation in contemporary literature.

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