

JOURNAL OF INVENTIVE AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH STUDIES

(A Double-blind Peer-reviewed Quarterly Online Journal, ISSN: 2584-0630)

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**“TRAUMA, TEMPORALITY, AND FRAGMENTED NARRATIVE IN MODERN
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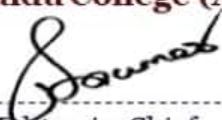
in Volume IV, Issue 1, March 2026 of

The Journal of Inventive and Scientific Research Studies (JISRS)

run by G. Venkataswamy Naidu College (Autonomous), Kovilpatti.



www.jisrs.com


Editor-in-Chief
Dr. R. Saravana Selvakumar

JISRS/V-IV/I-1/2026/31/03



TRAUMA, TEMPORALITY, AND FRAGMENTED NARRATIVE IN MODERN LITERATURE

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Received: February 17, 2026, **Accepted:** March 26, 2026, **Online Published:** March 31, 2026

ABSTRACT

The relationship between trauma, memory, and narrative form has become central to contemporary literary and cultural studies. Trauma disrupts the continuity of experience, particularly in terms of time and memory, making it difficult to represent through conventional linear narratives. This paper explores how trauma theory conceptualizes memory as delayed, fragmented, and repetitive, and how these characteristics influence narrative strategies in modern literature. Drawing upon theorists such as Freud, Caruth, Herman, LaCapra, van der Kolk, Felman, and Whitehead, the study argues that fragmented narrative is not merely a stylistic innovation but an essential response to the challenges of representing trauma. Through theoretical discussion and literary examples, the paper demonstrates how fragmentation reflects disrupted temporality, fractured identity, and the ethical complexities of testimony. It further examines how silence, repetition, and narrative gaps function as meaningful elements rather than deficiencies. Ultimately, the paper suggests that fragmented storytelling offers a more authentic way to engage with trauma by preserving its complexity and resisting artificial coherence.

Keywords: Trauma, Temporality, Memory, Fragmentation, Narrative, and Testimony.

Introduction

Modern literature emerges from a historical background marked by violence, displacement, and collective suffering. The twentieth century, in particular, witnessed

events such as world wars, genocides, and colonial oppression, which deeply influenced literary expression. The Writers confronted the challenge of representing experiences that seemed to exceed the

limits of language and conventional storytelling. Trauma, therefore, became not only a theme but also a structural force shaping narrative form.

Trauma disrupts the individual's sense of time, memory, and identity. As Cathy Caruth aptly remarks, trauma is not fully experienced at the moment it occurs; rather, it returns later in unexpected and fragmented ways. This delayed nature complicates the process of narration, as the survivor cannot easily organize the experience into a coherent story. Instead, memory appears in fragments—images, sensations, and emotional residues.

The traditional narrative forms rely on continuity, causality, and closure. However, these elements often fail to capture the disjointed nature of traumatic experience. As a result, modern and postmodern literature increasingly adopts fragmented narrative techniques. These include nonlinear timelines, shifting perspectives, and gaps in narration. Such techniques reflect not only aesthetic innovation but also the psychological realities of trauma. This paper argues that fragmentation is a necessary narrative response to trauma. By examining theoretical perspectives and literary examples, it demonstrates how disrupted temporality and fragmented memory reshape narrative form.

Literature Review

The theoretical framework for understanding trauma in literature originates largely from psychoanalysis and its later developments. Sigmund Freud's concept of repetition compulsion provides a foundational insight into trauma. He observes that individuals tend to relive traumatic events repeatedly rather than simply recalling them, indicating that trauma resists normal processes of memory.

Cathy Caruth expands this idea by introducing the concept of belatedness. She observes that trauma is marked by a deferred process of understanding, in which the original event is not fully grasped at the moment it occurs but instead resurfaces later in unexpected and intrusive ways. (This temporal gap makes coherent narration difficult and often results in fragmented storytelling.

Judith Herman further emphasizes that traumatic memory differs from ordinary memory. She notes that it is often "fragmented and dominated by sensory impressions". Survivors may recall vivid details but struggle to construct a continuous narrative. Anne Whitehead connects these psychological insights to literary form, arguing that trauma fiction frequently employs disrupted chronology and repetition to mirror the instability of memory. Similarly, Dori LaCapra distinguishes between "acting out" and



“working through,” highlighting the ethical dimension of narrative representation. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that trauma fundamentally reshapes both memory and narrative structure.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach that combines psychoanalytic theory, trauma studies, and narratology. The primary method is close textual analysis, which allows for a detailed examination of how literary texts represent trauma through narrative form.

The theoretical framework is grounded in Freud’s concept of repetition compulsion. Caruth’s notion of delayed experience and Herman’s account of fragmented memory. These perspectives provide a foundation for understanding the psychological dimensions of trauma. In addition, Whitehead’s analysis of trauma fiction guides the examination of narrative structure, while LaCapra’s distinction between “acting out” and “working through” offers an ethical lens.

The study focuses on key narrative features, including nonlinear chronology, repetition, narrative gaps, and shifting perspectives. These elements are analyzed as meaningful responses to trauma rather than mere stylistic choices. By integrating theoretical insights with textual analysis, the methodology seeks to demonstrate how

fragmented narratives reflect the complexities of traumatic experience.

Theoretical Foundations: Defining Trauma

Trauma theory finds its intellectual roots in psychoanalytic thought, especially in the writings of Freud, who, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, explains trauma as an intense and overwhelming experience that penetrates and disrupts the mind’s usual defenses. It tends to return indirectly through repeated and often unconscious forms of expression.

Caruth builds on this idea by emphasizing that trauma involves an inability to experience the event as it occurs fully. ⁽¹³⁾ This lack of immediate understanding results in delayed and fragmented memory. Trauma, therefore, exists not only in the event itself but in its ongoing repetition. Shoshana Felman characterizes trauma as an experience that occurs without a true witness, suggesting that the individual undergoing it is unable to fully grasp or express its meaning at the very moment it happens. This creates gaps in the narrative and limits the possibility of complete representation.

The Neuroscientific research further supports these ideas. Van der Kolk observes that traumatic experience is often retained not as a structured, story-like memory, but rather as intense sensory impressions—such as images, bodily sensations, and emotions—that resist being organized into a clear and coherent

narrative. ⁽¹⁵⁾ Judith Herman concludes that trauma disrupts the very structure of identity, making coherent narration difficult.

⁽¹⁶⁾

Trauma and the Rupture of Temporality

One of the defining features of trauma is its impact on temporality. Freud notes that trauma collapses the distinction between past and present, causing individuals to relive events as if they are happening again. ⁽¹⁷⁾ This repetition disrupts the linear flow of time.

Caruth characterizes trauma as a disruption in the mind's normal sense of time, where past and present no longer remain clearly separated but instead collapse into one another. ⁽¹⁸⁾ The normal sequence of past, present, and future is interrupted, and the traumatic event continues to intrude into the present. This creates a sense of temporal dislocation. In this regard, LaCapra further explains that trauma produces a collapse of temporal distance, making it difficult to separate memory from immediate experience. ⁽¹⁹⁾ As a result, traditional narrative structures, which rely on chronological order, become inadequate. The Literary texts respond to this disruption by adopting nonlinear structures. By breaking away from linear progression, they reflect the fragmented experience of time associated with trauma.

Memory as Fragment and Dissociation

The traumatic memory is fundamentally different from ordinary

memory. Pierre Janet observed that traumatic experiences remain isolated from normal memory systems, existing as separate fragments. ⁽²⁰⁾ These fragments resist integration into a coherent narrative.

Herman supports this view, noting that traumatic memories are dominated by sensory impressions rather than structured storytelling. ⁽²¹⁾ The survivors often recall vivid details but struggle to organize them meaningfully. Van der Kolk adds that trauma is stored in the body and expressed through physical sensations. ⁽²²⁾ This explains why traumatic memories are often intense and difficult to articulate.

Caruth links this fragmentation to the delayed nature of trauma, arguing that incomplete processing leads to disjointed recall. ⁽²³⁾ Literature reflects this condition through fragmented narrative forms.

Fragmented Narrative as Formal Correlate

The fragmentation in narrative form reflects the psychological fragmentation caused by trauma. Whitehead argues that trauma fiction frequently adopts disrupted chronology and repetition to mirror this instability. ⁽²⁴⁾ In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the narrative moves between past and present, illustrating how memory intrudes unpredictably. ⁽²⁵⁾ Similarly, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* presents a protagonist who is "unstuck in time," reflecting the disorientation of war. ⁽²⁶⁾

The repetition in these texts reflects unresolved trauma, echoing Freud's



concept of repetition compulsion. ⁽²⁷⁾ The fragmentation thus becomes a necessary strategy for representing the instability of traumatic experience.

Testimony, Silence, and Ethical Representation

Trauma representation involves significant ethical challenges. Felman and Laub describe testimony as a form of survival, yet they acknowledge that trauma often exceeds language. ⁽²⁸⁾ Silence plays a crucial role in this context. Narrative gaps and omissions reflect the limits of expression and the difficulty of articulating trauma. Caruth emphasizes that trauma resists simple comprehension. ⁽²⁹⁾

Agamben argues that the true witnesses of extreme trauma are often those who did not survive, highlighting the limits of testimony. ⁽³⁰⁾ Similarly, Adorno raises concerns about representing suffering without trivializing it. ⁽³¹⁾ The fragmented narratives address these ethical issues by avoiding closure and preserving complexity.

Postmemory and Intergenerational Transmission

Trauma does not remain confined to those who directly endure it; rather, it often travels across generations in subtle yet powerful ways. Marianne Hirsch's idea of postmemory helps explain how individuals who did not personally experience a traumatic event can nonetheless feel deeply connected to it through stories,

images, and inherited silences. ⁽³²⁾ These inherited memories are not exact recollections but emotionally charged impressions that shape identity and perception.

As a result, the boundary between past and present becomes blurred. The experiences of earlier generations continue to influence how later generations understand themselves and their history. This creates a layered temporality in which the past is never entirely past but remains active within the present. Such continuity often emerges through gaps, repetitions, and incomplete narratives.

The Literary texts respond to this condition by adopting fragmented structures. Multiple timelines, shifting viewpoints, and interruptions in narrative flow mirror the indirect and mediated nature of postmemory. In this way, storytelling becomes a means of negotiating inherited trauma, allowing writers to explore how memory persists even when it is not directly lived.

Fragmented Subjectivity

Trauma does not simply disturb memory; it unsettles the very sense of who a person is. When an individual undergoes a deeply distressing experience, their internal sense of continuity often weakens, leading to a sense of identity that feels divided or unstable. Judith Herman notes that trauma can interrupt one's connection with others and with oneself, leading to a

fractured self that struggles to maintain coherence. ⁽³³⁾ This fragmentation is not always visible outwardly, but it is deeply felt in the individual's inner life.

In literature, this condition is often represented through shifting narrative voices, disrupted perspectives, and incomplete self-representation. The characters may appear inconsistent or divided, reflecting their inability to form a unified identity. Dori LaCapra's idea of "structural absence" further explains how trauma leaves behind gaps that cannot be fully articulated. ⁽³⁴⁾ These gaps are not simply missing pieces but are central to understanding the subject's experience. The fragmented storytelling, therefore, becomes a meaningful way to represent this divided self, allowing literature to express what cannot be fully resolved or explained.

Concluding Reflection

The relationship between trauma and narrative form ultimately reveals that literature does more than represent experience; it reshapes the very conditions under which experience can be understood. When trauma disrupts the continuity of time and fragments memory, it also unsettles the possibility of telling a complete and orderly story. What emerges instead is a form of writing that accepts uncertainty, incompleteness, and rupture as integral to meaning rather than as failures of expression. Fragmented narratives, in this

sense, do not simply depict trauma but participate in its structure, allowing readers to encounter disorientation and repetition in a mediated yet affective way. At the same time, such narratives raise important ethical questions about representation. They resist the temptation to impose closure or clarity on experiences that remain unresolved, thereby preserving the depth and difficulty of traumatic memory. This approach suggests that silence, gaps, and discontinuities are not empty spaces but meaningful traces of what cannot be fully articulated. Ultimately, fragmented storytelling becomes a way of honoring both the limits of language and the persistence of memory.

Conclusion

To conclude, trauma fundamentally reshapes how individuals experience time, memory, and even their own sense of self, making it difficult to contain such experiences within conventional narrative frameworks. Linear storytelling, with its emphasis on order and resolution, often fails to capture the disjointed, lingering nature of traumatic memory. In response, modern literature turns to fragmented forms that more closely mirror the way trauma is lived and remembered. These narratives do not simply break structure for artistic effect; rather, they embody the disruption, repetition, and silence that accompany traumatic experience.



By allowing gaps, shifts, and unresolved moments to remain, such storytelling resists the urge to impose artificial coherence on what is inherently unstable. In doing so, it also acknowledges the ethical responsibility of representing suffering without simplifying it. Fragmentation, therefore, becomes more than a technique—it is a meaningful and necessary way of engaging with trauma, preserving its complexity while giving voice to experiences that might otherwise remain unspoken.

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