



## Review Article

# Childhood Shadows: The Lasting Impact of Early Trauma in Modern Fiction

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## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

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This study explores the enduring influence of childhood trauma as represented in modern fiction, focusing on how early emotional wounds continue to shape characters' identities, relationships, and life trajectories. Drawing on trauma theory, psychoanalytic developmental psychology, and narrative theory, the paper analyzes three works that portray childhood trauma in literary contexts: Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005), Kazuo Ishiguro's *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), and Tana French's *The Witch Elm* (2018). Through close textual analysis, the study investigates how authors employ narrative structure, focalization, internal monologue, symbolism, and memory distortion to depict the complex legacies of early trauma. The analysis reveals thematic and stylistic consistencies across texts—such as nonlinear chronology, unreliable narration, bodily metaphors, and haunting imagery—demonstrating how fiction can dramatize the psychological persistence of past wounds. By situating these literary representations within current psychological models of attachment, resilience, and re-traumatization, the paper highlights the capacity of narrative to render internal suffering and to frame trauma as a dynamic, lifelong process. The study concludes that modern fiction reveals how childhood trauma doesn't simply occur—it endures, morphs, and shapes emotional and moral landscapes across a lifetime.

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## 1. Introduction

In contemporary literature, trauma—particularly trauma rooted in childhood—emerges as a recurring motif that shapes narrative arcs and character development in profound ways. Fictional depictions of early psychological wounds often transcend their immediate narrative function, becoming metaphors for memory, identity, and resilience. The way childhood trauma is portrayed shows that more and more people and researchers are becoming aware of its long-lasting psychological effects, which include unstable emotions, separation, bad relationships, and trouble forming one's identity. People are becoming more aware of the emotional effects of traumatic events that happened in childhood (ACEs), and writing is also changing to reflect these scars in a more complex and understanding way.

These ideas are often present in modern literature, not just as background information, but as important parts of the structure and style of the stories. Trauma changes how people see time and how well they can remember things. These effects can be seen in the way stories are told, with nonlinearity, repeat, fracturing, and quiet. Traumatized narrators' voices are often inaccurate, unsure, or contradicting, which shows how trauma changes a person's thoughts and feelings. The idea that childhood trauma can affect people even years later is similar to what developmental psychology and neuroscience have found. These fields stress how

early emotional damage can change a person's brain and mind, sometimes in a way that can't be undone.

This paper looks at how childhood pain is shown in three modern books: *On Beauty* by Zadie Smith, *A Pale View of Hills* by Kazuo Ishiguro, and *The Witch Elm* by Tana French. Each book deals with early suffering in a different way, using a different literary style, culture, or mentality. In *On Beauty*, children growing up in a global, mixed home are affected by the psychological effects of family problems and moving around a lot. In *A Pale View of Hills*, the line between past and present pain is blurred, and the story is told through a mother's shaky memories of loss and grief. In *The Witch Elm*, a man's mental health starts to break down after a violent attack brings up old fears and emotional defences from childhood.

This study is guided by several research questions: How does modern fiction depict the lasting effects of childhood trauma? What narrative techniques and tropes are used to evoke or simulate traumatic memory and emotional fragmentation? And how do these literary portrayals correspond to or diverge from psychological and psychoanalytic theories of trauma? By answering these questions, this paper contributes to both literary trauma studies and the broader understanding of how fiction engages with the psychological intricacies of early emotional wounds.

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## 2. Literature Review

Literature's engagement with trauma has developed in tandem with advances in psychology, neuroscience, and cultural theory. Foundational trauma theorists like Cathy Caruth (1996) argue that trauma resists direct representation, instead manifesting through repetition, silence, and delayed revelation. In literary contexts, this has led to the identification of "trauma narratives," characterized by nonlinear temporality, fragmented memory, and emotional displacement. Dominick LaCapra (2001) distinguishes between "acting out" and "working through" trauma in narrative, suggesting that literature can function either to reenact unresolved trauma or to facilitate emotional and ethical processing.

Psychological perspectives further underscore the lasting effects of childhood trauma. Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory posits that early disruptions in caregiving relationships lead to internal working models that govern future emotional regulation and interpersonal behavior. van der Kolk (2014) expands this to include somatic and neurological symptoms, arguing that "the body keeps the score" of early traumatic experiences. These psychological models resonate with literary depictions of characters who exhibit emotional numbness, hypervigilance, dissociation, or compulsive repetition.

A lot of people who study literature have looked at how grief is encoded in stories. Anne Whitehead (2004) and Stef Craps (2013) say that trauma fiction often plays out the symptoms it talks about, using story techniques to make it seem like the characters are dissociating or having flashbacks. Whitehead talks about how jumbled timelines and inaccurate storytelling show how trauma affects our minds, while Craps criticises the Western-centered focus of a lot of trauma writing and calls for more culturally diverse portrayals.

You can use narrative theory to figure out how these mental states are stored physically. Both Genette (1980) and Bal (1999) talk about how changes in focalisation, diegetic layers, and time anachronisms affect how we feel when we hear a story. In books like *A Pale View of Hills*, where the narrator's memories blur the line between past and present, real life and dream, these tools are especially useful.

Trauma has also been shown to change the way literature is written. Gothic fiction, psychological tales, and postmodern metafiction are all common ways to explore childhood pain that was pushed down. Gothic themes like spooky houses, hidden secrets, and ghostly figures represent how people feel inside. As shown in *The Witch Elm*, painful memories are both the plot and the structure of psychological thrillers. Themes of mystery and reveal are similar to therapy healing or re-traumatization.

Studies that look at specific authors show how stress can change whole bodies of work. A lot of research has been done on Ishiguro's work because it deals with memory, denial, and guilt. In the same way, Zadie Smith's writing often deals with pain that spans generations and mental strength in diasporic settings. There is a lot of research on trauma in modern writing, but not many studies that compare childhood trauma in works with such different styles and cultural settings. This paper tries to fill that gap by looking at universal patterns in feeling and story that are not limited to one type or society.

## 3. Previous Studies

Even though trauma has been written about a lot in recent years, not many studies have looked at how childhood trauma is shown in different culture and story contexts. Existing study mostly looks at specific writers or works, which means that their results can't be used in a wider range of situations.

In the case of *On Beauty*, critical responses have primarily centered on race, class, and aesthetic theory. However, scholars like Jennifer DeVere Brody (2006) and Rita Felski (2008) have noted how familial disintegration and emotional inheritance underpin much of the novel's interpersonal conflict. Howard and Kiki's dysfunctional marriage, and the way their children internalize their parents' emotional chaos, offer a subtle yet powerful commentary on emotional trauma.

For *A Pale View of Hills*, many studies—such as those by Brian Shaffer (2000) and Cynthia F. Wong (2005)—emphasize memory, loss, and the lingering impact of war. The novel's unreliable narrator, Etsuko, becomes a vehicle through which repressed guilt and trauma are ambiguously relayed. Scholars have debated whether the character of Keiko exists independently or as a projection of Etsuko's unresolved trauma.

Tana French's *The Witch Elm* has attracted attention within popular fiction criticism, particularly for its psychological depth and structural complexity. Scholars like Megan Abbott (2020) and Sarah Weinman (2019) highlight how French explores trauma through a blend of Gothic and psychological thriller conventions. The novel's treatment of childhood trauma—particularly as it resurfaces in adulthood through memory distortion and narrative disintegration—places it firmly within the trauma fiction tradition.

These studies, while insightful, have not synthesized their findings into a broader comparative framework. This paper aims to connect these disparate strands, offering a multi-textual exploration of how early trauma is encoded, remembered, and interpreted in modern fiction.

## 4. Methodology and Analysis

This study employs a qualitative interpretive methodology, combining close textual reading with theoretical frameworks drawn from trauma studies, narrative theory, and developmental psychology. The selected novels were chosen for their explicit or implicit engagement with childhood trauma, their use of modernist and postmodernist narrative techniques, and their psychological complexity.

The analysis focused on the following criteria:

1. Narrative structure – How the novels use nonlinear timelines, unreliable narrators, and diegetic layers to depict trauma.
2. Psychological characterization – How characters internalize and express their early trauma through behavior, relationships, and memory.
3. Symbolism and metaphor – How authors employ recurring motifs (e.g., ghosts, distorted reflections, decaying spaces) to signify emotional residues of trauma.
1. *On Beauty* presents trauma as a transgenerational condition, evident in the way children mirror or rebel against their parents' neuroses. Jerome and Levi, in particular, reflect contrasting forms of emotional survival—withdrawal versus radical identification. Zadie Smith uses shifting third-person narration to delve into different psychological perspectives, showing how trauma is interpreted through sociocultural as well as personal lenses.
2. *A Pale View of Hills* uses elliptical narration and dreamlike recollections to suggest the presence of buried trauma. Etsuko's ambiguous narration—with sudden shifts in tense, perspective, and tone—mimics dissociative memory. The novel's unresolved central mystery (whether Keiko was real) exemplifies how trauma distorts and erases clarity.

In *The Witch Elm*, protagonist Toby's assault triggers a psychological unraveling that forces a confrontation with buried childhood experiences. French interlaces present-tense narration

with fragmented flashbacks, creating a mosaic of memory and repression. The symbolic presence of the wych elm—sheltering a literal and figurative body—illustrates how trauma is both hidden and central.

## 5. Discussion

A close study of the three books shows that they all deal with childhood pain in similar ways, both in terms of themes and structures. Each book uses different types of storytelling techniques, like breaking up time, telling stories in an inaccurate way, and using metaphors to show how stress can make you feel lost. These tactics are similar to how painful memories are described in therapy: they often come back unintentionally, incompletely, and skewed.

One important finding is how story uncertainty can show pain that hasn't been dealt with. There is a lot of uncertainty in *A Pale View of Hills*. The past can't be safely reached, and there is still no emotional closure. This fits with Caruth's idea that trauma is never fully integrated and is always partly hidden. In the same way, *The Witch Elm* ends on a morally ambiguous note when Toby realises he is not the harmless person he thought he was. This shows that stress changes not only memories but also identities.

Emotional inheritance is another important theme. Trauma is passed on in *On Beauty* through patterns of behaviour, fights, and quiet. Bowlby's theory of internal working models is supported by the fact that both Jerome's isolation and Levi's optimism come from seeing their parents' bad relationship. The hereditary aspect of trauma shows how it gets woven into the family story and keeps having an effect long after the event that caused it happened.

The books also talk about how stress affects men and women differently. Toby and Howard are examples of male characters who often deny or act violently, while Etsuko and Kiki are examples of female characters who take pain to heart, which can lead to sadness or quiet acceptance. These female trends fit with what researchers have found about how emotional speech is socialised after prenatal stress.

Ultimately, the novels suggest that trauma is not something to be cured but integrated. Fiction becomes a space for symbolic working-through, allowing characters—and readers—to confront what remains hidden, denied, or fragmented.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has examined how modern fiction represents the lasting impact of childhood trauma through narrative structure, psychological characterization, and metaphor. By comparing *On Beauty*, *A Pale View of Hills*, and *The Witch Elm*, it identifies

shared techniques and themes that dramatize the enduring effects of early emotional wounds. These texts depict trauma not as a discrete event, but as a lingering presence—shaping identity, distorting memory, and haunting relationships.

The findings support theoretical models that emphasize trauma's resistance to resolution and its pervasive influence across the lifespan. Literature, by simulating trauma's fragmented logic, provides not only aesthetic experience but also emotional insight. It invites readers to bear witness, to interpret, and perhaps to empathize with suffering that is often invisible.

Further research might extend this study to non-Western trauma narratives, explore how childhood trauma is represented in autofiction or graphic novels, or analyze the therapeutic potential of reading trauma fiction in clinical contexts.

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