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# “Speaking the ‘Unspeakable’: Reimagining Trauma Representation in Contemporary American Women’s Literature”

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# “Speaking the ‘Unspeakable’: Reimagining Trauma Representation in Contemporary American Women’s Literature”

MA Thesis

Leiden University

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**Abstract**

This thesis explores how contemporary female American authors Amber Smith and Kate Elizabeth Russell employ narrative structures to portray the complexities of individual trauma within *The Way I Used to Be* (2015) and *My Dark Vanessa* (2023) respectively. It does so by drawing on Joshua Pederson's new model of trauma theory, which calls for a shift in the ways that critics engage with representations of trauma. Pederson's framework actively challenges the traditional beliefs of the first wave of trauma theorists, who mainly believe that trauma can only be represented through three established tropes: (1) absence/silence, (2) indirection, and (3) repetition and return. By embracing Pederson's call for a revaluation of traditional approaches to trauma representation in literature, this thesis demonstrates how both novels challenge conventional methods by directly representing trauma through detailed, as well as explicit language.

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**Introduction**

The portrayal of trauma in literature has been extensively discussed in scholarly discourse, prompting debates about the influential role of narrative structures and techniques in shaping and depicting the experiences of trauma in literature. Throughout literary history, the utilisation of literature as a medium for conveying traumatic experiences has been profound. Within this discourse, a widely acknowledged conventional framework has emerged in which specific aesthetic trauma tropes are universally recognised and accepted as effective techniques to accurately represent trauma in literature. This framework favours certain narrative strategies, particularly those associated with postmodern forms such as repetition, a nonlinear chronology, and textual gaps to convey the complexities of traumatic experiences in fiction. Literary narratives have thus become a potent tool for communicating trauma because it transcends the limitations of non-literary language.

However, it is crucial to consider that while this traditional framework has been widely adopted in portraying trauma, there is ongoing debate among trauma theorists about the relationship between trauma and narrative, particularly about its representability through language. This is because the representation of trauma involves a complex interplay between the sensitivity of the subject and the potential consequences for victims if their experiences are misrepresented. Therefore, navigating the responsibilities of the portrayal of trauma has become crucial. In examining the relationship between trauma and narrative, one cannot overlook the dissatisfaction the traumatised have towards language (Lapugean 87). According to Mirela Lapugean, the traumatised frequently struggle with a sense of betrayal by a vocabulary that falls short of capturing the severity of their experiences (87). Survivors, then, may believe that conventional storytelling not only falls short but also risks diminishing the true horror of their experiences by rendering them as representable (87). Nonetheless, they feel a stronger need to communicate their story, regardless of their dissatisfaction with language in

representing trauma (87). This explains why authors continue to seek the most appropriate narrative forms and techniques, underlining the ongoing struggle among authors to both convey the depth of trauma while simultaneously avoiding disempowering those who have experienced it (Kurtz 9).

In the latter part of the twentieth century, specific literary works played a pivotal role in creating the trauma paradigm within American culture, which, in turn, established a new "trauma genre" (Gibbs 1-2). Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), for instance, served as a catalyst in creating the trauma genre, being one of the most referenced novels among scholars in this genre. Alongside other influential works such as Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, it played a significant role in shaping the trauma paradigm, characterised by its emphasis on postmodern literary forms. In *Beloved*, for example, the narrative "is purposely repetitive to indicate the lack of coherence induced by trauma" (3) as Damjana Mraoviç-o'Hare observes. This deliberate use of repetition slowly emerged as a widely adopted technique in narrating trauma. However, contemporary critics have begun to resist the notion that trauma can only be effectively represented through postmodern narrative techniques and are actively challenging such models in a variety of ways (Pederson 105). Alan Gibbs, for instance, argues that the exploration of trauma in contemporary American literature should extend beyond the limitations of conventional theoretical models (244). According to him, truly ground-breaking contemporary American literature exists in various forms and "borrows little if at all from what have become the tired techniques of postmodernism" (244). Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting that a new generation of trauma theorists is actively "developing more sophisticated paradigms for the study of its representation and effects" (246). Therefore, a key proposition in Gibbs's research is that contemporary American texts utilise a variety of narrative forms to represent trauma, and consequently should deviate from the conventional and more formulaic

critical approaches previously employed (41). He believes that these "unconventional" forms merit analysis and understanding through a critical lens (41).

Additionally, Critics have recently expressed the challenges that occur when representing sexual trauma in literature. One of those critics is Emma Miller who argues that representing sexual trauma is more challenging than depicting trauma resulting from war, given its broader prevalence and impact on individuals from diverse income levels and backgrounds (13). Miller addresses the inherent difficulties associated with portraying the experience of sexual trauma, emphasising that even in the 21st century, our narrative forms struggle to capture it adequately since it "seems to elude the easy grasp of language" (226). The discussion persists not only about whether literature should portray sexual trauma in literature but also about how it should be presented (229). She, therefore, highlights the importance of finding a narrative form that not only reflects the true experience of survivors but also garners understanding and respect from external authorities (238). Miller's emphasis on the need for a narrative form drives the analysis towards how contemporary female American authors navigate the representation of trauma, specifically sexual trauma. In this thesis, my analysis zooms in on two very recent literary works—Kate Elizabeth's *My Dark Vanessa* (2020) and Amber Smith's *The Way I Used to Be* (2016)—both contemporary debut novels published after 2015. These contemporary novels represent trauma by delving into the complexities of survivor experiences, shedding light on the profound emotional and psychological impact of traumatic events, particularly sexual abuse. They navigate the complexities of healing, resilience, and the quest for personal empowerment. Moreover, these works provide insight into how contemporary female American authors engage with and challenge conventional narrative structures.

This thesis, therefore, explores how contemporary female American authors employ narrative structures to portray the complexities of individual trauma within their literary works.

It will do so by drawing on Joshua Pederson's interpretative framework, which calls for a shift in the ways that critics engage with representations of trauma. Pederson's framework challenges the traditional beliefs of the first wave of trauma theorists who mainly believe that trauma primarily attends to three traditional tropes: (1) absence/silence, (2) indirection, and (3) repetition and return. By embracing Pederson's call for a revaluation of these perspectives, this thesis aims to offer a new perspective on how contemporary female American authors engage with and depict trauma within their works. Furthermore, the research seeks to unveil the extent to which contemporary female American authors both challenge and adhere to traditional trauma tropes. Simultaneously, this exploration holds the promise of uncovering new ways of representing and understanding trauma in literature as written by female American authors, especially in depicting sexual trauma.

Beginning with a general discussion on the origins of trauma theory and its core concepts, this thesis will subsequently turn to an examination of the representation of trauma in literature throughout history. The subsequent chapters will delve into various aspects of this topic. Chapter 2 will explore the techniques and representations of trauma in literature: it will analyse how authors grapple with challenges of accurately portraying trauma and the various narrative strategies used to convey its effects. Additionally, it will also discuss the portrayal of trauma in American literature, with a particular focus on sexual violence, tracing its evolution from the latter half of the twentieth century to the contemporary era. Chapter 3 will delve into the traditional trauma tropes of trauma fiction established by the first wave of trauma theorists. Moreover, this chapter will provide an in-depth exploration of applying Pederson’s framework in analysing trauma in literature. Chapter 4 will begin by examining how both authors choose to represent the sexual trauma experienced by their protagonists while also analysing the specific language employed in depicting such traumatic experiences. Chapter 5 will closely examine the use of narrative voice and its impact on the representation of trauma. Finally, in

chapter 6, I will explore the extent to which both authors use traditional trauma tropes in their respective works, as well as examine how these tropes are employed.

## Chapter 1: Trauma Theory

### 1.1 History of Trauma Theory

Trauma, originating from the Greek word meaning "wound", initially referred to physical injuries inflicted by external events. Nowadays, however, the term "trauma" is used to denote emotional or psychological harm rather than physical injury (Kurtz 1). When someone claims to have experienced trauma, they usually mean that they have gone through a distressing or shocking event, emphasising its emotional repercussions rather than any bodily harm suffered (1-2). Hence, we define trauma as "an injury to the psyche" brought on by disastrous events or even the possibility of experiencing them (2). The contemporary understanding of trauma, focusing on its emotional impact rather than physical injuries, echoes Freud's pioneering concepts. This conceptual shift in meaning aligns with Freud's early theories (e.g. *Studies on Hysteria* (1885), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920)), which have since been predominant in shaping the understanding and application of trauma within the field of literary criticism today (Balaev 361). His propositions, which suggests that traumatic experiences are unconsciously relived, cause the psyche to split, influence memory differently, and can only be understood through narrative recall of the past, serve as fundamental concepts guiding the initial wave of critics in trauma studies who explore its effects on memory and identity (363).

Through its evolution from denoting physical wounds to encompassing emotional and psychological distress, the concept of trauma has undergone a significant transformation. This shift has prompted increased scholarly interest in understanding trauma's implications within literature and society, as evidenced by the rise in academic work during the 1990s dedicated to exploring its meanings and effects (Balaev 363). Scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Soshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra played a prominent role in this movement. This initial wave of critics, influenced by Freudian thought, brought attention to the idea of trauma as "an unrepresentable event that fundamentally fragments the psyche" (Balaev 363).

In this perspective, trauma is seen as an intense mental response to an overwhelming and uncontrollable external event, resulting in significant psychological harm (Lapugean 86). The emotional devastation stems from the unexpectedness and terror of the event, leading the mind to "split or disassociate itself" (86-7). As a consequence of this split, the individual is unable to process the traumatic event, which leads to torment and intrusive traumatic memories that continue to haunt the victim (86-7).

Based on this notion, Caruth introduced a pioneering model that conceptualises trauma as an event "that fragments consciousness and prevents direct linguistic representation" (Balaev 363). Therefore, trauma is unspeakable. This rests on the idea that traumatic experiences are so extreme and overwhelming that they disrupt not only an individual's ability to articulate them verbally but also their understanding of reality (363). In other words, trauma fractures not only a person's understanding of oneself and the world but also language itself. Since traditional language and narrative structures are considered insufficient to convey the depth and complexity of traumatic experiences, survivors may struggle to find adequate words or expressions to communicate their suffering (363). Balaev also explains that trauma's true effects are gradually revealed over time, with individuals resorting to mental detachment as a coping mechanism (364). These aspects hinder the full comprehension and expression of the traumatic experience (364). This emphasis on trauma's "unspeakability" suggests that conventional forms of narration fail to capture the traumatic experience sufficiently.

Lapugean similarly addresses the problematic relationship between trauma and representation through language. She claims that those who have experienced trauma find language inadequate and are disappointed by its inability to communicate the intensity of their pain (87). They desire a new vocabulary that may better express the severity of their traumas (87). Language is thus regarded inaccurate in representing traumatic experiences. As a result, there is a lack of faith in narrative representation, with the perception that it either falls short

or minimises the trauma by attempting to make it understandable (87). In a similar vein, trauma fiction, according to Anne Whitehead, incorporates a paradox as the experience is thought to be so overwhelming and traumatic that it defies language or representation (3). This notion is echoed by Balaev, who explains that trauma gives rise to a "double paradox" in both consciousness and language, involving a "contradictory wish" to understand the meaning of the past coupled with the inability to fully grasp it (364).

In succeeding years, the concept of trauma's unrepresentability remained a central subject in scholarly discourse (365). However, it is worth noting that certain scholars (e.g. Pederson, Craps, Gibbs, Schwab), known as pluralists, have only recently begun to actively contest this notion of first wave trauma theorists. The pluralistic model of trauma differs from the idea that trauma is fundamentally unspeakable. Unlike the perspective that trauma fractures language and consciousness to the point where it defies representation, the pluralistic model acknowledges that while trauma can cause dissociative effects on consciousness and memory, it also manifests in different cultural contexts and through a diversity of narrative forms (366). This perspective characterises the act of remembering as a dynamic process of "constructing meaning" rather than a "static entity" capable of replicating the past precisely (367). In contrast to the traditional framework, the concept of memory is theorised differently. The pluralistic model specifically proposes that the interpretation of traumatic experiences is subject to an ongoing "remembering process" in which memories are consistently altered based on particular contextual factors such as place and society (Balaev xiv). The pluralistic model, therefore, provides a more thorough understanding of the representation of trauma by acknowledging its complexity and diversity across different contexts and narratives.

The emergence of pluralistic approaches in trauma studies also challenge the traditional framework proposed by Caruth. This shift prompts a critical revaluation of how trauma is conceptualised and represented, particularly in 21st-century fiction. In light of this, there arises

an urgent need to explore alternative narrative techniques utilised by contemporary authors to analyse how the wounds of trauma are narrativized. It is thus important to explore how literature has dealt with and continues to deal with the representation of trauma amidst the challenges posed by its inherently fragmented nature.

## Chapter 2. Representation of Trauma

### 2.1 Narratives of Trauma: Techniques and Representation in Literature

Due to trauma's fragmented nature, it is commonly held that trauma cannot be accurately represented nor fully captured through traditional narrative techniques (Mraoviç-o'Hare 2). Consequently, authors frequently embrace the idea that effectively portraying the impact of trauma requires mimicking its forms and symptoms, as noted by Whitehead (3). Furthermore, scholars such as Vickroy and Gibbs argue that trauma texts ought to focus on conveying or transmitting trauma rather than merely representing it (Gibbs 26). According to Vickroy, for example, "texts should seek to transmit affect onto the reader rather than attempt to represent or recreate the trauma" (qtd. in Gibbs 28) as this was considered impossible. Building on Vickroy's perspective, which emphasises the transmission of affect rather than direct representation of trauma in texts, the reader takes on the role of being a secondary witness to the trauma, experiencing its emotional impact indirectly through the text (30).

Kurtz further explores the intricate nature of trauma by describing it as a wound, suggesting that, similar to words, it requires interpretation due to its complex and multifaceted nature (2). He claims that literature serves as a reflection of humanity's reactions to life's hardships, including trauma (8). Many significant literary characters throughout history are depicted as being traumatised, with their individual suffering often symbolising larger societal or historical wounds (8). The character of Offred in *The Handmaide's Tale*, for example, is used to explore larger societal issues such as gender inequality and patriarchal control while Sethe's suffering in *Beloved* serves as a representation of the trauma endured by African Americans, particularly during slavery. Therefore, Marinella Rodi-Risberg views literature as a "privileged site" where trauma can be authentically conveyed to readers using innovative literary techniques that mirror and transmit the experience, rather than simply representing it (110). Caruth, on the other hand, claims that literature cannot directly depict trauma but instead

does so indirectly, often through figurative language such as gaps. In this view, readers are encouraged to discern what is absent from the text, alongside what is present, to fully grasp the representation of trauma. As a result, authors wishing to pursue direct representation of trauma in fiction, were encouraged to employ the "most indirect and experimental aesthetic forms possible" (Vickroy 26). Trauma fiction thus became linked to avant-garde and postmodernist techniques since these literary techniques allow for the portrayal of traumatic experiences in a fragmented and disjointed manner within the text (Mraoviç-o'Hare 2), thereby attempting to mirror the individual experience. This frequently results in narratives that are characterised by repetition and indirection or narratives that are distorted in terms of chronology and temporality (3).

**2.2 Representation of Trauma in American Literature**

The above makes clear why Gibbs addresses a notable change in the relationship between content and form in trauma literature. He compares the early trauma texts from the first generation of the latter half of the twentieth century, when form was more important than content, with the later evolution of many 21st-century works, when form became more important than content (46). In his study, he suggests that many texts from the late twentieth century onward depart from previous approaches by prioritising "a fascination with experimental forms" as the primary inspiration for new literary works (47). During this period, there is a significant emphasis on formal techniques such as fragmentation, dislocation, and repetition, which became established methods for depicting trauma (47). In these examples of trauma genre writing, the portrayal of traumatic content becomes subservient to form, as writers become more concerned with "the sublime jouissance of representing trauma" rather than attempting to accurately capture its true impact (47). Gibbs further contends that authors, by extensively employing these experimental forms in fictional works, aim to demonstrate their

"superior powers of representation" (47). Authors thus prioritised the aesthetic and artistic aspects of their work over the faithful representation of the actual effects and consequences of trauma.

The broad adoption of this new trauma paradigm in late twentieth-century American culture resulted in a tendency to analyse everything within its framework (Gibbs 1-2). This trend led to the emergence of a distinct literary genre characterised by certain conventions that authors consistently employed when writing about trauma. Consequently, as Roger Luckhurst explains, authors were "encouraged to seek structures that are experimental, fragmented, refusing the consolations of a beautiful form, and suspicious of familiar representational and narrative conventions" (qtd. in Gibbs 26). Scholars thus may have perpetuated what became increasingly common approaches to representing trauma (34). As a result of this, authors continue to learn from popularised theories on trauma, and subsequently adhere to the aesthetic guidelines outlined by these theories, to ensure that their works are perceived as authentic and compelling representations of trauma (38). Yet, this encouragement to adopt a restricted range of aesthetic options also limits the possibilities for representation.

Gibbs's study, however, claims that contemporary American texts employ a diverse range of narrative forms to depict trauma (41). When discussing the book *Unless* by Carol Shields, which emphasises suffering and loss, Gibbs argues that the absence of conventional narrative strategies within the trauma genre in the text serves as an example of the diversity of literary techniques employed to depict trauma (37). This suggests that the traditional framework is merely one approach to representing trauma, highlighting the range of techniques available to authors in capturing the impact of trauma in literature. The diversity of narrative forms used for representing trauma in American fiction, therefore, demonstrates the need for a framework that is more flexible and receptive to non-traditional forms of representing trauma (41). In the end, Gibb's research calls for a greater recognition for a wider range of

representations of trauma. This recognition aligns with his conclusion that the emergence of conferences on cultural representation of trauma indicates the rise of a new generation of trauma scholars who are developing more "sophisticated paradigms for the study of its representation and effects" (246). American literature on trauma, as well as trauma fiction in general, therefore, should not be limited exclusively to postmodern techniques; rather, it can manifest in a diverse array of narrative forms and techniques.

### 2.3 Representation of Sexual Trauma

During the 1970s and 1980s, there was a shift in focus which began to recognise sexual abuse as a traumatising experience (Kurtz 13). At the forefront of this transformative period was the feminist anti-rape movement, a sub-movement of second-wave feminism, which played a crucial role in reshaping societal perceptions by defining rape as a form of violence. One important strategy of the anti-rape movement involved hosting 'speak-outs', which provided survivors with a platform to publicly share their experiences (Fileborn & Loney-Howes 24). According to Fileborn & Loney-Howes, the idea of "breaking the silence" has been and continues to be the most effective strategy for educating people about the consequences of sexual violence (24). According to Miller, literary accounts of sexual violence have equally brought attention to the suffering of victims (228). These accounts not only recount the sequence of events but also attempt to clearly convey the emotional intensity of the experience, encompassing feelings such as terror, pain, shock, paralysis, impact on relationships, and the subsequent effects on victim's daily lives (228). Miller explains that by immersing readers in the lives of characters, authors hope to elicit a personal connection, dispelling the belief that such experiences are uncommon but could occur in one's own social circles – neighbours, friends, siblings – and even oneself (228).

Nevertheless, Miller argues that literature has played a conflicting role in influencing discussions and perceptions of sexual violence throughout history (227). According to her, fiction has played a profound role in questioning the nature of sexual violence because it shapes how it is defined and addresses the question of who is to blame, while simultaneously perpetuating negative stereotypes and reinforcing misconceptions (227). Therefore, language can "both be a part of the healing process and part of the problem" (227). In other words, fiction has the power to equally contribute to the healing process and contribute to the problem in the context of sexual violence.

Miller further discusses that although fiction has provided a useful medium for the narrating of first-hand experiences, there are limits to which people are willing to engage with certain narratives (229). This is particularly evident in the literary genre known as "misery lit" or "misery porn", exemplified by novels such as Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*, where the portrayal of extreme suffering may elicit discomfort or resistance from readers, underscoring the difficulties of narrative reception and the challenges associated with engaging readers emotionally. She observes, "Authors have long been aware of the unique problems of the narratology of sexual trauma" (227). The representation of sexual trauma in literature, from depictions of teen assault in contemporary novels to abusive parental figures in fairy tales, highlights the significance of addressing such experiences in writing across a wide range of literary genres and cultures (228). These narratives emphasise the need and the challenges of conveying sexual violence effectively. The ongoing discussion thus centres not only on whether literature should portray sexual trauma but also, if deemed acceptable, how to approach and represent it (228).

Moreover, Miller's examination highlights the intersection of literature and societal discourse on sexual trauma (237), stressing a change in contemporary works influenced by certain media debates. For example, in the wake of the MeToo movement, a significant number

of books addressing sexual trauma have been published, illustrating how evolving perspectives and responses to the issues of sexual violence reflect the dynamic interplay between literature and broader cultural conversations. As a result, there exists a corresponding requirement for literature and critical analysis to not only respond but also align with the ongoing developments in scientific work, as well as new societal discussions (238). The focus should thus be on finding a suitable narrative form that effectively captures the evolving understanding of sexual trauma resulting from these developments (238). This aligns with the aim of my research to offer new insights into how contemporary authors engage with and challenge traditional tropes of trauma representation.

## Chapter 3: Trauma Fiction

### 3.1 Traditional Trauma Tropes

For the first wave of trauma theorists during the 1990s, which includes scholars such as Hartman, Felman, Caruth, and LaCapra, narrating trauma primarily attends to three recurring tropes: (1) absence/silence, (2) indirection, and (3) repetition/return (Pederson 101). I will first provide an overview of these traditional tropes before outlining Pederson's alternate model of trauma theory.

Since trauma was initially seen as being beyond the grasp of consciousness by scholars such as Caruth, attempts to express it frequently led to tropes of silence and textual space (101), thereby mirroring the fragmented memory that victims have when remembering trauma. Contrary to the prevailing notion that trauma narratives inevitably rely on silence and textual gaps, Pederson contends that trauma occasionally leaves gaps and silences within a narrative, while in other instances, the narrative "flows around trauma like a river past a hillock" (102). His argument challenges the assumption that only silence, and textual gaps can adequately capture the essence of trauma. His perspective invites a more comprehensive exploration of how narratives can effectively convey the complexity of traumatic memory without exclusively relying on silence and textual gaps.

Pederson introduces the second traditional trauma trope, indirection, which involves representing trauma without explicit mention. An exemplar of this concept is found in Albert Camus's novel *The Plague*, where the narrative tells the impact of a plague on a town's population (102). Even though the novel never references the Holocaust, the pandemic is used as a metaphor to indirectly convey and represent the horrors of the Holocaust (102). Caruth similarly discusses how narratives dealing with trauma frequently employ indirect representation, using gaps and metaphorical language as key elements in the process (Pederson 102). This genre is now called "traumatic realism" as authors use indirect and metaphorical

means to discuss experiences that are otherwise inaccessible or traumatic. The idea is that using metaphorical language makes exploring traumatic experiences easier for readers to navigate and less overwhelming.

The third recurring trope in trauma fiction is repetition and return. This trope finds roots in Freud's theory, where he observed that victims re-experience trauma in dreams and flashbacks in which they relive their trauma through repetition (104). The use of repetition in literature can manifest in many different ways. Morrison, for example, deliberately uses repetition within the narrative to signify the "lack of coherence induced by trauma" (Mraoviç-o'Hare 3). The use of repetition can also be employed through the repetition of words, actions, events, images, or symbols to convey the persistent and fragmented nature of trauma. Whitehead further highlights the significance of repetition in trauma fiction, emphasising its manifestation through language, imagery, or plot (86). According to her, the use of repetition mirrors the effects of trauma by evoking the consistent reoccurrence of the event as well as the "disruption of narrative chronology or progression" (86).

The initial wave of trauma theorists thus established the groundwork for depicting trauma in literature. Yet, after this first wave, a second group of trauma theorists emerged (i.e. pluralists), aiming to "both alter and expand our understanding of how trauma and narrative interact" (Pederson 105). Pederson contributes to this evolving discourse by delving into new scientific studies on trauma and using these findings to challenge existing trauma theory frameworks. He also highlights scholars like Craps, who encourages readers to critically examine the assumptions made by the initial wave of trauma theorists (107). Craps, for example, explores which generic choices and narrative techniques are most effective for conveying trauma, challenging the notion that silence is always a symptom of trauma (Pederson 107). Instead, he posits that silence may signify a deliberate choice to gather strength and memorialise loss (107). Scholars such as Pederson and Craps persist in seeking innovative

techniques for the representation of trauma in literature, forcing us to reconsider the theories proposed by Caruth and others.

### 3.2 Trauma Theory Revisited: A Pluralistic Approach

#### 3.2.1 Redefining Traumatic Memory

Pederson's new framework draws upon Richard McNally's extensive research in psychology on trauma which refutes the notion of traumatic amnesia, as opposed to Caruth who refers to trauma as being indescribable. McNally's findings, as utilised by Pederson, mainly counter the idea that individuals who have experienced trauma are not able to speak. He explains that while victims may choose not to speak or think of their traumas, there is little evidence that they are incapable of doing so (354). McNally, therefore, concludes that traumatic events are typically unforgettable unless they occur during the two first years of life or if the individual suffers brain damage as a result of the event (275). He argues that the belief that the mind protects itself by repressing traumatic memories, rendering them unavailable to the individual, is "a piece of psychiatric folklore devoid of convincing empirical support" (275). McNally's discussion of the evidence of an abundance of studies on traumatic memory leads to him formulating three primary conclusions, two of which are relevant for the representation of traumatic memories in literature. First, individuals tend to remember traumatic events vividly and do not typically forget their trauma (McNally 2). Second, individuals may not constantly think of their trauma for a longer period of time, but this does not mean that they are unable to remember or recall their experience: it is doubtful that extremely unpleasant memories will fade from consciousness (2).

McNally's research, therefore, challenges longstanding beliefs about the retrieval and processing of traumatic memories. These findings naturally carry implications for the ways in

which trauma should be represented, as well as analysed, in literature. The understanding gained from McNally's research may impact how contemporary authors choose to represent trauma in their literary works. For example, Pederson stands as a testament to this since he has pioneered a new framework for interpreting trauma, drawing directly from McNally's findings. This framework encourages contemporary critics to re-evaluate Caruth's initial theories and proposes a theory in which trauma is in fact describable. Pederson argues that as the understanding of trauma continues to evolve in scientific circles, the literary theory of trauma must adapt too (334). Scholars in the field therefore should engage and respond to McNally's new theories since it contradicts the literary theories put forward by the first wave of trauma theorists (354). Consequently, Pederson's framework offers a variety of shifts in the traditional approaches that critics have typically employed when engaging with literary portrayals of trauma. This framework comprises three key stages where Pederson explains his modifications from the traditional framework laid out by Caruth. Ultimately, Pederson provides a new model for reading trauma, revealing new techniques of representing trauma along the way.

### 3.2.2 Pederson's Literary Trauma Theory

Since the first generation of trauma theorists, who subscribe to the view of trauma as being inherently unspeakable, frequently direct their attention to textual gaps and silence to identify what the narrative left unsaid, Pederson argues that critics are placed in a "quixotic position" where they seek textual evidence for something that is believed cannot be spoken (338). However, revisiting McNally's findings, which indicate that traumatic memories are both memorable as well as expressible, the newer generation should consider the accessibility of traumatic memory and the potential for victims to construct credible narrative representations of it (339). Therefore, Pederson proposes that instead of searching for textual absences, critics should redirect their focus by engaging with the actual text instead (338). According to him,

this approach will lead to new interpretations for old and new materials (338). It also offers two advantages. Firstly, the new approach distances itself from the theory of traumatic amnesia, a perspective that may prove detrimental for survivors (338). Pederson explains, "An unremembered trauma is an event over which the victim has virtually no control" (338), thereby stripping agency away from the survivor. The act of remembering thus empowers survivors by allowing them to reclaim agency over their narrative (338). Secondly, those who acknowledge the ability of language to heal are likely to interpret trauma fiction not as a collection of inadequate expressions that will never be able to fully capture traumatic events but as active attempts at rehabilitation (339).

The second statement that Pederson puts forward is that trauma theorists should actively look for instances where the narrative provides enhanced or enriched details when recounting their experiences, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of trauma and its impact. This is based on McNally's findings which propose that trauma could potentially improve memory rather than "hindering or banishing it" (339). Traumatic memories, then, according to Pederson, "are not elusive or absent; they are potentially more detailed and more powerful than normal ones" (339). The narrative may thus be loaded with "excessive detail and vibrant intensity" (33). He reiterates, "We may need more words – not fewer – to accurately represent its effects in text" (339). It therefore is important that readers or critics looking for representations of trauma in literature should not look for an absence of text but, instead, to an overflow of text filled with details for instance (339). Pederson further highlights that traumatic memory extends beyond visual language, involving the other senses such as hearing, smell, touch, and taste (339). In other words, the representation of a traumatic memory can be multi-faceted, involving a broader range of senses (339).

In his final statement, Pederson suggests that scholars studying the representation of trauma in literature should concentrate on depictions of experiences that are "temporally,

physically, or ontologically distorted" (339). In the context of trauma, it implies a need to explore how traumatic events may be depicted with alterations in the perception of time, physical sensations or the nature of reality. This is defined by McNally as dissociative amnesia, a condition characterised by symptoms such as derealisation, depersonalisation, amnesia, and a sense of time being distorted, where victims may feel time slowing down or happening really fast (172). Derealisation entails a surreal sensation described as having a "dreamlike sense" that their surroundings is not real, while depersonalisation involves a feeling of being detached from your body (172). Amnesia, on the other hand, denotes the inability to recall certain important aspects of what happened. It is crucial to note that amnesia does not entail the repression of the trauma but rather the inability to recall it, often stemming from suffering brain damage incurred during the event (186).

Additionally, McNally notes that the memories of victims may be altered in which time could be experienced differently as well as spaces (339). For example, the world may be experienced as unreal or victims may go through an out-of-body experience, which McNally describes as "dissociative alternations in consciousness" (339). Therefore, critics should consider "evocations of confusion, shifts in place and time, out-of-body experiences, and a general sense of unreality" (340) in trauma narratives. As is believed by Pederson, trauma does not erase memory, but it does have the potential to alter it (340). Textual representations of such distortions therefore may serve as useful narrative techniques to portray the effects of trauma. Pederson believes that modern literature is particularly capable of representing the effects of dissociative alternations in consciousness (340).

Nevertheless, Jennifer Phillips pointed out a significant omission in Pederson's proposed framework. In his framework, Pederson does not address the use of narrative voice in representing trauma in literature (113). Narrative voice is a crucial aspect in portraying how characters navigate trauma. Through an analysis of the narrative voice, a deeper insight can be

gained into how trauma is depicted in contemporary fiction. This approach, as suggested by Phillips, addresses a gap in understanding left by Pederson's model and leads to a more comprehensive understanding of trauma representation in literature. In my analysis using Pederson's framework, I will also pay close attention to the role of narrative voice in depicting trauma. By incorporating this aspect into my analysis, I aim to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how trauma is represented in two contemporary novels.

## Chapter 4: Exploring Contemporary Trauma Narratives

### 4.1 My Dark Vanessa and The Way I Used to Be

In *My Dark Vanessa*, thirty-year-old Vanessa Wye recounts her sexual relationship with her forty-two-year-old male teacher, Jacob Strane, when she was fifteen years old. The novel alternates between past and present, depicting her experiences before, during, and after the abuse. The novel opens in the present in the midst of the MeToo movement. Vanessa, employed as a concierge at a hotel in Portland, finds herself caught up in the tide of change as she stumbles upon a Facebook post in which new abuse allegations against her old teacher, who is now close to retirement, resurface again. Vanessa, who has maintained a close relationship with her teacher over the years, finds herself grappling with conflicting emotions as she has always viewed the relationship as a love affair rather than abuse. Yet, as the MeToo movement sheds light on the power dynamics at play, Vanessa has to confront the nature of her past relationship with Mr Strane. When a journalist asks her to come forward with her story, she is torn between her loyalty to him and the unsettling truth that it was never a love story. Vanessa, however, finds it difficult to acknowledge that she was also a victim of Mr Strane's manipulation and exploitation as a child, especially when more women begin to come forward with accusations of sexual assault against him. Mr Strane, overwhelmed by the impending consequences of his actions, resolves to committing suicide to escape his faith.

Similarly, *The Way I Used to Be* follows Eden McCrorey, a fourteen-year-old girl who is sexually assaulted by her older brother's best friend, Kevin. The novel is structured into four parts, each corresponding to a specific year of high school. The story immediately starts after Eden is raped at the beginning of her freshman year and follows her journey from a quiet freshman to a self-destructive and emotionally distant senior. Eden mainly blames herself for Kevin's actions and the readers are given an insightful look into how victims of sexual abuse form relationships, love, and cope with life after experiencing trauma. Both female protagonists

do not come forward about their trauma until the end of the novel. Eden, consumed by the fear of the potential repercussions of speaking about the assault decides to remain silent. Meanwhile, Vanessa initially convinces herself that she is not a victim of abuse and denies any suspicion that others have about her and Strane. *The Way I Used to Be* ends with Eden reporting her own rape at the police station whereas *My Dark Vanessa* closes with Vanessa rescuing an abused dog from the shelter in an attempt to move forward while staying hopeful for recovery.

Although both novels depict the devastating impact of sexual trauma, they differ in their exploration of the characters' responses to the trauma and how they navigate their experiences in the present. Yet, despite these differences, significant similarities emerge in the ways in which both authors chose to represent trauma within each narrative, which will be discussed in the following chapter.

### 4.2 Traumatic Memory

In alignment with Pederson's call for trauma theorists to actively interact with narratives that provide detailed depictions, it becomes evident that both Russell and Smit vividly aim to portray traumatic memories in their works. Both *My Dark Vanessa* and *The Way I Used to Be* delve into the complexities of traumatic memory, challenging previous theories that such memories are inherently unspeakable or fragmented. They achieve this through painfully detailed narratives wherein the "speakability" of traumatic experiences is challenged through the use of explicit language in representing trauma. This approach contrasts with earlier novels that typically depict traumatic memories as fragmented or elusive. By adopting a narrative approach wherein trauma is explicitly represented, the authors contribute to a form of fiction that empowers traumatised individuals as they provide victims with the opportunity to voice their experiences directly, thereby allowing them to reclaim their agency in the present. Hence,

by portraying traumatic memories and experiences with literal and explicit language, both Russell and Smith diverge from the conventional belief that figural language is the sole means of representing trauma. Amongst other strategies, they accomplish this by recounting the traumatic experiences through their protagonists, employing an abundance of descriptive as well as graphic language that mainly captures sensorial detail. This abundance of detail, for instance, serves to emphasise the "accessibility of traumatic memory", as noted by Pederson (338). By providing such detailed and graphic descriptions of the traumatic event, the authors not only underscore the idea that victims are capable of constructing "reliable narrative accounts" (338), but also highlight the capacity for victims to have control over their memories. This strategy, which grants victims agency over their past experiences and memories, contrasts with earlier theories claiming that trauma memories are unreliable due to the mind's fragmentation, leading to the forgetting of certain aspects or details. This indirectly undermines the reliability of the victims' accounts, a phenomenon that Pederson describes as harmful because it deprives victims of agency (338). In the next chapter, I will delve deeper into the ways in which Russell and Smith represent traumatic memory in *My Dark Vanessa* and *The Way I Used to Be*.

### 4.2.1 Narrative Detail

Although Eden in *The Way I Used to Be* is consumed by her own silence, the book is filled with graphic and descriptive language, providing an extremely vivid depiction of the sexual assault that she has experienced. For example, when Eden recounts how she was assaulted towards the end of the novel, the narrative is filled with an abundance of graphic details. The chapter begins with "what happened: I woke up to him climbing on top of me" (Smith 317), foreshadowing the events that are to unfold. In this passage, the significance lies in Eden's capacity to remember the traumatic event with precision. Not only does she remember the

precise sequence of events, but she also recalls the exact time each action occurred from the beginning to the end of the sexual assault. When her assaulter first attacks her, for example, she remembers seeing her alarm clock blinking 2:48 (317). At 2:49, he was able to remove her clothes, at 2:51, he managed to pry himself between her legs as she was struggling to fight him off, and finally, by 2:53, the assault was over (317).

In her recollection of the traumatic event, a departure from the expected fragmented trauma narrative emerges. Instead of experiencing a blur of disconnected images and sensations while she is sexually assaulted, Eden describes the unfolding events with striking clarity. She describes experiencing physical pain, such as the grinding of her wrist bones against each other and the suffocating pressure around her throat constricting every sound she makes (319). She goes on to describe how she felt crushed to the point where she thought her ribs would collapse from the weight of his body crushing her (319). Nevertheless, Eden's description of the sexual assault goes beyond simple remembrance of the physical; it also describes the sensory experience of the assault. This is emphasised by McNally's explanation that traumatic memories are "recalled with such vividness and emotional intensity that it seems as if the trauma were happening all over again" (105). This is particularly evident in the rape scene, where the narrator paints a vivid picture of the offender's actions by drawing the reader into the sensory experience of the assault as well. For example, Eden describes the "hollow, muted grunts and groans" (319) Kevin makes that reverberate through "the cotton and polyester stuffing" (319), fusing with the screaming noises in her head, which Eden describes as her "insides breaking" (319). This intensely descriptive imagery emphasises the extreme emotional anguish she experiences while being sexually assaulted. Moreover, she describes the "gurgling and sputtering" sounds coming out her as "dying noises – noises the body just makes when it's dying" (319), expressing her fear that she is slowly dying. This passage highlights the ability

of remembering small, important details, such as the noises made during the traumatic event illustrated in this example.

Moreover, returning to McNally's findings, it is found that emotional stress does not prevent the "encoding and memory for the central, important aspects of the experience" (50). This implies that victims are still able to form memories of the most important aspects of the experience even under extreme emotional stress, as demonstrated in this particular passage. While emotional stress may affect memory, McNally argues, it does not necessarily impair the ability to remember key details or important aspects of the event (50). He illustrates this point by using an example in which a victim of a robbery may be able to recall important things such as the kind of weapon or the person's face but could forget trivial details such as the type of shoes the robber was wearing (50).

After Eden is raped, she desperately tries to persuade herself that it was merely a dream. Yet, despite her efforts to repress the recurring images that are haunting her, she continues to struggle with the vivid and intrusive memories of the traumatic event. She recounts:

> I close my eyes again, but it's all I can see, all I can feel, all I can hear. His skin, his arms, his legs, his hands too strong, his breath on me, muscles stretching, bones cracking, body breaking, me getting weaker, fading (Smith 2).

Her description is rich with sensory imagery, engaging not only sight but also touch, sound, as well as physical sensations, thereby evoking a multisensory reading experience. Every aspect of the experience is expressed with such detail that it evokes a sense of immersion in the narrative. The detailed sensory recollections narrated by Eden, alongside McNally's insights into traumatic memory, therefore emphasise the importance of paying close attention to narrative detail, a principle central to Pederson's framework.

This can also be found in *My Dark Vanessa*. Just as Eden's recollection of the assault is marked by extreme graphic details, Vanessa's horrifying memories of her encounters with Mr Strane are similarly vivid and shocking. These memories entail explicit details about the sexual abuse she experiences. As Vanessa endures the assault, she vividly recounts Mr Strane's frantic and rapid movements, likening the experience to her brain rattling within her skull, her limbs growing limp, and her mind slipping away, retreating downstairs where the dog whines in her kennel, wondering what she had done wrong (Russell 155). Additionally, returning to the scene in which Vanessa is assaulted when intoxicated at Mr Strane's house, she thinks, "I can't talk, can't see. Even if I force my eyes open, they won't focus" (252). She describes her head as being cotton and her mouth gravel, saying "I'm thirsty, I'm sick, I'm nothing" (252). The imagery of a cotton-filled head and a gravel-like mouth metaphorically evokes a sense of disorientation, confusion, and discomfort.

Vanessa's rich sensory image, akin to Edin's, further reinforces the author's intention to convey the vividness and clarity of these memories. By portraying traumatic memories in this way, both authors challenge preconceived notions and highlight the significance of engaging directly with the narrative of trauma rather than through indirect language. It also redirects us from a theory of traumatic amnesia initially put forward by Caruth, which posits that trauma is an overwhelmingly painful experience causing the mind to split and potentially forget (as qtd. in Pederson 334). Rather than arguing that the victim is unable to describe the trauma with "literal language" (334), both novels align with Pederson's assertion that traumatic memories can be more enhanced or detailed compared to normal ones, thereby portraying the protagonists' trauma narratives with "excessive details and vibrant intensity" (333). As can be seen from the examples, these passages sometimes combine literal language with metaphorical language to convey the impact that trauma has on the victim while simultaneously making the description less graphic and more accessible to readers. Despite using metaphorical language,

which is often considered indirect, the metaphors in these passages are clear and explicit rather than abstract or vague. This ensures that impact of the trauma is conveyed directly and powerfully to the readers without overwhelming them emotionally.

Ultimately, by emphasising the intricacy and depth of these traumatic experiences, the novels contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of trauma and its impact, challenging previous notions that trauma can only be portrayed through narrative gaps and fragmented storytelling. This link between Pederson's theory and the depiction of traumatic memory in these novels, therefore, emphasises the importance of embracing diverse narrative forms that contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of trauma and its effects rather than relying on a single standard conventional framework telling us which way to represent trauma.

### 4.3 Dissociative Alterations

In exploring how the representation of trauma in literature may also be depicted with alterations in the perception of time or the nature of reality, *The Way I Used to Be* and *My Dark Vanessa* both function as poignant examples. Through the use of first-person narration, we witness the fragmentation of time, with past events intruding upon present experiences, blurring the boundaries between the unfolding events in the present moment and the protagonist's inner world. This narrative technique reflects what McNally calls "dissociative alterations in consciousness" (33). It is usually described as a "disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception of the environment" (172). According to McNally, numerous therapists perceive dissociation as a defensive mechanism that diminishes awareness of exceedingly distressing emotional information (172), serving as a way for the mind to distance itself from the event in order to cope.

In literature, this phenomenon manifests in various forms. For instance, protagonists may experience out-of-body sensations or a sense of detachment from reality due to certain events (Pederson 340). These symptoms, described as derealisation and depersonalisation respectively, are captured very clearly through both Vanessa's and Eden's narratives. During those traumatic events Vanessa dissociates or even imagines leaving her own body. When Mr Strane continues to touch Vanessa during class for the first time, for example, Vanessa describes it as a surreal experience where she feels as though her mind "brushes up against the ceiling" (Russell 46) until she sees herself from above, gaining an out-of-body perspective from which she can observe herself from a distance. She describes seeing her "hunched shoulders, thousand-yard stare, bright red hair" (46) as if she is observing a stranger. When class ends, Mr Strane moves away and Vanessa describes the other students packing up their things and leaving, saying "They're the same, but I'm changed. I'm unhuman now. Untethered. While they walk across campus, earthbound and ordinary, I soar, trailing a maple-red comet tail" (46).

The comparison between her classmates and herself exemplifies feelings of being detached and isolated, as if her body is propelled to carry on without her mind. By juxtaposing contrasting words such as “same” and “changed”, “unhuman” and “ordinary”, “untethered” and “earthbound”, as well as “soar” and “walk”, the narrator highlights their otherness from those around them. By stating, “I’m no longer myself; I am no one. I’m a red balloon caught in the boughs of a tree. I’m nothing at all” (46), she expresses a profound sense of loss of identity due to the traumatic event. The metaphor of being “a red balloon caught in the boughs of a tree” evokes an image of entrapment in which she, just like a balloon stuck by the branches of a tree, feels trapped and powerless, unable to break free. The experience has left her feeling unreal, detached from her own body. Another example showcasing this phenomenon can be found in the days after Vanessa’s initial experience of being sexual abuse by Mr Strane, where she defines her dissociative state during class as a “muted confusion” (Russell 114). She says, “Through it all, I’m only half there. My brain feels split, one part in the moment, the other existing within all the things that have happened to me” (114). For example, one scene depicts Mr Strane forcing Vanessa, who characterises her movements as “dutiful as a robot” (101), highlighting the disconnectedness from her brain.

Another example is when Vanessa, having been expelled from boarding school and now a senior, confronts Mr Strane after discovering his role in her expulsion. She arrives unannounced at his house, and as the conversations unfolds, Vanessa gradually becomes more intoxicated, with Mr Strane continuing to offer her beer. Vanessa, deeply inebriated, ends up falling asleep and eventually wakes to Mr Strane raping her. Vanessa says, “I see my body from above, ant-small, pale limbs floating on the lake, the water now past my ears. It laps at my cheeks, almost to my mouth, almost drowning” (251). The description of the water reaching almost to her mouth adds to the sense of being overwhelmed. She describes seeing monsters, leeches, eels, toothy fish, and turtles with strong jaws (251), heightening the sense of danger

that she feels. As she recounts this traumatic experience, flashes of reality punctuate her narrative, depicting Mr Strane's unrelenting advances while she asks him to stop. Again, another image starts to play through her mind in which she sees "loaves of bread rising, groceries moving forever forward, endless bags of sugar, boxes of cereal, broccoli crowns, and cartons of milk disappearing into the horizon" (252). This passage is significant because it juxtaposes ordinary imagery with the disturbing reality of the ongoing sexual abuse, thereby painting a vivid picture of dissociation while simultaneously conveying a sense of spatial distortion and disconnection from reality. This depiction resonates with Pederson's perspective that literature adeptly captures the effects of this condition through out-of-body experiences, shifts in time and place, evocations of confusion, as well as a general sense of unreality (340). As Strane keeps going, Vanessa describes thinking "is this rape is he raping me?" (Russell 252), illustrating the inability to fully grasp the immediate reality of her situation.

She further describes this sense of disconnectedness from reality as feeling as if one is observing oneself from a distance (114). Reflecting on her state of mind, she expresses, "Truly, everything feels like a simulation, unreal. I have no choice but to pretend I'm the same as ever" (114). In this passage, Vanessa reflects on her "unchanged" self amid her traumatic experiences, explaining how she feels as if a canyon surrounds her and sets her apart (114). This imagery implies that although Vanessa perceives herself as essentially unchanged, her experiences have caused a sense of detachment, leaving her feeling alienated from the world. This results in a paradoxical feeling of being both present as well as absent. Vanessa's sense of detachment and dissociation is further illustrated in her interactions with Strane in the present timeline. When she decides to meet him at a coffee shop, she describes the experience as feeling outside herself. She articulates this sensation by expressing, "I just feel outside myself, like I'm watching from across the room" (56). This emphasises Vanessa's ongoing struggle, spanning from the events of 2000 to the present in 2017. In her adult years, she

ultimately recounts her traumatic experiences with Strane as “watching your body star in something your mind didn’t agree to” (188), describing the “dreamlike sense” McNally refers to (172).

Similar to Vanessa, Eden’s narrative also describes the present of dissociative alternations in consciousness when she is mentally preparing to engage in sexual activity for the first time after experiencing abuse. Eden’s narration of the event provides the readers with a revealing glimpse into her psyche. For example, she describes, “I’m not breathing quite right, I know that much. My fingers and toes tingle. Things begin to go out of focus, then back in, and out again” (Smith 111). This illustrates the protagonist’s physical sensations and perceptual distortions during a moment of distress. Additionally, she says, “I hear this buzzing in the background, like static. Static pursing through brain waves, electric currents, floating around in this strange place, making the air feel nervous, activated somehow” (111). This passage describes how trauma can manifest in bodily sensations, in this case, tingling and breathing irregularities, as well as distortions in perceptions where things can go in and out of focus, exemplifying a detachment from reality where time and space can be experienced differently. These descriptions similarly mirror McNally’s observations about altered perceptions of space and time in trauma victims.

After having sex with Josh, Eden briefly returns to reality and is confronted with what has happened. As this seems to trigger memories of her sexual assault, Eden becomes overwhelmed with intense and terrifying emotions (Smith 111). While trying to calm herself down, she describes feeling as if the blood rushing through her veins has stopped (112). In this part, Eden encapsulates her dissociation with haunting clarity, “And then someone switches off the circuit breaker in my mind and everything just stops. Like wires are cut somewhere. I am disconnected, offline. And then things fade to this still, calm, quiet, nothingness” (112). As she remains in a state of disconnection, she reports slowly regaining awareness of her surroundings

again: “I’m vaguely aware when it’s over. Vaguely aware of him touching my face, vaguely aware of words coming out of his mouth. I am alive. I did it. I’m okay” (112). These passages found in *My Dark Vanessa* as well as *The Way I Used to Be* emphasise Pederson’s contention that contemporary literature is particularly capable of representing the effects of dissociative alternations in consciousness, rejecting the notion that trauma erases memory. Instead, contemporary literature demonstrates how trauma alters memory.

In focusing on textual depictions of temporally, physically, or ontologically distorted experiences in literature, as stated in Pederson’s framework, it was found that these alterations are effectively used as narrative tools for illustrating the effects of dissociative alternations in consciousness. What is significant about these portrayals is that they do not alter “the substance of the memory but instead its affect” (Pederson 339). This implies that while a victim may feel their traumatic experience is distorted, such as their perception of time, their memory of the event stays intact. Moreover, literature’s depiction of these experiences acknowledges the active role of trauma survivors in shaping and telling their own stories, which empowers them by giving them agency over their narratives.

**Chapter 5: Narrative Voice**

The two novels employ different narrative structures to explore trauma: *My Dark Vanessa* alternates between two threads of narratives, one about Vanessa's childhood and the other about her adulthood, spanning from 2000 to 2017. In contrast, *The Way I Used to Be* follows a linear narrative trajectory, tracing the protagonist's experience from the onset of the abuse to the aftermath over the course of the following four years. The linear narrative trajectory provides a more immediate exploration of the protagonist's experiences in real-time. Meanwhile, the two alternating timelines in *My Dark Vanessa* invite readers to read about the long-terms effects of trauma, highlighting how past events continue to affect the present.

Despite having different narrative structures, both works employ the same narrative voice since they are told in the first-person by a narrator who is also the protagonist, providing readers with an intimate glimpse into the protagonists' thoughts, emotions, as well as (traumatic) memories and experiences. According to Bishop, using a first-person narrative voice in trauma literature is an effective technique for conveying the survivor's viewpoint, allowing readers to gain insight and empathy (14). This narrative form in trauma literature is particularly effective in providing readers with an unfiltered and intimate view of the protagonists' feelings and emotions as a result of their traumas, a characteristic shared by both novels. More specifically, the inner voice of both Eden and Vanessa serve as powerful vehicles in expressing the impact and experience of traumatic events on their life, particularly in conveying feelings of self-blame that accompany such experiences. For instance, one of Eden's internal dialogues in *The Way I Used to Be* expresses the unsettling belief that her assaulter is the only person in the world that truly knows her (Smith 58). Eden's visceral reaction to this idea— "That's sick. Demented sick. Like, I-should-be-locked-up sick" (58)—illustrates the conflicting nature of her own thoughts. Furthermore, she thinks, "But [Kevin's] the only one who knows the truth. Not only the truth about what happened, but the truth about me, about

who I really am, what I'm really made of" (58). This passage reads as though Eden is confiding in the readers, drawing them into her internal conflict, thereby helping them to understand and empathise with her feelings. Her inner voice ultimately captures her struggle with self-blame: "No matter what anyone else did or didn't do, it was ultimately me who gave them permission. I'm the one who's lying. The coward too afraid to just stop pretending" (58).

In *My Dark Vanessa*, Vanessa similarly articulates her internal struggle with feelings of self-blame. Upon the sight of any random teenage girl, she cannot help but wonder whether they would allow Strane to touch them like she did. Every time she reflects on this matter, she finds herself not capable of imagining anyone craving Mr Strane's touch like she did when she was younger. She then recalls how Mr Strane told her that he never would have done what he did if she had not been so willing, which according to her, sounds like a delusion. While continuing to question herself, she still believes Mr Strane, stating "I was the kind of girl that isn't supposed to exist: one eager to hurl herself into the path of a paedophile" (110). She quickly objects with her word choice, thinking, "that word (i.e. paedophile) isn't right, never has been. It's a cop-out, a lie in the way it's wrong to call me a victim and nothing more" (110). Here, the internal dialogue similarly allows readers to enter into the conflicting mind of Vanessa as she tries to comprehend her past and navigate her own culpability.

These internal dialogues are thus useful in revealing the characters' complex feelings of self-blame, shame, and confusion in the aftermath of trauma, enabling them to not only speak about their past traumas but also reflect on them. The narrative voice in both novels invites readers to empathise and understand the effect that traumatic experiences have on victims. This effectively fosters a high degree of intimacy between the reader and the protagonist, allowing them to connect on a deeper as well as more personal level with the story. Nevertheless, while readers do directly hear Vanessa's and Eden's inner voice, they also gain insight beyond the characters own narrative voice. This phenomenon can best be illustrated through Vanessa's

juxtaposed narratives as readers gain a unique perspective that allows them to perceive truths beyond Vanessa's own understanding. She particularly expresses the difficulty in classifying her past experience as abusive rather than romantic, which offers readers a glimpse into the complex interplay between memory and emotion following a traumatic experience. For instance, she rejects the usage of words such as 'abuse' and 'victim' and replaces them with words such as 'love'. Despite acknowledging that Mr Strane's behaviour meets the criteria for grooming and abuse when she hears the stories of other victims, Vanessa continues to romanticise her relationship with him saying, "to be groomed is to be loved and handled like a precious, delicate thing" (197). In these moments, readers realise that Vanessa's narration is unreliable and often find themselves ahead of her as the story unfolds, grasping the reality of her situation before she is able to comprehend it herself. Vanessa tries to understand her past by consuming books, films or anything that involves a romantic age-gap trope; nevertheless, she always notices that the girls in those stories are usually victims, whereas she is not because she "never wanted to be" (270). According to her, the difference between rape and sex is a "state of mind" (270), wherein "the willing" cannot be raped, thereby referring to herself.

This phenomenon is similarly evident in *The Way I Used to Be*, where Eden grapples with the realisation that she bears no responsibility for the sexual assault that occurred. Through the use of internal dialogues, we discover that Eden questions her own actions and the events that led to the assault. For instance, she reflects on a day she spent with Kevin: "Maybe if that day never happened, maybe I wouldn't have become so smitten, so pathetically infatuated" (Smith 148). Additionally, she contemplates, "Maybe I wouldn't have flirted with him . . . And maybe I would've screamed . . . And maybe it was essentially all my fault for acting like I liked him, for actually liking him" (149), which presents some of her most intimate thoughts. These internal dialogues allow Smith to portray the conflicting emotions that often accompany trauma, showing how survivors grapple with their memories and their perceptions of the event.

The use of narrative voice in both novels, therefore, seems to guide our understanding of the character's emotions and the context surrounding them, which further challenges the belief that trauma is unspeakable for victims.

Another compelling narrative technique worth noting in *The Way I Used to Be* is the utilisation of first- and second-person narration within the retelling of traumatic memories. This technique occurs in the recounting of the rape scene towards the end of the novel, where the narrative initially adopts first-person narration before alternating between first and second-person narration. The chapter immediately starts with the protagonists' terrifying experience, as she recounts, "what happened: I woke up to him climbing on top of me" (Smith 317). A couple of sentences later, the narrative delves deeper into the traumatic experience, saying, "Because now his mouth is on your mouth and his hand around your throat" (317), thereby seamlessly transitioning to the second-person possessive "your" rather than first-person "mine". As the scene unfolds further, the narrative intensifies with the protagonist recounting, "he's whispering, "Shutupshutupshutup." You do. You shut up. You are stupid, stupid" (217), directly placing the reader in the shoes of the protagonist for a moment. This immersion in the narrative world allows readers to experience the events as if they were happening to them personally. While the storytelling of the assault continues, she reflects, "I remember you thought that hurt. But that was nothing" (318).

The use of alternating first and second-person narration in recounting the traumatic event could be a deliberate technique employed by Smith to immerse readers in the experience of the protagonist's trauma. It heightens the emotional intensity of the event, enabling readers to experience some of the fear, distress, and panic felt by the protagonist in that moment. It also helps readers to experience the events alongside the protagonist, almost as if they are living through them themselves. In this moment, readers are not merely observers but active participants in the construction of the protagonist's traumatic memory, allowing readers to gain

a more profound understanding of the trauma while simultaneously being able to empathise with Eden's traumatic experience.

The argument against the notion of traumatic memory effacing memory believes that it can potentially be harmful since it suggests that survivors of trauma may not be able to accurately recall or speak about their experiences. This, in turn, can contribute to a culture of scepticism around survivors' narratives about their trauma since it indirectly implies that inconsistencies in these accounts are the result of a failure in accurate memory retrieval, thereby stealing agency from survivors. However, in works such as *My Dark Vanessa* and *The Way I Used to Be*, where traumatic memories are conveyed through a first-person narrative with an introspective writing style, the authors empower the characters by presenting them as being fully capable of remembering and reflecting on their traumatic memories. This narrative approach emphasises the protagonists' agency in reclaiming control over their own narratives, challenging any doubts regarding their ability to accurately recall and speak about their traumatic pasts.

**Chapter 6: Repetition and Return**

Having demonstrated how *The Way I Used to Be* and *My Dark Vanessa* deviate from the conventional framework through the lens of Pederson's framework, it is necessary to investigate whether Russell and Smith also incorporate the traditional trauma tropes commonly found in trauma fiction: absence, indirection, and repetition and return. Given that searching for absence puts the reader in a paradoxical position of looking for what is missing (Pederson 338), it seems unrealistic to try and analyse the traditional trauma trope of absence in both novels. Moreover, the trauma trope of indirection is notably absent in both novels as I have demonstrated in my analysis that they explicitly confront trauma rather than implicitly. Therefore, I will focus on the trope of repetition and return in both novels. This exploration will enhance our understanding of how contemporary authors depict trauma within these narratives.

As has previously been articulated by Whitehead, one of the most significant tropes in earlier trauma fiction is the use of repetition and return, which can manifest through language, imagery or plot to mirror the effects of trauma (86). Building upon Freud's theory, which posits that victims often re-live their traumatic experiences through repetition in dreams and flashbacks (Pederson 104), *The Way I Used to Be* and *My Dark Vanessa* illustrate how certain places, activities, or experiences trigger memories of the original trauma, thereby demonstrating how victims continually relive parts of their traumatic experience in the present. For example, when Josh physically touches Eden, a traumatic memory with Kevin is triggered, making her relive part of the assault. In this moment, Eden describes how upon closing her eyes, she is transported back to that moment with Kevin, where he is forcefully holding her arms down against the bed while describing the feeling of his fingers on her as "dull knives slowly caring their way down to the bone" (Smith 99). In the grip of this intrusive memory, Eden experiences a surge of panic and an overwhelming urge to escape the present situation.

Another example that can be found is when Eden is in the cinema with her friends. While watching the film, she emotionally and physically disconnects and relives a memory of her and Kevin through an intrusive flashback. Instead of experiencing the flashback from her own perspective, she feels as though she is observing from an outsider's perspective saying, "It's like I'm back there, but not as myself. I'm there as someone else, like a bystander sitting at the table with them, watching her slide into the seat opposite him" (245). While watching herself play a video game with Kevin, she refers to herself as "the girl": "I want to slap the girl. I want to stand up and sweep my arm across the table" (248). She also reflects on the fact that she is now able to see what the girl, her past self, was unable to see at the time: Kevin's cruel intentions. Eden eventually tries to whisper in the girl's ear, saying "Edy, get up. Just lock your door. That's all you need to do. Lock your door. Edy, please!" (251) before coming back to the present moment, sweating and breathing heavily.

*My Dark Vanessa* similarly includes these particular moments where specific moments trigger traumatic flashbacks. As Vanessa discusses her final paper with her professor, she recalls a scene from *Lolita* where Humbert gives Lolita a pair of strawberry-print pyjamas. However, when her professor responds that he does not remember that specific detail of the pyjamas, Vanessa tries to recall the exact moment of the scene, only to find herself frozen in thought. Suddenly, an intrusive flashback occurs in which she remembers Mr Strane taking the strawberry-print pyjamas out of a drawer that he bought for her. Vanessa says, "I remember the feel of the fabric, trying them on in his bathroom, the harsh lights and cold tile floor" (Russell 291), describing it as a scene from a movie that she watched years ago. These intrusive flashbacks in both novels demonstrate how trauma survivors involuntarily relive painful memories, as well as how characters are trapped in a never-ending cycle of reliving and retelling their narratives.

Interestingly, *My Dark Vanessa* also employs the trope of repetition and return to further highlight the cyclical nature of trauma within its narrative. This trope manifests in the plot through recurring events that mirror Vanessa's past experiences, creating a sense of cyclicality. For instance, upon encountering her new college professor, Henry Plough, Vanessa comments that at first glance, he is like Mr Strane "all beard and glasses, heavy footsteps and wide shoulders" (272). She recounts a familiar sensation as Henry goes over the student roster, reminiscent of being in Strane's classroom and feeling his gaze drink her in (272). After the first class, Vanessa becomes fixated with Henry and writes about him on her blog. She admits to dressing like she did at fifteen in hopes of capturing his attention. Henry, whose wife was a former student of him, seems to have an interest in Vanessa as well considering that he denies being married and continues to seek out Vanessa even though he knows of her abuse and obsession with him through reading her online blog. Other recurring plot elements, such as Henry's admiration for Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, evokes memories of Vanessa's relationship with Strane since he gave her a copy of the poem's line from the book. Additionally, Henry's personal emails praising Vanessa as one of his best students further reminds readers of Strane's manipulative tactics. The repetition of certain key moments in the novel highlights the inescapable nature of trauma. Although Henry's character is ultimately open to interpretation, he seems to highlight these cyclical patterns in Vanessa's relationships and, therefore, simultaneously the cycle of trauma.

While the traditional trauma trope of repetition and return is prevalent in both novels, it does not singularly delineate the trajectory of these trauma narratives. Rather, it serves as a tool for both authors to illustrate the profound impact trauma continues to have on the characters' lives. By limiting the utilisation of traditional trauma tropes in portraying trauma, Smith and Russell challenge the prevailing belief that trauma can only be accurately represented through unconventional stylistic devices. Their moderation in employing stylistic

devices suggests a shift towards a different type of approach which prioritises the significance of using literal language for the literary representation of suffering, while still employing some traditional trauma tropes, albeit on a more minimal scale.

## Conclusion

This thesis has explored how contemporary female American authors employ narrative techniques to portray the complexities of individual trauma within their literary works, specifically sexual trauma. The discussion has focused on the perspective of the first wave of trauma theorists, who claim that literature cannot directly depict trauma due to its inherently unspeakable nature and favour unconventional, postmodernist techniques to mirror trauma's fragmented nature. However, recent trauma theorists challenge this by arguing that traumatic events are often vividly remembered and can be articulated.

Pederson's model of literary trauma theory advocates for a shift in focus among critics. This redirection steers the attention away from textual gaps and silences, encouraging a closer examination of the text itself. He also emphasises the importance of seeking out augmented narrative detail, as well as focusing on depictions that are temporally, physically, or ontologically distorted. To achieve a more comprehensive understanding, the analysis incorporated the aspect of narrative voice which Pederson's framework does not address. By drawing upon this, the research aimed to offer a new perspective on the ways in which contemporary female American authors engage with the representation of trauma in literature. Additionally, it analysed the extent to which these authors both challenge and adhere to the traditional trauma tropes of the first wave of trauma theorists.

The most significant finding to emerge from this research is that both novels challenge traditional approaches to trauma representation in literature by representing trauma head-on rather than relying on postmodern techniques such as silence or ambiguity, which were more prevalent in earlier works. Rather than depicting traumatic memories as fragmented or elusive, both authors highlight their vividness and clarity, portraying them as more enhanced and detailed compared to normal ones. The examination of textual depictions of distorted experiences in the perception of time and the nature of reality in literature additionally reveals

that these alterations serve as narrative tools to illustrate the effects of dissociative alterations in consciousness, as defined by McNally. These distortions highlight that while victims may feel as if their traumatic memory is distorted, their memory of the event remains intact.

It was also found that both novels use a first-person, unfiltered narrative voice to convey the emotions and feelings of its protagonists. This narrative approach not only allows the protagonists to tell their own stories and memories but also facilitates a more intimate connection with the readers, specifically through their internal dialogues that express feelings of self-blame. Additionally, it highlights the agency that victims have over their traumatic memories, emphasising their ability to decide whether to express these experiences or remain silent. Both authors thus emphasise the importance of acknowledging and validating survivors' experiences, even when those experiences are difficult to articulate through language explicitly. Another notable narrative technique observed was the alternation between first and second-person narration in recounting traumatic memories, which effectively immerses readers in the protagonist's traumatic experiences.

This research has also investigated whether Russell and Smith incorporate the traditional trauma tropes of absence, indirection, and repetition and return. The most obvious finding to emerge from this is that both authors use the trope of repetition to illustrate how certain places, activities, or experiences trigger intrusive flashbacks of the original trauma, which demonstrates how victims continually relive parts of their traumatic experiences. *My Dark Vanessa* additionally employs repetition to demonstrate the cyclical nature of trauma within its narrative through recurring plot elements. Overall, the results of this research indicate that contemporary female American authors seek innovative ways of representing trauma.

Through their narratives, both Russell and Smith contribute to a broader discourse on trauma, emphasising the importance of embracing diverse narrative techniques that improve

our understanding of trauma and its effects. However, since this research is limited in size, it was not possible to include other contemporary novels by female American authors. This research is also limited by the lack of secondary sources due to the recency of both novels. The absence of established scholarly discourse surrounding these literary works constrained the depth of the analysis and the ability to contextualise findings within existing academic discussions. Scholars should endeavour to fill the gap in secondary literature by conducting comprehensive analyses of contemporary trauma fiction to further guide the understanding of the representation of trauma in literature. Since this research was limited to the analysis of the representation of sexual abuse, it was not possible to assess whether this type of representation is also the case for different types of individual traumas. Therefore, considerably more work will need to be done to determine whether similar narrative patterns exist in the representation of various traumatic memories and experiences. Although this research draws from a limited sample of novels, its findings indicate a noteworthy shift in the analysis and representation of trauma in fiction, warranting further investigation.

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