

**The Art of Endurance: Incurable Trauma and the Commodification
of Queer Suffering in *A Little Life***

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in

English and Humanities

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how Hanya Yanagihara's novel, *A Little Life*, applies a calculative and artistic tactic that combines not only emotional intensity with market value but also makes 'trauma' and 'queer identity' central forces both economically and creatively. On one hand, most trauma fictions portray tropes of friendship, chosen family, or love as the ultimate healers of trauma; however, Yanagihara disregards such narratives of recovery or hope, eliminating contemporary trends of readers enjoying trauma to a certain extent with the desire of witnessing characters reaching a peaceful closure. Based on this, Queer theory, Trauma studies, affect theory, and Cultural Materialism examine how the author provokes instinctive reactions from readers with the implementation of affective strategies.

By doing so, trauma becomes an effective narrative tool as well as a strategy for increasing market value, as the author forces readers to feel a series of affective emotions, such as grief, disgust, discomfort, and even voyeurism. Here, the eradication of healing stage or promising closure for characters, especially the protagonist Jude, compels readers to become compliant in being consumers of queer pain and suffering. Hence, this paper argues that *A Little Life* transforms trauma into 'affective capital', emphasizing contemporary literary fields that romanticize emotional endurance and queer trauma but, in actuality, it is commodification.

Keywords

A Little Life, Affect theory, Affect Capital, Commodified pain, Consumer culture, Cultural Materialism, Empathy traps, Trauma Studies, Queer trauma, Queer suffering, Queer temporality.

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Introduction

In contemporary literature, theories such as Queer, Affect, and Trauma studies have proven significant in terms of opening the floor for readers to experience deeper emotional, social, and political aspects of a literary text that differs from traditional interpretations. In company with trauma and queer, this paper also focuses on the idea of materialism, how queer trauma is commodified and mentions the reader's active participation from their traditional 'passive' stance. By defying conservative interpretations regarding identity and feelings, these frameworks put emphasis on how culture, power, and emotions shape our perception towards human experience.

To begin with, Queer theory argues that gender and sexuality have rigid binary definitions and, therefore, challenges heteronormativity; the idea of heterosexuality being the natural, predetermined, and only acceptable form of identity an individual can have. This form of literary analysis reveals the underlying restrictions towards possibilities of non-heterosexual experiences by focusing on the "fluidity" and "instability" surrounding topics of gender and sexuality. As per Queer theory, the construction of gender based on societal norms reflects its monopolization of power.

Besides that, there is also a hint of intersectionality present in Queer theory, since theorists have deduced that, besides gender and sexuality, other aspects like race and class, which build culture, are at play in determining one's identity; the basis started from activist movements in 1969 where this theoretical structure was expanded to sectors of geology, ecology, spatiality across fields of literature and film. Additionally, central to this framework are scholarly works by Eve Kosofsky, Michel Foucault, and even Judith Butler, connecting gender to performativity studies

and presenting discourse on power to highlight society's way of setting definitions. Also, "queer readings" emerged from this theory, which caused the re-evaluation of canonical works and revealed hidden queer subtexts, deconstructing normative readings and highlighted marginalized perspectives while also providing opportunities for LGBT authors to flourish and express themselves through characters' motives and desires in texts.

On the other hand, Affect theory looks into how emotions function beyond language while demonstrating that literature elicits sensations, leading to bodily reactions in readers, which exceeds conscious thought. Instead of focusing on one aspect like the narrative, the theory explores basic affective emotions experienced by the readers as they read literary texts, starting from joy, fear, disgust, surprise, shock, grief, and so on, that shapes an individual's experiences. Similar to Queer theory, Affect theory has been developed further by thinkers like Lauren Berlant, Silvan Tomkins, and Brian Massumi, who regard this conceptual model as a pre-personal force that exists between texts and bodily responses generated, accentuating that emotions can be central to social and political aspects besides being only personal. Through this structure, we can comprehend why certain works trigger an intense array of emotions that not only occurs physically but also impacts the mental state.

In addition to that, affect theory becomes a prominent notion that can be implemented perfectly in Hanya Yanagihara's novel, *A Little Life*, published in 2015, which deeply interacts with the readers' emotional responses through its depiction of trauma in all forms; mental, physical, and sexual. Along with the novel extracting empathy, discomfort, disgust, exhaustion, and feelings

that keeps readers on edge, it successfully manages to position them as both witnesses who partake in the protagonist's pain. Unlike other contemporary novels dealing with trauma or queer identity, which often allow readers to hope for a peaceful closure, *A Little Life* diverts from providing any redemption arcs, making it a crucial object of research that is discerned with this theoretical basis. As a consequence, both of these theories open the door to inspect and delve into how trauma can function by intertwining identity and emotions, and also underscores that queer suffering and pain is not only illustrated but also perpetuated on a broader scale with readers being active spectators.

Therefore, the research question is: How does *A Little Life* demonstrate queer identity while portraying trauma to be an incurable condition, that is materialized and uncovers the role of readers in consuming contemporary trauma fiction?

Literature Review

According to Joshua Pederson, Jude demonstrates exceptional maturity and stable behavior, providing support for his friends unhesitatingly in more than one way, even if it inconveniences him. Nevertheless, this does not imply that “the pains of his adolescence do not pursue him into his ‘adulthood’ as they tend to manifest physically” (Pederson 227). In accordance with that, Robert Eaglestone raises the question of whether trauma can be healed and if there is a ‘little life’ waiting on the other side of it (Eaglestone 292). On the other hand, Meretoja claims that as the novel progresses, the focus of the narrative clearly leans towards demonstrating the emotional and social effects of childhood trauma. Since the novel engages with Queer, Trauma, and Affect theory, with the element of commodified pain also involved, Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity becomes central in understanding queer identity as it talks about gender being performed rather than being something innate.

1.1 Materialization of Queer Identity

1.1.1 Institutionalization and Political Dimensions of Queer Theory

Accordingly, James Penney argues that queer theory has been institutionalized for over a century, which is how it became a standalone concept now and no longer a part of Marxism, even though many of its key ideas originally came from that split. This outlook is significant to this study, for the reason that queer theorists like Judith Butler and even Michel Foucault’s discourse on power and gender tends to overlook the socio-economic conditions, highlighting their reluctance towards connecting notions of sexuality with capitalism. However, this perspective is overturned by Javdani (2022), asserting that the scale at which trauma stories are

told or heard depends on how well they can be marketed. Basically, how well the narrator performs or displays a particular kind of ‘victimhood.’ He even cites Kurt Borg, who observes that trauma narratives are judged by criteria of success or failure, as if they were performances.

1.1.2 Queer Suffering and Visibility

Adding to the discourse, Heather Love’s *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* formulates a theoretical framework that demonstrates how queer identity has always been entangled with pain, shame, and suffering since there has always been a form of “othering” and exclusion due to adopting different identities that exceed societal definitions. Her argument leans towards the fact that queer people are represented “affectively,” as if prior to this time, queer people did not exist, and it tends to linger on the negative aspects instead of overcoming them. This relates to Jude’s character as well, given that he resists curing his trauma despite being surrounded by people who love him, as it is instilled in his mind that he needs the ‘trauma anchor’ to keep control of his life, embodies what Love calls “the melancholia of queerness,” where suffering becomes both isolating and a mode of queer visibility. Drawing from this perspective, it can be perceived that Yanagihara positions Jude’s trauma as a medium of recognition and discomfort, forcing readers to confront rather than cure pain.

1.1.3 Commodification and Performativity of Victimhood

Nevertheless, this perspective is overturned by Javdani (2022) asserting that the scale at which trauma stories are told or heard depends on how well they can be marketed. Basically, how well the narrator performs or displays a particular kind of ‘victimhood.’ He even cites Kurt Borg, who

observes that trauma narratives are judged by criteria of success or failure, as if they were performances.

1.1.4 Affective Economies of Pain

Sara Ahmed's distinct outlook towards emotions strengthens this argument, as she raises the question of how emotions move between bodies, implying that emotions are not confined within an individual only, but transmitted on a collective level. An inclination of this is found in *A Little Life*, as affect operates through the transfer of Jude's pain to the reader, producing a participatory economy of suffering. This aligns with Ahmed's idea that emotions do not simply reside within subjects but move between them, creating proximity and distance simultaneously. Therefore, Jude's body becomes a source of passing affective intensity with lingering pain that involves the readers during its movement, suggesting that emotions do not generally exist inside a person or outside, but instead they form connections between people and the external world.

1.2 Trauma as an experience

In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth methodically presents the structure of trauma as a force that disrupts history or temporality. Elaborating on this, she claims that the traumatic event is not experienced or merged fully at the time of its occurrence, rather it registers belatedly and is highly insistent in terms of making a return, which is why it falls outside of spheres of memory and interpretation. This definition only indicates that trauma is an inexpressible experience that exceeds human comprehension. Her theory emphasizes the 'delayed' stage of trauma, suggesting victims do not feel it right away, rather it manifests as a painful sensation

after the event takes place. This happens because the individual's cognitive knowledge and emotional capacity fail to record 'trauma', given it appears as an overwhelming force incomprehensible at first hand. This line of thought connects with Freud's argument that the experience itself does not pose as trauma, rather it is the delayed revival of it as a memory once the victim has developed sexual maturity. This view assists in understanding Jude's acknowledgement of what happened to him as traumatic much later in his life.

Into the bargain, Javdani (2022) claims that narration of trauma is essential for the reconsolidation of the self, as it provides a sense of agency in order to "come into conscious possession of our past" as Ruth Leys also posits. Nevertheless, none of those are evident in Jude, even though he believes cutting himself to be an act of fortifying his integrity as an individual, it does not let him reconcile his trauma, rather adds up to it.

1.1.5 Intersection of Trauma, Memory, and Context

As this paper deals with *A Little Life*, which is regarded as a trauma fiction, we will explore trauma novels to draw a comparison. To start with, Michelle Balaev's *Trends in Literary Trauma Theory* provides functional insights on trauma experiences and how they are represented in literature. By her definition of trauma novels, traumatic events create a distinction between the self and the external world by confronting the normative moral laws and social relationships existing in the society, which are linked to specific contexts. Here, the focalization is on a character's historical and cultural values determining their ideas about 'identity'. Along with that, Balaev emphasizes the representations of trauma based on 'the place', which acts as the

‘trauma anchor’, putting an individual’s experience into a broader environment and thus shaping the memory and meaning of trauma.

While many critics have explored trauma, affect, and queer identity in *A Little Life*, few have questioned or examined how the novel examines queer identity, garners monetary value through prolonged trauma that compels readers to accept the roles of witnesses. Furthermore, trauma novels with similar concepts often show the recovery of trauma with tropes of ‘love’ or ‘friendship’. Nonetheless, *A Little Life* refrains from doing so. In fact, it somewhat avoids providing any possibility of hope for the characters, resulting in readers’ outrage and frustration. Therefore, this paper aims to underscore how trauma can be an unhealable condition that consequently feeds into the affective emotions caused by materializing queer pain.

Discussion

As per traditional definitions and findings, trauma is an incomprehensible condition that gradually settles in an individual’s senses as shock, as stated by Caruth and Freud, who broached the notion of ‘repression’, a condition where the brain subdues traumatic events, unconsciously in order to prevent further damage. Despite this, there are little to no mentions about trauma being incurable, why is that? Even when trauma theory is particularly prevalent in analyzing narratives of literary and cultural works with the prospect of dialing down traumatic experiences to a slightly comprehensible stage; an embodied experience, to be exact.

Trauma is surely a fascinating concept that has preceded its original field of research, meaning it is now a versatile topic that is often understood as a condition that can be healed with therapy, companionship, or reassurance. Yet, how often do we discuss trauma that resists recovery – trauma that remains irreparable and unhealed? Trauma studies are now regarded as a multidisciplinary system, to an extent that notions mentioned previously to presumably cure trauma are refuted in Hanya Yanagihara's novel, *A Little Life*, signifying how it has already been strongly established as a subject of study.

In accordance with this, *A Little Life*, as a contemporary novel, deals with non-heterosexual experiences of the characters, including the trauma accumulated in the protagonist by experiencing extreme sexual abuse throughout his life, since the age of eight. As a consequence, trauma becomes unhealable and permanently stays; deduced from his habit to self-harm and proneness to continue it, which disrupts his relationships with his friends, especially Willem, one of the novel's characters and Jude's roommate, lover, and friend. Additionally, this scenario causes affective experiences, which has raised debates regarding the portrayal of queer trauma, given that some readers claim it as mere "trauma porn" whereas others consider it to be "emotionally devastating", bringing forth the thesis's core argument, based on the novel depicting trauma as a permanent condition that lives in the body, while also deconstructing the readers' position as passive witnesses.

Firstly, the prominent aspect lies in the fact that trauma creates a permanent abode in Jude's body as he is shown to be limping, only adding to his high self-consciousness that makes it quite

impossible to recover and instead urges him to drown in oceans of misery and anxiety consistently. Over the course of the novel, there are instances where the stories of Jude's past are revealed to the readers, making them acknowledge how horrifying it actually is. Here, the author's narrative style refrains from describing Jude's story right away, unlike the other characters, turning him into an enigmatic character and embodying trauma itself with its definition of having 'delayed' reactions.

It is essential to note that the gist of the book revolves around unseen trauma, as all the characters struggle one way or another, such as JB feeling guilty due to not being successful but receiving familial love, Malcolm feeling inferior for staying dependent on his parents, even when he is nearing the age of thirty. Willem, a character central to Jude, is described as a kind and handsome man who grew up with emotionless parents. Then comes Jude St. Francis, who is the embodiment of 'Trauma' as all his life he has been subjected to unspeakable abuse, neglect, sexual assault, and abandonment. In one of the chapters of the novel, the lurking tragedy is foreshadowed with the lines stating how achieving happiness felt oppressive, as if happiness was something that everyone should and could attain (Yanagihara, 2015, p.43). This quote sets the stage for what to expect with the underlying factor inclining towards no redemption for the story ahead, and from here on, readers start to feel the affective emotions experienced by the characters themselves, making them accomplices.

Moreover, the author puts forward Jude's fear of slipping back to his past if he dared to remain stagnant in one place, which acts as the driving force of his future. It also highlights that his trauma always lingered at the back of his mind, no matter how normal he appeared outwardly or

with his friends; his past was a devious creature ready to feast with the slightest sign of weakness. If a comparison were to be drawn between Willem and Jude, men who find solace with each other, embodying a soulful friendship, the distinctions would become clear. On one hand, Willem is never anxious, never prone to self-pity (Yanagihara, 2015, p.55), everything Jude is. Willem is the complete opposite of him, starting from his willingness to visit his past, which Jude never can due to his extensively scarring and terrifying trauma, and also because nobody knows who his parents were, which ethnicity he belonged to, nor how he arrived at the monastery as a newborn – a matter of existential crisis.

Later on in the novel, it is known that Jude's limp is actually a spine injury caused by his kidnapper, Dr. Traylor, who ran him over with his car as a child after locking him in a basement and raping him constantly, a truth that is revealed in the following chapters when they are nearing the age of forty. Aside from this incident representing trauma permanently living in one's body and sustaining as an unhealable condition, certain habits of Jude signify aftermaths of enduring such intense abuse, like when JB advises him not to "make things elaborate than necessary" for their New Year's Eve party, which demonstrates Jude's inclination to always take extra measures, fearing he will be abandoned if he fails to fulfill his duties, as he thinks he is unworthy, so a consistent effort to prove himself is present.

One of the most prominent scenes justifying this paper's area of study is when Jude cuts himself. The scene begins with Jude waking up Willem, apologizing and asking to be taken to Andy, Jude's physician, is primal to his irredeemable trauma because, for one thing, his voice sounded calm, as if what he did was normal and nothing concerning. Secondly, the description Willem

gave after seeing Jude's wounded arm was as if Jude's arm had grown a mouth and vomited blood to such avidity that it formed bubbles, implying the severity of the cut, yet Jude's calm demeanor in this context was unnerving to witness. To top that, when Andy asks Willem if he knows about Jude's tendency to 'self-harm', it throws him off guard, as Jude always appears happy and was engrossed in cooking a few hours prior to this incident, stressing the fact that trauma can trigger at any given moment. Later that night, when they arrived home, Willem found "three columns of neat white scars, each about an inch wide and slightly raised, laddering up his arm" (Yanagihara, 2015, pp. 69-71), insinuating self-abuse to be Jude's second nature.

According to existing research, trauma is known to be treated through sharing experiences and receiving constant reassurance of the future. Nevertheless, none of this is evident for Jude, because even after receiving words of affirmation, comfort, and support, his mind seems to reject them and only remind him of his unworthiness and soiled body. This is part of the reason why many readers label the novel as 'trauma dump', but the depiction of his trauma is quite pragmatic and reflective of reality since victims of traumatic abuse fail to share and express their conflicted feelings and hence, fall into silence akin to Jude. This aligns with LaCapra (2001) suggesting that trauma narratives reject resolution and endure self-inflicted pain as that becomes their coping mechanism.

Based on Balaev's statements about how a typical trauma novel functions, we do not find any of those characteristics in *A Little Life*, as firstly, Jude's ethnicity or cultural background remains unknown until the end of the novel, so there is no "primacy of place" involved that can shape his memory of trauma. Also, there is no mention of Jude's previous self - prior to the abuse he endured as a child. Even his earliest memory is twisted and fed to him through unreliable

sources, so his existence itself remains under speculation. For this reason, he possesses no previous ideas about his individuality or standards to evaluate society's performance, which are disrupted by trauma. However, Balaev's argument about trauma novels conveying profound loss or intense fear on individuals or collective levels relates to this paper's claim of how readers become accomplices by partaking in Jude's trauma, given Yanagihara's mode of narration is accomplished in such a way that it makes readers feel as if they are right beside Jude as he is cutting his arm, when he is exploited as a prostitute, or also when he experiences excruciating pain from his spine injury that makes him question his determination to continue living.

Paradox of Hope

As stated by Lauren Berlant, cruel optimism is a term that refers to the illusion that an object of desire promising one of hope or any form of fulfillment, both mentally and physically, actually transforms into an obstacle, preventing one from succeeding wholeheartedly. If we look at Jude's character in *A Little Life* through this lens, we find this notion put into action, for instance, Jude's unconscious desire to love, be loved, and refrain from destroying friendships stems from the belief that it will heal his unworthy self. Even though he remains grateful for his friendships with his roommates, Harold and Julia, as well as Harold's love for him and Andy's genuine concern towards him, the doubts continue to creep inside him. In order to comprehend Jude, we have to look at his friend circle, which represents a form of belonging that is expected from a family, something that Jude never received in his life; strengthening his desire to hold onto it and which also urges him to throw himself in the face of possible danger no matter the situation just to ensure this friendship is intact. To justify this, the night of New Year's Eve is a perfect example

when four of them were stuck on the rooftop of Willem and Jude's apartment, and Jude volunteered to open his bedroom's window by asking his friends to lower him to the fire escape, despite Willem's consistent protests regarding how dangerous the act was. This incident took place right after the night Jude had cut his arm and Andy had advised Willem to keep a close watch on him.

Furthermore, Jude's friends, except Willem, were always curious about wanting to know his past, causing that connection and understanding to weaken, solidifying that optimism becomes cruel when based on concealment. This happens simply because his friends knew nothing about him, starting from his present life, how many relationships he has had, or how he really got the injury that frequently debilitates his legs. As a result, his "object of desire" in a way regulates and destroys his mental state simultaneously, given his self-hatred only deepens the more care he receives. For instance, how his love for Willem and Harold – his adoptive father – promises him wholeness but also reduces him to utmost brokenness because he has an internalized belief that they will grow weary of him as his greed to crave company will increase, when it is far from happening as their empathy and love for Jude stems from his true self, that is kind, gentle, polite, smart, and caring. Furthermore, he thinks he is "only an extravagant collection of problems, nothing more" (Yanagihara, 2015, p. 385) to all who love him unconditionally.

Another significant aspect is Jude's tendency to self-harm as a means of control, an illusion where he believes he is not suicidal as he believes the pain keeps him functioning. By doing so, he sustains his trauma's influence. Also, this mere action operates as a paradox because it keeps him alive, cruel optimism embodied. Drawing on his coping mechanism, Jude transferred his

shame, guilt, and internalized pain into cutting himself, to overcome the worthlessness he felt as a child. During Jude's childhood, while living at the monastery, he would experience waves of rage and throw tantrums, which compelled him to “throw himself against the stone walls, scream as loudly as he could, and bang the back of his neck, his elbows, his cheeks – all the most painful and tender parts – against the side of his desk” (Yanagihara, 2015, p.148). This was Jude's way of establishing ‘control’ over them, a form of revenge for the sexual, mental, and physical molestation the monks inflicted upon him in the name of ‘examining him’. Most importantly, his reasons for carrying out this behavior into his adulthood remained the same, yet the more he gave in, the more shame piled up inside him, and scars littered his skin, plus his excruciating leg pain recalling the original injury reflects the entanglement of trauma within his body.

In the fourth section of the book, “The Axiom of Equality”, when Jude faces a confrontation by Harold regarding his habit, he explains the reason why he does it. His first purpose is because he sometimes feels intensely ashamed and awful in his mind, and he believes he needs to make it physical in order to get rid of those feelings. But other times, it is when he is happy and thinks he is not deserving of that feeling, so he reminds himself of the ‘truth’ by doing it, even when Harold notes that he despises doing it but is incapable of conceiving a life without it. Moreover, after Jude gets caught by Harold, he says to Harold, “if you want to dissolve the adoption, I’ll understand” (Yanagihara, 2015, p.355). This instance puts the spotlight on Jude’s detrimental beliefs about himself as a consequence of being reminded of his past, urging him to think he will be abandoned, since he can never receive something permanent. He lives with the delusion that he “can control it” and that “it helps to control his life”, despite being exceptionally brilliant – a

clear sign of his incurable trauma, as he persists in not seeking help nor does he share his thoughts because he is unable to perceive them as his trauma.

Furthermore, the author portrays Jude's dissociation as a child living in the monastery when the monks hit him harder than usual, causing him to drown in a “blackness where things were done to him, but he remained unaware of it” (Yanagihara, 2015, p.149). As much as it adds to igniting affective emotions within the readers, it also brings attention to the narrative, which not only presents Jude’s fragmented memories but also effectively makes them the central point of the entire novel, with precise details that are ingrained into the readers' minds, making them unable to forget what happened to Jude – a pattern similar to the insistent return of trauma in Jude.

Elaborating on Berlant’s argument, a “hopeful attachment” appears to be dangerous to the people outside of that individual’s internal thoughts. If we look at earlier findings, this statement corresponds with how an event is not traumatic at the time of its occurrence, hence, precedes human understanding. Therefore, to that individual, it is a one-dimensional form of achieving a meaningful life, urging them to disregard the ominous aspects of it, in fear that if they let go of this hope, there will be nothing left to look forward to in life; highlighted by Jude’s consistent habit of refusing to open up about his past, as he feels utterly humiliated by it, to the point that he imagines those events as someone else’s, a form of isolation from himself.

The remaining last twenty pages of the novel also symbolizes how falsified attachments can prove to be cruel, since nothing saves Jude, even when he becomes a successful lawyer and start earning money, had a strong bond of friendship and received love, yet they all only pushed him on the edge, coercing him to take his life, his belief of being unworthy of receiving genuine

human connection solidified. Although he received parental love through adoption at the age of thirty, it still falls short to console what he had to withstand as an orphan as it is innate of him to think he is nothing without “his scars”.

Persistent Trauma; Romantic and Systemic Exploitation

In this section of the paper, the discourse concerns how trauma can be both systemic and relative, restating that Jude’s endurance and suffering is ultimately incurable and also materially dictated. One prime example legitimizing this claim is the character, Caleb who got into a relationship with Jude. A relationship that existed between an abuser and abused rather than of lovers, for the reason that Caleb was highly abusive and emotionally tortured Jude. This characteristic significantly caused the resurfacing of Jude’s trauma in adulthood – contrasting pre-existing findings and speculations of trauma theories presuming eventual healing. The words, expressions and actions inflicted upon Jude by Caleb was a reincarnation of his childhood and adolescent years, which included rape, beatings and bitter criticism of his entire being. It utterly ruptured Jude’s psyche, made him lose his composure completely with such extremity that even his coping mechanisms of cutting himself or repeating insults in his mind obsessively till the words became less meaningful, failed to console his mental state. Jude was always able to regain himself by imagining his memories belonging to someone else, as doing so, the memories became distant, yet never entirely disappeared. Considering the fact that Jude's psyche was already fractured since it took him countless efforts and endless time to refrain from recollecting his past, still that was his only means of being himself. What readers could comprehend, Jude constantly failed to acknowledge about himself and his incessant urge to reassure others that

nothing happened amidst writhing in absolute pain provided the readers with intense affective reactions. Moreover, anyone discovering him in one of his “episodes” made him feel ashamed and humiliated to such a degree that he became nauseated (Yanagihara, 2015, p.375).

Even after months of escaping the extreme relationship, Jude still vividly felt the heaviness of Caleb calling him “a cripple, a liar and disgusting”, his persistence in forcing Jude to repeat that he was “repulsive” and demand that he begs him to stay, settled deep within him, as if instilling his insults to be his true form; a version residing in his mind and not in reality. Jude’s habit of self-abuse stretched on, this time extremely horrid as “he began cutting around the scars, so he could actually remove wedges of flesh, revealing silvery sheen of scar tissue, yet it did not help, not enough” (Yanagihara, 2015, p. 383). With this scene, it is made transparent that indeed Jude’s trauma is bound to stay intertwined in him and return ceaselessly, for which he is solely accountable for. This pattern of past trauma renouncing any sort of settlement coincides with what Heather Love terms as “melancholia of queerness” that results in a permanent affective visibility, compelling both the reader and the character to address the agony.

Aside from Caleb, Brother Luke is Jude’s prime source of trauma that is systemic and socially constructed. In accordance with that, Jude’s responses to words of affirmations from his loved ones illustrate a deeper level of his psyche that shows trauma’s permanence, given Harold and Willem continually expresses their love and admiration for him, however, Jude is unable to internalize their affirmations, why? The answer revolves around him already hearing similar words of appraisal from Luke while he sexually exploited him as a child with the assurance that “it was alright to feel good” and that “he was born to do this” as so-called clients praised Jude’s “performance” (Yanagihara, 2015, p. 395). Even as a child, Jude’s mind fathomed that Luke was

committing something wrong and the work Jude was performing was “humiliating”, making him condemn himself and isolate from what was ‘normal’. As a consequence, he became incapable of differentiating genuine affection from forceful validation. Although Jude remains grateful towards both of them, he displays no signs of believing in their care and rather accepts Caleb’s views about him to be accurate. These examples exemplify how repeated encounters with trauma causes the decay of admitting positive assurances, reinforcing the main argument.

It is also important to note that Jude’s history of sexual abuse, comprising from the monastery, the countless clients he endured, Dr. Traylor, Luke and Caleb have been profoundly male-dominated, which presumably shaped his queer identity or solidified his perception in seeking intimacy through pain, domination and self-pity. This view reveals layers of his mind, and also explains his conflicting and complex attachment to Willem as he refrains from acting on his feelings despite loving him. In regard to this matter, the probable reason could be his own perceived incompetence about himself or simply his unwillingness to protect Willem from the inevitable pattern of producing self-depreciating coping strategies in order to remain sane, because intimacy for Jude is synonymous to misery and trauma. This attachment and incapability to engage in any form of closeness after getting into a relationship with Willem, plus his ultimate descent to take his own life after Willem’s death, only strengthens the notion of his queer identity or idea of self - remaining indivisible from the psychological residues of abuse.

Comparative Analysis

To further emphasize the claim of unhealable Trauma in *A Little Life*, a comparative analysis between *The Kite Runner* (2003) by Khaled Hosseini proves significant as both of the novels' has characters grappling with past trauma, affiliated with abuse. In spite of that, the latter uses narrative which promotes reconciliation of trauma through redemption, reflection, love, and confession unlike the novel in discussion. In *The Kite Runner*, the depiction of trauma is comparatively lighter, for the reason that the central character, Amir's trauma takes place from not interrupting Hassan's assault as a child, despite being the only eye witness. In this case, Amir actually resembles the readership of *A Little Life* as they are witnesses to Jude's incessant torture, yet unable to do anything. In Hosseini's story, Amir recovers from trauma by adopting Sohrab, Hassan's son, who is a victim of sexual abuse as a child and similar to Jude in terms of feeling "dirty", "used" and "disgusting", yet Sohrab's condition is nowhere as destructive as Jude's, given he receives reassurance and love as a child and ultimately is rescued by Amir. Both of them console their trauma after finding each other; Amir's guilt from remaining silent to Hassan's humiliation dissipating as he saves his son whereas Sohrab's trauma is healed gradually through courage, action and reparation. This connects to Caruth's notion of "belated comprehension". Also, the reappearing phrase that rings in Amir's mind "There is a way to be good again" (Hosseini, 2003) acts as the novel's central theme, the possibility of overcoming psychological abuse. On the contrary, *A Little Life* entirely deviates from this traditional pattern of recovery by displaying trauma that is irredeemable as the subject of matter himself defies confession.

It is not as though Yanagihara deprived Jude from friendship, parental love, independence or a sense of belonging – notions that are regarded as traditional methods of healing trauma. Instead, these only proved to bring in more despair for him, accumulated to his pre-existing trauma and thus, eliciting intensive emotions. Yanagihara's representation of trauma shows no signs of moral resolution, solidified with Jude's ultimate suicide at the end after Willem's death, which shunned readers from any form of closure. However, *The Kite Runner* ends with aspects of fragility, yet foreshadows substantial optimism for the future. With this comparison, *A Little Life* remodeled the concept of trauma as something that unreservedly escapes healing, which is supposedly a more pragmatic depiction according to Peyton Thomas, who writes, "Everything that happens to Jude is something that happens to real people." The novel not only defies norms of trauma fictions, but also compels readers to be equal participants to Jude's inexpressible pain; achieved through affective excess.

Affective Excess leads to Reader Complicity

To add to that, *A Little Life* has been central to controversies, criticism, and even praise on a global scale, even after years of publication, the debate around how pain is represented continues. One reader's interpretation illustrates the extreme impact of the affective: "Nothing in life is positive, there is only human suffering, true connection is impossible, predators will always find and ruin truly good people, everything is evil, the people who love you are not enough to save you, and your happiness will turn to ashes in your mouth. The End." This review only outlines a raw and profound level of emotion and discomfort elicited by the novel, adding up to the dispute at its refusal to offer resolutions to treat trauma. Also, the author's narrative

avoided misrepresenting trauma — dramatized because it is fiction — but it accentuated systemic abuse, exploitation of childhood innocence and the lasting psychological damage inflicted. As a result, *A Little Life* positions itself amongst contemporary fiction that insists readers to violently feel, be it to confront or savor the unsettling reality of human suffering, which is part of human experience in true sense.

Again, most of the criticism stems from the novel's explicit portrayal of traumatic events, such as childhood sexual harassment, rape, attempts at suicide, a tendency to self-harm, and prolonged mental and physical abuse. With labels of 'trauma porn', its readership has also accused it of exploiting "real-life traumas and disabilities faced by the protagonist" (Sison 2021). Another reason for receiving such harsh responses is due to the absence of 'trigger warnings' at the beginning of the book, a trend followed in the 21st century. Nevertheless, in an interview with Adalena Kavanagh, the author Yanagihara claims that embracing the act of being participants in others' suffering is part of human experience. Hence, one should always be prepared to challenge themselves by being brave enough to get intellectually and emotionally vulnerable as much and often as they can.

In spite of all the negative reviews, this novel remains a classic in terms of analyzing trauma, for the reason that it articulates the inexpressible aspects of trauma. As stated by Sigmund Freud, that 'trauma' is a shared relationship between two events, one event that is forgotten because it happened during childhood, whereas the second one probes into the matured mind to remind it of the initial, and hence, the memory gets 'repressed'. Similar to this notion, we find this pattern in our protagonist as well, when he gets jolts of pain in his legs at an unprecedented moment; a harsh reminder of how trauma makes a permanent abode by entangling within the body.

In spite of the aggressive forms of criticism centered around the portrayal of excessive trauma in this novel, it still is a powerful narrative as it demands attention with its explicitness. According to Kellermann, this novel manages to modify literary forms and depict what lies beyond the limits of ‘discursive intelligibility’

Materialistic Narrative, or something more?

Hanya Yanagihara’s peculiar narrative makes Jude a mysterious figure, as subtle hints of his horrifying past are scattered throughout the first section of the book, evoking readers’ intrigue. As a consequence, the readers become emotionally invested, half-hoping for a surface level depiction of trauma – like usual trauma fictions do – while the remaining half hopes to sympathize with Jude once his trauma is disclosed, since revelation of trauma can be both intimate and invasive. By withholding the shock factor and inserting it without trigger warnings, the affective impact of being accomplices is heightened as the simple act of reading morphs into a stimulation of emotions.

Additionally, Yanagihara restates the condition of a damaged psyche, which enables “shattered assumptions” according to Janoff-Bulman’s theory. This framework shows that trauma sabotages an individual’s fundamental beliefs about how the world functions as a uniformed, just and predictable system, for which readers often feel their psyche rupturing while reading Jude’s relentless exploitation that raises questions or concerns about their own own space — believed to provide them stability and security. This is an “empathy trap” utilized by Yanagihara as a

narrative tool that insists readers' emotional engagement with Jude's trauma, be it by relieving their own pain through his or by lamenting over humanity's cruelty.

Even after a decade of publication, *A Little Life* still thrives as a central subject of ongoing debates on several social media platforms, mainly TikTok, where global readers engage to see if it is really a book worth reading. One of the primary reasons for its relevance is the tactic of implementing the tool of emotional destabilization, which garners high market value. This technique deconstructs readers' "personal invulnerability", the belief that one is immune to the dangers and negative consequences affecting others, which in turn fuels debates and increases readership because as much as it is a marketing strategy, the novel clears the illusion of trauma being an arbitrary concept. By doing so, it feeds on empathy as 'affective disturbance' results in consumption since readers want to partake in the experience and decide whether to recommend reading the book or not.

To elaborate, theorists like Lauren Berlant (2011) talks about contemporary capitalism's reliance on emotional experiences based on basic affects, grief, joy, suffering, empathy and so on. For this reason, *A Little Life* fits the structure due to being a perfect example of "affective capitalism" that aligns with Sara Ahmed's affective economy as well, since it reinforces her claim of emotions shared amongst the collective rather than being something private. Furthermore, readers' emotional attachment towards a piece of work signifies "affective economies" as emotions "stick" to certain objects and perpetuate globally, culturally and socially — channeling investments.

Jude St. Francis' character is a testimony to excruciating detail, urging readers to experience being by his side as he grapples with thoughts of intense self-loathing before reaching twisted

conclusions all the time. They begin to care for him deeply, especially after his childhood experiences fill the pages, yet they are powerless. This form of affective intensity is made possible as Yanagihara succeeds in producing a connection between Jude and his accomplices, making it a piece worthy of gaining acknowledgment in the literary field.

Despite being labelled as a “Trauma porn” novel, it remains as an especially poignant piece of writing that broaches about rising themes prevalent to be seen. As per Abbot, NSPCC statistics reveal that around half a million children are victims of all kinds of neglect, be it physical, mental, emotional or sexual abuse. This sheds light on Yanagihara’s detailed and “graphic writing” not merely achieved to make money or attract attention — since literature is not meant for ‘fan service only— rather the author intends to elicit the reader’s misery along with the protagonist. This claim is further fortified with the additional last twenty pages, dictating that a happy ending would not have immobilized the readers with a mass of emptiness and pure rage due to how miserable Jude’s life was till the end, for which she prominently designed an unfixable character and portrayed it with brute maximalism.

To sum up, *A Little Life* is the perfect embodiment of contemporary trauma fiction where pain is both aestheticized and transformed into an affective commodity. This conclusion emerges from Jude’s trauma that consistently returns in his life and plagues his mind with self-depravity, readers’ unconsciously becoming helpless participants and ensnared within the novel converting sentiments into a system garnering capital. Therefore, the novel’s success relies not only on its representation of never-ending narratives of trauma, rather also from its ability to continually conjure emotional investment, reader’s complicity and the controversies surrounding it, which makes it a fruitful source of consumption as well as an ethical commitment.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative approach, rooted in textual analysis and surveying theoretical frameworks, for which a close reading of *A Little Life* (2015) has been conducted in order to highlight its narrative style of incorporating complex subjects like queer identity, trauma theory, and affective capitalism. By doing so, this paper aims to analyze how trauma transcends its arbitrariness with its unique representation, as well as commercialization. As a result, evoking mixed responses from readers regarding the consumption of suffering and making them partners. In order to unravel and comprehend Jude's psychological and physical trauma, the research approach inclines strictly towards a thorough textual analysis as well as reflecting on pre-existing findings regarding the main theories. Through a critical lens, the approach identifies how meaning is constructed, manipulated, and perpetuated through narrative affect, for which *A Little Life* was selected, as it not only constitutes a widespread recognition but also actively remodels the idea of trauma, reader complicity as a consequence based on affects.

Theoretical Framework

Drawing on a multi-perspective theoretical analysis, this research paper intersects insights from Trauma Studies, Queer Theory, and Affective Capitalism. Firstly, Trauma Studies is the core of this thesis' argument as it significantly illustrates Jude's suffering – spanning from his childhood to adulthood – and reinforces how trauma can permanently live inside one's body to shed light on its irreparability as it incessantly returns through memory, intimacy, and isolation from the self and society. To add to that, Balaev's theory of cumulative trauma questions pre-existing

notions of trauma transmitting through generations, like race or gender, without any individual experience; a logical and pragmatic claim indeed. Her perspective interlinks with Jude's trauma being structurally embedded, given there is no existing information regarding his ethnicity nor his culture, strengthening the claim of trauma being an individual experience. She also adds that cumulative trauma develops due to repeatedly encountering trauma that can also potentially cause the rise of conditions like Post-Traumatic Disorder (PTSD) that can disrupt identity formation – vividly observed in Jude.

On the other hand, Queer theory provides a complex insight by placing trauma in unconventional paradigms and affective relations, making Jude's trauma existential besides being psychological. Jude's trauma immobilizes him from being 'normal' in terms of expressing himself, sharing his trauma or being able to openly accept love due to his fear of his close ones witnessing his episodes that he considers to be utterly "humiliating", which is what resists resolve (Sedgwick 1990).

Additionally, Affective Capitalism, as argued by Eva Illouz (2017) in her book *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, is a dual process where both emotions and economy mutually co-exist. In this sense, Yanagihara's narrative works in line with Illouz's 'emotional economy,' where feelings are spread, shared and consumed as part of cultural production. This study interprets *A Little Life* as a product of affective capitalism, since emotions and trauma transpire as commodities in the novel. For instance, the narrative is designed in such a way that it elicits readers' pain and attachment – the presence of market logic that rewards affective investment. Drawing on this theory helps in understanding why details of Jude's extreme

suffering gain global interest. By enforcing a multi-dimensional framework, the study exceeds basic thematic reading and instead offers a layered illustration showing how trauma gets documented, aestheticized, and even commodified in trauma and queer fictions.

Methodological Approach: Close Reading and Comparative Analysis

The primary method employed is an in-depth reading and textual analysis where the focus was on the articulation of trauma through narrative style, diction, imagery, and point of view.

Furthermore, a significant amount of attention is also given to the novel's non-linear narration, reflecting the protagonist's fragmented memories and subjectivity as a consequence of surviving an atrocious past. With the implementation of a thorough analysis, the author's narrative tactics are underscored, such as deliberate repetition, retaining information, and imitating trauma's persistent return through Jude's agonizing pain in his legs and spine.

Apart from that, a comparative segment offering a brief analysis of *The Kite Runner* (2003) assists in revealing the unique demonstration of trauma in *A Little Life*, which precedes normative interpretations and surveying of trauma novels. For example, Khaled Hosseini's text offers signs of redemption and hope for the future, whereas Hanya Yanagihara refrains from displaying any signs of healing or reconciliation of Jude's trauma – fortifying trauma as an incurable condition. With the integration of this contrast, the thesis' argument about *A Little Life* destabilizing conservative definition of trauma is reinforced, given that the readers are forced to witness rather than having any cathartic release.

Scholarly Findings

Alongside the primary text, the secondary sources have been selected with theorists specializing in the three central theories, such as Caruth, Ahmed, Butler, Balaev, and Javdani (2022), whose ideas help position the textual analysis within a broader theoretical framework, as well as make it easier to comprehend how Yanagihara converts private suffering into a shared cultural event, where trauma becomes performative and affect becomes marketable. Also, reviews of readers and interviews of the author are added to reflect public response towards the commodification of trauma and marketing based on playing with readers' emotions. Over the course of the analysis, everything maintains spontaneity to represent how the act of interpretation itself is affective, that is, the readers and the critics are compromised into the affective economy which constitutes the text.

Ethical Contemplations and Limitations

As the paper deals with highly sensitive and heavy topics that *A Little Life* brings in, like detailed descriptions of sexual abuse, child exploitation, domestic violence and prominent scenes of suicidal tendencies, it is essential to address the direction of this study, which only serves to outline the irredeemable nature of trauma deforming an individual's perception of self. As a result, this cumulates as affective excess that makes the readers participants to vehemently tortured writing, which becomes too much for them to digest. This paper's analysis is far from dramatizing suffering, rather it strives to underscore the ethical responsibility shared amongst the readers, the critics as well as the author while dealing with trauma narratives, given none of these elements promote a demoralizing view of individual trauma and queer pain. Moreover, it is the

acknowledgement that empathy can also become borderline voyeurism, for which the focal point is to critically demonstrate commodified pain in literature.

In spite of the study relying on an in-depth reading of the primary text and critical examination of other scholarly articles, it addresses some limitations as well. Firstly, the qualitative research method quite heavily prioritizes the interpretative skills over generalizations that can be made through observations. Secondly, the paper posits *A Little Life* in the Western context, which in a way disregards or negates non-Western depictions of trauma. For this, a comparative perusal of *The Kite Runner* is included to alleviate this limitation by representing trauma on a global spectrum – displaying differing views of how trauma and redemption operate across cultural narratives.

Findings and Conclusions

In contemporary times, Hanya Yanagihara's novel, *A Little Life* might be one of the most antagonizing trauma fictions ever. Primarily known for its subject of queerness, however, this text involves more than one realm, as it crucially contributes in reshaping trauma narratives by traversing the borders of empathy, exploitation and the commercialization of pain. By establishing the text within the structures of Trauma Studies, Affect Capitalism and Queer theory, this thesis incorporates Yanagihara's unnerving representation of trauma in such a way that the narrative compels readers complicity by employing intensive affects, and monetize this very affective experience. As demonstrated, Jude St. Francis' trauma remains at the heart of the novel and this study, given the detailed and in-depth exploration of his lifelong trauma refusing

redemption provides a defying outlook towards the normative narrative style that coincided healing with closure or confession. Opposing to that, Yanagihara simply intensified the reinstating of trauma through memory, dreams and realizations, linking with Balaev's idea of trauma recurring due to continual exposure – Jude's trauma is fiercely individual and sustained in his body through his own adamant and foolish hope that it will disappear if he remains silent and isolated. This recurrent ineffectiveness to separate his past from his present imitates the narration's refusal to offer catharsis to its readers – also foretells how the present will inevitably reincarnate the past through Caleb.

Besides that, this thesis also emphasizes how Jude's trauma transforms into an embodied condition, validating its permanence by negating the 'metaphorical' stance and establishing as a somatic condition instead. For the reason that his trauma severely affects his mobility, his sleep, his thoughts and primarily pose as a hurdle in his relationships with other people. Furthermore, his abusive relationship with Caleb induced an internalized notion within him that insisted his mind to believe he is degenerated, which acts as the catalyst for his withdrawal from Willem and his inability to accept love as healing; solidifying trauma's insistent return.

While analyzing the text and narrative techniques of the author, the matter of 'space' becomes relevant, owing to the fact that the novel undermines normal understandings of queerness with a distinct portrayal of Jude's sexuality, occupied with nothing but shame and guilt, affecting all his relations, especially with Willem. Jude and Willem's relationship was an exceptional one, full of understanding, empathy, love and tenderness where they found solace within each other, yet a symbolism of queer intimacy which swayed from being desirable to damaging Jude's psyche further. This only embodies that love, empathy or care are not sufficient to cure trauma, something that Yanagihara repeatedly demonstrated by forcing the readers to witness Jude's

agonizing pain to extreme levels, as explained through Lauren Berlant's notion of 'cruel optimism'; a hopeful attachment that reached into Jude's psyche and ruptured what was left of it.

All these instances germinate the love-hate correspondence shared between the novel and its readers by creating an emotional attachment where suffering becomes an inevitable force for them due to its brutal projection – affective intensity and excess. Besides queer and trauma, affect theory adds a layered groundwork for this thesis with its aspect of capitalism that links emotional influence with materialization, a common trend in the contemporary world identified in *A Little Life* as well. As mentioned in the earlier sections of the paper, emotions are no longer constricted to an individual rather executed under a capitalistic system which provides intensity and exposure in a rather unfeeling generation. Therefore, pain becoming a primal gadget of consumption and emotional exhaustion a source of readership elevation in *A Little Life* perfectly situates the novel under the realm of affective capitalism. Despite the depth of introspection and cohesive beauty of prose employed to depict trauma and, in a sense, aestheticize the suffering, the narrative strictly abstains from minimizing traumatic experience of an individual, instead it outlines the true form, that is appealing enough for emotional consumption.

There is a dual projection of suffering that Yanagihara achieves in representing, which is the aestheticization and sensationalisation of suffering. In terms of sensationalizing, it refers to the severity of Jude's trauma where readers remain as mere spectacles to his agony, such as the scenes of him committing the act of self-harm and the years he spent with Luke as a child. These events create a space where intrigue and repulsion exist synchronously. On the other hand, the aestheticization part is the author narrating Jude's condition with a mixture of tenderness and delicacy, making his experiences of suffering paint a beautiful picture for the readers. An example of this is when Jude surrenders to the thoughts of self-depravity after the Caleb incident

and sits under the shower, with his shirt sleeves folded and a glass of wine before his dark red blood engulfs the white of his bathroom. This scene dictates his fragile mindset that can no longer repress memories, yet the prose adds a tint of beauty to the entire setting, reframing pain as an object of emotional investment instead of moral discomfort. In essence, *A Little Life* remodels the concept of ‘feeling’, while ensnaring everyone who reads it within its pattern of emotional exchange – further mounted with the last twenty pages that does not imply closure rather externalizes an ache reflective of Jude’s lingering despair.

Therefore, *A Little Life* redefines trauma by labeling it as a condition that remains at the depth of an individual’s mind, which transcends traditional interpretations of redemption. Along with that, it justifies the depiction of queer suffering through endurance with its narration focusing on commodifying trauma through affect and reader complicity. Overall, the novel’s radical refusal of healing challenges the ethical boundaries of consuming trauma as art, in turn opens the platform to reevaluate contemporary fiction using and commercializing suffering, especially queer suffering.

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