

***Speaking* Trauma:**
Of Being Woman, Of Marginalization and Reification of the Body,
And its Reiteration in Literature

by

Tasnia Nahla

17203029

A thesis presented to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment
of requirements for a Bachelor of Arts degree with Honors in English

Department of English and Humanities

BRAC University

Summer 2022

© 2022 BRAC University

All Rights Reserved

Declaration

I hereby declare that the thesis titled “*Speaking* Trauma: Of Being Woman, Of Marginalization and Reification of the Body, and its Reiteration in Literature” is my own authentic work, submitted to BRAC University, Department of English and Humanities, in partial fulfillment of requirements for a Bachelor of Arts degree with Honors in English. This thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where it has been accurately stated, and does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, in part or in full, to any other university or towards any other degree.

Tasnia Nahla

17203029

Approval

The thesis titled *Speaking Trauma: Of Being Woman, Of Marginalization and Reification of the Body, and its Reiteration in Literature* submitted by Tasnia Nahla, ID: 17203029 in Summer 2022, has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts.

Examining Committee

Supervisor

Seema N. Amin

Lecturer, Department of English and
Humanities

BRAC University

External Examiner

Dr. Abu Sayeed Noman

Professor, Department of English and
Humanities

BRAC University

Departmental Head

Professor Firdous Azim

Professor and Chairperson, Department of
English and Humanities

BRAC University

*For women,
everywhere.*

Acknowledgements

There are debts that can be named and debts that can only be lived. The first belongs to my parents. It is because of their relentless, thankless labor that I was afforded something far rarer than comfort: the place and the space to think. If Virginia Woolf argued for a room of one's own, then mine was built not of inheritance but of their sacrifice. They made room for my silences, for my abstractions, for things that did not always promise practical return. Whatever thinking I have done here, whatever writing has emerged, rests first on their endurance.

I owe profound gratitude to my supervisor Seema N. Amin, whose faith in this project and in me, exceeded my own. Her encouragement arrived in margins, in conversations – even as I worked through the night and came up with questions and doubts – her encouragement arrived in the simple insistence that I keep going.

To Dr. Abu Sayeed Noman, who has been the most generous of teachers: thank you for the intellectual rigor, for the patience, and yes – for cutting me more slack than I likely deserved. There is a particular kind of grace in being seen beyond one's flaws and be held in confidence for what might yet me. His faith, too, sustained me in seasons where I had very little in myself.

Finally, I want to thank my smallest companion, my cat, my love, Kitana, whose presence stitched together the long hours of writing, offering wordless reassurances throughout my sleepless days and nights expecting nothing but proximity in return. I suspect I owe her my sanity.

Abstract

This thesis examines trauma not merely as singular rupture but as condition: as a structure of being that precedes event and inheres within the female body. Trauma theory has traditionally centered the catastrophic incident (war, violence, disaster), but I argue that women-authored literature often begins within the fracture rather than moving toward it. The trauma under examination here is not exclusively the spectacle of harm but the ambient, inherited wounding of inhabiting a body already marked by marginalization, gaze and containment.

Drawing from Freud, Reich, van der Kolk and Rothschild, I trace trauma as first somatic (embedded in posture, silence dissociation and “character armor”) before it is narrativized. Through Cathy Caruth’s formulation of belated experience, I consider narration as “reactivation”: the moment in which the body’s unassimilated history becomes legible. Literature here functions as representation and embodiment i.e. fragmentation, absence, recursion, and unstable subjectivity mirroring the nervous system’s imprint of trauma. Applying this understanding to Morrison’s *Beloved*, Engel’s *Bear*, Cusk’s *Outline* and *Second Place*, Duras’s *The Lover*, Sontag’s journals, and other texts, this thesis posits that trauma operates as inheritance in women; that it is a maternal and historical transmission sedimented in the body. The female body emerges not as a whole and later fractured but as constituted through *lack*: a self formed within negation, surveillance, and inherited silence; assuming that in women’s narration, trauma is ontological, a condition of being rather than a deviation from it. This stands in direct contradiction to most accounts of male trauma narratives presupposing coherence disrupted by event. Ultimately, this study proposes that women-authored literature be read as trauma literature even beyond the confines of the “trauma novel” because it articulates the embodied residue of a marginal existence.

Contents

1.	Introduction	8
2.	Methodology	10
3.	On that Space in the Margins / On Being-As-Being-Free	13
4.	On The Body and Trauma / <i>The Talking Cure</i>	19
5.	On The Trauma Novel / On the Expression of Self as <i>Lack</i>	26
6.	On the Embodiment of Trauma in Literature / On the Language of the Body	30
7.	Conclusions	32
8.	Works Cited	34

1. Introduction

Where the preoccupation began is an unidentifiable point: it has always existed or always required existence; its reiteration in literature is to recount experience and perhaps in some form represent the speechless fright or the temporal gap that must exist in its inexpressibility. The preoccupation is with tragedy. And in speaking of tragedy, I am referring to a broad set of experiences that comprise both an abject kind of violence or madness and subtler variances of trauma too, that necessitate narrative recall. “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory” points to the Freudian concept of trauma and memory in its exigency for recreation or abreaction through some form of narrative recall of experience while also noting Kali Tal’s emphasis on the *approximation* of remembrance because trauma “precludes knowledge, and hence, representation” (Balaev150).

The problematics of representation, Balaev would argue, is an epistemological matter which leads me back to the almost inherent preoccupation. Narrative or visual, art has historically submerged itself (or risen from, actually, which lends to common tropes of the “tortured artist”) in experiences of rupture and violence. Schönfelder focuses on Laurie Vickroy to highlight the *choice* for trauma fiction both in terms of reading and writing because “literary approaches to trauma provide a necessary supplement to historical and psychological studies” that the “literary imagination with its ability to fictionalize and symbolize can create a space in which experiences that defy understanding and verbalization [...] can be explored” (29). But *writing trauma* is also a testimony: something tangible for something intangible. What does trauma translate to, for the singular individual? How may they, in turn translate trauma for recognition of suffering? These questions often reiterate in fictional fluidity, perhaps invisible but it’s there. In its reiteration, I came across Olivia

Laing's *Everybody* (2021), charting a vexed relationship between trauma and the body, or how we must return to it in its capacity for resistance.

Everybody led me to Wilhelm Reich, “Freud’s most brilliant protégé” who, in the advent of the First World War, “began to suspect his patients were carrying their past experiences in their bodies, storing their emotional pain as a kind of tension he compared to armor” (Laing 6). The trauma Reich talks about surpasses Freud’s crux of the family; he witnesses “psychic disarray” among his patients, not caused from incidents in childhood but from any instance of rupture that threatens the idea of self (7). Through Reich, Laing explores marginal spaces; marginality. She goes back to the body – what it means to inhabit one, how they are positioned in a hierarchy of value, how freedom is curtailed or preserved. The body is unable to move past boundaries (abstract or political), it encounters its limitations first in exploring its relationship with space – the body exists in a marginal space – it conducts the primordial conflict before it can become a battleground or a site of resistance. This marginal space is what I want to explore: the wounding from existing in marginal space, its somatic manifestation and primarily, *what it means to be female or inhabit a female body*.

2. Methodology

This thesis is a qualitative, text-based study grounded in close-reading and library-based secondary research. It examines literary and theoretical texts in order to explore trauma as a mode of being rather than an isolated event of rupture. The primary corpus of this study consists of selected women-authored literary works, read alongside psychoanalytic, somatic, and feminist theoretical texts that inform the interpretive framework of the thesis.

Corpus and Scope

The texts selected for analysis are not unified by genre or geography but by a shared structural concern and that is that each chosen text registers the female body as *already* marked by constraint, inheritance, or existential lack. Rather than centering trauma as a discrete and identifiable event, these texts render marginality as a structuring force of subjectivity and are therefore, particularly suited to an inquiry that approaches trauma as ontological. It's important to note that while this thesis engages a specific corpus, it proceeds from the broader proposition that many accounts of women-authored literature remain legible through this lens: that the condition of being woman, as historically and politically constituted, renders trauma less an exception than a background pressure, saturating narrative form even where no singular rupture is named.

Analytical Framework

The method used here is interpretive rather than empirical. It does not seek clinical validation and instead, engages critically with existing scholarship to illuminate how trauma is articulated in literature.

Rather than “applying” theory to literary texts, the approach was to trace how theoretical and literary discourses already intersect in their concern with the wounded subject / the

politicized body. Psychoanalytic and somatic accounts of trauma (Freud, Rothschild, Reich, van der Kolk) are read in conversation with feminist and radical feminist thought (Hooks, Mulvey, Burstow), alongside work on visibility, illness, and embodiment (Kozol, Sontag, Laing). These texts form the theoretical terrain through which the female body is approached in this work as both the site and the record of trauma.

This thesis does not test a hypothesis. It proceeds by following the movement of a question: *if trauma is any rupture that threatens the idea of the self, what does it mean when that rupture is not singular or spectacular but continuous?* More elaborately, what does it mean if the rupture is structured into the condition of inhabiting a female body within systems that objectify, discipline and politicize it from the outset? To address this, the chapters examine how marginalization, somatic memory, and narrative form operate across both literary and theoretical texts.

The analytic approach is dialogic and comparative. Ideas such as embodiment, marginalization, repression, and inheritance are traced across theoretical and narrative forms to observe how they sediment within language and structure. Interpretation attends to patterns of voice, perspectives, spatial positioning and self-articulation, examining how marginality is encoded in thematic content and also within the architecture of the text itself. Recurring motifs of silence, shame, illness, hyper-vigilance, and the language of lack, are treated as symptomatic traces. Formal strategies like fragmentation, repetition, narrative gaps, and tonal instability are read as structural inscriptions of psychic strain. Through this method, trauma is approached as an organizing pressure that shapes narrative rhythm and textual coherence to show how stylistic choices *enact* trauma and act as micro-sites where theory and narrative converge.

Point of Departure

Departing from dominant strands of trauma criticism that center on historically circumscribed catastrophes or identifiable incidents of violence, the argument here, instead, turns toward marginalization itself, particularly the condition of being woman, as a primordial structure of wounding. While such frameworks remain foundational, this study proposes that marginalization may itself function as such a structure. By reframing trauma as ontological rather than episodic, the thesis suggests that women-authored literature often presumes (knowingly or unknowingly) trauma at the level of being, even where no singular event is foregrounded.

Limitations and Ethical Positioning

Finally, this methodology acknowledges its situated perspective. While the thesis does not collapse criticism in autobiography, it recognizes that interpretation emerges from within the gendered structures it seeks to analyze. The focus on women does not presume homogeneity, nor does it ignore that certain bodies (racialized, colonized, disabled, queer, economically precarious) are more intensely politicized than others. Rather, it proceeds from the understanding that the category of “woman” itself is unevenly constituted, and that marginalization operates along layered axes of power. The aim of this study is articulation. To render legible a form of suffering that appears too continuous, too normalized, to be easily named as trauma. The method then, is to listen closely to the silences, to the gaps, to the body speaking beneath the sentence, and to argue that it is there in that broken register that trauma begins.

3. On that Space in the Margins / On Being-As-Being-Free

“Ours Is a Broken Voice”

Going back to the body is to go back to the boundaries within which it is limited, often these are the boundaries of family, religion, community, or nation but the first restraint is within the body itself, the first encounter of *lack*. I’m thinking of the Arcade Fire song “My Body is a Cage”, I’m thinking of Agnes Martin choosing to deny her body altogether, I’m thinking Bell Hooks speaking from the margins, I’m thinking of Sontag and illness, I’m thinking of Nina Simone, I’m thinking about freedom. Steven Hoelscher’s review “Visualizing Stories of Time and Place” raised questions on how “visual cultures” have “contributed to both the privileging of certain subjects and the disciplinary control of subordinated citizens” (Wendy Kozol in “Marginalized Bodies and the Politics of Visibility”, p.237). Kozol was talking about the representation of select histories, and the current visual discourse of the United States “war against terrorism” (237). But my primary concern here is reading female bodies as subordinated citizens, as bodies limited, not within geographical or national boundaries but within abstractions, within socio-political constructs. The hierarchal force of these abstractions mean that the body is never free, never liberated, that it is exiled within itself. In speaking of these bodies, I am speaking about women.

“Radical feminism begins with the existential”, that’s how Bonnie Burstow phrases it in *Radical Feminist Therapy* (1992), that our “human existence is predicated on our ability to project meaning, to embark on projects, to create world” (1). *Transcendence of self*: the method / the distinguishing factor that separates the human animal from objects, the object that is being “*in-itself*” and what does not possess awareness of self and so cannot alter self, in contrast to beings with capacity to transcend self / situation: the self and the world, that are beings “*for-itself*” or, as the existentialists have termed it, “*being-as-being-free*” (1). But this

mode of existence, i.e. free, does not render the possibility of transcending concrete circumstances that create resistance to *be* or to *act*, and does not, by the duality of its nature, disallow a part that is *in-itself*. I mean to say that the human existence as being *for-itself* constitutes of, akin to rest of existence, an element that is *in-itself*, so when in the absence of encounter, what is external to us is perceived by another person, let's say, or when we are thought about without context, "our in-itself is seized", wherein we are made objects under gaze. Burstow writes:

The existence of other consciousness means that each of us can at any time become objectified, can at any time be robbed of our freedom. It means that we have an outside that is always in the other's hands and that leaves us forever vulnerable. This "outside" from which we are alienated and that renders us alienated from ourselves allows us to be categorized and used the way objects are, and it extends to both our bodies and consciousness. We are not fat, greedy, or "a good lay" innately or because we choose this but because others see / use / reduce us this way. Just as each of us can be turned into an object, each correspondingly can be a subject who objectifies. We can forego encounter with any consciousness, seeing "it" as "other" than ourselves. We can turn any being into another object in our means-ends network, reducing that being to something pleasurable or unpleasurable, serviceable or unserviceable. (2).

That we are periodically robbed of our freedom does not translate to oppression. To state this is not to say oppression does not establish an inherent lack of freedom but that it isn't something that occurs intermittently only. Oppression would mean that we are subjected to systematically placed inequalities (boundaries, abstractions, if you will), that we are defined by the virtue of our placement within a group (whether we have chosen this group for

ourselves is irrelevant but it is this virtue that dictates the extent of our freedom or the curtailment of our “projects”). And as it is as women, we are in any case defined by our virtue, through categorization of being, reified / reduced, and so, our oppression like all oppression begins with objectification. A threat to *being as being free*: a threat that cannot be simplified enough to say that it is something as uncomplicated as sex role division for example because what we’re approaching here is a fundamental subjugation, reification, animalization of one entire sex (Burstow 3).

As women we cannot speak, when we do, it’s about how we speak that’s important. The way we speak is under gaze, what is external to us is under gaze. This is the gaze that reifies, renders us objects; it’s what puts us in that space in the margins. This gaze that is in essence the gaze of oppression, the first rupture, the first act of violation. We are violated in the way we are looked at in that space in the margins, through that gaze that is inherently male. The sexual politics of that gaze is to “frame” woman as object of male desire at the expense of her agency: that is how Laura Mulvey describes it in “Narrative Cinema and Visual Pleasure”, but to be more apt, it is the heterosexual male gaze not simply the male gaze that commits its violence in looking.

I want to extend on that: Mulvey theorized the way women were looked at (shown) in cinema, and more specifically, in traditional Hollywood cinema; I think the gaze ranges beyond the limits of screen. Of course, visual cultures have deep impact in framing personal narratives. (Think of Wendy Kozol’s “Marginalized Bodies and the Politics of Visibility”: she writes of Afghani women taking off their *burkhas* in a campaign to promote U.S. declaration of war against terrorism (237). Ultimately, what effect does this visual discourse have? It does not exactly effectuate an anti-terrorism movement, but what it does is promote a sentiment, an idea that is reinforced through image production, of imperialist agenda, especially with these images of Afghani women, where taking off the *burkha* is read

synonymously to liberation. Kozol might be talking about something that may appear to be vastly different from what we're discussing here but the same principles apply. Visual discourse has an impact, that's undeniable, but it is this impact that is weaponized in propaganda). So, the way the woman appears on screen is the way the woman is perceived off screen. (Saying this, I am reminded particularly of the Indian film industry, or Bollywood's depictions of women: objectified, over-sexualized, more so through music regarded as "item songs" that transgressed enough to become practice, (I'm talking about referring to women as *items*, here). But it doesn't end there either; Bollywood's narrative cinema operates strictly under the male gaze insofar that there have been enough accusations against the industry for promoting rape culture to a degree of romanticizing abduction, stalking and rape itself).

It's universal too, this effect. As women, we are primarily reduced to body: fetishized, rendered for pleasure or servitude; "arranged, maimed, jeopardized, and tailored for the purposes of men-defined eroticism" (Burstow 4). Eroticism is rape. It is the violation of body for pleasure. And still this goes beyond too: Burstow drew from Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) in their demonstration of the act of heterosexual sex to be bordering on conventional rape where the common practice is that man "takes" woman, possesses her, "straddles and thrusts": "His virility is measured by his forcefulness, by the decisiveness of his thrusts. Significantly, penetration remains the *sine qua non* of patriarchal heterosexuality regardless of its irrelevance to female orgasm", (5).

The story is the same; the story is always of the woman as spectacle, the sex object, something to *take* and own: "from vision to preparation to act, the story of the woman as the sex object is the story of violence defined as love." (5). Generally, what is presented as *sexy* is what reduces her to body, what distorts and damages because the ideals are male and for male gratification down to its last speck so much so that violence becomes essential and not

merely an effect, to dominate, humiliate, conquer. The paradigm for heterosexual sex emerges from domination (think of war loot, sex slaves, rape as a tool for warfare, women are predominantly subjected to this. (There is also the factor that my point is based not in consideration of matriarchal societies but really the history that created the basis of our current political air). This violence is also the violence made explicit in pornography). But to understand this violence is to forfeit typically held dichotomies between “good men” or “bad men” masking casual, everyday violence. It’s essentially the same argument as the *#notallmen* trend that started, which in its own right perpetuated these black or white dimensions that if you’ve never spiked a drink, raped or assaulted, you do not deserve to be categorized that way.

The point here is to read marginalization as an ontological state and not a social condition that is imposed upon select individuals. This is not to say that all forms of marginalization are equal, or a means to overlook bodies that are racialized, colonized, displaced or militarized – this is only to argue that the state of *being woman* is in itself a sequence of structural marginality. All bodies are political, yes, but to be woman means to occupy a body that is politicized from the onset, preceding expression, visibility or action. This is a mark inscribed through histories of subjugation, through cultural mythologies and through epistemic violence, and in this context, what marginalization is *not*, is a spatial or temporal aberration. It is not experienced as isolated incidents of exclusion or violence, it is a lasting structure that outlines the relationship with self, others and the world.

If trauma is any instance of rupture that threatens the idea of self, then the trauma from inhabiting an inherently marginalized body means that it is derived from a systemic ontological diminishment. And since it prefigures experience, it shapes perception and defines limitations of what can be said, felt and known. The more politicized a body becomes by virtue of its race, class, sexuality, or disability, the more acutely it becomes marginal. But

even in its most unmarked state, the female body is never un-politicized: the category of *woman* is itself a signifier for deviation, structured through exclusion and hierarchy. This condition is traumatic precisely because it naturalizes restriction. As women, we affectively learn the parameters of mobility, speech and desire. These are micro-intimacies of control that accumulate into somatic knowledge – the body’s way of internalizing its own contingency – and what emerges is not a fractured self but one that is hyper-vigilant: she monitors, disciplines and curates in response to her own precarious visibility.

What is external also reaches the internal. To be violated, reified, is also to accept it and to accept it is also to accept defeat. We learn of our lack, our differences very young, and in essence assume rape of self. Ours is a colonized consciousness, “ours is a broken voice”, “When you hear the broken voice, you also hear the pain contained within that brokenness – a speech of suffering”, (Bell Hooks, *Yeaning*, “Choosing the Margins as a Space of Radical Openness”, pp. 146). That brokenness of our voice is a sound nobody wants to hear, so *when we speak, it is how we speak that is important*. Writing about dominion, or violence, we write *to* those who dominate, we adapt, adjust, hoping to be not too much, or too little of anything, and often, who we are, is written back to us. Our voices are heard, reckoned with when it comes from that space of dominion. The “we” is “us” in the margins, perpetually attempting to reconcile with the trauma of existence, of inhabiting a body.

4. On The Body and Trauma / *The Talking Cure*

“My Body Is Speaking Louder, More Plainly Than I Ever Could”

The body remembers.

Two accounts of scientific literature: one of Babette Rothschild, *The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment*, published in 2000, traversing the body and somatic memory, reviewing various case studies, attempting to outline how trauma manifests through the symptomatology of PTSD, how the traumatized body refuses to be ignored, and how treatment should be in correspondence with both mind and body; and second of Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), drawing from over thirty years of research in the capacity for trauma to reshape mind and body. He emphasized dissociation as the essence of trauma; the “smoke detector” – an analogy for the activated survival mode of the brain, applied throughout his work – that loses its capacity to reckon with safety or danger within spaces translating into a lost sense of self as a basis for his subsequent emphasis on the requirement to “reactivate” that sense as the route to recovery. Of course, there are other accounts detailing this link between psyche and soma too, but my point here is to establish a factual basis for the *capacity* of somatic memory, so as to not have what I am trying to hypothesize, appear in vacuum.

The body remembers. It is to reconcile with remembrance, to reconcile mind and body, that at some point during the 1990s, in an attempt to formalize her understanding of the body, Olivia Laing delved into a degree in herbal medicine that her tutor would later refer to as “narrative medicine” because the process of treatment was through narration of the patient’s life by the way of the body (Laing 22). It closely resembled psychotherapy, “the talking cure”, she would call it, paying homage to Freud, fascinated by “the way they

experienced their physical and emotional lives as interwoven. In their telling, a divorce prompted cystitis, old griefs attached to tumors, the bereaved developed ulcers or lost their voices, like Freud's famous patient Dora." (23). This isn't necessarily the somatic memory Rothschild was referring to but it is often in connecting soma and psyche that people make sense of their bodies or what ails them (the patients Laing saw were already ill but it was this illness that made them forcibly aware of their bodies, that made them think about other aspects of their lives). It's a coping mechanism if anything, a method to overcome the mysterious nature of illness, and yet it transgresses that too. My position is not to say that a divorce can prompt cystitis, for example, but that trauma is in fact contained within the body, that all the things we deny or disavow, retain themselves, become compelled to expression. This is in essence what I'm talking about: somatic manifestations; the body's own elusive tongue for speaking unacknowledged history; and this is primarily the position Reich had set out to explore too: to structuralize this disgruntled, fragmented language of the body / the method in which we "speak" our trauma.

The conclusions he had reached (repression and its subsequent manifestation) already predated him by a year with Freud's *Studies on Hysteria* (1896) arguing that "hysterical symptoms were not the result of madness, but caused by repressed traumatic memories; a notion made even more shocking by his claim that trauma was always sexual in origin" (Laing 29). Preceding this, Reich wrote *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933) in scrutiny of Hitler's use of "unconscious sexual anxieties, including the fear of infection and contamination" to manufacture sentiments of anti-Semitism (Laing 7). But what he saw in his patients were not "hysterical symptoms" that required analysis or interpretation, Laing wrote that what he witnessed was a "clenching and cramping that pervaded a person's entire being" (33). She described his theory in picturing a soldier:

...with their military bearing and stiff upper lip, their body disciplined away from feeling. Not everyone undergoes such rigid training, but very few people pass through childhood without learning that some aspect of their emotional experience is unacceptable, some element of desire a source of shame. ‘That’s babyish’, a parent might say, or ‘boys don’t cry’, and so the child tenses their body in an attempt to master or subdue feeling. What Reich realized was that this process inscribes permanently, turning the body into a depository for traumatic memories and banished feelings of all kinds. (34).

This depository of what we suppress is what Reich would call “character armor” (33), *solidified tension*, visible in how we conduct ourselves: it could be in the way we smile or shake hands, the way we reserve (or not reserve) ourselves, reaching far beyond Freud’s *Hysteria*, and was perhaps, his only distinctive contribution to psychoanalysis. Or at least, the only one that made its way into conventional psychotherapy – providing the basis for body psychotherapy, and other physical approaches that became quite popular during the 1960’s like gestalt, Rolfing and primal scream therapy (36). Reich had other major contributions: he’d coined the term “sexual politics” and “sexual revolution”, (sex was central to his notion of bodily freedom (to liberate body is to liberate sex from years of shame and oppression) but he was a pariah among social circles, and he isn’t as discussed still because of the ideas he developed in exile the excesses of which – included the invention of the *orgone* accumulator that could liberate bodies, (and also cure cancer), pseudo-scientific theories on disease and a “space-gun-machine that controlled the weather” (8) – overshadowed the ideas he’d developed earlier on sex and politics.

Going back to the original point: the body remembers. But what does it remember when there isn’t a single incident of rupture that can be traced back to, or separated from the rest as the root of trauma? If our trauma is of being, if it isn’t a direct assault, a visibly

understood threat, how does it then translate? In this specific case, if our trauma transpires through the act of being woman, of being under gaze, of inhabiting a body, how do we “speak” it?

I’m thinking of Sontag and illness: it’s what I had written when I spoke of the first encounter of lack and it’s what I will talk about now when I produce my answer. It isn’t because of *Illness as Metaphor* (1978) (that served as inspiration for this research) that I want to so specifically focus on Susan Sontag; it’s because of the history that led her to it. Sontag had an unhappy childhood: her mother, Mildred, was volatile, alcoholic, absent; she was raised by her grandparents for the most part until Mildred returned, told her, her father was dead and sent her out to play; when Laing writes about her, she says, “her (...) childhood resembles an unhappy masterclass in how the past lodges in the body, like a fishbone in the throat” (37). And it’s true because she denied the existence of her body altogether, “a decision driven by her despair and self-disgust concerning her inadmissible attraction to her own sex” (38), and a decision she carried out to its limits in denying all regulations of the body: including a refusal to wash herself, or brush her hair; she “chain-smoked and took speed to suppress her appetite and need for sleep. She was shocked that childbirth caused pain, and had a baby before she had her first orgasm,” (39).

Sontag did not only theorize illness; she embodied the problem: the refusal of body and the subsequent impossibility of that refusal. The entirety of her intellectual position was that of denial, ascetism and control. Her suppression of hunger, of pleasure, of sleep – is simply the spitting image of a body refusing to house its history. Her pain was ontological and her illness was neither metaphorical nor separate from her psyche. The clinicality of the cancer that she wrote about must also be read as part of a continuum of repression that started long before a terminal diagnosis: the body that she disowned, continued to speak through her, even in silence.

Now, this is not a suggestion that her cancer may, perhaps, have been caused because of psychic distress, nor is this a suggestion to conflate illness with metaphor in the reductive way she herself, had warned against. The point is to notice how psychic pain manifest through / in the body and how the refusal to acknowledge it does not and cannot silence it; the point is to see illness not symbolically but as part of a continuum – of history, of repression, of *being* – that cannot be wholly disentangled from the subject who lives it. To write it plainly: the body holds the ability to respond in ways that refuse neat medical or psychological categorization.

Essentially, this is the space my argument holds too: between the body as historical subject and the body as text. Freud initiated this through the language of hysteria: a psychic rupture rendered legible through bodily disruption that Reich later hypothesized as a structural condition of being. His “character armor” is a sedimentation of repression, not a kind of incidental rigidity. Reich’s patients narrated their pain and they *wore* it too, visible in affect, in musculature, in how they entered rooms or held their jaws, and this is foundational in understanding the female body in trauma: constantly negotiating the conditions of her subjugation. Kolk and Rothschild extend on this logic by discussing the traumatized body as neurological, physical and cellular. Their interventions reify the speculative in considering trauma’s existence in the autonomic nervous system dysregulating time, memory and sensation. The contradiction between their work and my hypothesis is that it also presumes a rupture: a before and after. What I propose instead is a non-spectacular, structural, continual violation from the condition of being. A trauma that is pre-verbal, pre-conscious, but always proximate.

This is the point where somatic memory transcends clinical phenomenon. The female body develops its own syntax under the weight of gaze, discipline and containment – a physicality shaped by what it must anticipate. And this is not theory alone: it is evident in the

quiet choreography of self-minimization, and in the cultural codes women inhabit and reproduce through posture, speech, gesture, and other mannerisms developed as tactic. “Solidified tension” is a socially legible element then, evident through slouched shoulders, nervous laughter, disappearing acts. It is aesthetic too, because it migrates into fiction, autofiction, memoir, poetry. The form, for women writers, is an architecture of both their containment and resistance. And this is exactly why trauma demands expression: what is often denied linguistic space, finds space elsewhere. And if the “talking cure” is a means of translating trauma, then literature gives it echo, resonance, structure.

The Body Keeps the Score (2014) discusses recovery from trauma being dependent on the ability to *reactivate* a disrupted sense of self – a process that begins with the capacity to narrate *absence* (van der Kolk 188); and in the context of female literature, (particularly narratives rooted in bodily memory and structural marginalization) this act of narration becomes the mechanism through which fragmented subjectivity is tentatively reassembled by constructing the self.

To reactivate is to narrate: *the talking cure*; and because narration would mean re-enactment, *to narrate* is to *experience at all*. Cathy Caruth essentiate the same argument in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996): “the historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced” (17), that it is in “the way it was precisely not *known* in the first instance” (4) that it creates a “temporal gap”, compelling recall. But to narrate is also to testify because to testify is to word the dissolution of self, and to word it, again, is to recover that sense. The literary or imaginative approach to trauma is in its most basic components a method of *recall*, that supplements comprehension where “experiences that appear to defy understanding and verbalization, that concern existential dimensions of the human condition – especially threatening experiences of vulnerability or mortality – can be explored from multiple

perspectives” (Schönfelder 29). This form of narrative recall is accessory to understanding historical and psychological studies, to establish a nuanced engagement with the subject of trauma, within a context.

5. On The Trauma Novel / On the Expression of Self as *Lack*

“I Have Wanted to Be Free My Whole Life and I Haven’t Managed
To Liberate My Smallest Toe”

The Trauma Novel employs a sentiment of profound loss or fear or both for an individual subject or within a collective, often defined by a shift in self by the way of an external factor / subject / experience / circumstance. Reconciliation with this external, post the encounter of threat, is what Balaev calls “the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and world”; she considers this external as not being limited to a large scale violence or disaster but that “the event may include, for example, the intimately personal experience of female sexual violence, such as found in Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard Out of Carolina* and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, or the unexpected death of a loved one, as found in Edward Abbey’s *Black Sun*” (150). My position isn’t to analyze a direct loss or infliction of sexual violence, per se but that most accounts of female narration, especially within the scope of the novel, carry a lingering sense of the *self as lack*, or the self as other; a sense of unraveling, a sense of inherited madness; or in other words, it carries a scent of trauma not from a direct *hit* but a trauma reinstated through the act of being – through the act of being woman, being other / made other.

The concept of trauma as an inheritance, a legacy passed through generations, takes on rather intense implications when we look to the female body not only as a vessel but as a living record of pain, violence, and survival. As Michelle Balaev articulates, trauma itself resists neat historical categorization, often existing outside the limits of a single traumatic event. Instead, it roots itself in the collective memory, in the “residue” of experiences that women have been forced to internalize as bodily and existential truths (Balaev 153). This residue is not narrated as rupture. This residue is ambient and textural and it exists in the way

the body is carried, described, or entirely made absent. By extension of this, women-authored literature *enacts* trauma through dislocated timelines, through recursive narration, silence or fragmentation, or a complete refusal to traditional character development. The body – whether it is physical or textual – is the space where trauma is registered and the self is destabilized.

Read as example: *Beloved* (2007) where Morrison literalizes this residue. Sethe's body is an archive of unspoken violences of slavery: the chokecherry tree scarred into her back is a historical mark of trauma embedded in the body and it *speaks* of what was done to her and what she continues to carry despite her attempted erasure. Beloved (the character) arrives as rememory, as a haunting, as a reincarnation of repressed grief, desire and guilt. And the trauma here is a violence interwoven throughout the psychic and corporeal fabric of the women in the text and is reinstated in the project of naming who is remembered, who is buried, who is reborn – and is in essence, a process of writing the self back into a history that has overwritten it.

Marian Engel's *Bear* (2021) narrates trauma entirely in absence. There is no narration of a past violence instead what's read is a kind of historical, emotional, and erotic *vacancy*. The protagonist is a solitary history archivist, detached, and attempting to begin a sexual relationship with a bear. And this is often read in terms of a sensationalized act and not so often for what it actually is and what it is, is an encounter with otherness that is in equal parts about bodily alienation and desire. Her gestures are tentative, curious, and desperate for something: for contact, for sensation, perhaps, for disruption, and her body, detached from meaning or intimacy, becomes a vessel through which something preverbal is felt. This is not, in any way, healing in the conventional sense, but rather a collapse of normative structures revealing the depths of her estrangement. The text speaks through gestures: through her retreat from human interaction, through her attempts to retrieve meaning from

myth and nature. Again, her trauma here is not a scar born from violence, it is simply *vacancy*.

That reading this vacancy feels particular to women is not incidental because Lou's estrangement begins with isolation, yes, but it also stems from centuries-long dislocation of women from their bodies that is the learned habit of distance, of self-containment and of substituting function for sensation. Her desire is not simply a desire for touch but for *permission* to *feel* and to inhabit a body without mediation or moral surveillance. As this sentiment builds to a crescendo, the encounter with the bear becomes evident to be exclusive to the female condition. It is how the text stages a crisis of embodiment that is, in essence, simply, an attempt to reconcile instinct with social constraint, to reclaim physical selfhood in a world that has rendered the female body spectacle and taboo.

Trauma literature often centers the *event* that is the made-visible rupture: the accident, the war, the act(s) of violence that dislodges the self from coherence. But women-authored literature, even without a label of the "trauma novel", may be read *as* trauma literature because it presumes trauma from the onset, because it begins *within* a rupture that is the primordial wound, predating experience by inhabiting a body marked by history, gaze, and containment. Take for instance, Rachel Cusk, because she writes into flesh this condition of *beginning within rupture*. Her narratives do not move toward a fracture, it does not show a fall from prior *wholeness*, it speaks from within an already fractured existence. *Second Place* (2021) and *Outline* (2016) stage trauma – although not explicitly because whatever wounding there is, is framed through a state of inherence, never formally spoken – through form. The center or an event is deliberately withheld and readers only receive impressions of the self's indirect encounter with its own dissolution.

In *Outline*, the narrator is almost entirely defined by negative space and the interiority or the “outline” of the protagonist is mediated through monologues of characters she converses with. Often these conversations are a *retelling*; what she chooses to dwell on, relay, or omit bares more than a confession could have contained. But this absence of affect, the stripped prose, the dislocation of “I” from any stable identity all point to a subjectivity, predating experience, and already shaped, that cannot be fully apprehended. *Second Place*, too, resists catharsis. It navigates the destabilizing force of art and male presence through a woman who speaks but cannot quite say. Her attempts at drawing meaning are thwarted by language itself, constantly circumscribed by doubt. She says, looking at a painting of a male artist, that it exhibits a kind of freedom that is “male to its last brushstroke” (11) and, “I have wanted to be free my whole life and I haven’t managed to liberate my smallest toe” (7). Cusk articulates a trauma of *having to be*. To be formed through the gaze of others, to be unable to assert, without apology, one’s own narrative center; to be *woman* and to be, therefore, *lacking*.

6. On the Embodiment of Trauma in Literature / On the Language of the Body

“I Am My Mother’s Iron Lung”

What has emerged by now is the idea that the body is the first site and the primary archive for trauma. This is the point where the works of Reich, van der Kolk, and Rothschild converge: trauma begins as sensation. It begins as muscle and nerve, as tightening and shutdown. What is repressed in consciousness does not disappear, it imprints itself somatically. Reich called it “character armor”, van der Kolk evidenced how the traumatized nervous system remains locked in survival even after the threat of harm has passed; Rothschild confirms that the body retains implicit memory long after the explicit fragments or fails. For women, this somatic repository is genealogical, meaning that trauma is passed through breath, gesture, and silence, and that women inherit a legacy of vigilance and contraction instead of a stable foundation of selfhood. “I am my mother’s iron lung”, Sontag wrote, refusing the illusion of psychic autonomy or bodily neutrality (Sontag 59). And so, trauma is also inherited. The body is a conduit for a maternal history of fear, grief, and containment. Feminist scholarship also insists on this inseparability of body and meaning. For example, Judith Butler discusses how gender is not something one *has* but something one does – a performative reiteration of norms that sediment themselves into the body over time (Butler 25). Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* shows how emotions “stick” to bodies, shaping how they are perceived and where they are permitted to move; histories adhere to the skin, directing orientation anterior to conscious choice (Ahmed 8). Elaine Scarry, writing in *The Body in Pain*, writes about the fragility of language in response to bodily suffering: pain unravels speech, reduces the world to the immediacy of sensation – a reminder of how deeply meaning relies on embodiment (Scarry 4). Such theories insist that the body is both produced through and productive of politics.

To inhabit a female body is therefore to inhabit precarity. Gestures of self-preservation – folding inward, policing desire, quieting tone – precede singular wounding. Trauma does not arrive *at* the woman, it is constitutive of her condition and when it enters literature, the narrative form becomes the body's second skin. Fragmentation mirrors dissociation. Silence mirrors repression. The unstable or disappearing "I" becomes the textual equivalent of a precarious as (*read as example*: Chapter 5: Cusk staging trauma as structural absence where the narrator's subjectivity is hollowed into white space and her selfhood is mediated through other's voices. Or Engel using vacancy as a corporeal condition where her estranged physicality can be read as symptomatic of a historical dislocation from desire). Across women's literature (and outside the scope of the trauma novel), trauma is depicted not as interruption of life but as its ground. *To the Lighthouse* depicts a body that labors invisibly under domestic care, self-effaced into symbol (Woolf 39); *Ariel* dramatizes pain, erupting through metaphor – the poem itself becoming a convulsion of the body (Plath 14); *Wide Sargasso Sea* narrates madness as a prefigured outcome of patriarchal and colonial violence where the body is foreign both to the self and the world (Rhys 112). These works do not seek catharsis, they represent continuity. They refuse the narrative of trauma as a before / after experience. It is, in fact, *antecedent* to experience, because there *is* no identifiable beginning. It begins with being.

And so, the literary voice becomes the bodily voice expressing what was first lived somatically. The disorientation of the nervous system becomes the disorientation of narrative time and the written word becomes an act of "reactivation"; the testimony of a body that has always already been speaking.

7. Conclusions

Where this began was not with an event; it began with a question: *why do women-authored literature so often feel fractured even though nothing visible has shattered?* Trauma theory suggests that experience is not always available to itself. Cathy Caruth writes that trauma is only encountered belatedly, that it is “only in and through its inherent forgetting” that it is first experienced at all (17). What cannot be known in the moment insists upon return. Christa Schönfelder similarly reminds us that literature offers a space in which “experiences that appear to defy understanding and verbalization” may be explored from other perspectives (29). Trauma resists comprehension and the narrative form become its approximation.

But the works examined here suggest something more unsettling and that is that for women, trauma is not solely what was forgotten, it is the articulation of what was never permitted recognition in the first place. Women’s writing is always arriving at and speaking from a condition already marked by gaze, containment and historical omission. The instability of the narrative “I”, the refusal of closure, the recursive temporality aren’t aesthetic gestures alone, they are formal admissions, they are manifestations of a self constituted under pressure, of a self already fractured in being. Reading literature written by women almost always means reading presumed rupture historically and politically established preceding consciousness or experience. And this is why the idea of “the self as lack” recurs not as pathology but as ontology. It is, in essence, formation through negation, because to be woman is to experience self entirely *not* as being-as-being-free (Burstow 2); because to be woman is to be shaped in relation to what one cannot fully inhabit: autonomy without mediation.

Trauma is origin. And if it demands expression, the written word stages its persistence. The written word is “narrative recall”. The written word is how it is first experienced at all. The preoccupation, then, was perhaps never only with tragedy as event, it was with tragedy as being.

8. Works Cited

- Abbey, Edward. *Black Sun*. Simon and Schuster, 1971.
- Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd ed., Edinburgh University Press, 2014.
- Allison, Dorothy. *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Dutton, 1992.
- Arcade Fire. "My Body Is a Cage." *Neon Bible*, Merge Records, 2007.
- Balaev, Michelle. "Trends in Literary Trauma Theory." *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2008, pp. 149–66.
- Burstow, Bonnie. *Radical Feminist Therapy: Working in the Context of Violence*. Sage Publications, 1992.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
- Caruth, Cathy. "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History." *Yale French Studies*, no. 79, 1991, pp. 181–92.
- Cusk, Rachel. *Outline*. Picador, 2014.
- Cusk, Rachel. *Second Place*. Faber & Faber, 2021.
- Duras, Marguerite. *The Lover*. Translated by Barbara Bray, Pantheon Books, 1998.
- Efron, Arthur. "The Sexual Body: An Interdisciplinary Perspective." *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, vol. 6, no. 1/2, 1985.

Engel, Marian. *Bear*. Daunt Books, 2021.

Freud, Sigmund, and Josef Breuer. *Studies on Hysteria*. 1895. Translated by James Strachey, Basic Books, 2000.

Hite, Molly. "Writing-and Reading-the Body: Female Sexuality and Recent Feminist Fiction." *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1988, pp. 120–42.

hooks, bell. "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness." *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. South End Press, 1990, pp. 145–54.

Hoelscher, Steven. "Visualizing Stories of Time and Place." *Journal of American History*, vol. 89, no. 3, 2002, pp. 1009–14.

Kozol, Wendy. "Marginalized Bodies and the Politics of Visibility." *American Quarterly*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2005, pp. 237–47.

Laing, Olivia. *Everybody: A Book About Freedom*. Picador, 2021.

Martin, Agnes. *Agnes Martin: Writings / Schriften*. Edited by Dieter Schwarz, Hatje Cantz, 1992.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.

Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18.

Nina Simone. "Feeling Good." *I Put a Spell on You*, Philips Records, 1965.

Reich, Wilhelm. *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. 1933. Translated by Vincent R. Carfagno, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970.

Rhys, Jean. *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Penguin Classics, 2011.

Rothschild, Babette. *The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment*. W. W. Norton, 2000.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford University Press, 1985.

Schönfelder, Christa. "Theorizing Trauma: Romantic and Postmodern Perspectives on Mental Wounds." *Wounds and Words: Childhood and Family Trauma in Romantic and Postmodern Fiction*. Transcript Verlag, 2014.

Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978.

Sontag, Susan. *Reborn: Journals and Notebooks, 1947–1963*. Edited by David Rieff, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008.

Tal, Kali. *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.

van der Kolk, Bessel. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin Press, 2015.

Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. Hogarth Press, 1927.

Women Against Violence Against Women. "Pornography Is the Theory, Rape Is the Practice." 1979.

