

# Trauma, Storytelling, and Collective Memory: A Subject Review

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## Abstract

This subject review examines the evolving relationship between trauma, storytelling, and collective memory within contemporary literary criticism, medical humanities, psychology, and cultural studies. The study explores how narrative functions as a means of witnessing, survival, resistance, and emotional recovery in contexts shaped by war, exile, migration, illness, violence, and displacement. Drawing upon the theoretical contributions of scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Dori Laub, Judith Herman, and Bessel van der Kolk, the review discusses the fragmented nature of traumatic memory and its representation through silence, repetition, symbolism, and disrupted narrative structures. The article further investigates storytelling as an ethical and communal practice that enables testimony, ritual mourning, identity reconstruction, and collective remembrance. Particular attention is given to recent interdisciplinary developments in trauma studies, including narrative medicine, ritual healing, refugee literature, postcolonial trauma, digital memory, and artificial intelligence. Through discussions of selected contemporary studies such as *The Corpse Washer*, *The Arbaeen Pilgrimage as Unintended Drama Therapy*, *The Physician as Storyteller*, *Prescription for Humanity*, and *Hamlet Rewired*, the review demonstrates how storytelling continues to preserve human dignity and cultural continuity in traumatic circumstances. The paper concludes that contemporary trauma studies increasingly emphasize resilience, ethical

listening, and communal healing, while storytelling remains central to understanding pain, memory, identity, and survival in both personal and collective contexts.

**Keywords:** Trauma Studies, Storytelling, Collective Memory, Narrative Fragmentation, Ethical Witnessing, Medical Humanities, Ritual Mourning, Refugee Literature, Postcolonial Trauma, Narrative Medicine, Digital Memory, Artificial Intelligence, Identity, Exile, Resilience

## **Introduction**

Today the fields of trauma studies and storytelling research are closely interrelated for contemporary literary criticism, medical humanities, cultural studies and psychology. In the last twenty years, the study of using narrative in a context of helping persons, or communities, to cope with experiences of violence, displacement, sickness, war, exile and emotional breakdown has become a focus. Story telling is now not only a literary art form designed as an ornament but rather a tool for resistance, recovery, remembrance and survival.

In particular, there have been some recent studies focusing on testimonial writing, memory studies, refugee literature, postcolonial trauma, illness literature and the literature of war. Contemporary thought around the study of traumatic memory and the process of narrating trauma contours have been shaped by scholars like Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, Dori Laub, Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk. In their work they propose that trauma also has a tendency to disrupt the regular sequence and/or the linear progression of language. Because of this, the survivors often use a fragmented narrative, repetition of symbolic elements, silence and reconstruction of memory to communicate painful experiences.

Meanwhile, the field of trauma studies has continued to expand with more recent work in literature and in interdisciplinary studies that responded to subjects like ritual healing, digital memory, artificial intelligence, migration studies and medical education. The

growing body of research demonstrates that story is a crucial tool in emotional survival because trauma poses a danger to self-identity and to communicating experience.

The subject review covers some significant advances in trauma and narrativity as well as the concept of passing which will be discussed as part of the secondary concept. Passing comes to the fore as an implicit theme in topics of identity transformation, exile, adaptation, silence, masking and social performance, though it is not central to this article. In the event of trauma, people may vacate between various character and emotional configurations. Survivors can move from memory to forgetting, the public to the private, homeland to displacement, healthy to ill, culture to alienation and living to death.

A couple of recent scholarly works, which contribute to the question debated, also are taken into account in the review. Studies covered in these include ritual mourning studies, narrative medicine, Iraqi war literature, artificial intelligence and trauma studies, and medical humanities education. The following terminology is used throughout the review, in different contexts: “Washing the Fallen: Art, Storytelling, Ritual, Remembrance, and Resilience in Sinan Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer*,” “The Arbaeen Pilgrimage as Unintended Drama Therapy,” “The Physician as Storyteller: Ethical Vision and Empathic Imagination in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* and Abraham Verghese’s *Cutting for Stone*,” and “Hamlet Rewired: Trauma, Memory, and Recovery in the Age of Artificial Intelligence,” and finally “Prescription for Humanity: Iraqi Medical Education Adds a Dose of Art and Storytelling.” In sum, these studies are conclusive examples of the ways in which storytelling is articulated in literature, medicine, ritual use and ethics, and collective memory.

### **Trauma and Narrative Fragmentation**

A focal issue of trauma theory is that trauma can often disrupt narrative. Cathy Caruth believes that traumatic events can happen so rapidly that they may not be fully comprehended or integrated into one's mind when they happen. The traumatic memory can therefore be

recalled later - repeatedly, through nightmares, through feelings or through the scattered memories. In such terms, "trauma" can't be directly and straightforwardly narrated.

Fragmentation remains a consistent subject of literary criticism of trauma narratives recently. In most of today's novels about war, migration, genocide, abuse and disease, it is seldom found and in most cases mainly for the purpose of being informative. Instead, they will use fault lines in their timelines, memory gaps, varying or conflicting viewpoints and symbolism. These story forms are a reflection of the disturbed psychological condition and inner landscape of survivors and mirror the muddy nature of traumatic memory.

It has also been a focus of growing studies for the past few years concerning trauma's influence on language itself. Survivors may have trouble being succinct and explicit about a traumatic event, as can be determined from research in narrative psychology. Metaphor, repetition, being silent and being slow to act can then be used as alternatives, instead. In this context, recounting a story is more than just a way of recalling; it's also a way of reconstructing.

The idea is evident in the Sinan Antoon's article "Washing the Fallen: Art, Storytelling, Ritual, Remembrance, and Resilience in The Corpse Washer." The paper explores human dignity issues in regards to stories and ritual in the circumstances of mass violence in Iraq. The main character in Antoon's novel is faced with death and destruction over and over, but can somehow stand their ground because of the power of narrative memory not to lose heart emotionally. The article demonstrates the synergy between ritual and the narration in an act of resistance to de-humanization. The study reveals the interplay between the two devices, that is, between ritual and storytelling, as acts of resistance to de-humanization.

In recent trauma studies, however, they've broadened from issues of personal trauma to collective trauma and survival. The study of war-stricken communities, communities of

people forced to relocate, communities experiencing sectarian violence, communities experiencing environmental disaster, and communities experiencing political oppression is now becoming a common trend in scholarship. This brings storytelling into a relationship to shared memory or shared historical witness in such contexts.

### **Storytelling as Witnessing**

The notion of ethical witnessing is another important part of the contemporary understanding of trauma. Storytelling has come to be used more and more as a means of creating a connection between the storyteller and the listener. Testimony is also to be preceded by the act of narration...but also an active audience that can hear and recognize suffering.

Holocaust testimony remains one of the most influential areas with regard to writings that focus on Dori Laub. He says that those who have endured trauma may require sensitive listeners to help them make sense of what has happened to them, even if they missed key moments or had multiple unexpected alterations in their perception. This concept has been expanded to refugee stories, stories from Indigenous communities, prison writing, and literature dealing with the postwar landscape in more recent studies.

Today, it would also be wrong to showcase the trauma story as a spectacle or viewing it as a passive consumerist product. Suffering, not exploitation is the key element and something of a balancing act when it comes to the ethical aspects of the story. This is a theme that has become more relevant in a digital media landscape where images were exchanged on a fast and continuous basis, especially those containing violence and images of human suffering.

The narrative medicine is an important contribution to this debate. In recent medical humanities research it is proposed that doctors must have a talent for narrative, to peel back

the layers of a patient's life to better comprehend him or her. The term 'clinical terminology' does not adequately convey feelings of pain, fear, suffering, memory or experience.

In “The Physician as Storyteller: Ethical Vision and Empathic Imagination in Ian McEwan's *Saturday* and Abraham Verghese's *Cutting for Stone*”, this argument is discussed. The article looks at how storytelling enables the development of empathy and interpretive awareness to improve ethical practice in medicine. The doctor – not just a technical expert – is also a listener and an interpreter of human experience, in this view.

Other recent publications in humanities medicine confirm the value of storytelling as a way of enhancing the care of patients, mitigating emotional distancing and fostering reflective practice in the company of patients. The literature is gradually becoming a part of medicine education due to the importance of interpreting narratives as a means of developing emotional sensitivity and moral discernment.

### **Ritual, Mourning, and Collective Trauma**

The trauma studies have also shifted away from literary texts into ritual studies, performance theory and communal mourning practices to a greater extent in recent years. A storyteller attribute of storytelling has now come into recognition: storytelling can occur through movement, symbolic repetition, lamentation, pilgrimage and ritual reenactment.

In a community where long conflict has existed this is significant. Rituals can be used to remember history where political statements of memory and loss are inadequate to suffering. The communal mourning in that context is a continuity of the story.

The Arbaeen Pilgrimage as Unintended Drama Therapy is among the growing range of studies on pilgrimage as a means of group expression. The ritual participation is explained based on the concepts of Drama Therapy and Psychotherapy healing. Grief is communally shared and expressed symbolically, through telling stories and collective memories.

Recent research into ritual healing and the use of ritual to heal trauma also proposes that shared involvement in ritual helps mitigate emotional isolation. Post traumatic people tend to feel out of the mainstream of daily life. Ritual narration; reconnecting through emotions and symbols.

In recent years, scholars have taken growing interest in these types of collective remembrance of the postwar societies. The subject of the funerary ritual, for example, as well as a focus on martyrdom and its narratives, religion and its symbolism, and memory and its oral histories, are explored in the context of Iraqi literature and cultural studies. Those practices help to maintain identity in the context of violence, loss and displacement.

Transitions in social roles in which the trauma survivor moves are mentioned in these discussions indirectly in relation to the idea of passing. People can energetically go through movements and show stability out loud, while taking their grief in private. Ritual can provide a temporary means through which invisible, unseen, and unknown pain becomes visible, seen, and known.

### **Trauma, Exile, and Identity**

The link between trauma and displacement is an important area of more recent research. Issues of a fractured identity, emotional exile, and an unstable sense of belonging are treated in refugee literature, diasporic writing and writings about postcolonial exile. Migration's impact on the individual and their sense of place, memory and self is increasingly discussed.

There are many types of passing resulting from the displacement. Refugees and migrants might change their language, their behavior, their appearance or their public identities in an attempt to adapt to the surroundings that they are accustomed to. In times of trauma, this process is more complicated as past experiences continue to be lived in the present even in the face of “new” social and cultural situations.

Recent (indeed current) literary criticism concentrating on writers like Mohsin Hamid, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Abdulrazak Gurnah, brings up the very unstable relationship of memory and identity. People who have been exiled dwell in the interstices of cultures, histories, languages and emotions.

A related front of the study of inherited memory is explored by contemporary post-colonial trauma studies. An additional aspect of inherited memory is also explored in contemporary post-colonial trauma-study. However, post-memory, a concept coined by Marianne Hirsch, is extremely influential and she offers an explanation for how later generations receive and are responsible for the emotional histories of which they were not direct participants. Stories, silences, photos, rituals, words about families, family memories – these carry trauma.

This is a burden passed on to contemporary Iraqi and Middle Eastern literature. Youth try to create a new or continuation of their stories through storytelling. Literature is an archive of experiences, in that case, experiences that are ignored, marginalized or excluded from official histories.

The notion of passing, instead, is introduced in a more emotional manner of 'passing' identity rather than racial passing as such. Being a survivor is a flux between visibility and invisibility characterised by negotiating to manage precarious self-understandings influenced by war, migration, memory and loss.

### **Trauma in Medical and Health Humanities**

Medical and health humanities is one of the new and evolving fields in scholarships. There is a growing discussion in the field of medicine regarding the need to understand human suffering through the comprehension of literature, philosophy, ethics, visual culture and narrative studies.

In the article “Medical and Health Humanities as a New Rapidly Growing Transdisciplinary Academic Field”, it analyzes the interdisciplinary perspective as a new academic way of thinking about illness, care and human vulnerability. Trauma is represented as a central element in this discipline since it is impossible to detach psychological suffering from social, cultural and narrative experiences.

To date, some recent studies on the role of narrative medicine have shown that the practice of storytelling can help patients make sense of illness experiences and find their way back to their emotional agency. Just as trauma, illness can impact identities. The patient can disaffirm his or her previous knowledge of self and his or her body's functions and social roles.

Literature and story telling activities are increasingly a part of the curriculum in medical education to develop students' empathy. Such a shift in education becomes evident in prescription for humanity: Iraqi medical education adds a dose of art and storytelling. The article posits that storytelling as well as the act of engaging in art can make the medical profession human, especially in environments when war, social unrest and collective trauma are present.

In recent years, the study of health humanities has also focused on burnout and as well emotional exhaustion of the human healthcare staff. Storytelling provides a mirror which will be able to reflect and not suppress suffering, for doctors and students. Literature serves as an educational tool and also as a therapeutic tool in this respect.

In its dianesic aspect, the notion of passing happens indirectly here via professional performance. Healthcare uses clinical and/or professional demeanor to cover emotional expressions. Reflective writing in the form of a narrative is effective in uncovering the unseen emotional truths in health care systems.

## **Technology, Artificial Intelligence, and Memory**

One new trajectory in trauma research is on technology, digital memory. The use of AI, the digitization of archives, and virtual communication is increasingly being studied to see how it affects how people cope with, remember and communicate their emotion when they're grieving.

The question of whether a tech system can be used to help heal an emotion is an intensely debated topic today. Some people believe that AI technologies can aid in the preservation of testimony, save collective memory and enhance access to psychological assistance. Others warn that it could become an algorithmic regressive process that dangerously lowers the ethical level of testimony from the point of view of technology and increases the "compile" of suffering in patterns. Others try to warn of technologization as a danger to degrading human suffering to patterns and removing the moral density from the accounts themselves.

The above is discussed in "Hamlet Rewired: Trauma, Memory, and Recovery in the Age of Artificial Intelligence." The article revisits Shakespeare's Hamlet in the context of the debates on memory, emotional processing and digital reconstruction in the modern world. Hamlet's consuming grief and the disintegration of his mind is seen as being like present day perceptions about what is considered an unresolved trauma.

Recent research in the field of digital grief also explores the Online Memorials, Virtual Mourning Places and AI-reconstructed voices. Researchers discuss and comment on the potential for technology to either enhance or hinder true evidence of human relationship.

Although these technological advances have been made, a lot of recent work in trauma has focused on the importance of doing things 'with people'. Storytelling is a type of relational engagement. Empathy, interpretation and ethical listening is what is required of survivors more than mechanical analysis.

## **Contemporary Directions in Trauma Studies**

Scholarship in trauma today has grown, and it is becoming more and more interdisciplinary. Literary studies meet with the sciences of psychology, neuroscience, anthropology, performance studies, digital humanities and medical ethics. This expansion comes as a recognition that there is no part of the human experience that trauma does not impact upon.

In recent years also more attention has been devoted to studying the world and its issues. Trauma theory tended to view the subject in isolation in previous studies, largely in the context of European history and the Holocaust issues. Modern scholars however move beyond a focus on traumatic experience in the Middle East, Africa, and the Americas in favor of examining traumatic experience in other regions where it occurs such as South Asia and Indigenous communities.

Climate change, outbreak of pandemic diseases, forced displacement and political turmoil have also added to the trauma research field. These conversations continue to be guided by storytelling, as uncertainty, loss and disruption are all things that can be navigated through using story.

Similarly, researchers have started to shift their attention more towards resilience. Whereas trauma criticism during earlier times tended toward a focus on trauma, a focus on survival, on adaptation, on communal care, on ritual continuity and creative ways of rebuilding have been studied in more recent works.

This change is particularly noticeable in the fields of Iraqi literature and cultural memory. Story abilities remain alive despite violence and instabilities as a means of maintaining identity, grief, humor, ritual, and hope. And so narrative does not just document the afflictions, but it is a testimony to the endurance of the people from whom it is told.

## Conclusion

New research into the experience of trauma and storytelling demonstrates the power of narrative as one of the greatest human responses to trauma. Trauma impacts memory, language, identity and social connection. Storytelling attempts to heal these broken systems by telling stories, doing rituals, reflecting on the past, and recalling together.

Increasingly interdisciplinary and global strategies are used in contemporary trauma studies. This is literary criticism merging with medical humanities, psychological studies, ritual studies, migration studies and digital memory studies, as well as ethics. This development has been accompanied by an corresponding insight on how trauma impacts people and communities.

All the studies reviewed in this review emphasize again the continued value of story for safeguarding the dignity of the human person. In the literature of the Iraq War war literature, 'washing the Fallen' is a focus on remembrance, and ritual and narrative. "The Arbaeen Pilgrimage as Unintended Drama Therapy" focuses on the collective grieving, and emotional involvement. In "The Physician as Storyteller", the author finds the ethical implications of stories, in the context of Doctors and their work. "Prescription for Humanity" pairs storytelling and Medical education and Empathy. Hamlet Rewired is a look at trauma and memory in our current technologic times.

The theme of passing, though not a primary one, is a salient one in these conversations. Trauma survivors are "survivors" whose identities are in flux as are their emotions and social performances. They can mask suffering, make themselves at home in a place of displacement, and cope by negotiating precarious types of membership. These hidden transitions will become visible through storytelling.

In fact, recent trauma studies have continued to show the stories are not just a reflection of suffering. They have the ability to retain memory, to be indelible, to establish

moral bond, and to support cultural survivability. The importance of storytelling in literature, medicine, ritual, and collective memory is evident in all these domains, providing a means for humans to continue to understand pain in a narrative fashion.

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