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SCARS BENEATH THE SURFACE: NARRATIVE REPRESENTATIONS OF EMBODIED TRAUMA IN ROSSON'S SHORT FICTION

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Abstract

This research explores the representation of trauma in Rosson's *This world or the Next* and *Homecoming* through the lens of Van der Kolk's trauma theory. It examines that trauma is not confined to mental damages but rather gets ingrained in the body, manifesting up through assortment of symptoms like numbness, disconnection, emotional regulation. It also emphasized that trauma effects not only individuals but communities as well by resulting in communal and generational sufferings. In Rosson's, narratives, characters demonstrate trauma through silence, self-harm, fear and hallucinations. In *This World or the Next,* characters emerge physically and spiritually depleted, executing fabricated miracles while confronting profound internal conflicts. Similarly, *Homecoming* portrays a soldier returning from war who experiences alienation and estrangement from his hometown, reflecting the lingering effects of war trauma. The study demonstrates how Rosson's fiction reflects van der Kolk's assertion that trauma is embodied and collectively transmitted. Thus, the research highlights the role of literary fiction in representing traumatic experiences that often resist direct expression.

Keywords: *Dissociation, Emotional Numbness, Fragmentation, Hallucinations, Trauma.*

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1. Introduction

In contemporary literature, authors employ trauma narratives to reflect the profound human psychological scars, with positioning trauma as a dominant and enduring thematic concern. Literary depictions of trauma provide a significant framework for examining the complex correlations among psychological, bodily, and narrative dimensions. This study investigates trauma in Rosson's (2021) short stories *This world or the Next* and *Homecoming* from the collection of *Folk songs for trauma surgeons*. Both stories delve into the narrative that trauma is not just a psychological wound but also a lived, embodied experience that becomes engraved in the human body, relationships and surroundings. It also navigates how emotionally distressed people survive in an environment followed by poverty, war, moral depravity emphasizing on both individual and collective trauma.

The foundation for this study is Bassel Van Der Kolk's (2014) trauma theory. Van der kolk redefines trauma as an embodied experience, arguing that trauma is not merely stored in the mind but in reality it is imprinted in the body, where it affects its nervous system, body perceptions, and emotional ability. He emphasizes that trauma manifests through dissociation, fragmentation, and numbing and it is beyond the individual echelon, demonstrating it as a collective trauma. Communities affected by war, poverty, violence inherit and transmit unresolved trauma across generations. This collective trauma not just disturbs the memory or identity but also effects trust, emotional durability, and communal system. In Rosson's (2021) stories, trauma is not showed through direct violence or definite breakdown, but through subtle psychological decline, emotional disability and the dissociation between the mind and body. Likewise, *In this world or the Next* trauma emerges through bodily self-harm of a young woman, the fading visions of a preacher, and the paralysis of a man due to fear which echo's Van der kolk's theory that trauma disrupts the body. Moreover, the group travels through towns followed by economic hardships, emotional disturbance, abandonment, symbolizing a massive and shared trauma within broken communities. In *Homecoming*, on the other hand, reflects trauma through a war lens, the protagonist soldier returning to decayed hometown that in reality reflects his inner emptiness. He is emotionally dislocated and fragmented followed by haunted memories. The trauma of war is not just limited to the battlefield but it destroys the landscape, disrupts identity and alienates him from his self and society. Soldier's physical reactions, numbness and hallucinations align directly with Van der kolk's trauma theory that trauma continues to live in the body and the body keeps the score even after hurtful things have ended. Comparably, in Gliman's (1892) *The Yellow Wallpaper* does not directly shows violence yet the experiences of the protagonist, her oppression and subsequent hallucinations reflect the manifestations of trauma, illustrating how the body retains and reenacts past wounds and scars. These narratives suggest that trauma does not solely impact the individual but

also reverberates through the surrounding environment, influencing broader social and cultural contexts.

2. Literature Review

Caruth (1995) defined trauma as an experience that remains in the victim's memory but is inexpressible. It irreversibly shatters identity and harms the victim's mental health. The victim's stunned mind refuses to comprehend the circumstances; as a result, he is unable to express his feelings or thoughts verbally. However, the victim's fright never goes away and the trauma affects both identity and language. While Caruth emphasizes on memory fragmentation, Herman (1992) focuses on the psychological aftermath, in *Trauma and Recovery*, psychological trauma manifests as a sense of hopelessness. Overwhelming force leaves the person defenseless during the ordeal. Traumatic occurrences are exceptional because they surpass the typical human responses to life, not because they do not happen often but on the contrary, the ordinary disasters, typically involve intimate personal encounters with violence and death, or threats to life or bodily integrity. They provoke the reactions of disaster and people encounter the utmost levels of horror and helplessness.

LaCapra(2001) in *Writing history, writing trauma* examines that historical trauma provides a different angle as there are two basic ways that people remember traumatic events "acting out" and "working through." Acting out involves repeatedly reliving the trauma without comprehending or healing it; the person feels trapped in the past. Working through involves actively processing the trauma in order to comprehend it and move on. He focuses on how people and societies process trauma, especially in historical contexts like the Holocaust. In addition, Gass's (1968) *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country,* explores themes of childhood trauma, alienation, and character breakdown. Gass's writing is a reaction to his challenging upbringing, which he defined as unpleasant, as he had an abusive father and a passive, alcoholic mother. As he argues that “I grew up with the heavy smell of failure. It coated the furniture, my father’s clothes, my mother’s hair.”(Gass's , 1968, p.)

Whereas In *Beloved* (1987), Morrison offers a maternal lens and explores how trauma disrupts memory, identity, and language which closely aligns with Caruth’s (1995) trauma theory. Morriosn uses the story of a runaway slave, which is centered on the death of her defenseless baby, to address the most evil aspects of life. The fractured impact of slavery on the human psyche is demonstrated by Beloved's twisted mother-daughter interactions. It addresses these phenomena in a radical way by giving the psychological impacts of slavery a physical form and bringing a figure back to life to take on the secondary identities of the living. Beloved, a physical representation of Sethe and Denver's divided identities, arrives at a fictitious juncture in the protagonists' lives. Building upon

this idea in Gliman's (1892), *The Yellow Wallpaper,* describes a young middle-class woman's experience in a haunted house. A lady whose trauma is portrayed through complex symptoms brought on by reductive paradigms imposed by society. A hallucination of an enslaved lady on the yellow wallpaper of the room she is confined to is a recurrence of her horrific memories as a woman.

Additionally *Maus,*(1986) examines the psychological and emotional effects of horrific experiences with a special emphasis on Holocaust. Spiegelman skillfully presents a character who struggles with mental illness, a condition heavily impacted by the trauma he acquired from his parents' Holocaust experiences. Art's sense of self, relationships, and general mental health are all impacted by this transmissible trauma, which also shows itself in his language. The novel's language captures the psychological state of trauma survivors and their fractured mind. Spiegelman's experiences have a significant impact on the vocabulary and narrative structure of his graphic novel, *Maus*, and might suggest symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is characterized by "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events… often uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena." (Caruth, 1996, p. 57). Trauma, according to Caruth (1996), is an injury that manifests itself by presenting unknowable facts. She claims that the goal of both literature and trauma is the same: they are both interested in the mind. Writing most concisely on this subject, Geoffrey Hartman asks whether trauma "can only be reclaimed by literary knowledge?" (Caruth and Hartman 1996, p.641) and argues that literature can help us "read the wound" of trauma (1995, p.537). These contributions illustrate the lasting effects of trauma and underscore the profound psychological impact of traumatic events.

3. Theoretical Framework

Trauma is an injury to the body and mind which disturbs our emotional and mental stability and could happen at any age. It mostly occurs when an individual perceives intense events such as violence, abuse, and natural disasters. Trauma can be caused by range of different events and it doesn't always have to be physical, it can also be emotional or mental. This is further established by Bessel Van der kolk (2014) in *The Body keeps the score* (2014) that how trauma reshapes the body, mind and behavior. He explains that trauma does not only affect our minds but it also affects our body drastically and each body part gets associated with it. He emphasizes on the fact that trauma is not just psychological experience but it is deeply incorporated into our body. According to his trauma theory, individuals disconnect with their emotions or perceptions to survive shattering events. "traumatized people chronically feel unsafe inside their bodies, they are… constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs" (Van der kolk, 2014, p.112).

A key concept of Bessel's theory is trauma is as an embodied experience which highlights the fact that trauma is not stored in the body but it becomes the part of the body, he delves into the fact that trauma disrupts the connection between the self and the body. Van der kolk addresses that trauma affects bodily sensations and perceptions when a person faces trauma, the nervous system is activated and the body enters a state of hyper arousal, creating long term physical effects (like chronic pain, tension, difficulty in relaxing).They simply no longer feel alive. The body activates the autonomic nervous system; the amygdala (alarm system) becomes hyperactive. These physical symptoms are mostly indications of unsettled trauma and individuals may be unaware of the fact that these body reactions to stress are related to their previous experiences. Trauma is not just a mental event but something more than that which disturbs our physiological system, impacting the nervous system and triggers responses. Its victims may not be able to explain their experiences into words but their bodies often react as if the traumatic episode is happening again. He emphasized that the conscious mind may attempt to forget but the body remembers in different ways, trauma leaves a physiological imprint, "trauma victims cannot recover until they become familiar with and befriend the sensations in their bodies."(Van der kolk, 2014, p.117).

Another key aspect of Van der kolk's theory is that trauma impact on Brain and Memory when a person is suffering from trauma; their mind breaks into several parts thinking that it would help them in bearing the pain. Trauma disrupts the brain's ability to encode memories properly. As a result memories become fragmented, and survivors often experience them in flashes of images, sounds and dreams rather than systematic narrative. Each brain part holds different memories, abuse, rage, pleasure and tends to fight with each other. In trauma the self-system breaks down, this is why the survivor might have trouble in recalling the whole event, they would get flashbacks and it may feels like the event is happening again. "They often become expert at ignoring their gut feelings." (Van der kolk, 2014, p.117). The fragmented trauma is closely linked to dissociation, a protective mechanism where individuals disconnect them mentally from traumatic experiences in order to protect themselves from pain and fear. Dissociation is a psychological response, like a mental escape or detaching themselves from pain. It highlights that it could range from slight detachment (e.g, daydreaming) to a severe one (e.g, amnesia). Individuals may feel numb or disconnected from their body contributing to a sense of alienation. Together these two mechanisms can make it extremely difficult for a person to heal.

Van der kolk (2014) also acknowledges the fact that societal or historical contexts (like war, political disruption, or violence) could result in collective trauma. He emphasizes that trauma experiencing individuals may find difficulty with trust, intimacy, and emotional intelligence. Trauma often emerges from socially imposed harm such as

child abuse, domestic violence, war, racism, and even political oppression making it a social and cultural issue not just a personal scar. Survivors of extensive trauma (e.g war or colonication) may even carry shame and guilt leading to communal conflicts and long term malfunction. This type of trauma could even affect generations and even whole community, creating lifelong wounds among parents and their children. An individual experiencing this kind of trauma simply detaches or distant themselves from others. This is also known as intergenerational transmission of trauma. Van der kolk notes that if trauma is not treated or healed, it may be handed down to the future generations. This is clearly visible in children of war survivors, genocide survivors, and colonized people who carry the emotional burden of their forefather's sufferings. He asserts that trauma especially omnipresent (e.g communities) becomes a socio public health calamity. It demands communal healing without this, it will continue to echo through the minds, bodies and future generation relationships.

4. Analysis

The short stories *This world or the next* and *Homecoming* from the book *Folk songs for trauma surgeons* (2021) by Keith Rosson are powerful narratives on how trauma impacts an individual profoundly. These stories illustrate trauma not through just a single event, but through a series of emotional, spiritual and bodily fragments. These two short fictions align significantly with Van der kolk trauma theories.

4.1. This word or the next

The story revolves around a struggling small group of people who travels around poverty-stricken towns in the American South, putting on spiritual renewal or religious awakening shows. The group consists of four people: Branson, the noisy and confident preacher who says he sees visions from the god. Emma is a young woman who injures herself on stage to give the impression that God has healed her. Sissy is an elderly woman who pretends to be disabled and abruptly begins to walk in front of the town's gullible residents. Clyde is a quiet elderly man who manages the stage and attends to the requirements of the group. They combine religion with tricks in their performances. They pretend to perform miracles so that the crowd would give them money in hope to be saved or healed. They simply play with people's minds. However, things start to fall apart for them. Branson owes a group of dangerous people and his alleged visions are not working anymore and he is becoming unsure and scared. Emma is tired of lying to people and start thinking to escape. Clyde tells her that the people Branson owes are way too dangerous and they might be in great trouble. Everything comes to an end as Branson suddenly leave without telling anyone. Emma takes this as her only chance to leave. At the end, Clyde is left alone by their old van watching the headlights coming towards him, which might be the bad people to whom Branson owes or something else but whatever it is that's not good.

It's a disguised trauma story, using divine deities to reveal human wounds.

4.2. Trauma as an Embodied Experience

According to Van der kolk (2014), trauma becomes part of the body and becomes evident through fear, tension, uneasiness or disconnection. In the story, the character of Emma is the explicit demonstration of these phenomena. She takes part in the performance by harming herself to imitate miraculous healing. Even in her fervor "she tries to find a spot on her lacerated palms that she hasn't cut recently" (Rosson, 2021, p. 79). This repetitive harm symbolizes that the body has been traumatized, mirroring Van der kolk's idea that trauma individuals become expert in ignoring their pain and feelings. They simply detach themselves from physical sensations. Emma's body is her stage and battlefield too, she cannot feel safe in it. Moreover, the daily task of faking miracles, hiding her injuries and endorsing pain highlights long-term chronic and physical effects of trauma and it is deeply incorporated into her body. Her smile demonstrates her detachment from the body despite bleeding. However, the wounds symbolize the fact that the body remembers even if the conscious mind tries to ignore it. This aligns with his trauma insight, that trauma locks an individual into a state or sense of numbness. As "she smiles in return. The blood has run in strings down her arms." (Rosson, 2021, p. 73).

4.3. Dissociation and Fragmentation

Van der kolk emphasizes that fragmentation and dissociation come hand in hand as trauma fragments memories and perception, which often leads to dissociation (a psychical escape from pain). Branson, the preacher in the group demonstrates this as his "visions" terminate and his confidence fall into pieces, as "no visions then, Boss" (Rosson, 2021, p. 75) Bransons's visions stopped and this suggests a disturbance in his spiritual identity, a state of psychological amnesia where he cannot align with the belief system he once embodied. He is stuck between one's façade and reality reflecting Van der kolk's idea that trauma causes the individual self-system to fracture, and the individuals grapple to restore their past and present. Likewise, he states that "I had a lot of dreams Emma. But I couldn't make out what they were." (Rosson, 2021, p.75). Dissociation, as defined by Van der kolk (2014) is a defensive mechanism where the mind disconnects from the present moment to protect itself from the pain coming. Similarly, Clyde sat by the van, "watching the road. The headlights were coming. He didn't move." (Rosson, 2021, p. 84). In this final scene, Clyde shows clear signs of dissociation, he didn't react to the danger approaching (headlights) may the dangerous people to whom Branson owes money. He is physically present there but not psychologically or mentally. Trauma includes freeze where the body becomes immobile as a survival tool. This motionlessness is not calmness but is the paralysis of the individual who is emotionally overwhelmed and subjectively exhausted. In short, the nervous system is so flooded with stress that it stops recognizing threats. His numbness is not bravery, but it is dissociative shutdown. His character also

shows the signs of fragmented identity throughout the story. He rarely expresses his emotions or a feeling, when everyone leaves Clyde and is left behind without any purpose, direction and identity.

4.4. Collective Trauma

Branson, Emma, Sissy, and Clyde work together as a group but they don't show any kind of emotional affection or intimacy. Their interactions are always seen as avoidance, silence, or indirect aggression. According to Van der kolk, (2014) trauma disrupts one's ability to form healthy relationships or connection. Emma didn't cry when Branson left, she just turned her back on others and "that same rotted-out schoolhouse with the sagging bleachers. That same rusted swing set, or one just like it. That same crowd." (Rosson, 2021, p. 77). The group travels through poor southern towns that are emotionally and economically abandoned. These communities are not just poor towns but a storehouse of collective trauma. This emphasizes how each town undergoes the same scars and wounds (hopelessness, breakdown, betrayal). The people of the town for which they perform are looking for healing, hope, salvation and escape because they have been traumatized by poverty, neglect and abandonment. Throughout the story, the religion is exploited and is turned into performance, and faith becomes a product to be sold to the traumatized people. The group is itself a symbol of traumatized society, playing the role of healing others while being deeply wounded. This echo's Van der kolk's (2014) view that unresolved trauma in a community becomes a public crisis, going from one generation to another.

4.5. Homecoming

The narrative of Homecoming begins with a soldier returning to his hometown after several weeks without a clear sense of direction or purpose. When he gets to the town at night, he discovers that it is oddly quieter, deserted, and motionless than it was earlier. Wearing his uniform, he strolls around the streets with the expectation that people will know and appreciate him. But some of the folks he encountered failed to provide him a genuine greeting. The vibrant colors of the town are washed away, the buildings are decaying, the town seems sad and it felt like a horrifying dream to him. Afterwards, he enters a tavern or pub where a sheriff and bartender were sitting in complete silence. Both appreciated him being served but there were no joy and warmth in their tone. The soldier eventually finds a house with unlocked doors and decides to stay in. He began to see ghostly visions of his companion soldier Ramon, who lost his life in the war. Moreover, he also began to see people from the town like; young boy, his parents who appeared as lifeless haunted versions. The soldier tries to make sense of everything about what is happing to him and his surroundings but fails and can't compile the meaning. He couldn't sleep in the house, so he began to sleep outside on the streets. However, the town remains abandoned and silent with a keen absence of liveliness. He visits the pub again; drinks

with the bartender and sheriff but no one speaks much about what's going on. At last, the soldier becomes aware of the fact that the war had not ended for him, it has followed him to his hometown, into his dreams, it has simply soaked every aspect of him. He feels as though he is trapped in a purgatory or a ghostly village. In the end, he stays in the quiet village, entangled in a never-ending circle of traumas and memories. The narrative suggests that the soldier has passed on and entered the afterlife.

4.6. Embodied Experience

Van der kolk (2014) states that trauma is not just stored in the mind, but it deposits itself in the body as well. Traumatic individuals repeatedly carry physical and emotional numbness, as their body remembers what their mind tries to forget and that is why, the soldier "seemed mostly to have been hollowed out by things he had seen and done while on the front." (Rosson, 2021, p. 167). The term "hollowed" symbolizes how trauma has affected the soldier's self; he has been shattered physically, emotionally and mentally. In this story, the soldier is numbed, not just emotionally but his identity is also numbed which aligns perfectly Van der kolk's trauma theory that trauma malfunctions the bond or connection between the self and the body. As "the beer tasted sharp on the soldier's tongue, like gunmetal" (Rosson, 2021, p.168). The taste of the beer tasting like gunmetal symbolizes how his body reacts to memory even without conscious awareness showcasing how trauma affects everyday experience when it's deeply embodied.

4.7. Fragmented Memory and Dissociation:

Van der kolk (2014) emphasizes that trauma disrupts one's ability to decode memory which leads to fragmentation, flashbacks and a state of functionality and it seemed to the soldier that each storefront, "each threadbare lawn, was instead a place that tugged at some dim vestige of his memory… like something spied through a dream." (Rosson, 2021, p.167). This fragmented sense in the story reflects greatly trauma influenced by dissociation. The soldier is psychologically detached, struggling to recognize his own hometown which feels unfamiliar to him. Rosson portrays a sense of shattered self-system where the soldier struggles to reconnect with the surroundings, as if his traumatized mind is unable to adjust himself in the reality. "He had learned that it was better to keep quiet…" (Rosson, 2021, p.168). Furthermore, trauma individuals often lose to ability to portray their pain verbally and they often avoid talking about their trauma or pain thinking that they would relive it and it would give them more pain. The soldier's silence demonstrates that it was a mechanism for saving himself from pain.

4.8. Collective Trauma

In this story, Rosson portrays the soldier's town as empty, deteriorated; haunted by silence symbolizing that the whole community is suffering. According to Van der kolk, collective trauma occurs when the whole community suffers from war like scenarios like "no parade, no banners or ballons… the town even more desolate than it had been before

he'd left." (Rosson, 2021, p. 167). The soldier expected a warm welcome but unfortunately he returned to a town showcasing its own collapse. This reflects collective trauma possibly due to war or poverty caused by the war. The infertile landscape and lack of appreciation for the soldier's service demonstrates a community disconnected from healing. The bar was empty save for the two of them and a man in a far booth, who sat with his face cradled in his hands, "he seemed to be weeping." (Rosson, 2021, p.168). This scene demonstrates shared unspoken pain. The man sobbing, the soldier, and the bartender are all physically nearby, yet they are mentally and emotionally apart. This aligns with Van der kolk collective trauma theory that people see others pain but receive no support. Trauma basically ruptures the sense of belonging and sabotage trust in individuals or in community.

5. Conclusion

Keith Rosson's stories *this world or the next* and *Homecoming* offers deeply refined exploration of trauma, not as individual psychological scars but as embodied, fragmented and collective conditions. Through the lens of Bassel van der kolk's (2014) trauma theory, this research has analyzed how trauma disturbs memory, identity, and bodily sensations leaving a lasting impact on not just the mind but also on the body of both individuals and communities. Rosson's (2021) fictional characters reflect trauma not through dramatic explosions, but through numbness, fragmentation and physical disconnection symptoms which align with Van der kolk's theory in *the body keeps the score* (2014). Moreover, this study illustrates that trauma is not limited to a single catastrophic event but ongoing internalized battles. Eventually, this study restates the power of literature to read the wounds of trauma and to write narrative on things which are mostly inexpressible.

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