



Memory, Trauma and Fragmented Narrative: A Poetics of Broken Time in *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between memory, trauma, and fragmented narrative structure in *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, arguing that the novel constructs a distinctive narrative form that mirrors the psychological experience of trauma. Rather than presenting trauma as a coherent recollection of past events, the narrative disrupts chronological continuity and develops a structure based on repetition, narrative gaps, and temporal dislocation. Drawing on trauma theory and memory studies, this paper argues that Roy's narrative technique produces what may be described as a poetics of broken time in which past and present coexist simultaneously. Through nonlinear structure, narrative silence, and linguistic experimentation, the novel represents trauma as an ongoing psychological condition rather than a completed historical event. The study demonstrates that fragmentation functions not merely as a stylistic device but as a representational strategy that reveals the persistence of traumatic memory.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, Fragmentation, Temporality, Narrative Form

Introduction

The representation of trauma has become an important area of inquiry in contemporary literary studies, particularly in relation to narrative form and memory. Traumatic experiences often resist coherent representation because they disrupt the ordinary processes of perception and recollection. As Cathy Caruth argues, trauma is not fully experienced in the moment of its occurrence but returns later in fragmented and repetitive forms. This delayed and disrupted nature of traumatic memory challenges conventional narrative structures that depend on chronological continuity and logical progression.

Within this critical context, *The God of Small Things* presents a powerful exploration of trauma through experimental narrative techniques. This paper aims to examine how *The God of Small Things* employs fragmented narrative structures to represent memory and trauma as forms of broken, non-linear time. The novel narrates the story of a family shaped by social violence, caste hierarchy, and personal tragedy, yet it refuses linear narration. Instead, the narrative unfolds through shifting temporal perspectives in which past and present intersect continuously.

This paper argues that the fragmented narrative structure of the novel reflects the psychological reality of trauma. Roy's narrative technique does not merely describe traumatic experience but formally reproduces the processes through which trauma is remembered. Memory appears as discontinuous fragments rather than unified narration, creating a temporal structure in which the past remains inseparable from the present.

METHADODOLOGY

Drawing upon Cathy Caruth's trauma theory and Maurice Halbwachs's memory studies, the paper proposes that Roy constructs a narrative model that may be described as a *poetics of broken time*. In this model, fragmentation becomes a means of representing psychological truth rather than narrative disorder.

Caruth's trauma theory suggests that traumatic experiences are not fully understood at the moment they occur; instead, they return later in fragmented, repetitive, and indirect forms. Trauma resists linear narration because it is experienced as a rupture in time, where memory appears in flashes, gaps, and disjointed sequences. This explains why narratives shaped by trauma often abandon chronological order, reflecting the mind's struggle to process overwhelming events.

Similarly, Halbwachs' concept of collective memory emphasises that memory is not purely individual but socially shaped. Personal memories are reconstructed through cultural frameworks, which means that recollection is often partial, selective, and fragmented. In this sense, memory itself does not follow a smooth, linear progression but is constantly reshaped by present contexts, contributing to a layered and broken sense of time.

In addition, insights from narratology, the study of narrative structures and storytelling techniques, help explain how such fragmentation operates formally within the text. Narratological concepts such as non-linear narration, temporal shifts (analepsis and prolepsis), and disrupted chronology reveal how the narrative deliberately rearranges time to mirror the inner workings of memory and trauma (Genette 27–30). Rather than presenting events in a clear sequence, the narrative structure mimics the associative and recursive patterns of thought.

Thus, by integrating trauma theory, memory studies, and narratology, this methodology demonstrates that fragmentation in Roy's work is not merely stylistic experimentation but a purposeful strategy. It becomes a way of expressing the complex relationship between memory, trauma, and time, ultimately producing a narrative form that captures the psychological reality of broken experience.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The most striking structural feature of the novel is its nonlinear narrative organisation. The narrative moves repeatedly between past and present, refusing chronological progression and creating a sense of temporal dislocation. Events are introduced long before their full significance becomes clear, and the reader encounters outcomes prior to causes.

This disrupted temporality reflects the nature of traumatic memory. As trauma theorists have observed, traumatic events are often remembered in disconnected fragments rather than continuous narratives. The novel reproduces this psychological process by presenting the past as a series of incomplete recollections that gradually accumulate meaning.

The narrative structure forces the reader to reconstruct the story through scattered details and repeated references. The death of Sophie Mol, for instance, is revealed gradually through fragmented memories that appear throughout the narrative. The event is not presented as a single moment but as a series of recurring images.

The repetition of key scenes produces a cyclical sense of time in which the past continuously returns. The river, the History House, and the violent death of Velutha reappear throughout the narrative as persistent memories that resist closure.

This cyclical structure challenges the conventional idea of time as linear development. Instead, time appears layered, with different moments existing simultaneously. Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative temporality is useful in understanding this structure, since the novel organises time according to memory rather than chronological sequence.

The characters remain psychologically bound to earlier experiences even as chronological time advances. Temporal movement does not produce emotional distance. Instead, the past remains active within the present. Fragmented temporality, therefore, becomes a structural representation of trauma.

Memory in the novel functions not as objective recollection but as emotional reconstruction. The past is remembered through sensory impressions and emotional associations rather than through logical explanation. The narrative frequently adopts the perspective of Estha and Rahel, whose childhood understanding of events is partial and impressionistic. Their memories are shaped by perception rather than interpretation, producing a narrative that emphasises atmosphere and sensation. Objects and minor details acquire symbolic significance because they are associated with traumatic experiences. Small incidents and seemingly insignificant moments assume disproportionate importance within memory.

This emphasis on detail reflects the novel's concern with the relationship between minor experiences and major consequences. Memory organises experience according to emotional intensity rather than chronological importance. The return to Ayemenem in adulthood triggers a process of recollection in which past and present collapse into each other. Memory functions not as representation but as re-experiencing. The novel represents memory as a process of continual return rather than final resolution. The past remains present because trauma prevents closure. Sigmund Freud's concept of repetition compulsion helps explain this process. Traumatic experiences return repeatedly because they have not fully assimilated into conscious understanding (Freud 18–23). The novel represents memory as a process of continual return rather than final resolution.

Silence plays a crucial role in the representation of trauma in the novel. Certain experiences remain difficult to articulate and therefore appear only indirectly within the narrative. Estha's withdrawal into silence after the traumatic events of childhood represents the inability of language to express suffering. His silence functions both as a psychological symptom and a symbolic representation of trauma.

Narrative silence also appears in the gradual revelation of key events. Significant moments are described through partial references rather than direct explanation. The reader must interpret these fragments to understand the narrative. This indirectness reflects the limits of representation. Trauma cannot be fully translated into language because it exceeds ordinary forms of understanding.

The novel, therefore, represents trauma both through narration and through absence. What remains unsaid becomes as significant as what is explicitly described. Silence produces gaps within the narrative structure, reinforcing the sense of fragmentation. The incomplete nature of narration reflects the incomplete assimilation of traumatic experience.

Roy's linguistic experimentation contributes significantly to the representation of trauma. The narrative employs unconventional syntax, repetition, and rhythmic patterning that disrupt standard prose style. Words and phrases recur with slight variations, creating patterns that resemble the repetitive nature of traumatic memory. Language becomes circular rather than progressive. Childlike expressions appear frequently in the narrative, reflecting the perspective through which many events are remembered. The linguistic texture of the novel preserves the immediacy of childhood perception. Unusual capitalisation and word combinations create a sense of estrangement from ordinary language. These stylistic features reflect the psychological disorientation produced by trauma.

Language becomes a medium through which psychological disruption is formally represented. Rather than describing trauma directly, the novel allows trauma to shape the structure of expression itself.

Fragmentation, therefore, operates at multiple levels within the text. Narrative structure, memory, and language all participate in the representation of psychological rupture.

The novel emphasises the continuing presence of traumatic memory in the lives of its characters. The adult identities of Rahel and Estha remain shaped by their childhood experiences.

Their reunion does not produce resolution but instead reveals the depth of their shared trauma. The past remains the central reality around which their lives are organised. The narrative structure reinforces this persistence by returning repeatedly to earlier events. The conclusion shifts backwards in time to focus on the relationship between Ammu and Velutha. Ending the narrative in the past rather than the present emphasises the dominance of memory. Chronological closure is replaced by emotional continuity. Trauma prevents the possibility of final resolution. The characters remain connected to the past through memory.

The novel suggests that trauma becomes part of personal identity rather than an experience that can be left behind. This persistence of memory defines the temporal structure of the narrative.

The narrative structure of *The God of Small Things* can be theoretically understood through an intersection of trauma theory, psychoanalysis, narrative temporality, and postcolonial studies, which together illuminate its fragmented form as a meaningful representation of psychological and historical experience.

The disruption of chronological time aligns with Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative temporality, where time is reorganised according to subjective experience rather than linear progression, allowing past and present to coexist. At the same time, memory operates as an affective reconstruction shaped by emotion rather than factual continuity, consistent with memory studies that view recollection as inherently unstable and interpretive. The novel's use of silence, particularly through Estha's muteness, underscores the limits of language in representing trauma, suggesting that what cannot be spoken is instead embedded structurally through gaps and absences. Moreover, a postcolonial perspective reveals that this trauma is inseparable from social forces such as caste oppression and historical violence, demonstrating how personal suffering is produced within broader systems of power. Taken together, these theoretical frameworks show that fragmentation in the novel is not merely stylistic but a necessary narrative strategy that captures the persistence of trauma across time, shaping both individual identity and collective memory.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the relationship between memory, trauma, and fragmented narrative structure in *The God of Small Things*. The analysis demonstrates that Roy's nonlinear narrative technique reflects the psychological reality of traumatic memory.

Fragmented temporality allows the novel to represent the persistence of past experience within the present. Memory appears as emotional reconstruction rather than chronological record, and silence becomes an essential component of representation. Through repetition, narrative gaps, and linguistic experimentation, the novel constructs a poetics of broken time in which trauma remains active across temporal boundaries. Fragmentation emerges not as a stylistic ornament but as a narrative strategy that enables the representation of experiences resistant to conventional storytelling.

Roy's novel ultimately redefines narrative coherence by replacing chronological order with psychological continuity. The text demonstrates that traumatic memory cannot be fully resolved but continues to shape perception and identity across time. By transforming narrative fragmentation into a mode of representation, *The God of Small Things* offers a profound exploration of the relationship between memory and trauma in contemporary fiction.

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