



# Exploring Trauma and Memory in 21st Century English Fiction

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**Abstract-** In this paper, a comprehensive exploration of the representation of trauma and memory in 21st-century English fiction will be discussed, particularly in terms of how contemporary English writers have developed new forms of narrative strategies to portray the fragmented, non-linear, and embodied nature of traumatic experience. Through a systematic examination of recent literary criticisms from 2021 to 2026, a research study will be conducted to analyze the development of trauma narratives from modernism and postmodernism to what has been termed "post-postmodern" or "metamodern" forms of engagement. This paper will present an integrative trauma memory narrative framework (ITMNF) which differentiates between formal strategies (fragmentation, repetition, unreliability) and thematic concerns (intergenerational transmission, embodied memory, postcolonial trauma, ecotrauma). Through such an analysis, it was found that contemporary trauma narratives have moved beyond postmodern fragmentation to a more nuanced form of balancing formal innovation with ethical commitment to witnessing. The works of authors like Zadie Smith, Colson Whitehead, Ocean Vuong, and Tsitsi Dangarembga show how narrative innovation has the dual role of representing the unrepresentable and opening up possibilities for meaning-making and healing. By examining the comparative evaluation of the selected work in four analytical dimensions—narrative form, temporal structure, embodiment representation, and cultural specificity—it has been found that trauma fiction in the 21st century has the common feature of taking risks and being responsible.

**Keywords-** Trauma fiction, memory studies, narrative form, postcolonial trauma, intergenerational trauma, metamodernism, contemporary literature, ecocriticism

## I. Introduction

The relationship between trauma and memory has been one of the central concerns of literary studies since the late 20th century, but a major shift in the relationship between English literature and trauma/ memory has occurred in the 21st century. While modernist literature from the early 20th century, such as Virginia Woolf's and T.S. Eliot's works, responded to the trauma of World War I through a fragmentation of form, contemporary literature faces a reality shaped by a series of traumas, including colonialism, racism, environmental disaster, displacement, and the mediated representation of trauma in digital culture [3].

Contemporary trauma literature differs from earlier forms of trauma literature in a "metamodern" sensibility, which combines elements of modernism's formal innovation with postmodernism's skepticism and a renewed commitment to ethical engagement and meaning-making. Unlike postmodern literature from the late 20th



century, which often highlighted the impossibility of representing trauma in a direct fashion, 21st-century literature shows a renewed desire to think about ways out of trauma, ways to connect with others, and ways to heal.

The theoretical underpinning for the study of trauma and memory in literature also continues to develop. While building on the foundational work of scholars such as Cathy Caruth, who wrote that "trauma is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available," scholars are now extending the theory to consider the particularities of different traumatic events [7]. Postcolonial scholars are also extending the theory to consider the traumatic effects of colonialism and the ways in which these may be understood and represented in literature [8]. Ecocritics are also extending the theory to consider environmental disaster and catastrophe [10]. This paper examines the ways in which contemporary English fiction represents the complex relationships between trauma and memory. It examines the ways in which authors represent trauma and memory in their work, the ways in which the themes of trauma and memory have developed as central to contemporary fiction, and the ways in which contemporary fiction manages to represent trauma without risking exploitation.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, a literature survey of trauma studies and memory studies in contemporary literature will be discussed. In Section 3, an introduction to the proposed integrative trauma memory narrative framework will be given. In Section 4, analysis and discussion of the work will be included, along with four figures and a table. Finally, in Section 5, conclusions will be drawn.

## II. Literature Survey

The body of research on trauma and memory in 21st-century English fiction has grown exponentially in recent years, covering various aspects of research, theory, and cultural studies. This survey is a synthesis of various criticisms from 2021 to 2026.

Beville's research on post-postmodern novels in English literature observes a change from the "ironic distance" of 20th-century English fiction to "affective realism," which is "an embrace of emotionality and a continued sophistication of form" [1]. Her discussion of novels by Zadie Smith, David Mitchell, and Jennifer Egan shows how English fiction in the 21st century makes use of various narrative devices such as polyphony, disruption of time, and metafictionality to convey a better understanding of trauma, rather than avoiding it.

The theory of metamodernism by Vermeulen and van den Akker, though formulated a little earlier, is extensively applied in recent research on trauma fiction in English literature [2]. The metamodern condition of feeling, which is an "oscillation between modernism and postmodernism," offers a perspective to comprehend English fiction in the 21st century in relation to trauma and memory, as this oscillation between modernism and postmodernism allows authors to "slide between fragmentation and coherence, between scepticism and credulity, between irony and sincerity."



The theme of intergenerational trauma has also been studied. Critics have analyzed the ways in which novels like Ocean Vuong's *\*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous\** and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *\*This Mournable Body\** deal with the intergenerational transmission of trauma. They have also discussed the ways in which historical trauma, like the Vietnam War in *\*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous\** and colonialism in *\*This Mournable Body\**, affects the subjectivity of the protagonists many years later [3]. Such studies have also included discussions of the ways in which the authors have employed literary techniques to represent intergenerational trauma.

The theme of trauma and its relation to the human body has also become important in the studies of trauma in literature [3]. Researchers have analyzed the ways in which trauma has been represented in recent literary works [4]. Such studies have included discussions of the ways in which trauma has been represented in the human body. Novels like Brandon Taylor's *Real Life* and Eimear McBride's *Strange Hotel* have been studied in this context [5].

Environmental trauma, or "ecotrauma," has emerged as a significant subfield in recent criticism. Scholars examine how contemporary fiction represents the psychological and cultural impacts of climate crisis, ecological destruction, and environmental catastrophe [6]. Works such as Richard Powers's *Bewilderment* and Diane Cook's *The New Wilderness* explore how environmental trauma manifests in both individual psyches and collective consciousness, deploying speculative and dystopian modes to render the scale of ecological threat.

The ethical issues surrounding representation continue to be a subject of critical debate. Scholars have discussed issues such as the aesthetic representation of trauma, bearing witness, and the healing potential of literature, particularly trauma literature, from an individual and collective perspective [9]. Contemporary writers address such issues by incorporating elements of self-reflexivity, bearing witness, and reader response.

Synthesis of literature: Based on the literature review, some key findings about trauma literature in the 21st century are: 21st-century trauma literature is characterized by formal innovation, an increase in theoretical perspectives, and an emphasis on multiple traumatic experiences. Some gaps in literature: There is a need to compare different traumatic experiences, a lack of exploration of digital representation of trauma, and a need to develop a framework to analyze form and ethics.

### **III. Methodology**

Based on the literature synthesis, this article suggests the Integrative Trauma-Memory Narrative Framework (ITMNF) for the analysis of trauma and memory representations in 21st-century English fiction.

#### **Theoretical Foundations**

The Integrative Trauma-Memory Narrative Framework is grounded in three theoretical foundations. Firstly, trauma studies (Caruth, LaCapra, Herman) are seen as

providing the key concepts: belatedness, repetition compulsion, dissociation, and the dialectic of knowing and not knowing. Secondly, memory studies (Hirsch, Assmann, Rothberg) are seen as providing the key concepts: collective memory, post-memory, multidirectional memory, and cultural memory. Thirdly, narrative theory (Genette, Phelan, Herman) is seen as providing the key concepts: narrative, narrative strategies, and narrative techniques.

### Framework Components

The Integrative Trauma-Memory Narrative Framework comprises four analytical layers.

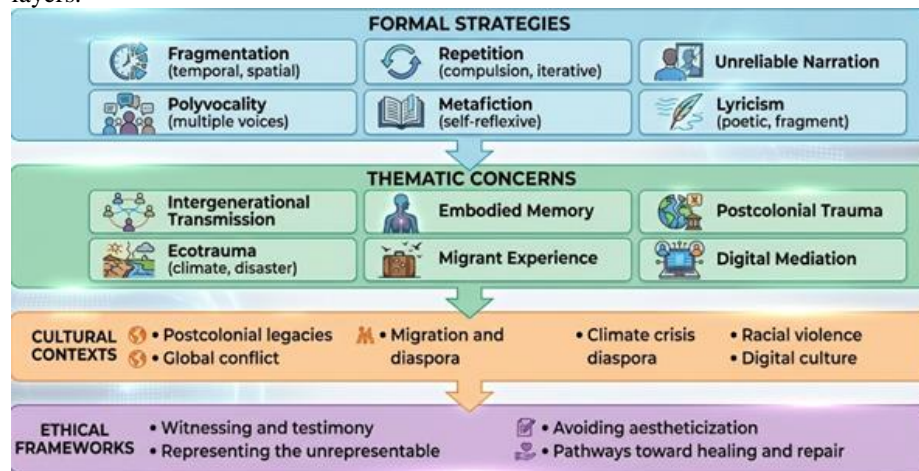


Figure 1: Integrative Trauma-Memory Narrative Framework (ITMNF)

### Analytical Dimensions

The framework provides a basis for systematic examination in four areas:

- Narrative Form: An exploration of formal choices (linear/nonlinear, fragmented/unified, use of first/third person, single/multiple narrators) in relation to trauma representation
- Temporal Structure: An exploration of time representation (chronological, analeptic, proleptic, circular, suspended) in relation to trauma representation
- Embodiment Representation: An exploration of representation of bodily experience (somatic symptoms, illness, pain, sensory overload) in relation to trauma representation
- Cultural Specificity: An exploration of the role of historical context, cultural tradition, and geopolitics in trauma representation

## IV. Result Analysis And Discussion

This section presents analytical findings regarding trauma and memory in 21st-century English fiction, organized around four illustrative figures and a comparative evaluation table.

### Formal Strategies in Contemporary Trauma Fiction

The formal innovations of 21st-century trauma fiction represent a significant evolution from earlier traditions.

FORMAL DIMENSION	MODERNIST (1910-1950)	POSTMODERNIST (1960-2000)	21ST CENTURY (2000-2026)
<b>Fragmentation</b>	Stream of Consciousness Internal Rupture <i>Examples: Joyce, Woolf.</i>	Collage, Pastiche, Intertextuality <i>Examples: Burroughs, Vonnegut.</i>	Layered, Polyphonic, Digitally Mediated, Dispersed <i>Examples: Egan, Smith.</i>
<b>Temporal Structure</b>	Nonlinear, Subjective Time, Iterative Memory <i>Examples: Faulkner, Proust.</i>	Hyper-real, Simulacrum, Timeless, Deconstructed <i>Examples: Baudrillard, DeLillo.</i>	Multitemporal, Intergenerational, Slow time, Reparative Memory <i>Examples: Sebald, Morrison.</i>
<b>Narration</b>	Unreliable Narrator, Inaccessible Interiority <i>Examples: Nabokov, Ford.</i>	Self-Reflexive, Ironic, Metafictional <i>Examples: Barth, Calvino.</i>	Limited Omniscience, Collective 'We', Empathic, Ethical Witnessing <i>Examples: Ishiguro, Whitehead.</i>
<b>Relationship to Truth</b>	Traumatic reality: Is truth accessible? The 'wound' The 'wound' <i>Examples: O'Neill, Hemingway.</i>	Impossibility of objective truth, Simulation of reality <i>Examples: Lyotard, Foucault.</i>	Practical Truth, Ethical Witnessing, Testimonial <i>Examples: Agamben, Butler.</i>
<b>Emotional Register</b>	Restrained, Compressed, Laconic, Stoic <i>Examples: Eliot, Pound.</i>	Ironic, Detached, Cynical, Cool <i>Examples: Foster Wallace, Eggers.</i>	Affective, Vulnerable, Reparative, Empathic <i>Examples: Knausgaard, Ferrante.</i>

Figure 2: Formal Strategies in Trauma Fiction: Comparative Evolution

Figure 2 demonstrates the way in which trauma fiction in the 21st century draws upon and transforms earlier traditions. While high modernism's use of the stream-of-consciousness technique provided an inside view through associative interiority, contemporary writers have employed complex and polyphonic forms that draw upon multiple voices, times, and viewpoints. This "polyvocality" allows for the representation of both individual and group traumas.

The move from postmodernist hyperreality and simulation towards "affective realism," as critics have named it, is an important change. While postmodern writers were preoccupied with the impossibility of representation, their 21st-century heirs offset their formal self-awareness with a commitment to the cause. This "oscillation" between modernism and postmodernism enables the writer to tackle the trauma without naive realism or ironic distance.

The affective, emotional, and vulnerable nature of contemporary trauma fiction stands in contrast to both modernism's formalism and postmodernism's irony. Writers such as Ocean Vuong and Brandon Taylor are emotionally direct, acknowledging the emotional commitment required to witness the traumatic event while at the same time employing complex and sophisticated formal techniques.

### Thematic Concerns: From Individual to Collective

Contemporary trauma fiction has expanded thematic scope to encompass collective and intergenerational dimensions of traumatic experience.

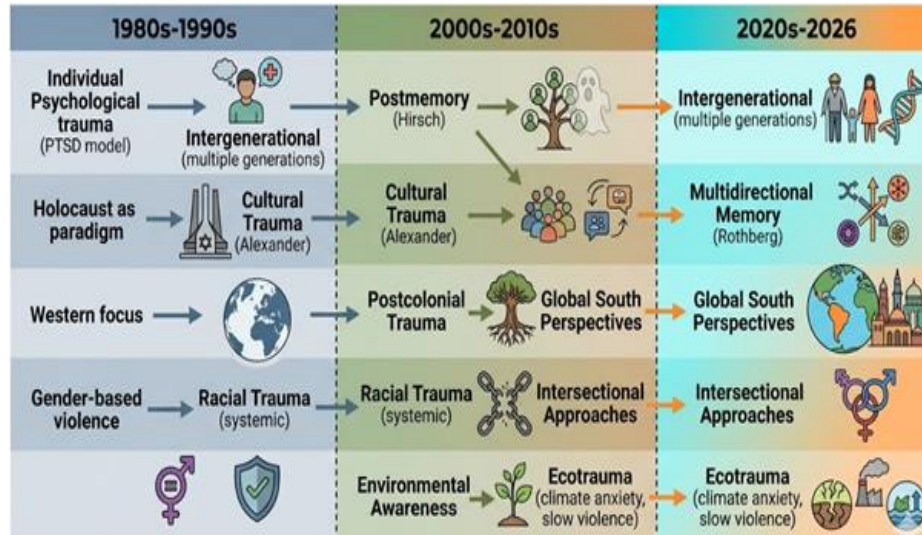


Figure 3: Thematic Evolution in Trauma Fiction

Figure 3 illustrates the considerable increase in the scope of traumatic experience dealt with in trauma fiction over the last several decades. Previous studies of trauma dealt mainly with psychological trauma, with the Holocaust being the paradigmatic event.

Recent fiction treats a range of traumatic experiences, each of which intersects with others, acknowledging that traumatic experience is not isolated but rather embedded in a range of historical and social contexts.

The idea of "multidirectional memory" has become a dominant idea in recent trauma studies, first proposed by Michael Rothberg, who argues that different traumatic experiences are not in competition but rather intersect and influence each other. Recent fiction, such as Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* and Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift*, treats multiple traumatic experiences, such as slavery, colonialism, and ecotrauma, as interconnected rather than separate.

The appearance of ecotrauma as a significant theme reflects the contemporary awareness of the climate crisis, as evidenced in recent fiction such as Richard Powers' *The Overstory* and Jenny Offill's *Weather*, which treats the way in which ecotrauma is traumatic not only in the event but also in the long-term effects of environmental degradation and the anxiety of anticipated loss.

### **Intergenerational Transmission: Memory Across Time**

Representation of intergenerational trauma has emerged as a central concern, with authors exploring how violence and loss shape subsequent generations.

MODE	DESCRIPTION	LITERARY EXAMPLES
Postmemory (Hirsch)	Memory transmitted through stories, photographs, silence	Vuong, <i>On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous</i>
Embodied Transmission	Trauma stored in body: illness, pain, somatic symptoms	Taylor, <i>Real Life</i> ; McBride, <i>Strange Hotel</i>
Architectural Memory	Space holds memory: homes, landscapes, abandoned sites	Smith, <i>NW</i> ; Mitchell, <i>Slade House</i>
Linguistic Transmission	Language carries traces of loss: silence, fragments, untranslatability	Gurnah, <i>Afterlives</i> ; Dangaremba, <i>This Mournable Body</i>
Haunting	Past returns as ghost, specter, unresolved presence	Whitehead, <i>The Nickel Boys</i> ; Enright, <i>The Gathering</i>

Figure 4: Modes of Intergenerational Transmission

Figure 4 demonstrates the variety of ways in which modern authors deal with the transmission of trauma. Marianne Hirsch's term "postmemory" refers to the second generation's connection to the trauma event that they did not directly experience but that plays a role in their identity. In *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Ocean Vuong's work is a prime example of this type of trauma literature, in which the protagonist tries to reconstruct his mother's experience of the Vietnam War. Another type of trauma transmission that has been prominent in recent trauma literature is the idea of embodied transmission. In works such as *Real Life*, Brandon Taylor's novel, trauma has been represented as being lodged in the bodies of the protagonists. This trauma expresses itself in uncontrollable ways. Another type of trauma transmission that has been prominent in recent trauma literature is architectural memory. In Zadie Smith's *NW*, architectural memory has been represented in the protagonist's neighborhood in London. In David Mitchell's *Slade House*, architectural memory has been represented in the form of a haunted house.

**The Ethics of Representation: Witnessing and Repair**

Contemporary trauma fiction is distinguished by its explicit engagement with ethical questions about representing suffering.



Figure 5: Ethical Frameworks in Contemporary Trauma Fiction

Figure 5 shows that contemporary trauma literature is marked by a self-conscious concern with representation. Following LaCapra’s work, writers tend to use a form of “empathic unsettlement,” which recognizes the limitations of representation but does not succumb to the temptation of giving up representation altogether. This approach steers clear of the complacency of understanding trauma completely and the spectatorship of not engaging at all.

The testimonial form has been a key form of representation. By incorporating documentary elements, multiple voices, and address, writers have been able to provide a space for testimony, which re-establishes agency. Works such as Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *This Mournable Body* and Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Afterlives* provide a voice to histories previously suppressed by colonialism and postcolonialism.

Contemporary authors also show evidence of complex strategies for avoiding the aestheticization of suffering. The use of metafictional comments, discomfort with representation, and fragmentation all work to avoid the temptation to make suffering beautiful or consumable .

Most important, contemporary trauma fiction now frequently shows possibilities for healing. While avoiding the idea of easy resolutions, contemporary fiction shows caring and communal responses to trauma as possibilities. This focus on possibilities for healing clearly sets contemporary fiction apart from earlier traditions that emphasized the impossibility of healing.

### Comparative Analysis of Trauma Fiction by Period

Table 1 presents a comparative analysis of trauma fiction across three periods, evaluated across five analytical dimensions.



Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Trauma Fiction by Period

Dimension	Modernist (1910-1950)	Postmodernist (1960-2000)	21st Century (2000-2026)
Representative Authors	Woolf, Faulkner, Hemingway	Pynchon, Morrison, Coetzee	Smith, Whitehead, Vuong, Gurnah, Dangarembga
Formal Strategies	Stream of consciousness, fragmentation, interior monologue	Metafiction, pastiche, irony, hyperreality	Polyvocality, multitemporal, affective realism, metamodern oscillation
Temporal Structure	Nonlinear, subjective, psychological time	Fragmented, simulated, anti-narrative	Layered, intergenerational, multidirectional
Relationship to History	Individual experience of collective catastrophe (war)	Suspicion toward grand narratives; history as text	Intergenerational transmission; recovery of suppressed histories
Ethical Orientation	Witnessing, psychological depth	Critique of representation, suspicion of empathy	Ethical commitment, testimonial, pathways to repair

**Analysis of Comparative Dimensions:**

Representative Authors demonstrate the move from Western-centric canons toward a more global approach. Although the modernist and postmodernist canons were dominated by the Euro-American perspective, the 21st-century trauma canon includes authors from Africa, Asia, and the Global South, reflecting the emergence and reevaluation of the canon from a postcolonial perspective.

Formal Strategies show the development from the interiority of modernism, the irony of postmodernism, to the polyphony and emotional engagement of the 21st-century approach. The contemporary writers combine elements of earlier strategies with new forms that reflect their era.

Temporal Structure progresses from psychological time to an intergenerational and multi-directional approach that considers the fact that contemporary trauma is multi-generational and has intersecting historical connections with many different events. The relation to History moves from individual experiences of collective disaster (modernism) to distrust of historical narratives (postmodernism), to the discovery and recovery of hidden histories and intergenerationally (21st century).



The Ethical Orientation has moved from modernist witnessing to postmodern critique, to ethical commitment and imagining of healing, balancing the limits of representation with the importance of meaning-making and healing.

## V. Conclusion

In addition, this paper has offered a comprehensive analysis of trauma and memory in 21st-century English fiction, building on existing criticism and outlining a new Integrative Trauma-Memory Narrative Framework. This paper has demonstrated that 21st-century trauma fiction has developed specific formal innovations, widened its thematic scope, and created complex ethical frameworks of trauma representation. Some key findings of this paper are as follows.

Firstly, 21st-century trauma fiction marks an evolution from earlier forms. While modernist and postmodernist writers developed foundational innovations, 21st-century writers have developed a polyphonic, multitemporal, and ethical form appropriate to their moment. This evolution should not be seen as one of progress or decline but as an adaptive response to changing historical conditions.

Secondly, formal innovations in trauma fiction are closely connected to ethical considerations. Indeed, the fragmentation, polyphony, and multitemporality of 21st-century trauma fiction are not merely formal innovations but a response to the need to represent a fragmented, nonlinear, and embodied form of traumatic experience.

Thirdly, there has been a significant expansion in the thematic scope of contemporary fiction. There is a depiction of multiple and overlapping experiences of trauma in recent works of fiction: intergenerational transmission of trauma, postcolonial trauma, racial trauma, migrant experience, ecotrauma, and digital mediation.

Fourthly, there has been a significant focus on the issue of intergenerational transmission in recent works of fiction. Writers have employed various methods for representing intergenerational transmission of trauma: through the concept of postmemory, embodiment, architectural memory, haunting.

Lastly, there has been a significant ethical dimension in recent works of fiction on trauma. There has been a move beyond the postmodern position in recent works of fiction on trauma in the 21st century; there has been a move beyond the postmodern position of ambiguity and complexity towards witnessing, testimony, and healing.

Sixth, the canon has grown to include diverse perspectives. In other words, contemporary trauma fiction features authors from Africa, Asia, the Global South, and other marginalized communities, bringing new formal, thematic, and ethical approaches to the genre.

Some of the implications of the ITMNF for literary studies include the following: For literary critics, the framework offers a model for analyzing the relationship between form, content, and ethics in contemporary trauma fiction. For literary educators, the framework offers a model for comparative analysis of literature from different time periods and traditions. For literary authors, the strategies offer a model for representing trauma in a sophisticated and ethical manner.



The limitations of the review include the limited scope of the review, given the breadth and diversity of the literature, the speed at which contemporary literature is being written, and the difficulty of capturing contemporary trends.

Some of the avenues for future research include a deeper examination of digital and multimedia representations of trauma narratives, comparative studies of trauma representations in global literatures, reader responses to trauma fiction, and the therapeutic value of reading trauma fiction.

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