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Haunted Tracks: Navigating Emotional Rupture and Redemption in Paula Hawkins's *The Girl on the Train*

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Abstract--Paula Hawkins' psychological thriller is explored within the disciplines of trauma studies. The text employs spatial metaphor, fractured narration, and a narrator who narrates unreliably to show trauma and the psychological consequences it has. Symbolized repeatedly through the train, it serves as a symbol for the helplessness and unyielding nature of the emotional makeup of the protagonist, Rachel. She moves unpredictably between bereavement, which is not consummated, addiction, and a fractured personality. Her voyeurism of other people's lives through the train window teeters on the edge of voyeurism, which at a certain point is an escape mechanism but later becomes a means of self-discovery and empowerment. This chapter explores the intersections of remembering, space, and narrative in the representation of trauma based on the theories of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman. Hering's distorted memories and fragmented narrative structure only mirror the interruptions of the trauma. Still, her regained mastery of her mental organs reconfigures the healing process into a disjointed, complicated business. Besides, the chapter uncovers the voyeuristic ethical concerns in positioning the reader as a witness to trauma, avoiding the level of intrusion and the threshold of sympathy. By depicting Rachel's path from emotional numbing back to self-acceptance, the chapter asserts that *The Girl on the Train* is still an influential work within contemporary trauma discourse. This text disrupts typical recovery narratives by cultivating these ideals in imperfect and vulnerable figures and revealing the gendered face of trauma

Keywords-- Trauma studies, emotional fragmentation, identity reclamation, narrative structure, Paula Hawkins, *The Girl on the Train*, psychological recovery.

I. INTRODUCTION

Trauma studies focus on providing incisive analysis of how contemporary fiction depicts psychological suffering, memory loss, and recovery. An intriguing example is Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train* (2015), which illustrates how trauma affects perception and self through the use of spatial imagery, a fractured narrative, and an unreliable narrator. A compelling case study is the tale of Rachel Watson, an alcoholic who suffers from affective detachment and memory loss. Her everyday commute reflects her psychological dead end.

She establishes the complex relationship between voyeurism, memory, and self-awareness by turning her fixation with observing strangers from an escape into a means of resolving her pain.

Drawing on Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman's politics of trauma, this study closely examines how the novel's fragmentation of narrative, untrustworthy narration, and spatial metaphors of trauma hinders one's ability to cope and narrative one's experiences. Rachel's memory gaps and blackouts mimic real-life trauma responses, and her shifting attitude in the long term resists conventional narratives of recovery. It is interested in the gendered nature of trauma too, the psychological aftermath of gaslighting, domestic violence and societal dismissal of women.

- 1) This chapter contends that *The Girl on the Train* recasts trauma narratives as ones where healing is an incomplete, nonlinear process, instead of a linear recovery. Through analyzing the intersectionality of trauma, identity, and perception, this research joins the wider debate regarding popular fiction's approach to psychological and emotional realities. Finally, Hawkins' novel illustrates how narrative can mirror the broken, multifaceted nature of trauma, and thus it is an important work in recent trauma fiction.

II. TRAUMA STUDIES IN LITERATURE

The study of trauma in literature has gained prominence in recent decades, particularly through the works of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Dominick LaCapra. Trauma is often characterized by its disruptive impact on memory, identity, and perception of time. Caruth defines trauma as an event so overwhelming that it cannot be fully processed at the moment of occurrence, leading to involuntary repetition and distortion in the victim's memory (Caruth 4). This fragmented experience of trauma is central to understanding Rachel Watson's struggles in *The Girl on the Train*, where her past continuously intrudes upon her present, preventing her from moving forward.



The repetitive nature of trauma forces victims to relive distressing experiences, often through subconscious triggers, as seen in Rachel's obsessive focus on her past relationship and the people she observes from the train.

Similarly, Judith Herman emphasizes that trauma fractures a person's sense of self, creating a state of dissociation where past events intrude into the present, preventing healing (Herman 37). Rachel's narrative is structured around this very phenomenon—her alcoholism and blackouts serve as mechanisms of avoidance, but they also deepen her disconnection from reality. These experiences align with what LaCapra describes as "acting out," where trauma survivors compulsively repeat past events without fully understanding them (LaCapra 142). Rachel is caught in a cycle of remembering and forgetting, unable to make sense of her suffering, which results in her increasing dependence on alcohol to numb her pain. Her struggle reflects the broader literary exploration of trauma, where narratives often mirror the disoriented and fragmented reality of trauma survivors.

Literary trauma studies have often explored how narrative structures mirror the psychological states of traumatized individuals. According to Anne Whitehead, contemporary trauma fiction frequently employs fragmented storytelling, non-linear time shifts, and unreliable narrators to reflect the fractured nature of traumatic memory (Whitehead 82). Hawkins adopts this technique by structuring the novel through shifting timelines and multiple perspectives, reinforcing Rachel's unreliable perception of reality. The fragmented structure allows readers to experience Rachel's disorientation firsthand, making them complicit in the uncertainty and confusion that accompany trauma. Through this technique, Hawkins aligns her novel with the broader tradition of trauma fiction, which seeks to represent psychological distress through experimental narrative forms.

III. UNRELIABLE NARRATION AND MEMORY DISTORTION

Unreliable narration is a crucial element of *The Girl on the Train*, as Rachel's alcoholism and memory loss make her a flawed and inconsistent storyteller. Wayne C. Booth first introduced the concept of the unreliable narrator, describing it as a narrative voice that lacks credibility due to psychological instability, personal bias, or intentional deception (Booth 158). In the case of trauma fiction, unreliable narration is often involuntary, resulting from the survivor's struggle with fragmented memory and emotional distress. Rachel's recollections are often incomplete or distorted, making it difficult for both her and the reader to separate truth from illusion.

This unreliability is not just a plot device but an essential aspect of trauma representation, as it reflects the disjointed and often contradictory nature of traumatic memory.

Suzette Henke argues that trauma survivors frequently struggle with memory distortion, leading to inconsistencies in their accounts of past events (Henke 65). Rachel's inability to recall key events due to alcohol-induced blackouts aligns with this phenomenon, making her a prime example of an unreliable narrator shaped by trauma. Her struggle to reconstruct past events mirrors the psychological difficulty trauma victims face when attempting to make sense of their experiences. Hawkins' use of Rachel's memory gaps forces the reader to navigate uncertainty alongside the protagonist, reinforcing the novel's engagement with trauma theory.

Moreover, Rachel's shifting recollections reflect what Sigmund Freud describes as the "repetition compulsion," wherein trauma victims unconsciously relive distressing experiences (Freud 23). Each time Rachel attempts to piece together the missing fragments of her past, she reconstructs her memories based on incomplete information, leading to further disorientation. This narrative approach places the reader in Rachel's position, forcing them to experience the uncertainty and confusion that accompanies trauma-induced memory loss. As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub suggest, trauma narratives often compel readers to engage in an active process of meaning-making, mirroring the survivor's struggle to reconcile past events (Felman and Laub 57). The novel's ability to immerse the reader in Rachel's psychological turmoil makes it a compelling case study for the relationship between trauma and narrative unreliability.

IV. VOYEURISM AS A COPING MECHANISM FOR TRAUMA

Voyeurism plays a significant role in *The Girl on the Train*, both as a symptom of Rachel's psychological distress and as a narrative device that drives the plot forward. John Berger argues that the act of looking is inherently tied to power and control, particularly when the observer is emotionally or physically detached from the subject (Berger 107). Rachel's obsession with watching Megan and Scott Hipwell from the train window initially serves as a means of escapism, allowing her to project an idealized narrative onto their lives. By imagining their seemingly perfect relationship, she constructs an illusion of stability that contrasts with the chaos of her own life.

Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" in cinema is also applicable to Rachel's voyeurism, as she initially assumes a passive role as an observer, reinforcing traditional gender dynamics (Mulvey 11).



However, as the novel progresses, Rachel shifts from passive spectator to active investigator, reclaiming agency over her own narrative. Her movement from observation to participation suggests a shift in power—she is no longer a silent witness to the lives of others but an active participant in uncovering the truth. This aligns with trauma theory's assertion that healing requires survivors to reclaim control over their own stories (Herman 55).

V. GENDERED TRAUMA AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE

The novel also addresses the gendered dimensions of trauma, particularly through the themes of gaslighting and domestic abuse. Rachel's ex-husband, Tom, systematically manipulates her into doubting her own memories, a classic tactic of psychological abuse known as gaslighting (Stern 89). Miranda Fricker introduces the concept of "epistemic injustice," wherein victims of trauma, particularly women, are discredited due to their perceived emotional instability (Fricker 149). Rachel's struggle to be believed mirrors the real-world tendency to dismiss women's experiences of trauma, particularly when they deviate from socially accepted victim narratives. The novel critiques these societal tendencies, shedding light on how power dynamics shape the way trauma is perceived and validated.

Megan Hipwell's storyline further explores gendered trauma, particularly in the context of maternal loss and unresolved grief. According to Adrienne Rich, narratives of female trauma often intersect with societal expectations of motherhood, reinforcing the pressure placed on women to conform to traditional roles (Rich 97). Megan's secret past, including the loss of her child, highlights the ways in which unprocessed trauma shapes self-destructive behaviors. The novel's portrayal of both Rachel and Megan underscores the broader theme of female trauma and resilience, challenging the notion that women's suffering is simply a consequence of personal failure.

VI. CONCLUSION

The analysis of trauma in contemporary fiction has been on the rise in recent years, especially in narratives that negotiate memory fragmentation, psychological trauma, and gendered experiences of abuse. Paula Hawkins' *The Girl on the Train* is a powerful case study of trauma fiction, as it seamlessly integrates these themes into its structure, characterization, and narrative voice. Under the gaze of trauma theory, this paper has explored how unreliability narration, distortion of memory, voyeurism, and psychological abuse structure the protagonist's life and help in a wider discourse of representation of trauma in contemporary literature.

Hawkins' novel not only portrays the cognitive and emotional aftermath of trauma but also satirizes the societal structures that make silencing and invalidation of the victims possible, especially women.

Perhaps the most important discovery of this research is the novel's depiction of gaslighting and epistemic injustice, especially how Rachel Watson's trauma is exacerbated by external doubt. Her experiences illuminate actual-world prejudice against women who struggle with addiction, mental illness, or historical trauma, illustrating how survivors tend to be discounted and invalidated. Megan Hipwell's narrative also brings together female trauma, societal expectations around motherhood, and the repression of mourning, to reaffirm the novel's critique of how women's suffering is misunderstood or ignored. The psychological abuse by Tom Watson is an illustration of the way coercive control works in intimate relationships, coercing victims into doubting their reality. By raising awareness of these concerns, the novel is a part of wider discussions regarding power, control, and the long-term consequences of psychological trauma for survivors.

Also, the novel's structure and deployment of unreliable narration are literary devices that reflect the fragmentation, repetition, and disorientation of trauma. The changing viewpoints and timelines make the reader as uncertain as Rachel, duplicating the fragmented quality of traumatic memory. This is consistent with the argument of Cathy Caruth and Anne Whitehead that trauma fiction tends to resist standard storytelling to truly capture psychological suffering. Hawkins' use of narrative perspective not only amplifies the novel's suspenseful thriller aspect but also intensifies its exploration of trauma as a revolved, repetitive experience.

In addition, voyeurism works as both narrative tool and mechanism of coping, highlighting the manner in which trauma survivors tend to create alternate worlds as a function of avoiding the pain of feeling. Rachel's compulsive monitoring of the Hipwells operates as an endeavor to regain lost stability, describing how observation could be both destruction and a form of access to truth. Her journey from passive witness to active investigator is a metaphor for the recovery of trauma, as survivors need to rebuild their own stories in order to feel empowered again. This is supported by trauma theory that states that healing involves confronting the past and claiming one's story.

Through the combination of trauma theory and literary critique, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how contemporary fiction addresses psychological trauma, memory, and recovery.



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Not only is *The Girl on the Train* an engaging psychological thriller, but it is also a critical analysis of the complexity of trauma, the process of socialization according to the dominant gender norms of psychological violence, and the societal dismissal of women's suffering. Its popularity in popular culture also helps to draw attention to the growing significance of trauma narratives in modern literature, as an indicator of increased readiness to accept these difficult but essential conversations.

To sum up, Hawkins's novel accomplishes more than providing suspense—what it provides is unflinching, disturbing writing on trauma, memory, and survival. In light of its themes in the context of trauma theory, gender studies, and narrative formation, this paper demonstrates how literature is a powerful platform for depicting and engaging with psychological suffering. Before us, research can examine other recent psychological thrillers and how they use trauma, or how unreliable narration emerges as a literary device in trauma fiction. *The Girl on the Train* is an exemplary work within literary trauma studies, compelling the reader to critique the nature of truth, vision, and unseen wounds that form human realities.

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