



Trauma, the Fragmented Psyche, and the Cycle of Repetition in Narratives of Maya Angelou

(A Critical Study of Trauma, Memory, Dissociation, Repression, Maternal Abandonment, and Narrative Healing)

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Abstract

This paper examines trauma as a psychological wound that can affect memory, identity, behaviour, relationships, and the individual's sense of safety. It focuses particularly on childhood trauma, maternal abandonment, dissociation, repression, traumatic memory, repetition, sexual violence, and the struggle to return to a sense of wholeness. Drawing on the ideas of Revital Goodman, Sigmund Freud, Susan L. Bloom, Cathy Caruth, George Hartman, Sándor Ferenczi, Jay B. Frankel, and Kali Tal, the paper considers how traumatic experiences can remain active long after the original event has ended. It argues that childhood trauma is especially significant because it can shape the developing sense of self and influence how individuals respond to later experiences. Maternal care is considered an important source of security, while parental failure and abandonment can leave the child vulnerable to further trauma. The paper also examines dissociation as a protective response to overwhelming experiences and explores how repressed memories may return through repetition, flashbacks, behaviour, and storytelling. The idea of a Sisyphean cycle is used to describe the repeated struggle of the trauma survivor to escape the past while continually returning to it. Particular attention is given to sexual violence and the experiences of women, especially African American women, whose psychological wounds may be intensified by racial and social oppression. The paper concludes that trauma may fragment the psyche, but remembering, narrating, and confronting painful experiences can also become part of the movement towards healing and psychological reintegration.

Keywords:

Trauma, childhood trauma, maternal abandonment, dissociation, fragmented psyche, memory, repression, repetition, sexual violence, African American women, healing.

Introduction: Understanding Trauma

Revital Goodman, in her article titled “Contemporary Trauma Theory and Trauma-Informed Care in Substance Use Disorders: A Conceptual Model for Integrating Coping and Resilience,” defines trauma as:

An identified event or series of events that has been experienced by the individual as physically or emotionally harmful, threatening, or overwhelming, and has lasting and holistic effects on the individual’s functioning (Goodman 187).

Goodman adds that maladaptive functioning can also be a symptom of childhood trauma. She identifies dissociation, attachment problems, and reenactment as indicators of trauma. She also notes that trauma can be debilitating and can make individuals susceptible to problems such as substance abuse, health issues, and sexually transmitted diseases (Goodman 189).

Those who have experienced childhood trauma can lead to a life marked by dysfunction because, at a very young age, the traumatized child may come to understand that the world is not a safe place. The child then tries to cope by adopting defensive or regressive mechanisms such as dissociation. Dissociation allows the mind to distance itself from experiences that are too painful to face. The child may function outside the trauma by avoiding reality or creating a different inner reality.

This response can produce a fragmented sense of self. Parts of the psyche may be repressed or forgotten, but they do not necessarily disappear. The fragmented parts can return when the individual encounters similar experiences or enters periods in which old memories are awakened. In this way, memories that have remained hidden can trigger a new traumatic response.

Trauma as a Wound of the Psyche

The inability to cope with trauma may also lead individuals to adopt negative coping mechanisms. Some traumatized people turn to alcohol or drugs in an attempt to escape painful memories. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, certain drugs can produce dopamine and feelings of euphoria (nida.nih.gov). In Nigeria, although drug abuse may not be as widespread as in some Western societies, alcohol abuse is socially accepted in many settings and can become a way for some people to conceal or avoid painful memories. Trauma can also be defined as a wound of the psyche caused by poor parenting or exposure to sexual, emotional, or physical abuse. Trauma may also result from ostracism based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or social class. It can arise from alienation, war, violence, racism, and nepotism. In this sense, trauma is any experience that changes or breaks the psyche from a state of wholeness into a fragmented state.

This definition is important to the present study because it allows trauma to be understood not only as a single catastrophic event but also as a process that may develop through repeated experiences. A child who experiences abandonment, abuse, racism, or violence may carry the effects of those experiences into later life.

Childhood Trauma and the Development of the Self

Childhood is especially important in the study of trauma because the child depends on adults for safety, protection, and emotional support. When those forms of protection fail, the child may struggle to develop a stable sense of security. Goodman's discussion of childhood trauma supports this argument. Dissociation, attachment difficulties, and reenactment can become ways in which the child attempts to live with experiences that cannot easily be understood or expressed. Susan L. Bloom also notes that the human search for internal integration, or "wholeness," is part of human development. She explains that responses to stress can involve automatic survival responses, emotional responses, and more conscious responses (Bloom 3). Bloom further observes that the earlier trauma occurs, the longer its effects may last

(Bloom 3). For Bloom, traumatic situations can produce physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural responses. These include the fight-or-flight response, chronic hyper-arousal, fear conditioning, freezing, dissociation, hyper-attention, altered memory, emotional numbing, avoidance, traumatic reenactment, the compulsion to repeat, risky behaviour, addiction, re-victimisation, and trauma bonding (Bloom 4-18).

These responses help explain why trauma does not always end when the traumatic event ends. The event may be over, but the mind can continue to remain at the point of the trauma.

Trauma, Memory, and Repression

The repression of traumatic memory can become a Sisyphean task for the trauma survivor. The traumatic memory may resemble a personal hell or a recurring nightmare because the victim continues to relive aspects of the experience. Even when the memory appears to have been successfully repressed, traces of it may remain. These traces can be understood through the idea of trauma reminders. For example, combatants and veterans may react strongly to fireworks because the sound reminds them of combat. The National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder explains that such reminders can make veterans feel jittery, remain on edge, or become easily startled by loud and sudden noises (www.ptsd.va.gov 1).

The example shows how the past can remain active in the present. A person does not have to consciously remember the original event for the body or mind to react to something associated with it. Sigmund Freud also examined the relationship between memory and traumatic responses. In Ivan Smith's *Freud's Complete Works*, and in Freud's "Studies on Hysteria," Freud observes that hysteria was connected to psychic trauma rather than simply physical injury. He also suggests that several traumatic experiences, rather than one isolated event, may contribute to the hysterical response (Smith 8). Freud notes that the memory of a traumatic event contributes to the response of the traumatized individual (Smith 9). He argues that guided recollection can help reduce the effects of traumatic experiences and observes that "hysterics tended to suffer many reminiscences" (Smith 10).

Freud also explains that trauma can affect memory through splitting of consciousness, revision of the traumatic event, and unconscious forgetting (Smith 114). He further observes that the retention and accumulation of experience can leave a "mnemonic symbol" (Smith 118). In simple terms, traumatic experiences can leave a lasting mark on the individual even after the event itself has ended.

Repressed Memory and the Return of the Past

Freud's patient Frau Emmy von N. provides an example of the relationship between memory and traumatic responses. She was the thirteenth of fourteen children, and only three of her siblings survived. She was frightened by a sibling who threw dead animals at her, and this contributed to her becoming easily startled. On another occasion, her brother frightened her by dressing as a ghost (Smith 50).

She was also affected by the deaths she witnessed, including the deaths of her husband, mother, sister, and aunt. These experiences contributed to her psychological distress. Freud describes her as a hysterical patient who could be hypnotized "with the greatest ease." He observed that

she spoke in a low and sporadic voice and displayed tic-like movements. Her speech could also become erratic, with sudden interruptions, shouts, and exclamations. Under hypnosis, however, she appeared calm and relaxed. As she retold traumatic experiences, Freud found that she was able to recover memories that had remained latent in her mind (Smith 53).

Trauma and the Fragmented Psyche

Trauma can separate memory from ordinary experience. The traumatized individual may try to escape the painful memory while at the same time remaining connected to it. Susan Bloom argues that traumatic memory can be permanent and almost impossible to eliminate (Bloom 12). This writer agrees with Bloom that the trauma survivor can become caught in a cycle of reliving and avoiding the trauma. Many actions may be directed toward either suppressing the memory or finding a way to live with it. The struggle is therefore not simply about forgetting. It is also about trying to bring the fragmented parts of the mind back together.

George Hartman, in "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies," observes that adults do not completely escape the vulnerability of childhood. Because childhood is a period of vulnerability and creativity, the traumatized child can remain psychologically present in the adult (Hartman 538). The adult may continue trying to return to the point where the trauma began. Hartman uses William Blake's *Albion Rose* to describe a character caught in a traumatic cycle. Albion tries to recover a state of unity and self-integration, but his attempt is complicated by history and a restricted imagination. His experience becomes a repetitive nightmare through which he tries to purge what has been internalized (Hartman 538). Hartman describes this condition as a "genesis moment" that begins a chain reaction and can bind both body and mind (Hartman 538). The mind becomes caught in a loop and repeatedly returns to the point where the trauma occurred. This idea is useful in understanding Maya Angelou's repeated return to her childhood experiences. Angelou revisits her being sent to Stamps, Arkansas, in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Gather Together in My Name*, *Mom & Me & Mom*, and in her 2013 *Guardian* article, "My Terrible, Wonderful Mother." The same pattern of returning to an earlier wound can also be seen in the examples Hartman discusses and in Freud's cases involving traumatic memories.

Maternal Abandonment and Parental Failure

Sándor Ferenczi identifies an important relationship between trauma, parental failure, and later psychological difficulties. In "Confusion of Tongues between Adults and the Child—The Language of Tenderness and Passion," he argues that a child needs maternal love as a source of protection against trauma. When that protection is absent or replaced by harmful forms of love, the child may be exposed to long-term difficulties. Ferenczi also examined the relationship between war and trauma. In his 1918 presentation "War Neurosis," he discusses observations from the Russian Revolution of 1917 and describes how violence and carnage damaged the psyche of communities. He notes that soldiers returning from war could experience neuroses that could not be explained simply through physical injury:

The mass-experiment of the war has produced various severe neuroses, including those in which there could be no question of a mechanical influence, and the neurologists have likewise been forced to recognize that something was missing in their calculations, and this something was again—the psyche (Ferenczi 6).

Ferenczi writes that even when the physical injury appears small, the psychological impact can be severe. He describes symptoms among war veterans such as hypersensitivity, reduced tolerance for sound, anxious dreams, and the reliving of traumatic experiences (Ferenczi 20). He also notes that infants can develop reflex responses when their routines are disrupted (Ferenczi 21). For the present study, Ferenczi's emphasis on the child's need for protection is particularly important. Emotional abandonment can leave the child without the security needed to process later experiences. This makes maternal abandonment an important theme in the study of childhood trauma.

Maternal Comfort and the Ability to Heal

Jay B. Frankel, discussing Ferenczi's trauma theory, explains that childhood sexual abuse can have lifelong effects. Ferenczi's work also links trauma to parental hatred, sexual violence, emotional abandonment, and other failures of care (Frankel 2-3). Frankel notes that a child may be able to survive severe trauma when the mother is a source of comfort. Without that support, however, the child's suffering can become more difficult to resolve because the child feels that the suffering is denied or ignored (Frankel 3). This point is important to the study of Maya Angelou because it helps explain why the presence or absence of maternal care matters so much in her trauma narrative. A child's relationship with the mother can influence how the child understands safety, love, abandonment, and trust.

Dissociation as a Response to Helplessness

Ferenczi views dissociation following trauma as a kind of psychic death that may occur when the victim realizes that there is no way to escape the situation. Dissociation becomes a coping mechanism that allows the victim to survive an experience that feels impossible to endure. Frankel compares this response to the death-like state animals may adopt when faced with danger. The traumatized child may also use fragmentation, regression, identification with the perpetrator, or a return to an earlier psychological state that feels safer. Ferenczi further suggests that some children mature too quickly because of fear and develop heightened sensitivity and unusual intellectual abilities as ways of reading and surviving their environments (Frankel 4-6).

The traumatized individual may come to live in a world that feels unsafe. Ferenczi identifies mistrust, hypersensitivity, rigidity, difficulty sustaining relationships, pessimism, and an aversion to life as possible results. The individual may become highly alert to danger and may see other people as potential aggressors (Frankel 7).

Trauma, Fear, and the Loss of Safety

The loss of safety is one of the central effects of trauma. The traumatized person no longer experiences the world as predictable. This can affect relationships, memory, behaviour, and the ability to trust others. Frankel explains that trauma can shake the victim's faith in life because it often occurs without warning. Childhood abuse, sexual violence, parental hatred, emotional abandonment, and other traumatic experiences can cause the psyche to crack (Frankel 2-3). Ferenczi's theory therefore helps connect childhood experiences with later behaviour. A child who learns that the people who should provide protection can also cause harm may develop strategies based on mistrust and constant vigilance.

Theme Ten: Sexual Violence and the Trauma of Women

Kali Tal, in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, describes trauma as a liminal experience that exists outside ordinary human experience. Trauma can radically unsettle the victim's understanding of reality (Tal 15). She also identifies numbing as a coping mechanism for people who cannot immediately face the full weight of traumatic experiences (Tal 129). Tal discusses several forms of coping, including sexual behaviour, alcoholism, drug dependence, self-devaluation, and dysfunctional relationships (Tal 172). These responses can become attempts to manage pain even when they create additional problems.

Tal also argues that women experience particular forms of trauma related to rape, incest, and sexual abuse. She points to the vulnerability of women and discusses how sexual violence can strip women of a sense of identity while empowering the perpetrator (Tal 137-164). Her argument is especially relevant to African American women's trauma narratives. Tal notes that African American women have historically faced sexual violence and racial oppression at the same time. She illustrates this through Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, particularly the experiences of Nanny, who is abused by the plantation owner and later faces the threat of violence from his jealous wife (Hurston 20). Tal's discussion provides a useful way of understanding how sexual violence is connected to power. Rape is not only an attack on the body; it can also affect a woman's sense of identity, safety, and control.

Trauma, Gender, and the Distortion of Identity

Tal argues that oppression of women is widespread and that rape can reduce a woman to an object of gratification rather than recognizing her as a whole person (Tal 164). In her discussion of Louise Armstrong's *Kiss Daddy Goodnight*, Tal shows how repression and dissociation can become ways of surviving incest and abuse. However, Tal also warns that internalizing abuse can become destructive. Abuse may distort the victim's sense of self because the victim begins to carry the shame and consequences of what was done to her. This is particularly important when examining the experiences of female trauma survivors. The victim may not only struggle with the memory of the event but may also struggle with the meaning she attaches to herself after the event.

Flashbacks and the Return of Traumatic Memory

Tal notes that flashbacks can occur among Holocaust survivors, Vietnam combatants, sexual abuse survivors, incest victims, and other people who experience post-traumatic stress. These memories may appear as intrusive thoughts that return without warning (Tal 167). This writer views flashbacks as one of the ways in which the mind attempts to deal with what has not been fully processed. Because trauma may be dissociated from ordinary memory, parts of the experience can remain hidden for years and return later. Trauma may therefore keep the individual psychologically connected to the period in which the trauma occurred. A person can grow older physically while remaining emotionally trapped at the point of the original wound.

Trauma and the Sisyphean Cycle

The idea of a Sisyphean cycle is central to this study. Like Sisyphus, who repeatedly pushes the stone up the hill only to see it roll back down, the trauma survivor may repeatedly

attempt to escape or suppress the past only to encounter it again. This does not mean that every return to the past is pointless. Repetition may also create an opportunity to understand what happened. The survivor may return to the same memory through dreams, flashbacks, relationships, behaviour, or storytelling. Trauma can be repressed but cannot simply be erased. The survivor's actions may be directed toward suppressing the memory, avoiding it, understanding it, or bringing the fragmented psyche back toward wholeness. Catharsis can provide temporary relief, but the process of healing may require repeated confrontation with the past.

Trauma and Behaviour after the Event

Trauma can continue to influence behaviour even after the individual has left the original traumatic environment. People who grow up in poverty, for example, may carry behaviours developed during that period into later life. Some may become hoarders because they fear not having enough. Others may become extremely concerned with money. Some may become anxious, while others may become high achievers because they are determined never to return to the conditions in which they suffered.

Social exclusion can also shape behaviour. A person who has experienced exclusion because of poverty may later try very hard to conform or may distance themselves from people who remind them of their former circumstances. These examples show how trauma can continue to shape the individual long after the immediate danger has disappeared. Survival strategies that were useful during the traumatic period may become difficult to change later.

The Mechanics of Performance and Trauma

Literary evaluations of Maya Angelou's autobiographical output frequently oscillate between accusations of calculated performativity and acclaim for emotional resonance. Françoise Lionnet, in "Con Artists and Storytellers: Maya Angelou's Problematic Sense of Audience," questions the authenticity of Angelou's narrative voice, arguing that she aligns her text with both African American and white readerships through a tactical mastery of dialogue. Lionnet aligns Angelou's narrator with a modern-day Moll Flanders and the traditional shiftless trickster figure, such as Brer Rabbit, who survives marginalization through wit and storytelling. While Lionnet's critique offers an incisive look at the text's contextual framing, it risks reducing Angelou's cosmopolitan literary choices to superficial calculation. Conversely, Suzette Henke's trauma-informed approach in "Maya Angelou's Caged Bird as Trauma Narrative" redirects critical attention toward the psychological interior. Henke establishes that Marguerite's early life is fractured by maternal abandonment and sexual violence, setting the stage for an ongoing quest to locate the lost mother figure. By bridging Lionnet's critique of the performative exterior with psychoanalytic examinations of the interior, this paper investigates how structural artifice and traumatic memory coexist in Angelou's work.

Tactical Storytelling and the Dual Audience

Lionnet's assertion that Angelou writes like a performer harmonizing with a crowd underscores the complex socio-political positioning of the Black female autobiographer. Angelou draws heavily upon a diverse literary heritage spanning Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, and rich African American folk traditions. Rather than alienating her audience

through rigid sectarianism, Angelou adopts an integrationist approach. Critics like Lyman Hagen note that Angelou avoids monolithic stereotyping, presenting a nuanced view of race and power dynamics. This cosmopolitan stylistic breadth allows Angelou to transcend the boundaries of segregated literature. Her performance is not deceptive artifice; rather, it represents a survival strategy—a tactical framework designed to navigate a racially fractured society while articulating deep-seated individual alienation.

The Mother Archetype and Maternal Abandonment

At the heart of Angelou's trauma narrative is the profound disruption of early attachment. Carl Jung defines the mother archetype through qualities of maternal solicitude, spiritual exaltation, and sustaining growth. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Vivian Baxter's inability to embody this archetype leaves Marguerite and Bailey Jr. bearing the psychological weight of "motherless darlings."

- **The Stigmatized Journey:** Being shipped by train from California to Stamps, Arkansas, at age three with identification tags attached to their arms leaves an indelible mark of abandonment.
- **Parental Substitution:** While Momma provides a steadfast matriarchal anchor and a model of early African American feminism, she cannot fully replace the primal need for maternal security.
- **Neurological and Psychological Fall-out:** Jung and Sándor Ferenczi both emphasize that parental failure is a primary catalyst for infantile neuroses and developmental splitting. The absence of reliable maternal comfort prevents the child from experiencing the world as a safe, predictable environment.

Dissociation, Sexual Violence, and the Fractured Psyche

Trauma operates as a profound wound of the psyche, shattering internal wholeness. For Marguerite, the trauma of sexual violence perpetrated by Mr. Freeman compounds the initial wound of maternal abandonment. According to Ferenczi and Susan L. Bloom, when an individual faces overwhelming horror without protective support, dissociation becomes a vital defense mechanism, a psychic death protecting the child from unbearable reality.

Kali Tal's exploration of women's trauma highlights how sexual violence strips away identity while empowering the aggressor. For African American women, this vulnerability is compounded by historical racial oppression. Dissociation, hyper-vigilance, and emotional numbing manifest in Angelou's narratives as coping tools that allow survival in a threatening environment, even as they trap the adult survivor in the emotional landscape of childhood trauma.

The Cycle of Repetition and Narrative Healing

Trauma does not conclude when the external event ends; instead, it initiates a repetitive loop. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's observations on hysteria and traumatic memory alongside George Hartman's "genesis moment," trauma survivors often find themselves caught in a Sisyphean cycle, repeatedly returning to the primal wound. Angelou's recurrent return to her childhood exile in Stamps across multiple texts (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, *Gather*

Together in My Name, Mom & Me & Mom) exemplifies this compulsion to repeat. However, repetition in Angelou's corpus is not purposeless. Through the structured act of writing, Angelou transforms fragmented memories into a coherent narrative text. Storytelling bridges the chasm between dissociation and integration, allowing the survivor to confront the past, reclaim agency, and move toward psychological healing.

Conclusion

The theories discussed here present trauma as a lasting wound that can affect memory, identity, behaviour, relationships, and the individual's understanding of safety. Goodman emphasizes childhood trauma and its effects on functioning. Freud connects trauma with memory, repression, and the return of forgotten experiences. Bloom explains the physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses to trauma. Caruth emphasizes the delayed and repetitive nature of traumatic responses. Hartman describes the way the traumatized individual can remain psychologically connected to the point where the trauma began. Ferenczi highlights parental failure, maternal protection, dissociation, and the child's struggle to survive overwhelming experiences. Tal places particular emphasis on women, sexual violence, oppression, memory, and the ways trauma is represented in literature.

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