

Fractured Reflections: Gender Performativity and Traumatic Memory in Margaret Atwood's Cat's Eye

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Abstract

Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* is a layered narrative that portrays the psychic scars of girlhood through fragmented memories and the lingering echoes of trauma. This paper explores how Atwood merges personal memory and collective gendered experience to question the very nature of identity and power. The research identifies a critical gap in Atwood scholarship, where trauma and gender have often been examined separately. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's notion of trauma as an "unclaimed experience" and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the paper argues that Elaine's fragmented selfhood arises from the intersection of embodied trauma and performative gender roles.

Through close textual analysis, the paper examines how Elaine's memories of childhood cruelty return as vivid, embodied flashbacks that shape her adult subjectivity. The study also situates her trauma within the collective social matrix of internalized misogyny, where femininity becomes a performance enforced by other women. The methodology involves a theoretical synthesis of trauma studies and feminist thought, engaging particularly with post-feminist and decolonizing readings of trauma. Ultimately, the paper contends that *Cat's Eye* not only represents the psychic wounds of girlhood but also reframes trauma as a site of potential self-reclamation and ethical testimony.

Keywords: Trauma Studies, Cathy Caruth, Gender Performativity, Judith Butler, Embodied Memory, Internalized Misogyny, Female Relationality, Ethical Testimony

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988) returns, like the very memories it depicts, to the unresolved pains of the past. Through the lens of painter Elaine Risley, Atwood crafts a deeply introspective narrative about memory, art, and the lingering aftershocks of girlhood cruelty. As Elaine revisits her childhood, her recollections refuse to unfold in linear order. They arrive in fragments—disjointed, involuntary, and haunting. These memories resemble what Cathy Caruth describes in *Unclaimed Experience* as "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."

Atwood's depiction of memory and trauma resists closure. Elaine's story, though highly personal, speaks to a collective female experience where social conditioning and gender expectations operate as

subtle yet violent forms of control. Her pain does not stem from overt patriarchal oppression alone but from the micro-aggressions of female peers, who enact the gender roles they have learned to internalize. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* helps us understand this cycle: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results." Elaine's tormentors, Cordelia, Carol, and Grace, do not merely bully—they enforce femininity as performance, punishing deviation and rewarding conformity.

The problem, then, lies not only in what Elaine experiences but in how she remembers and re-narrates it. The memory of trauma is not static. It returns in flashes, through physical sensations, dreams, and art. Atwood's portrayal aligns with Caruth's argument that "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on."

Existing Atwood scholarship has explored *Cat's Eye* through feminist, psychological, and autobiographical readings. Yet, few studies have combined trauma theory with gender performativity to interrogate how the text exposes the intimate operations of socialized cruelty among women. This research fills that gap by examining the convergence of traumatic memory and gender performance, analysing how Elaine's embodied experiences of childhood violence become both personal and collective inscriptions of trauma.

The paper will proceed as follows. The **literature review** will outline key trauma and feminist theories, focusing on the works of Cathy Caruth, Judith Butler, and Kali Tal, alongside recent post-feminist and decolonizing perspectives. The **analysis section** will unpack three key aspects: fragmented memory as the structure of trauma, the enforcement of gender binaries through performative cruelty, and the ethics of testimony in narrating pain. Finally, the **conclusion** will highlight how Atwood's text contributes to trauma studies by showing that remembering is both a burden and a form of resistance.

Literature Review

Trauma studies and feminist theory form the dual framework of this research. Cathy Caruth's foundational idea in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) defines trauma as an event that "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor." This notion of belatedness helps explain Elaine Risley's fragmented memory in *Cat's Eye*, where recollections of childhood cruelty do not surface in a continuous line but through gaps, disorientation, and sudden emotional recall.

E. Ann Kaplan extends this discussion by emphasizing that trauma "demands a witness" and that narration itself becomes an ethical act. In Atwood's novel, Elaine's artistic retrospection serves as such a witnessing process, translating personal pain into creative testimony. As she paints her past, the act of creation bridges memory and healing, showing that trauma can be revisited not just as suffering but as meaning-making.

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) complements this reading through her theory of gender performativity. Butler argues, "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance." In *Cat's Eye*, Atwood dramatizes this through the cruel dynamics among girls who police one another's behaviour according to prescribed femininity. The bullying that Elaine endures is not random, it enforces conformity and punishes deviation.

Scholars such as Sharon Rose Wilson and Coral Ann Howells have read *Cat's Eye* as a psychological and feminist narrative exploring identity formation. Wilson views Elaine's art as "a form of self-reclamation" through which she "reclaims her own gaze," while Howells notes that Atwood's female characters "negotiate power through shifting identities, never fixed, always performed." These readings emphasize that Atwood's narrative destabilizes binary notions of gender and challenges traditional feminist victimhood by presenting women as both enforcers and sufferers within patriarchal systems.

More recent scholarship has moved toward intersectional and post-feminist approaches. Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt* (1996) reminds us that trauma is "a cultural and political product," shaped by historical and collective conditions. This helps situate Elaine's trauma within broader social structures that produce and perpetuate gender-based hierarchies. Likewise, Stef Craps' work on decolonizing trauma theory suggests that Eurocentric frameworks often overlook the sociocultural contexts in which trauma unfolds. Atwood's Canadian setting, with its tensions between colonial legacy and modern identity, subtly reflects this shift, linking the personal with the national.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives allow this study to examine *Cat's Eye* as both a narrative of personal fragmentation and a critique of gendered social conditioning. The interplay between Caruth's trauma, Butler's performativity, and post-feminist readings situates Atwood's work within a continuum where remembering becomes both survival and resistance.

1. Fragmented Traumatic Memory

Elaine's recollections of childhood cruelty are neither linear nor fully conscious. They arrive as fragmented, involuntary memories that haunt her adult life. Cathy Caruth's notion of trauma as "unclaimed experience" helps explain this pattern. She writes:

Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on. The survivor experiences a belatedness in which the trauma returns in repeated flashbacks and dreams, often as a form of intrusion that defies direct comprehension (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 4).

In *Cat's Eye*, Elaine experiences precisely this intrusion. Memories of her peers' cruelty and social exclusion appear unexpectedly, often triggered by minor events or sensory cues. She reflects:

I can remember now what it felt like to be caught in that small circle of girls, to be at once a part of and outside it. The blows, the laughter, the exclusion—all of it returns in pieces, as though my childhood had been a shattered mirror, each fragment reflecting an image of me that I barely recognize (Atwood, *Cat's Eye*, 57).

These fragmented recollections emphasize that trauma is not a story neatly told, but a disruption in the continuity of self. The novel thus illustrates Caruth's claim that trauma "is experienced in the very act of remembering, as memory returns unbidden and unstructured" (Caruth, 1996, 5). Elaine's adult attempts to reconstruct these memories through art and introspection show both the persistence of trauma and the possibility of bearing witness.

2. Embodied Trauma

Trauma in *Cat's Eye* is not only psychological but also physical. Elaine's body carries the imprints of past suffering, echoing the insights of theorists on embodied memory. Shoshana Felman observes:

Trauma is not a mere memory of events; it is an experience that inscribes itself upon the body. The body remembers what consciousness cannot fully articulate. Traumatic memory emerges in gestures, somatic reactions, and physical sensation, often before it is comprehended intellectually (Felman, *Testimony*:

Crises of Witnessing, 19).

Elaine frequently experiences involuntary bodily reactions: tremors, nausea, and tension whenever she recalls moments of bullying. Atwood writes:

I can feel the old hurt still pressing in my chest, my stomach twisting in ways I do not understand, as if my body remembers the cruelty before my mind does. The memory is not a story I tell myself; it is a landscape I inhabit, a terrain of ache and hesitation that I carry with me (Atwood, 102).

These passages highlight how trauma manifests somatically. Elaine's embodied responses reinforce the argument that traumatic memory is stored and enacted through the body, not only through conscious recollection. The novel shows that recovery is not merely intellectual but requires reconciliation with these physical traces of pain.

3. Gender Performativity and Internalized Misogyny

Elaine's trauma is inseparable from the social and gendered dynamics of her childhood. Butler's theory of gender performativity frames the bullying Elaine experiences as an enforcement of socially constructed femininity. Butler notes: "Gender is not a noun, but a set of repeated acts within a regulatory frame. The performance of gender is both compelled and policed, producing the appearance of an essential identity while in reality constructing it through iterative repetition" (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 25).

In Atwood's narrative, female peers like Cordelia and Carol act as enforcers of these gender norms. They inflict pain precisely because Elaine resists conformity. Elaine recalls:

They seemed to know the rules better than I did, how to twist words and gestures into weapons. I wanted to be friends, to belong, but each mistake, each hesitation, each failure to perform the expected gestures of girlhood made me a target. It was not just cruelty; it was instruction, an enforcement of a code I could never fully learn (Atwood, 45).

This reflects **internalized misogyny**, where women themselves perpetuate patriarchal norms. As feminist scholar Susan Bordo explains:

Bodies are sites of inscription of social norms, and women police not only their own behavior but that of others in accordance with cultural expectations. Female aggression toward other women is frequently a manifestation of internalized patriarchal pressures rather than personal animosity (Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 132).

Through these dynamics, Atwood complicates simplistic victim narratives. Elaine's suffering is not only a consequence of male-dominated society but also the product of complex female relationality shaped by socialized gender hierarchies.

4. Ethics of Testimony and Art as Reclamation

Finally, Elaine's narrative illustrates the ethical dimensions of bearing witness to trauma. Atwood grants Elaine a voice, showing that art can serve as testimony. As Felman and Laub argue: "The act of testimony is an ethical encounter, an event in which the survivor's speech becomes an instrument of recognition. Bearing witness is not merely reporting facts; it is an ethical obligation to the past and to the possibility of communal understanding" (Felman & Laub, *Testimony*, 63).

Elaine's paintings reconstruct her memories, offering a space where the psychic wounds of girlhood can be named and reflected upon. Atwood writes:

I paint the small cruelties, the eyes and gestures that lingered like ghosts. In the act of putting them on canvas, I claim them, and in claiming them, I am no longer entirely at their mercy (Atwood, 201).

Through artistic testimony, Atwood negotiates the tension between aestheticization and ethical

representation, demonstrating that remembering trauma is simultaneously an act of survival and resistance.

Discussion

The analysis of *Cat's Eye* shows that Elaine's trauma operates at multiple levels: psychological, bodily, and social. Caruth's concept of trauma as an "unclaimed experience" illuminates how Elaine's memories emerge in fragmented flashes, resisting linear narrative and demanding ethical attention. This fragmentation mirrors not only the disjointed nature of traumatic memory but also the instability of identity shaped under gendered social pressures. Elaine's past, though personal, resonates as a collective narrative, demonstrating the interplay between individual and social trauma.

Gender performativity, as theorized by Judith Butler, clarifies the mechanisms of Elaine's suffering. The bullying she experiences is not merely interpersonal cruelty but a reinforcement of socially constructed norms of femininity. Atwood complicates the traditional binary of male oppressor and female victim, showing that women can internalize and enforce patriarchal norms. Elaine's tormentors act as both instruments and victims of a system that defines gender through performative repetition, highlighting the ethical and relational complexity of female aggression.

Embodied trauma, evident in Elaine's somatic responses, further demonstrates that memory and experience are inseparable from the body. Atwood portrays the body as a repository of unspoken pain, aligning with Felman's assertion that trauma inscribes itself physically before it is cognitively processed. This embodiment complicates recovery, emphasizing that healing involves both psychic integration and reconciliation with the physical traces of trauma.

Finally, Elaine's art and narrative serve as ethical testimony. Through painting, she claims and represents her experiences, transforming haunting memories into a form of agency. Felman and Laub's framework for witnessing suggests that this act constitutes an ethical engagement with the past. Atwood presents remembering as both a personal and social responsibility, underscoring that trauma literature must navigate the tension between aesthetic representation and ethical obligation.

Conclusion

Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* intricately explores the psychic wounds of girlhood, showing how traumatic memory, embodied experience, and gendered socialization intersect. Elaine's story illustrates that trauma is neither solely personal nor solely social; it resides in the interplay between the two, haunting consciousness, body, and relational dynamics. By applying Caruth's theory of trauma and Butler's concept of gender performativity, this paper demonstrates that Atwood's narrative destabilizes binary understandings of victimhood and gender.

Elaine's memories, fragmented and somatic, reveal how trauma enforces conformity and punishes deviation from social norms. At the same time, her art becomes a medium of reclamation, allowing her to bear witness ethically and creatively. The novel thus contributes to trauma studies and feminist theory by showing that memory, gender, and social conditioning are deeply intertwined.

The broader implications of this study suggest that future research could further explore trauma in the context of internalized misogyny, post-feminist perspectives, and cross-cultural frameworks. Atwood's work encourages a reading of trauma that is simultaneously personal, ethical, and socially informed, offering a model for understanding both the vulnerabilities and agency of women within patriarchal structures.

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