

# Trauma and the Unseen Wounds of Displacement in David Szalay's *Flesh*

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## **Abstract:**

In his novel titled *Flesh*, David Szalay portrays the broken life of Isták, who is a teenage Hungarian whose unintentional murder of a neighbor sends him on a lifetime journey of displacement from post-communist Hungary to the unstable underbelly of London. In order to map the contours of unresolved trauma and the alienating effects of globalization, this paper contends that Szalay uses a somatic, or bodily, narrative. By closely examining Isták's detached sexual encounters, his forced emigration, and his work in London's service economy, the analysis shows how trauma becomes ingrained in the body, showing up as compulsive behaviors, emotional dissociation, and a lifelong state of spectatorship. The book challenges the narrative of immigrant success by arguing that, rather than promoting healing, cross-border travel can exacerbate the traumatized subject's sense of isolation. In the end, *Flesh* exposes the permanent and frequently undetectable wounds that violence and displacement inflict on the human body and mind.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Displacement, Embodiment, Alienation, Globalization, Sexuality, Immigration, Psychological Fiction

## **Introduction:**

The novel titled *Flesh* by David Szalay is an examination of a life that was upended by a single, violent accident and then molded by the impersonal forces of a globalized society. The book traces Isták's journey from a stifling adolescence in Hungary, where a covert and perplexing relationship with an elderly neighbor results in her husband's unintentional death, to a rootless adulthood in London, where he works at a number of low-paying jobs before landing a specialized job as a driver for the wealthy. Szalay's "spare and penetrating" (Szalay 3) prose rejects sentimentality in favor of a clinical assessment of a man who serves as "a calm, detached observer of his own life" (3). The novel's examination of trauma revolves around this narrative position. In contrast to more dramatic therapies, *Flesh* suggests that severe psychological damage frequently shows up as numbed detachment, where the self is divided between actor and spectator, rather than hysterical outbursts. Judith Herman describes this condition as a fundamental sign of chronic trauma, in which the victim feels "estranged from others and disconnected from their own bodies" (Herman 53). Bessel van der Kolk's thesis that "the body keeps the score" of traumatic experience is based on the idea that the human body is the site where unresolved psychic conflict, social alienation, and historical displacement are registered and enacted (van der Kolk 21). This is indicated by the novel's title. This essay will examine how Szalay presents Isták's trauma as an embodied condition, looking at its roots in teenage violence and shame, how it is sustained through migration and transactional relationships, and how it ultimately manifests as a persistent state of existential spectatorship. By using this perspective,

Flesh challenges neoliberal notions of mobility and self-invention and becomes an important modern intervention in the literature of trauma and displacement.

### **The Genesis of Trauma: Adolescent Sexuality and Accidental Violence:**

Isták's trauma stems from the intertwined experiences of fatal violence and teenage sexual initiation. His neighbor, a married woman "close to his mother's age," is the object of his first sexual encounters (Szalay 3). These interactions are characterized by a bewildering blend of duty, latent disgust, and transactional exchange (Somloi galuska for kisses) rather than passion. The physical awkwardness is described in detail by Szalay: "Her lips lightly touch his for a moment," followed by "she kneels on the floor and takes it in her mouth again." He's focusing on the top of her head and the roots of her hair, where he can now see a hint of gray mixed with blond (21). Isták's viewpoint is one of detached observation, which serves as a safeguard against the act's emotional complexity. An early example of what Freud might refer to as the "compulsion to repeat" unmastered experiences, this relationship, carried out in secrecy and tinged with shame, creates a model for Isták's future relationships: intimacy as a confused, physically engaged but emotionally vacant transaction (Freud 22). When the neighbor ends the affair, the trauma solidifies. Isták and her husband get into a fight over Isták's desperate, teenage insistence on seeing her, which ends in a shoving match on the stairs where the husband falls and dies. Terrifying psychological acuity is used to depict the aftermath. Isták's memory and sense of agency break during police questioning: "He starts to wonder if he is remembering it correctly or not." He desired the man's death. He did want him dead, and he begins to question whether that's what really occurred (35). Traumatic memory is characterized by this internal disarray, where the distinction between reality and desire, accident and intention, becomes dangerously hazy. According to Cathy Caruth, trauma is an occurrence that is "not fully assimilated as it occurs," reappearing as a disruptive, delayed puzzle (Caruth 5). Instead of being processed, the incident is internalized as a "indelible contour" (Szalay 3) that will mold his entire future—a permanent, unresolved knot of guilt and warped self-perception.

### **Displacement and the Spectator Self in a Globalized World:**

After he is released from a youth institution, István's life in Hungary is one of inertia: characterized by economic depression and disconnection — a state Guy Standing describes as typical of the "precariat," a class burdened with precarious labor and deprofessionalization (Standing 7-8). His migration to London is less actively chosen than yet another case of being acted on by forces: still his "rocky trajectory" (Szalay 3). In the London setting, Szalay gives us a global city commuting between István's flesh-and-blood body and his social invisibility. He dwells in its service sector underbelly, working as a bouncer at a Soho strip club where "the girls... didn't take people like him very seriously" (114), and then, after an accidental encounter with one of his employers' entourage, he is trained to be a driver/bodyguard for the rich. This trajectory is the reflection of Edward Said's observation that the modern exile exists in a state of "contrapuntal awareness," simultaneously part of and apart from their new society, which can lead to a heightened but powerless spectatorship (Said 148).

His service to the elite, especially to Mrs. Helen Nyman, solidifies his position as a constant observer. He drives, waits, watches, and sometimes fulfills her sexual desires, all while keeping an emotional distance. Szalay emphasizes this aspect when István contemplates their relationship: "It's quite nice to have sex with her, and then to be alone. He likes the moments just after she has left" (115). His apartment, accessible only by the "tradesmen's entrance" (104), is a physical metaphor for his social position, which is adjacent

to the world of privilege but excluded from it. He observes the lives of Nymans from his window, literally looking down on their garden parties, which is a silent witness to a world that uses him but does not see him. This professional spectatorship is a mirror to and reinforces his internal detachment; his life is something that happens to him, observed from a slight but unbridgeable distance, which is a manifestation of the “divided self” common to those whose labour requires the performance of a role distinct from their inner reality (Butler 136).

### **The Body as Archive: Sex, Transaction, and Failed Connection:**

Isták’s trauma and alienation are primarily expressed through sexual encounters throughout the book. Rarely is sex about intimacy or pleasure; rather, it is a compulsive, frequently depressing activity that either asserts a tenuous sense of agency or momentarily relieves a sense of emptiness. He observes, “It’s strange that he doesn’t feel any different, that nothing seems to have changed,” following his first sexual encounter with the neighbour (24). Van der Kolk connects this symptom to the shutdown of the brain’s emotional regulation centres during traumatic stress (van der Kolk 66). This sets the tone for all subsequent encounters and suggests a profound disconnection between physical act and psychic integration.

His connections in London are transient and transactional. The experience is a blur of impersonal group sex and speed with the Norwegian student in Budapest (Szalay 69). Sex with Helen Nyman is an extension of his paid responsibilities, a professional transgression that nevertheless perpetuates the disparity in power. His deep cynicism stemming from his trauma is evident even in his reflections on relationships: “it’s hard to have an experience that feels entirely new, that doesn’t feel like something that has already happened... Therefore, it seems arbitrary to be with any one person (118). While the body takes action, the self does not. Szalay uses these repetitive and empty sexual moments to illustrate that trauma can commodify the most intimate moments of human experiences, which turns the flesh into a site of routine operation rather than connection. This is similar to critique of Barbara Ehrenreich about the commodification of all human interaction under late capitalism, where private actions can feel like forms of alienated labour (Ehrenreich 95).

### **Unresolved Hauntings and the Impossibility of Narrative Closure:**

The unresolved and eerie nature of Isták’s trauma is a crucial component. The past is an ongoing, low-grade infection rather than a completed tale. His childhood trauma is compounded by military PTSD from his time in the Hungarian army, which included a horrific event in Iraq where his friend Riki was killed. He is asked to write down his thoughts during therapy, but doing so only serves to reinforce his guilt: “You say more than once that you think you could have done more to save Riki’s life” (Szalay 82). A clinical approach that may manage symptoms without addressing the underlying, embodied memory of trauma is reflected in the therapy, which provides “short-term management through medication (Seroxat) but not a cure” (Herman 155).

The structure of the book defies conventional narrative arc or redemption, tracing “the imperceptible but indelible contours of unresolved trauma” (Szalay 3). Isták’s final situation, where he and his employer’s wife are cosy in the sterile luxury of a Munich hotel while her husband passes away from cancer in a nearby clinic, is one of extreme existential and moral ambiguity. He is offering some sort of “support” while also taking part in a fresh betrayal (134). This is a classic reflection of his: “Thinking about death makes everything seem sad because it makes everything seem unimportant, at least for a moment” (139). This captures the final stage of his traumatic dissociation, which is the flattening of all moral and emotional

terrain. The trauma can produce a “grey zone” where moral clarity fades, as Primo Levi observed for survivors (Levi 42). The original trauma is still pulsing beneath the surface of an apparently orderly, transnational existence; there is no catharsis, only the continuation of a life in which the self observes its own actions with passive interest. Thus, the novel presents trauma as an ongoing, unassimilated presence rather than what Caruth refers to as the “redemptive narrative” that is frequently imposed on it (Caruth 70).

### Conclusion:

In *Flesh*, David Szalay paints a powerful and objective picture of trauma as a physical and enduring state of existence. Van der Kolk’s main idea is validated by the novel’s portrayal of Isták’s journey, which shows how violence—both abrupt and systemic—becomes ingrained in the body, dictating patterns of relation, labour, and movement. Echoing Said’s observations on the contemporary state of exile, Szalay deftly dissects the immigrant success story, demonstrating how geographic displacement can worsen psychic dislocation rather than lessen it. Despite having more material security, Isták’s life in London only serves to further solidify his status as a spectator in his own life. His trauma is now dressed in a suit and driving a Mercedes, a striking example of the precariat’s difficult transition into the service economy. By insisting on the “indelible contours” of unresolved pain and refusing narrative redemption, *Flesh* has offered us a crucial corrective to more facile understandings of recovery and mobility. It asserts that in the fragmented scenario of contemporary globalization, the wounds of the past are not always left behind; they are the only things we carry with us and etched into the very flesh of our present.

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