

Bearing Witness: Language, Silence and Trauma Representation in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*

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Abstract

The paper examines the role of language in shaping and perpetuating trauma in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*. While many trauma theorists conceptualise trauma through repetition belatedness and linguistic crisis, their framework often privileges fragmentation and silence as universal modes of representation. This analysis resists narrow framing by demonstrating how Yanagihara's novel dramatises not only through gaps, silences and muteness but through the coercive force of language itself. Dialogues between Jude and Brother Peter, Father Gabriel, Brother Luke, Doctor Traylor, Caleb reveals how words of accusations, conditional affection and manipulative praise actively construct Jude St. Francis's psychic injury, binding him to narratives of shame and inevitability. By foregrounding linguistic violence as a mechanism of trauma, the paper argues that literature does more than bear witness to the unspeakable; it exposes how language itself becomes a weapon that subjugates, erodes agency and identity. This intervention insists on expanding trauma studies beyond Western stylistic paradigms, emphasising the ethical necessity of recognizing trauma as lived entrapment in imposed narratives that resist closure.

Keywords: Trauma, Trauma Theory, Language, Linguistic Violence, Trauma Representation

Theoretical Framework

Trauma studies occupies space in literary and cultural theory, it attempts to articulate experiences that by definition resist articulation. Sigmund Freud's early psychoanalytic work laid the foundation for understanding trauma as a psychic wound than a physical one. Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) describes trauma as an event that "precisely not known in the first instance" and therefore returns belatedly to haunt the survivor. This belatedness destabilises identity, leaving the subject in cycles of repetition. Freud's concept of "repetition compulsion," introduced in *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through* (1914), which refers to an individual's unconscious tendency to place themselves in a situation similar to the traumatic event or its circumstances, causing distress that repeats identical experiences from the past. The victim repeats the event over and over from the past, especially in their dreams, but the victim does not 'normally' remember it. Freud believed that survivors repeated their memories in the hope of mastering them. These memories came in the form of repetition, which took the shape of re-enacting the event, putting themselves in situations similar to the traumatic event or having recurring dreams, behaviours and flashbacks. Jude St. Francis, the protagonist of Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* embodies this compulsion: his life is marked by recurring memories of abuse and self-punishment, not as a conscious recollection but as haunting repetitions that structure his existence.

Cathy Caruth extends Freud's insights by situating belatedness at the centre of trauma theory, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) she describes trauma as "an overwhelming

experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucination and other uncontrolled phenomenon” (Caruth 11). This notion implies that trauma does not cause an immediate effect; affects are seen much later, over time. In Caruth’s definition, trauma causes an epistemological crisis and bypasses linguistic reference and is thus paradoxically only experienced later through representation in form of traumatic effects, which are seen to literally represent the traumatic event. Caruth posits belatedness in her seminal work. In *Parting Words: Trauma, Silence and Survival* Caruth details trauma as a “missed encounter,” an absence that resists direct articulation, literature becomes crucial here, because it can bear witness to trauma not by representing it directly but by mimicking its disjointed temporality. Caruth believes trauma is not easy to articulate or represent (Caruth 23).

Literature, therefore, becomes a platform for bearing witness to trauma through literary devices that mimics and impart rather than represent the traumatic phenomenon’s affect to readers in its literality. Caruth believes literature helps us understand which is not explicable in direct, simple or straightforward manner. The indirect, nuanced manner of literature forces the transmission of history of trauma through euphemisms, silence, gaps and metaphorical language. She notes trauma repeats itself in forms of nightmares and flashbacks. Caruth states, “What returns to haunt the victim, these stories tell us, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known,” she argues that traumatic experiences make the victim(s) enter a realm which is nearer to death. This makes the victim feel insecure and inferior about themselves (Caruth 6). Traumatic experiences change the victim’s definition of self. Caruth’s understanding of Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*, writes individuals experiencing trauma are caught in a relentless internal struggle, oscillating between the immediate crisis of the death and the unbearable burden of living the nature of traumatic events and the intolerable nature of traumatic survivor’s survival (Caruth 7).

Similarly, Jon Allen’s *Coping with Trauma: A Guide to Self-Understanding* (2005) suggests that a traumatic experience has two components: the subjective and the objective. Subjective interpretation, especially the perception of danger, dictates the traumatic impacts of objective events. Notably, the cognitive appraisal of threat is primary determinants of trauma. Increased perceived endangerment leads to heightened traumatisation (Allen 14). Metaphors might express the inexpressible and help capture the essence or feel of the traumatic event even if it does not aim to reproduce the facts (Pederson, *Trauma and Narrative*, 99). As Step Craps noted modern narration styles use fragmentation, which is supposed to mimic what experiencing trauma feels like (Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing* 41). Although many agree with this notion, it is often a point of criticism, by stating trauma can be represented through western fragmented style it disregards non-western trauma representations that leads to a narrow-privileged representation of trauma. Trauma representation in fiction is often characterised by using gaps, silence and fragmentation. Similarly, literature does more than just represent trauma, it reveals the depth of trauma such as “silences, simultaneous knowledge and denial, dissociation, resistance, and repression, among other” (Vickroy 2002, Whitehead 2004). Trauma challenges the limits of language and destroys the meaning altogether since “suffering is unrepresentable” (Balaev 360).

The paper aims to analyse the language and repetition in *A Little Life* through the framework of select trauma theorists, analysing the importance of language within the context of repetition, compulsion and the representation of trauma through language. By textual analysis of the novel identifying literary

devices indicating words, phrases and language used to subjugate the protagonist, Jude St. Francis. The paper also discusses the dynamics of trauma in the novel and how chronology disrupted through language whilst using narrative devices to replicate the nature of trauma experienced by the protagonist.

Introduction

Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015) follows the lives of four college friends—Jude, Willem, JB, and Malcolm—as they navigate the complexities of adulthood. The narrative intricately unravels around Jude St. Francis, a brilliant but profoundly damaged man whose past is marked by extreme sexual, physical, emotional, and verbal abuse. As the novel progresses, Jude's painful history is revealed, relived and delved into how the scars of his past experiences shape his present-day relationships in adulthood, perception of self, and the inability to heal. The paper will examine Yanagihara's employment language to both reflect and perpetuate his suffering to represent Jude's trauma and the intrusive nature of trauma. By employing a close textual analysis and employing trauma theorist's ideas the work aims to provide a holistic representation of the effect of language on Jude's self-perception and his relationships as an adult. Trauma is not just revealed in *A Little Life* but Jude relives trauma; a cynical, cyclical and daunting reliving of the haunting past that is etched into the language of the novel. Language acts as a tool that reveals and represents the nature of trauma, mirroring the disjointed and alarming nature of traumatic events. Yanagihara allows readers a unique experience which captures the impending life of Jude St. Francis. Language reflects and represents trauma but actively acts as a tool of power, control and manipulation. The following analysis of language and select dialogues between protagonist Jude St. Francis and other characters shed light on the dynamics of language and representation of trauma in literature.

Brother Peter is one of the monks at the monastery in South Dakota where Jude grew up. Although Brother Peter teaches Jude mathematic and morals, he also abuses Jude physically and emotionally with other monks at the monastery. "You must have done something very bad to be left behind like that," Brother Peter used to tell him after he hit him with the board, rebuking him as he stood there, sobbing his apologies. "Maybe you cried so much they just couldn't stand it any longer" and he'd cry harder, feeling that Brother Peter was correct (Yanagihara 146-147). Brother Peter imposes guilt and shame on Jude. The accusation, tied to physical violence, creates a traumatic imprint. Jude internalises the notion of abandonment as his fault, a belief that reverberates throughout his life, resurfacing as self-traumatising. Brother Peter's abuse has a repetitive dynamic approach to it as violence acts followed by coercive language, Caruth argues that trauma is relieved rather than integrated into a coherent narrative, similarly, Jude's flashbacks of his encounter with Brother Peter in his adulthood is an evidence of repetitive nature of trauma. Shoshana Felman also highlights the nature of language and how trauma manifests into language often indirectly or symbolically. Peter's remarks reframe Jude's suffering as the cause of his abandonment, silencing his perspective and forcing him to accept his interpretation of events. This manipulation and imposition of the singularity of truth is reflected in the concept of trauma as an event of language by Felman, where the very act of speaking becomes a site of power and violence. Jude's response is essential: crying hard, fearing Peter's correctness, associating opinions as truth especially as a child illustrates the linguistic establishment of his psyche. Jude's silence signifies the limitations of articulation and the depth of his emotional wound.

The absence or silence of the victim can help understand the complexity of representing trauma (Balaev 368). Caruth justifies the means of literature through which the inarticulation and unheard can be understood. Language is weaponised to neglect Jude's agency, Brother Peter denies Jude the possibility

of witnessing his past on his terms. This erasure of agency exemplifies how language can perpetuate and subjugate victims. Pederson's work on the cynical nature of abuse and trauma is essential to understand the interplay between physical and emotional abuse ensures that Jude cannot escape the traumatic past as a victim who is entrapped in it. The linguistic reinforcement of shame aligns with how trauma reshapes Jude's perception of self, leading to self-blame and self-punishment in the narrative. Jude subconsciously repeats the abusers' words in his adult life, these linguistic intrusions shapes Jude's present. Peter's declarative tone asserts authority in its setting, age and power dynamic, leaving no place for Jude to question or contest his claims. Peter's use of irony to manipulate Jude underscores the use of language to manipulate the victim by an abuser. The act of Jude's silence and crying serve as non-verbal testimony to his suffering, highlighting the limits of language and articulation in traumatic events.

Father Gabriel, was a monk at the monastery where Jude grew up in who also abuses Jude sexually, emotionally and physically. Gabriel remarks "You'll always be ugly, but doesn't mean you can't be neat" (Yanagihara 235), this internalises shame in Jude at a young age. Cruel assertion of ugliness encapsulates the traumatic imprint that Jude reinterprets as a truth he cannot escape, consequently, Jude also claims "although Father Gabriel was wrong about many things, he knows he was right about this" (Yanagihara 235-236). The permanence of the word 'always' erases any possibility of growth and transformation, positioning Jude as someone who is inherently flawed. Caruth argument of reliving trauma becomes relevant here, Jude in his adulthood recollects these words and memories and affirms them proving trauma disrupts self-perception and identity, forcing Jude to relieve his wounded past. Gabriel's remarks not only subjugate Jude but also manipulates Jude's understanding of himself, fostering despair and a conditional sense of worth.

Shoshana Felman like Carthy Caruth insists that there is a belated understanding of traumatic events. Felman's concept of trauma as an event of language, where language is incomprehensible and meaning is not always simultaneously revealed, conceals the power dynamics. Gabriel's remark illustrates the linguistic imprint of trauma, the statement is not only spoken but is internalised by Jude, he accepts the judgement as truth, demonstrating how language can function as a mechanism of long-term psychological manipulation. Jude's age plays a major factor in the internalisation, as a minor who is subjugated, abused and mistreated, Jude is isolated forming a sense of self. Father Gabriel emotionally isolates Jude and reinforces shame, this shame is self-reinforced later in his adulthood. Geoffrey Hartman emphasises trauma in literature is not merely recounted but trauma is re-lived. Jude's recollections of Father Gabriel's words perpetuate the emotional injury, showing how words of the abuser bind to the survivor's trauma. Jude expresses "how badly he stank, like urine and blood, and he would scream and rage and howl, interrupting lessons, pushing books off tables so that the brothers would have to start hitting him right away, the lesson abandoned" (Yanagihara 150). Jude's response to the abuse reflects his internal conflict, he lacks agency and is not given the space to express his inner turmoil; Jude then repulses to everything until he is beaten to exhaustion (Yanagihara 150). The traumatising event not as an experience of the past but as a continuing experience of the present. These experiences could take the form of flashbacks, intrusive memories, repletion, compulsion and other symptoms (Hunter 66). Jude's repetition highlights how language imprints surface and resurfaces over time, shaping the survivor's concept of self and their relationship with others, language embeds a sense of worthlessness and subjugation in Jude from a young age at the monastery.

Brother Luke, is a malevolent character in *A Little Life*, another monk at the monastery shaping the trajectory of Jude's life through exploitation, grooming and child sexual abuse. Brother Luke initially

appears to care and provide guidance to Jude when Brothers and Father Gabriel at the monastery abuse Jude physically, emotionally, verbally and sexually. However, he ultimately becomes a figure of profound betrayal for Jude's character. Brother Luke abuses Jude in a veneer of care, love, warm affection and false promises of the future. This distortion of care and trust profoundly affects Jude's sense of self, reinforcing worthlessness, shame, guilt and conditional love. A section that exemplifies this more is: "I look at you sometimes, and I think: you don't deserve to have these things happen to you. You deserve to be with someone else, someone-" and then Brother Luke stopped again, because he had begun to cry again. "Jude," he said, surprised. "Don't," he sobbed, "please, Brother Luke- don't let them send me away; I'll be better, I promise, I promise. Don't let them send me away" (Yanagihara 373). Luke emotionally manipulates Jude feigning vulnerability and shifting focus onto his emotions, positioning himself as a victim simultaneously absolving himself of responsibility. Jude's response to Luke's tears illustrates the failure of witnessing the self. Luke's manipulation silences Jude's suffering, forcing him to perform repentance to appease his abuser. Luke's behaviour further strengthens Jude's dependence on his approval, this dynamic perpetuates the cycle of trauma and disrupts Jude's agency. This erasure is emphasising the importance of ethical witnessing, where the survivor's narrative(s) is received without distortion. Here, Luke's behaviour prevents such validation.

In *Testimony* Felman's theory of trauma and testimony highlights the betrayal in moments where language, rather than expressing truth, is used as a weapon of control. Luke's intentions are later revealed in the narrative where he exploits Jude to child sexual abuse in the name and promise of future. The flashback of this memory is essential to understand the belatedness of trauma, Jude's reaction to Luke signals the difficulty of processing trauma as it occurs. Caruth's notion of belatedness posits trauma as something which is only understood retrospectively, as its meaning is obscured by immediate emotional and psychological overwhelm. Jude's fear of abandonment and his plea to "be better" reflects the cynical nature of trauma, where Jude's past rejection and exploitations are replayed in his present interactions with Luke. This repetition traps Jude into a state of perpetual self-blame, Felman's analysis of language as performative and indirect can be observed in through the close reading. Jude's response is manipulated by his past and its effect on his present interaction with Luke, reflecting how trauma survivors often mirror the language of their abusers or oblige to their abuser's words. Jude's response echoes Luke's implicit accusation demonstrating how language can be internalised by victims.

Trauma disrupts the coherence of memory, leaving survivors grappling with contradictory feelings of attachment and betrayal (Caruth 8, Hartman 362). Language becomes a tool of manipulation highlighting how abusers' narrative is often internalised by survivors. Luke continues this episode with the following "Well. You know how much I care for you, right? But lately I've been feeling that you don't care for me" This was terrible to hear this and for a moment he couldn't speak (Yanagihara 375). Here the abuser's narrative is internalised by survivor; experiencing betrayal of language leaving them no space for articulation. Jude's response further explains this, "That's not true!" (Yanagihara 375). His immediate denial and compulsion to articulation reflects his internalisation of blame, as he prioritises Luke's emotional needs over his lived reality as a victim of child sexual exploitation, revealing how absorbed responsibility for violence enacted on his life. This dynamic underscores Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History, Writing Trauma* distinction between "acting out" and "working through", Jude remains trapped in the former, compelled to Luke's complaints rather than moving forward towards a transformation even as an adult (LaCapra 36). "But Brother Luke shook his head "I keep talking to you about our house in the forest," he said, "but I don't get the feeling you really want to go there. To you, they're stories, like fairy

tales” Yanagihara 375). Trauma resists full comprehension as it occurs, meaning Jude may only later understand how Luke’s language has distorted his sense of reality and self-worth (Hartman 541). By accusing Jude of not caring and linking his promises to fairy tales, Luke invokes guilt and disappointment. This emphasises how Luke invokes disappointment suggesting Jude is indifferent to their shared dream creating a scenario.

Brother Luke’s dialogues and body language are important to observe the dynamics between language and age, and how it manipulates Jude. “Brother Luke knelt by him “You’re going to do what you did with Father Gabriel and a couple brother,” he said, and then, slowly, he (Jude) understood what Luke was saying, and he stepped back towards the bed, everything within him seizing with fear (Yanagihara 395). This dialogue demonstrates how Brother Luke normalises exploitation by framing it as something Jude has done before, making it seem normal. Luke employs language as a weapon of coercion, constructing a narrative that normalises the sexual abuse while minimising Jude’s ability to resist or even conceptualise what is happening. ““Jude it is going to be different now,” Luke said, before he (Jude) could say anything” (Yanagihara 395). By referencing previous sexual abuse, Luke creates a framework of inevitability, implying that the act of sex as a task of routine and thus stripping Jude of his agency. Luke’s manipulation often begins with his self-victimisation, self-pity, blaming Jude’s lack of interest and then proposing situations where Jude complies out of fear. Jude’s reaction, “seizing with fear,” reflects his body’s recognition of danger although the language used to address to him attempts to normalise child sexual abuse.

To understand the effect of these conversations Luke’s words become important “It’ll be over fast, I promise you. And you’re so good at it. And I’ll be waiting in the bathroom to make sure nothing goes wrong, all right?” He stroked Jude’s hair... held him (Yanagihara 396-396). The notion is trauma eluding immediate comprehension, instead returning in fragmented, haunting ways, displays the significance of not just the dissonance between Jude’s emotional and physical responses but also Luke’s coercive language, which highlights the language of grooming as well as the unassimilated nature of trauma. Luke’s words, “You’re so good at it,” not only distort reality but also weaponizes praise to diminish Jude’s ability to resist. This creates a dynamic where language serves as a tool of entrapment rather than expression, deepening Jude’s isolation. Luke intertwined manipulation with (feigned) care, using statements that constructed a false narrative of mutual benefit and a shared purpose. This tactic shifts the responsibility for their situation onto Jude, reinforcing his emotional dependency on Luke while masking the exploitation. Pederson highlights how survivors often become trapped in the repetitive cycle of trauma. Geoffrey Hartman emphasises the fracture of identity in trauma survivors. Jude’s eventual nodding acceptance signifies the erasure of his initial fear and resistance, further splintering of his agency. Luke’s figure in Jude’s life is of a protector, guide and a person who truly loves Jude yet it is clear to readers of Jude is exploited. “You’ are a wonderful kid... It is because of you and what you’re doing that we’re going to have our cabin... and finally, he (Jude) had nodded” (Yanagihara 396). Luke’s reassurance operates as a linguistic strategy of minimization, transforming Jude’s fear into a false sense of virtue, this manipulation rhetoric exploits Jude’s history of sexual violation, normalising its recurrence under the cloak of care reaffirming the abuse. Jude’s inability to verbalise his resistance reflects in his silence, as the language surrounding him is dominated by Luke’s narrative. Caruth argues trauma often manifests in silence and the ‘unspeakable’ this imposed silence perpetuates the trauma, as Jude is left without the words to articulate or resist his experiences.

“Luke shook his head, sadly. “I won’t know for a while... but you’re doing such a good job, Jude. You’re so good at it. It’s nothing to be ashamed of” (Yanagihara 396). The normalisation of exploitation through praise also demonstrates how Luke uses language to normalise exploitation. By framing the abuse as a skill and attributing positive outcomes to Jude’s suffering, Luke manipulates Jude into perceiving his compliance as both valuable and essential. Felman’s *Testimony* highlights how trauma narratives can be entangled with deception, particularly when language is used to obscure reality. “Because we are in love,” he’s (Luke) said, and he (Jude) believed him, and when it had felt the same after all- as painful, as difficult, as uncomfortable, as shameful, he assumed he was doing something wrong, especially because the brother was so happy afterwards. (Yanagihara 398). This dialogue illustrates the insidious manipulation that blurs boundaries between love, abuse, violence and pleasure. Jude’s belated repetition and haunting return of Brother Luke’s memories is conceptualised by Caruth, as the inability to fully comprehend the event as it happens, experienced instead in belated repetition (Caruth 4, Freud 7). This linguistic and lack of cognitive register makes it impossible for Jude to represent his voice consciously. Jude’s confusion and his beliefs are distorted, the evidence that trauma is not registered in direct cognition but in repeated disorientation and embodied suffering. Felman emphasises how language fails trauma survivors, leaving them entangled in narratives imposed by perpetrators (Felman and Laub 57).

He grew more and more silent. “Where’s my smiley boy?” the brother would ask him, and he would try to smile back at him. “It’s okay to enjoy it,” the brother would say, sometimes, and he would nod, and the brother would smile at him and rub his back. “You like it, don’t you?” he would ask, and wink, and he would nod at him, mutely. “I can tell,” Luke would say, still smiling, proud of him. “You were made for this, Jude.” Some of the clients would say that to him as well—You were born for this—and as much as he hated it, he also knew that they were right. He was born for this. He had been born, and left, and found, and used as he had been intended to be used. (Yanagihara 398-399)

Jude’s body language also reveals his loss of ability to form his own language around Brother Luke. The notion of the unspeakability of trauma is observed in Jude’s silence and muteness as compliance and inexpressibility (Hartman 544). Jude’s internalisation of the dialogue “You were made for this,” by Luke and the clients, ultimately adopting the language as truth, Pederson’s analysis on trauma representation in literature helps identify the gaps in the novel (Pederson 338). This aligns with Judith Herman’s concept of “insidious trauma,” in *Trauma and Recovery* refers to the “gradual, cumulative destruction of self” (Herman 97). Brother Luke’s language serves to erode Jude’s sense of self and replaces it with a twisted acceptance of his exploitation. Luke’s encouragement, coupled with other clients’ corroborating statements, “You were born for this,” creates a reality where Jude’s abuse becomes his identity.

Furthermore, Jude’s muteness and nodding are indicators of trauma’s impact on his ability to articulate his experiences (Hartman 544). Felman in *Testimony* argues trauma often results in a “crisis of witnessing,” where the victim is unable to comprehend or express what has happened fully (Felman 5). Caruth also argues that trauma is marked by the inability to fully comprehend the event as it happens and Jude’s belated repetition returns as a haunting memory (Caruth 44). Jude’s silence is not simply absence of word but a manifestation of his long-term childhood trauma. Luke’s insistence that “It’s okay to enjoy it” and Jude nodding, reveals how Jude loses his voice around Luke’s abuse (Yanagihara 399). Irene Visser’s concept of trauma’s temporal disruption and the inability to place oneself coherently within a narrative, Jude’s manifestation to growing silence (Visser 275). His diminished voice symbolises his inability to articulate his experiences and represents resistance caused by the internalisation of Brother Luke’s words. The impact of language as a tool of manipulation, subjugation, where perpetrators overwrite

the victim's sense of reality. Luke's coercive language while tending to Jude with affection and care, reveals violent intrusive in its power becomes a linguistic cage. Jude's belief that "he had been born, and left and found, and used as he had been intended to be used" reflects what Caruth calls the "endless repetition" of trauma narratives, where survivors like Jude are trapped within narratives they cannot escape (Yanagihara 398, Caruth 5). Jude's persistent belief of being born to be used throughout the novel represents how language can be destructive and shapes one's identity.

Herman argues psychological trauma is not about the physical wound but about the systematic dismantling of autonomy, often through linguistic coercion (Herman 93). Brother Luke tells Jude, "Because we're in love", distorting the language of affection to justify sexual abuse. The phrase forces Jude into a state of cognitive dissonance, making him question his own perception of this violation. Caruth's theory of trauma as an event that is not comprehensible at the moment but returns through repetition becomes relevant as Luke's words continue to shape Jude's self-perception long after the abuse and event occur (Yanagihara 398, Caruth 4). Luke's manipulation escalates when he asks, "Wasn't that nice?... Didn't it feel different?", these rhetorical questions serve to gaslight Jude, invading his own experience by coercing him into an agreement (Yanagihara 398). Felman argues that trauma survivors are deprived of ownership over their testimony, as their words have been pre-emptively dictated by their abuser(s) (Felman and Laub 57). This framework highlights Jude's recollections exemplifying the dynamic but also extend it, his memories oscillate between the factual truth of past events and distorted perception imposed by Luke. I argue, this oscillation highlights how survivors are not only constrained by the language of their abusers but also struggle to reconcile with the traumatic event itself, even when it resurfaces through intrusive memories, recollections and flashbacks, showing how testimony is fractured not by simply silencing but by the survivor's inability to reconcile competing perception of their past. Jude's silent compliance. His nods, forced smile and silence demonstrates Luke's language not only forces Jude into submission but also denies his ability to articulate his discomfort and trauma. The "unspeakable wound," is significant as Jude's trauma is compounded by his inability to resist the words imposed upon him (Hartman 544).

Theorists have emphasised that trauma is not always verbalised but is often displaced onto the body, especially when the victim is forced into silence, Jude's growing muteness: "He grew more and more silent" (Yanagihara 398). His quietness signals not just his emotional withdrawal to an extent but also physical suppression of his agency. Marinella Rodi-Risberg in *Problems in Representing Trauma* and Emma V. Miller in *Trauma and Sexual Violence* argue that trauma victims often adopt performative behaviours to survive, and this is evident in Jude's body language. His body and how it is subjugated by Luke's words, actions and imitations. Silke Arnold-de Simine in *Trauma and Memory* highlights how survivors are often subjugated to repeated linguistic reinforcement of their oppression, which then manifests as "truths" (Arnold-de Simine 142). Luke utterance, along with those of his clients' during and after sexual encounter with Jude, who is a minor function as coercive speech acts. "You like it, don't you?" ... "You were made for this, Jude," ... "Because we're in love" ... "You were born for this (prostitution)" further emphasise how repeated linguistic reinforcement effects with Jude's perception of self (Yanagihara 398-399). Freud's concept of repetition compulsion explains why Jude remains trapped in the cycle of child prostitution, his trauma forces him to re-enact his submission, believing compliance is the only way to mitigate his suffering. "He had agreed, too embarrassed to admit that it had been no different at all, that it had been just as awful as it had been with the client the day before" (Yanagihara 398). Visser argues that trauma disrupts identity by forcing the victim to internalise the language of the abuser(s), Jude begins

to believe that “he had been born, left... used as he had been intended to be used” (Yanagihara 399). The phrase “intended to be used” reveals the dehumanising effect of Luke and the client’s words.

“Jesus,” he’d said, “slow down, you little slut. How many times have you done this, anyway?”

... The clients called him names: he was a slut, a whore, filthy, disgusting, a nympho (he had to look that one up), a slave, garbage, trash, dirty, worthless, a nothing... He was perfect, said Luke, he was smart, he was good at what he did and there was nothing wrong with what he did.

(Yanagihara 417)

Linguistic violence permanently alters self-perception, Luke juxtaposes affection with degradation, “Other people won’t want you if they knew how many clients you’d been with” he says, before reassuring Jude, “But I’ll always want you, even if you’ve been with ten thousand clients” (Yanagihara 417). This conditional acceptance isolates Jude, making him believe his worth tied exclusively to his abuse. The clients reinforced this by calling him names, reducing him to an object of use rather than a person and by contrast, Luke reassures him that he is “perfect.” This dichotomy forces Jude into a permanent state of self-loathing, reinforcing his belief that suffering is his only purpose in life and that he was born to suffer. The effect of this repetition is profound as it conditions Jude to accept his trauma as an inherent part of his existence. As Freud notes, repeated exposure to trauma leads to a resignation to suffering rather than an attempt to resist it (Freud 15). Jude’s longing for the monastery, a site of previous trauma that now appears preferable to his current suffering. “He now dreamed of the monastery, and thought how stupid he’d been to leave” (Yanagihara 398). This exemplifies Freud’s notion of distorted perception, mankind’s past suffering more tolerable in comparison to present agony. Trauma, therefore, disrupts coherence, preventing victim (s) from structuring their past and present into logical sequences. Jude’s shifting perception of abuse, oscillating between recognition and denial, reveals the fragmented nature of trauma on the victim’s psyche.

Luke’s casual remarks after every sexual encounter further reinforces this conditioning: “Well, that was a good one,” he says. “I could tell you liked that one” (Yanagihara 418). By framing abuse as something Jude actively enjoys and participates in, Luke erodes any possibility of resistance or articulation. Judith Herman posits in order to escape accountability for a perpetrator’s crime, they would do everything in their power to promote forgetting (Herman 8). Herman discusses how abuser(s) often manipulate the victim(s) into believing that suffering is natural or deserved, and this precisely what Luke’s language accomplishes (Herman 93). The psychological toll is devastating, Jude begins to count the days until he is sixteen because he has been promised that the abuse would and will stop, illustrating how language has conditioned him to believe that his suffering has an expiration date, even when he is aware that there is no guarantee of escape (Yanagihara 418). Hartman’s notion of unspeakability of trauma and the failure of language to fully articulate pain (Hartman 544). Yet, ironically, abuser’s language fills this void becoming the only frame for survivors’ reality. Jude’s “silently praying to be taken away” and the details that even his eyes and name are no longer his own evokes this profound dispossession (Yanagihara 398). Brother Luke’s abuse leaves a lasting impact on Jude, becoming one of the past traumas that define his adulthood. Brother Luke’s actions and words have a lasting effect on Jude. Luke’s relationship with Jude is complex and represent the devastating consequences of betrayal by those who nurture and protect yet eventually exploit. Brother Luke’s betrayal plays a significant role in Jude’s life resulting in his inability to trust other, his self-destructive tendencies and his struggle to form healthy relationships.

Doctor Traylor, a psychiatrist, represents a critical figure in Jude’s traumatic history, functioning both as a purported caregiver and perpetrator of extreme abuse. Post-institutional escape, Jude was

subjected to severe maltreatment by Traylor, who leveraged his professional authority to establish a regime of confinement, nutritional deprivation and verbal abjection, designed to induce profound internalisation of shame and humiliation. This progresses into sexual assault, framed within the context of exploitative reciprocity. Visser and Herman emphasise that trauma often strips individuals of their autonomy by imposing external definition onto the victim(s) (Visser 272 Herman 93). Dr Traylor's words "You're diseased. I can't have a diseased person touching my food", positions Jude as someone who is untouchable, unclean and reinforces his sense of worthlessness he has experienced from past abusers. This degradation aligns with Marinell Rodi-Risberg's view that language is not just a means for communication but an instrument of power that can be used to dismantle identity (Yanagihara 547, Rodi-Risberg 114). By labelling Jude as "diseased," Dr Traylor denies him subjectivity, reducing him to a symbol of contamination due to his venereal disease.

"You don't like it when I call you a prostitute," the man said, and he managed, this time, to raise his head and look at him. "No," he said. "I understand," the man said. "But that is what you are, isn't it? Although I could call you something else, if you like: a whore, maybe." He was quiet again. "Is that better?" "No," he whispered again. "So," the man said, "a prostitute it is, then, right?" and looked at him, and finally, he nodded (Yanagihara 547).

Dr Traylor's escalating degradation from "prostitute," to "whore" forces Jude to complicity with his own dehumanisation (Yanagihara 547). The repeated imposition of label coerces Jude into accepting that others have imposed on him, demonstrating how perpetuates through language. Jude's silence functions as both a survival mechanism and a site of control. Jennifer Yusin and Caruth argue that trauma survivors often struggle with articulating their experiences, leading to forced silences that reinforce their suffering (Yusin 364, Caruth 5). This is evident when Dr Traylor commands Jude to speak (Yanagihara 547). The demand to speak is not an invitation for Jude to reclaim his voice but a coercive act designed to control and humiliate him. Jude's hesitant response "I don't know... I never had any" demonstrates how trauma fractures language, making self-expression almost impossible. When Jude is questioned again, and he finally nods to Dr Traylor's assertion "A prostitute it is, then, right?" (Yanagihara 547). Jude's silence is not an act of agreement but an act of submission, reflection Freud's repetition compulsion, the unconscious re-enactment of past trauma in new contexts (Freud 15). Jude's inability to verbally resist demonstrates how linguistic coercion erodes agency, making it nearly impossible for him to reclaim his voice. Jude's physical response, particularly when speech is restricted. Trauma inscribes itself on the body, "he looks down, humiliated," ... swallows convulsively, and later begins to rocks himself (Yanagihara 547-550, van der Kolk 1-2). These bodily responses reflect what Yusin describes as the "somatic aftershocks" of trauma, where the body becomes a site of suffering when words fail (Yusin 364). Jude's rocking, self-soothing behaviour often linked to trauma survivors, reflecting his attempt to regain control in a situation where speech has been weaponised against him. Freud theorises trauma where psychological wounds often manifest into physical symptoms, as seen in Jude's growing dissociation and self-harm (Freud 16).

He looked for something to cut himself ... So he pressed his fingernails into his calves as hard as he could, bent over and wincing from the effort and discomfort, and finally he was able to puncture the skin... He fell asleep again (Yanagihara 547). His internal dialogue "I have made the wrong decision... You're so stupid, the voice inside him said, you're so stupid," reveals how abusive language imposed upon him is internalised (Yanagihara 550). Emma V. Miller notes trauma survivors when subjugated to repeated sexual and verbal abuse, their voice often becomes an echo of their abusers, reinforcing their

self-hatred (Miller 227). Jude's self-recrimination demonstrates how language, once used a tool of control continues to inflict damage long after the immediate abuse has ended. Hartman explores how trauma survivors often struggle with power imbalances, as they are conditioned to view themselves as powerless (Hartman 544-545). Jude's reaction to Dr Traylor exemplifies this "It had never occurred to him to fight with the clients, had never occurred to him to challenge them" (Yanagihara 550). Jude's submission demonstrates how linguistic coercion perpetuates past abuse into the present, rendering psychological defiance impossible. The phrase "Brother Luke had trained him too well" underscores how language itself has been weaponised to condition Jude into compliance (Yanagihara 550). Trauma is a recursive experience, where past and present abusers blur into on continuous cycle (Yusin 365). When Jude thinks, "If he sacrifices his legs, he will admitting to Dr Traylor that he had won", he equates his bodily harm with linguistic submission (Yanagihara 595). His refusal to surrender symbolises his last attempt at retaining agency, even in self-destruction. However, Caruth notes, trauma is not just an event but a wound that speaks continuously resurfacing through language and memory (Caruth 5). Jude's suffering is not confined to a single moment or event but is perpetuated through linguistic structures that have shaped his existence and haunted him since his childhood sexual, physical, verbal and emotional abuse.

Caleb Porter is Jude's first romantic partner as an adult. Throughout their time together, Caleb persistently degrades Jude, particularly by belittling his disability. Caleb's linguistic violence dehumanises Jude, reinforcing patterns of emotional, physical and sexual submission. As Visser argues in "Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies," trauma strips survivors of autonomy by reducing them to labels imposed by their abusers (Visser 272). This linguistic dehumanisation is evident in Caleb's words: "You're cripple and a liar and a bad fuck. And you're right... You're disgusting" (Yanagihara 332). Trauma is often inflicted through linguistic coercions, where repeated verbal abuse conditions survivors into accepting a narrative of their degradation. By defining Jude through ableist and derogatory words, Caleb enforces an identity rooted in shame and worthlessness, compelling Jude to internalise these perceptions. Caleb's remarks on Jude's body reinforce these perceptions, reducing Jude to his disability and physical scars- "You really are deformed" (Yanagihara 335). Jude's reaction to Caleb's insults and violence mirrors his past experiences with previous abusers: Brother Luke, Brother Peter, Father Gabriel, the client and Dr Traylor as seen when he automatically complies with Caleb's demands: "Beg me," says Caleb... and he does, pleading with him (Yanagihara 336). Repeating Caleb's words back to him as he instructs: I'm repulsive. I'm disgusting. I'm worthless. I'm sorry, I'm sorry (Yanagihara 336). By forcing Jude to verbalise his own self-loathing like past abusers, Caleb ensures that his words become a part of Jude's internalised self-perception, demonstrating how linguistic trauma extends beyond the moment of abuse.

Yusin emphasises that trauma often fractures survivors' inability to articulate, creating gaps in memory and expression (Yusin 364). Jude's response to Caleb's initial aggression: "In that moment, he goes blank, the world, his very self, erasing themselves" (Yanagihara 311-312). His inability to react verbally or physically demonstrates the dissociative effect of trauma, where language fails and survival is reduced to submission. Freud's notion of "speech inhibition in trauma" suggests that survivors of prolonged abuse may experience paralysis when confronted with similar situation which is relevant here to understand Jude and his trauma (Freud 15-16). Jude's automatic compliance "out of habit and memory, and the inability to do anything else" demonstrates how trauma conditions survivors into silence, stripping them of agency (Yanagihara 311). Miller in "Trauma and Sexual violence," discusses how trauma-induced silence is often accompanied by bodily disassociation, where survivors mentally detach from their

experiences as a coping mechanism (Miller 236). This reflected in Jude's dissociation during sex: "He (Jude) always struggled to remain present ... he could leave himself" (Yanagihara 487). Brother Luke's clients had complained about Jude's vacant expressions, "His eyes looked dead." Forcing him to feign engagement (Yanagihara 487). Caleb later echoes this, commanding him to "Wake up. Where are you?" (Yanagihara 487). Jude then worked hard to stay engaged, even though it made the experience more vivid and haunting, this instance represent the nature of trauma, survivors downplay of their distress to avoid shame and humiliation (Yanagihara 487). The repetition of these phrases reinforces how Jude's trauma becomes cyclical and cynical, Caleb's reaction to his dissociation perpetuating Jude's suffering the same as his past abusers: brothers at monastery, Luke, Clients and Traylor. Trauma is inscribed on the body, often manifesting through involuntary compliance or, and physical reaction (Hartman, 545, Cifti 20). Caleb's ridicule of Jude's gait "Why are you walking like that?" demonstrates how Caleb words reinforces bodily trauma, making Jude hyperaware of his physicality. He hesitant response – "Am I walking strangely?" shows his attempt to mask pain and shame, further illustrating how trauma compels survivors to minimise their suffering. These instances align with Natalija Stevanovic's assertion that trauma survivors often pre-emptively downplay their distress to avoid further humiliation (Stevanovic 282).

Jude's internalisation of Caleb's words– "He had decided that Caleb was right, that he was disgusting" (Yanagihara 366) demonstrates how linguistic violence continues to shape his self-perception long after the abuse has ended. His belief that he "somehow deserved what had happened to him" (Yanagihara 366) reflects what Felman describes as the "perpetual guilt of trauma survivors," where victims come to believe they are responsible for their own suffering (Felman 15). This self-recrimination is observed each time abusers violated Jude physically, mentally, sexually and verbally, which had a lasting impact on language in reinforcing trauma. Arnold-de Simine discusses how abusers attempt to rewrite narratives through linguistic manipulation, making victims question their realities (Arnold-de Simine 46). Caleb's apology after violating Jude physically, sexually and verbally– "Believe me, because you believed me before: you are beautiful and perfect" (Yanagihara 366) Caleb contradicts his previous insults, creating a disorienting effect. His insistence "I was wrong, I was mistaken, no one could ever have been more wrong than I was" (Yanagihara 366) demonstrates what Emma V. Miller describes as "traumatic dissonance," where abusers alternate between degradation and praise control (Miller 179). This false apology manipulates Jude into questioning his own suffering, reinforcing a psychological bind that prevents him from escaping the cycle of abuse. Caruth argues that trauma is often marked by "linguistic contradictions," where survivors struggle to reconcile opposing realities (Caruth 5). Jude's forced agreement with Caleb's mockery– "Jude St. Francis. A slut after all," and he had made himself smile and agree," (Yanagihara 478) demonstrates his submission to a false narrative. By forcing himself to confirm Caleb's words, Jude performs what Joshua Fisherman terms "linguistic survivalism," where victims adopt the language of the abuser(s) as a means of self-preservation.

Even after escaping physical and sexual abuse, Jude remains trapped in the linguistic structures of his trauma, unable to break free from the labels imposed upon him by abusers. Jude's suffering is not confined to past events but is continuously reactivated through language making his trauma an event of the past, and inescapable present. Caleb expresses visible disgust towards Jude's use of the wheelchair, which Jude occasionally relies on when experiencing severe back and leg pain. Caleb perceives this as a sign of weakness, insisting that Jude should walk despite his physical suffering. In addition to his verbal and psychological abuse, Caleb physically assaults and sexually violates Jude. Before meeting Caleb, Jude

appeared to be making progress in his recovery from past abusers like Brother Peter, Father Gabriel, Brother Luke, the clients, Colin and Dr Traylor. However, Caleb's abuse reinforces Jude's deep-seated fears of being unworthy and inherently repulsive, leading him to disregard the reassurances of his friends, who attempt to convince him of his inherent value and capacity for love.

The exploration of the profound impact of language in representing and perpetuating trauma in the paper through the analysis of dialogues, instances and interactions involving Jude and his abusers. The analysis represents how language is weaponised to manipulate, subjugate and distort Jude's sense of self. The insidious nature of the abuser is revealed through the abuser's words, which create a reality where Jude's suffering is normalised and internalised. Laura Vickroy's *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*, one of the primary efforts in contemporary feminist literary trauma studies, begins with a gesture toward Herman's work: "These works attest to the frequency of trauma and its importance in a metacontextual social issue, as it is a consequence of political ideologies, colonization, war, domestic violence, poverty, and so forth" (Vickroy 2). Theories of Freud, Caruth, Hartman, Felman, and others have illuminated how trauma is not merely an event but a cynical cyclic process of repetition, belated understanding, linguistic manipulation and control. The conceptualisation of language and trauma in the paper shows how abusers' language declarative absolutes, linguistic manipulations, conditional validation, forced admissions, enforcement of shame, and humiliation abusers' language functions as a tool of control, subjugating Jude, becomes internalised by Jude, shaping his self-perception and perpetuating his trauma. The exploration of silence and distortion of language has provided a deeper understanding of how trauma is represented and experienced. The linguistic architecture of *A Little Life* exemplifies the paradox of trauma representation: the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of narration. Yanagihara's recursive prose, elliptical dialogues and strategic silencing depicts Jude's suffering and her artistic choice to represent a book where a character never gets better, a book of extremes... extreme in despair and extreme love, extreme poverty, in all senses of the world (Yanagihara 2016). The novel's refusal to offer narrative closure or therapeutic resolution mirrors Jude's own entrapment, the text foreground the ethical stakes of witnessing trauma, compelling readers to confront the inadequacy of language.

Conclusion

Beginning with an examination of trauma theory, the paper analysis the intricate ways in which psychological trauma is inflicted and endure, rendered narratively. Drawing on foundational concepts of trauma studies, the analysis engages with close reading of Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*, revealing how the novel's formal and linguistic strategies mirror the psychic fragmentation of Jude. Language emerges as a not merely as a medium of expression but as a mechanism of harm: verbal abuse, manipulation, and the internalisation of abuser(s)'s voice constitutes a form of linguistic violence that profoundly shapes Jude's psychological landscape. This violence manifests in his compulsive self-criticism, muteness and inability to articulate his suffering, underscoring how trauma is both enacted and silenced through language. Rather than offering resolution, Yanagihara's narrative resists closure challenging dominant paradigms of recovery and the complexities of trauma representation. In doing so, the novel challenges readers to grapple with the boundaries of empathy, ethical demands and responsibility of bearing witnessing, presenting literature as an essential, if imperfect, site for engaging with trauma which resists is unspeakable, unassimilated and fragmented. Future research could extend this inquiry by investigating how linguistic trauma unfolds across varied cultural and linguistic contexts, or by examining how narratives complicate the interplay between language, memory and trauma.

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