

Trauma without Witness: Memory and Generational Silence in Claire Fuller's *The Memory of Animals*

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Abstract

*The literature of trauma frequently depends on witnessing via testimony, recollection, and generational storytelling to maintain memory and facilitate healing. Nevertheless, Claire Fuller's *The Memory of Animals* (2023) explores a distinct landscape, illustrating trauma as unobserved, unvoiced, and defiant to expression. This article investigates how such trauma interrupts narrative consistency and unravels identity. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma as belated and incomprehensible, alongside Dominick LaCapra's notions of post memory and the acting out/working through framework, the novel reveals how personal and inter generational trauma persists in silence, exposing fractures in memory, communication, and the capacity to process or transmit suffering across generations. The characters' struggles serve as a poignant reminder of the enduring impact of unresolved pain, often manifesting in their relationships and perceptions of self. The narrative challenges readers to confront the complexities of trauma, urging a deeper understanding of how it shapes both individual lives and societies.*

Keywords : Trauma, Memory, Unmarked, Inter Generational, Existence.

Introduction

In the realm of trauma studies, having a witness, be it an external observer or a narrative voice, is frequently deemed crucial for affirming and processing traumatic experiences. The developing critical frameworks contest this model by examining

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the concept of 'trauma without a witness', a type of unrecognized suffering that escapes acknowledgment, expression, and the passing of memory. As the outside world collapses, the depths of memory and buried sorrow come to light, suggesting that trauma can appear not just through overt or conspicuous events, but can also be rooted in more subtle, transmitted silences.

This article examines how *The Memory of Animals* portrays trauma that is both intensely personal and passed through generations, yet remains unarticulated and unnoticed. This theme is central to Claire Fuller's exploration of memory, the legacy of silence, and the cognitive barriers associated with endurance in *The Memory of Animals* (2023). The story, set in a future Britain devastated by a terrible disease, centers on a young marine scientist named Neffy whose personal and family problems are revealed while she is imprisoned in a medical research facility. The novel demonstrates the communication and memory gaps that occur when pain goes unspoken by combining theoretical viewpoints from Dominick LaCapra's distinction between structural and historical trauma and Cathy Caruth's idea that trauma is something that is not fully understood during the experience. The story explores the representation of hidden grief, inherited suffering, and suppressed family stories by looking at concepts related to post-memory and Cathy Caruth's theories on trauma. Moreover, the narrative brings forth issues about the precision and comprehension of memory due to the absence of a definitive witness to Neffy's suffering and her fragmented recollections. Besides offering a bleak backdrop, the imaginary environment of the novel symbolizes emotional estrangement, insufficient grieving, and the unspoken traumas that linger across generations. *The Memory of Animals* adds to an expanding collection of works that reframe trauma as a persistent absence instead of a documented occurrence where this absence has a profound influence on identity, morality, and memory in crucial ways.

Discussion

Literature has traditionally served as a means to deal with trauma, offering a framework for storytelling and a moral space to recognize profound suffering. However, it remains unclear what happens when trauma is endured in solitude or without anyone observing, especially in situations that interrupt the flow of history. Claire Fuller's *The Memory of Animals* (2023) fundamentally redefines trauma as an event that takes place in stillness, loneliness, and dislocation. It presents trauma not merely without observers but frequently lacking a definite source, shared background, or the chance for healing. Fuller's *The Memory of Animals* (2023) specifically addresses this issue.

Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma describes trauma as an event that cannot be incorporated into one's understanding and that resurfaces later in the form of recollections and interruptions. Dominick LaCapra's reinterpretation of post memory, distinguishes between acting out and working through to examine how trauma and memory appear in the narrative. These theories shed light on how *The Memory of Animals* (2023) disrupts the traditional function of storytelling in trauma

recovery, placing emphasis instead on disjointed memories, ethical silence, and the lack of resolution.

Dystopia as Interior Landscape

Set in a post-apocalyptic Britain devastated by a pandemic and experimental medical trials, the novel interrogates the limits of trauma theory by presenting trauma that lacks an origin story, a collective memory, or a community of witnesses. Devastated by a lethal virus and scientific trials, the book focuses less on outside disasters and more on internal breakdown. This enables Fuller to investigate the emotional realm of trauma, how it can be sensed yet unarticulated, recalled but not communicated, and passed down without comprehension. In this way, he constructs a multifaceted story in which the central character, Neffy, serves as both the victim and an unwilling keeper of unaddressed, frequently indescribable trauma. This analysis explores how Fuller represents trauma as internal, fragmented, and ethically ambiguous, a trauma that occurs without witness, without audience, and often without words.

Memory as Ruin

Cathy Caruth's foundational work, particularly in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), theorizes trauma as an 'unclaimed' event, one that is not fully experienced in the moment of its occurrence and returns later, often involuntarily. According to Caruth, trauma is not a wound that can be told into resolution; instead, it resides in the gap between experience and awareness, appearing through flashbacks, nightmares, silence, and delayed effects (7). In *The Memory of Animals*, the main character Neffy experiences a severe psychological collapse amid and following the worldwide disaster. Her trauma isn't pinpointed to one specific moment but is dispersed throughout memory voids, silences, uncertainties, and the morally questionable choice to take part in an experimental vaccine study. Her seclusion during the lockdown, the fatalities she observes, and her suppressed memories create a traumatic framework that defies conventional storytelling. If we analyse critically, Neffy's trauma is never fully verbalized. Fuller deliberately withholds a coherent timeline, using dream-like sequences and the 'reveal' sessions—technological memory inducers—to emphasize the inaccessibility of memory. These temporal ruptures parallel Caruth's understanding of trauma as a disruption of linear temporality. The reveal sessions, designed to help patients recover blocked memories, only underscore the futility of narration. Instead of offering clarity, these sessions uncover greater contradictions: memories aren't facts, but reconstructions shaped by guilt, shame, and fear. This renders the traumatic history not just uncommunicable but essentially unpredictable. "When the memories come, they don't feel like mine. They press in, sharp-edged, but slide away before I can name them" (Fuller, *The Memory of Animals*, 2023).

This crisis of narrative is central to trauma without witness. Neffy cannot assemble her narrative since it defies order, clarity, and reason. The trauma she holds is additionally complicated by the ethical ambiguity of her participation in

scientific experiments. In contrast to victims in conventional trauma stories, Neffy is not completely blameless. This moral ambiguity complicates any possibility of confession or testimony

Furthermore, the novel presents a conjectural version of post memory: not inherited trauma in the conventional familial sense, but imposed memory, created artificially. While Hirsch's post memory focuses on the children of Holocaust survivors and their inherited trauma, Dominick LaCapra refines this idea by distinguishing between 'acting out', the compulsive repetition of trauma, and 'working through', the attempt to come to terms with the past. LaCapra critiques uncritical repetitions of trauma and emphasizes the importance of narrative as a space for ethical, performative engagement. In *The Memory of Animals*, however, this binary is not cleanly sustained. The character Neffy is caught in a loop of acting out—returning to the same memories of treachery, abandonment, and complicity, without any access to a shared community or therapist-like 'listener' to aid working through. The technological memory reconstructions simulate the possibility of working through, but ironically, they trap her in a cycle of repetition. Through the 'reveal' process, memories are manipulated, inserted, and replayed. This manipulation fractures LaCapra's framework because the "past" becomes unreliable and mutable. In such a world, what it means to inherit trauma is the question.

The character Neffy from *The Memory of Animals*, as both a scientist and a survivor, becomes the custodian of collective memory but the collective no longer exists. In place of community, she is surrounded by a few equally broken individuals who either refuse to remember or fear knowing. The silence between them is not only generational but ontological, a silence embedded in the loss of humanity itself. This deepens LaCapra's insight: "when no cultural scripts remain to frame trauma, the process of working through becomes suspended in an ethical limbo" (43).

One of the central questions comes out as: can trauma be inherited or remembered if its historical context is obliterated. The post-pandemic setting offers no official record, no shared archive, no ceremonies of remembrance. The trauma is not only private but also lacks external validation. This trauma without witness represents a radical break from traditional trauma narratives rooted in social frameworks such as genocide, war, colonialism.

Neffy's trauma also includes survivor's guilt, but with an added layer of ambiguity as she volunteered for a medical trial that may have killed others. This trauma has no clear moral compass, no villain or hero. It reflects what LaCapra might call 'limit events', moments where ethics, memory, and identity collapse. Her inability to speak or even to fully remember her past is not a failure of character but a structural feature of trauma as Caruth and LaCapra describe. In fact, the work critiques the demand for full disclosure or narrative coherence which suggests that remembering, especially when technologically manipulated, may be a violent act.

The Violence of Retrieval

In *The Memory of Animals*, Fuller's use of silence, both literal and metaphorical, is central to how trauma is conveyed in the novel. It is evident that the characters rarely communicate directly about their experiences. Even when memory is retrieved, it is not shared. This silence is not merely repression but can be seen as a narrative strategy that resists the reduction of trauma to 'story', as Caruth argues, trauma lies in the telling that can't be told. Neffy's silence also operates as an ethical boundary. She chooses not to reveal certain memories to others, not to name all her losses, and eventually, not to remain in the space of memory reconstruction.

This decision aligns with LaCapra's idea that some traumas need to be treated with performative respect—not to use memory for clarity, but to preserve the honour of its opacity—is supported by this ruling. Speculative fiction offers a unique opportunity to explore trauma not attached to historical referents. Fuller's employment of a post-apocalyptic backdrop heightens the feeling of cultural forgetfulness and societal collapse. Traditional indicators of shared grief such as ceremony, faith, authority, family dynamics are missing. In their place is a new reality in which trauma can neither be recorded nor collectively processed.

Yet, even in this collapsed world, Fuller insists on the lingering weight of memory with its distortions, burdens, and ethical dangers. Through Neffy, she raises profound questions: If memory can be reprogrammed, is forgetting more humane? If trauma is never witnessed, can it still shape identity? These questions extend past LaCapra and Caruth, advancing trauma studies into speculative and posthuman realms.

In conventional trauma accounts, like Holocaust testimonies or post-war literature, the existence of a witness like listener, community, or therapist, is essential for the processing of trauma. A witness is crucial for trauma to be expressible, and in the absence of someone to acknowledge and react, trauma still remains stuck in time. But in *The Memory of Animals*, there is no such witness. Neffy's trauma is intensified by the absence of listeners. Her fellow survivors avoid discussing their pasts. They dwell in shared, emotional stillness occupying space without connection. Fuller employs this context to demonstrate how trauma can intensify when it remains unrecognized and unvoiced. Even when memories surface, there is no dialogic framework to house them. This silence is both protective and corrosive. "We don't talk about before. We don't talk about after. We only talk about now. But even now feels like a memory of something that might never have happened" (Fuller, *The Memory of Animals*, 2023).

Neffy's narrative is carried out in isolation, both physically and psychologically. Confined within a research center following a viral outbreak that ravages the outside world, she remains among the few survivors. Her seclusion is intensified by her position as a test subject for an experimental vaccine, a decision that torments her and muddles her feelings of self-esteem and guilt. *The Memory of Animals* depicts memory not as a source of healing but as a weight, an area where revisiting

might cause more damage than benefit. The reveal sessions represent the institutionalization and commercialization of memory, providing a cautionary critique of the belief that remembering is fundamentally redemptive. These sessions evoke intense memory recollections, compelling characters to experience their history again without the reassuring presence of a witness or a therapist. This practice ironically violates the psyche in the name of healing, showing that remembrance can itself be traumatic. In Fuller's dystopia, the very technologies that aim to help survivors become instruments of re-traumatization. Neffy's encounter with her own past, especially her morally compromised decisions, is painful, but not cathartic. Unlike Caruth's idea of delayed understanding, Fuller shows that the return of memory doesn't guarantee clarity or transformation. Instead, it leaves Neffy emotionally paralyzed, stuck in a liminal space between knowledge and action.

Witness Refused

Another important element of trauma without witness in the novel is the lack of cultural continuity. In post-apocalyptic literature, characters frequently serve as the final guardians of a lost society. However, in *The Memory of Animals*, even this function is compromised. There exists no grieving community, no remembrance rituals, and no societal frameworks to contextualize trauma within a broader story. Neffy's recollections of her family are brief and twisted. There is no direct inheritance of trauma through lineage or storytelling. The trauma she carries is not rooted in shared history—it is solitary, floating, disconnected from communal frameworks. This is where Dominick LaCapra's post memory theory becomes relevant.

LaCapra argued that working through trauma requires both an acknowledgment of absence and an engagement with presence, that is, one must mourn what is lost but remain ethically situated in the present. In Fuller's novel, such mourning is nearly impossible. There is no 'presence' left to engage with. Instead, the characters drift in psychological stasis, surrounded by ruins without narrative. This creates a form of 'orphaned memory', not passed down, not witnessed, not ritualized. The trauma exists, but it cannot be grounded in a historical or generational framework. Neffy's memories do not belong to anyone but her and even she cannot fully claim them. Fuller's prose reflects the themes of trauma without witness. Her language is minimalistic, succinct, and frequently interrupted by pauses in conversation. Silence serves as a stylistic and thematic device. Neffy finds it difficult to express her emotions, even in her own thoughts. Her recollections are frequently articulated not through words, but through feelings like warmth, respiration, sound, life force. The inability of language to address trauma is a common motif. Whenever Neffy tries to discuss her history, she encounters indifference or avoidance. Her fellow survivors don't want to remember. They prefer the false peace of forgetting. This creates a world in which language itself becomes dangerous, something that threatens the fragile emotional numbness they cling to. Fuller's narrative thus refuses the idea that speaking trauma is always liberating.

Rather, it shows that sometimes, silence is the only ethical response to overwhelming loss. But this silence is not passive but it is charged, meaningful, and at times, protective.

Conclusion

Claire Fuller's *The Memory of Animals* reconfigures the landscape of trauma literature by confronting one of its most unsettling possibilities: trauma that exists without witness, without a clear referent, and without the redemptive power of narration. Through its post-apocalyptic setting and ethically complex protagonist, the novel dislocates trauma from its conventional frameworks, be it the shared communal memory of genocide, war, or familial inheritance, and presents it instead as an internal, disjointed, and often solitary phenomenon.

Utilizing Cathy Caruth's trauma theory and Dominick LaCapra's notion of post memory, the analysis demonstrates that Fuller creates a narrative where memory and trauma are not only delayed reactions to former pain, but dynamic and precarious forces that defy containment. Caruth's theory suggests trauma as an unacknowledged experience, a disruption in awareness that re-emerges sporadically through intrusive memories, gaps, and disjointed reminiscences. This framework is clearly demonstrated in Neffy's experiences—her memory gaps, the skewed 'reveal' sessions, and her struggle to create a coherent story about her history.

Fuller highlights the unachievability of narrative resolution through a fragmented timeline and unclear ethical landscape. Neffy experiences distress as a result of a string of morally dubious choices, feelings of desertion, and the breakdown of social and personal networks rather than a single traumatic incident. Her involvement in experimental medical research serves as a concerning constant because it raises moral and mental questions in addition to the obvious physical repercussions. Neffy is trapped in repetitive cycles of reliving, whether through the technologically induced reveal sessions or her internal psychic loops, without ever reaching resolution. Unlike traditional models of post memory that depend on familial inheritance of trauma, Fuller imagines a world in which memory is artificially imposed, manipulated, and decontextualized. There is no generational or cultural scaffolding to support mourning or healing. Instead, memory becomes a burden, a relic of a vanished world, distorted and isolated. Neffy's trauma is 'orphaned', floating in a reality that has lost its historical and ethical moorings. The absence of witnesses, of community, and of shared language means that trauma in Fuller's novel cannot be rationalized in conventional ways. The lack of observers, a community, and a common language indicates that trauma in Fuller's narrative cannot be conveyed through traditional storytelling methods. It is felt in quiet moments, through feelings, and in the spaces between expressions. The imaginative dystopian backdrop, stripped of societal customs or cultural remembrance, intensifies this critique. Neffy's world is not only ravaged by disease but by the collapse of human frameworks that might have otherwise held

space for grief, accountability, and mourning. Her solitude is not only physical, but also existential. Without collective memory or dialogic frameworks, trauma becomes unanchored, it is unable to be shared, observed, or ethically contextualized.

By denying the reader the solace of resolution or the restorative journey of healing, *The Memory of Animals* creates a deep and disquieting realm within trauma literature. It implies that trauma, especially in our imagined futures or posthuman scenarios, might no longer be expressible in the ways we have historically comprehended. This challenges trauma theory to account not only for the ruptures in individual psyche but also for the breakdown of the cultural and ethical systems that make working through possible. Fuller's ethical silence, her unwillingness to simplify suffering into narrative, and her investigation of the perils of memory provide a deeply layered, poignant perspective on trauma without witnesses. It may be concluded that when memory can be manipulated, distorted, or deleted, what persists is a fragmented self, the one which is disconnected from continuity and coherence.

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