

**UNIVERSITATEA „OVIDIU” DIN CONSTANȚA
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SUMMARY

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**MIXING MEMORY AND DENIAL: COPING WITH TRAUMA IN DON DELILLO,
KARAN MAHAJAN, AND ARUNDHATI ROY**

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This dissertation is conducted at the intersection of literary studies and psychoanalytic thought, motivated by yet another ethical imperative to engage with trauma as a lived, narrated, and often silenced experience. It is also framed by the historical and cultural moment in which it is written, a time in which the reverberations of traumatic events such as 9/11 are still felt, systemic oppression, wars (be it in Europe or in the Middle East), and global pandemics continue to reshape the way individuals and societies understand themselves and their pasts. Literature, particularly contemporary fiction, emerges as a privileged site of inquiry which is not only about representing trauma, but also about actively participating in the work of claiming, negotiating, and sometimes denying it.

Moreover, literature offers a unique space for coping with trauma: through narrative, metaphor, and aesthetic form, it enables both characters and readers to appear to process overwhelming experiences, reconfigure fragmented identities, and confront the unspeakable in ways that clinical discourse or historical record often cannot. Literature thus becomes not only a medium of representation but also a practice of survival. From the fragmented monologues of postmodern fiction to the elliptical silences and absences in trauma narratives, literature provides formal strategies that echo the psychological mechanisms of trauma survivors. Flashbacks, narrative disjunction, repetition, and the inability to find closure mirror the survivor's own struggle to integrate traumatic memory into a coherent life story. In giving shape to what resists shaping, literary texts enact a symbolic working-through that approximates, if never fully achieves, the therapeutic aim of mourning and integration. This symbolic space allows characters to tentatively reassemble meaning and identity.

The corpus of the dissertation is made up of Karan Mahajan's *The Association of Small Bombs*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. These novels allow for an interdisciplinary approach to trauma as both a psychological phenomenon and a socio-political reality, tracing how denial and memory operate not only within the psyche but also within families and individuals, communities, nations, and the broader cultural imaginary. The first two

are particularly important because they engage in the ways in which trauma and identity are shaped by and inscribed within systems of power, particularly those articulated through postcolonialism, necropolitics, and biopolitics. Drawing on the work of theorists such as Mbembe and Foucault, the study interrogates how state control, ideological systems, and colonial legacies continue to shape which lives are worthy of grief or not, which bodies are disposable, and how trauma is socially distributed and politically denied. Especially in Chapter Three and Four, questions of who is permitted to speak, who is allowed to remember, and who is condemned to silence, or erasure are foregrounded through close readings of fictional narratives shaped by violence, systemic marginalization and historical forgetting.

The corpus that was studied in this doctoral dissertation had the role to show that literature occupies a unique position in the landscape of trauma and memory studies. They serve as vessels for testimony and sites of active intervention, where form can resist closure, language can register silence without erasing it, and narrative structure can enact the very temporal disruptions that traumas inflict. In doing so, these texts model forms of ethical engagement that resist the commodification of suffering and confront the complicity of both state and spectator. This points toward a broader implication: the study of trauma fiction is not solely about cataloguing damage but about interrogating the cultural conditions under which damage becomes narratable, shareable, and politically meaningful.

Chapter One maps the conceptual terrain of trauma studies by forging a dialogue between psychoanalytic, deconstructive, and trauma-theoretical paradigms to illuminate how traumatic experience is encoded, recalled, and reimagined in literary texts. Beginning with Freud's pioneering insights into repression and the return of the repressed, the chapter will turn to Derrida's and Lacan's elaborations on the spectral interplay of language, and the speaking subject. Lacan's notion of the Real as an unrepresentable void, which disrupts the symbolic order, allows for an understanding of trauma as something beyond language, a rupture that resists full assimilation into the psyche and narrative. Building from this, the chapter integrates the work of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra to underscore the ethical and historiographical stakes of bearing witness to trauma. Caruth's notion of traumatic experience as belated and repetitive challenges traditional models of narrative understanding, while LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through trauma opens a critical avenue for engaging with memory, denial, and representation in literature. This chapter, thus, lays a multifaceted foundation for considering how trauma operates

both as an individual experience and a collective, cultural phenomenon, emphasizing how literature can provide insight into both personal and societal trauma narratives.

This dissertation aims to reengage with these conceptual foundations, not merely to rehearse established theory but to critically examine their ongoing transformation in the literary representation of trauma on both individual and collective levels. It aims to engage with some prevailing and frequently asked questions in the field of trauma studies such as whether there is a possible way to recover from trauma, and whether or to what extent age, gender, and race are key factors affecting the traumatized characters. To what extent can literary trauma theory and the work of trauma therapists from the medical professions contribute to a framework to be taken into account when acknowledging the power of “trauma fiction”? It is also important to note the personal motivation behind the thesis as it is my attempt to contribute to an evolving and contemporary trend in trauma studies, one that moves beyond its traditionally Western, Eurocentric, and often victim-exclusive framework. This calls for an obligatory shift to include the study of perpetrators too, even if prioritizing the study of trauma victims, to be seen in Karan Mahajan’s *The Association of Small Bombs*.

Chapter Two builds on the theoretical framework established earlier, focusing on how trauma is narrativized in Don DeLillo’s *Falling Man* within the context of post-9/11 cultural trauma. The chapter examines the novel through the intersection of psychoanalysis, trauma theory, and postmodern critique, exploring how the narrative reflects the complex relationship between personal and collective trauma in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks. Through a detailed reading of the novel’s fractured temporalities, symbolic motifs, and shifting narrative perspectives, the chapter focuses on how *Falling Man* captures the psychic disorientation caused by 9/11 while also highlighting the broader cultural and political implications of witnessing, media, and national identity in a postmodern world. This analysis positions the novel as an example of postmodern trauma fiction, demonstrating how it resists narrative closure, embraces fragmentation, and interrogates the unstable boundaries between reality, memory, and representation. DeLillo’s text is shown to be less about recovering from trauma and more about living within its spectacle – a key concept that critiques both the media’s aestheticization of trauma and the social structures that shape public memory. Additionally, the chapter emphasizes how *Falling Man* engages with the notion of post-traumatic identity, exploring how the characters’ experiences of 9/11 disrupt their

sense of self and challenge dominant cultural narratives about victimhood, heroism, and national security.

By focusing on these literary techniques and themes, the chapter underscores the novel's role in shaping post-9/11 cultural memory, contributing to the ongoing conversation about how societies process, represent, and resist traumatic events through fiction. It also examines the ethical and political stakes involved in witnessing and representing such trauma, with particular attention to how DeLillo's work complicates our understanding of recovery, identity, and the politics of remembrance. In the wake of that event, Western discourse frequently framed Otherness, particularly ethnic, racial, and religious difference, as a site of paranoia, surveillance, and exclusion. Literature that addresses the aftermath of 9/11 thus becomes a key space for rethinking these dynamics: it interrogates not only the trauma of the attack itself, but also the secondary traumas of xenophobia, cultural fragmentation, and nationalistic denial that followed. The subject's urge to align everything with their own identity is shown to be a fragile defense against a deeper terror: the terror of meaninglessness, instability, and vulnerability.

The third chapter continues the dissertation's investigation into cultural trauma by shifting focus from a globally mediated catastrophe like 9/11 to a more localized and underrepresented site of violence: the 1996 Lajpat Nagar bombing in Delhi, as depicted in Karan Mahajan's *The Association of Small Bombs*. Building on the theoretical foundations of postcolonialism, biopolitics, and necropolitics, this chapter is meant to interrogate how trauma not only fractures individual psyches but also reconfigures social identities, moral categories, and systems of power. Drawing from the work of Achille Mbembe, Michel Foucault, and Anne Kaplan, the analysis foregrounds how acts of terror — especially those deemed “small” by global standards — are processed unevenly across class, religion, and national lines. Mahajan's novel resists moral binaries and simplistic narratives of victimhood by examining the fluid boundaries between victim and perpetrator, most notably in the psychological trajectories of Mansoor and Ayub. The novel reveals how trauma is not merely an after-effect of violence but an ongoing political process, shaped by media erasure, institutional neglect, and systemic marginalization. In doing so, it critiques the spectacle of trauma from the margins, asserting the ethical imperative to bear witness not only to visible catastrophes but also to those quietly endured in the shadows of postcolonial modernity.

Postmodern literature often deploys self-reflexive and metafictional strategies that challenge the stability of narrative, memory and identity. These techniques, although stylistic in nature, mirror the fractured psychic states of traumatized subjects and the difficulty of representing trauma itself. In Karan Mahajan's *The Association of Small Bombs*, the oscillation between different perspectives reveals the contractedness of identity and forces readers to interrogate their assumptions about guilt, trauma, and empathy. Postmodernism's emphasis on the inherent fictional nature of narratives can prompt critical reflection on the ways in which traumatic experiences are mediated through storytelling. The concept of Otherness, of the quality of being different, is important to be integrated. The self and the Other are to be simultaneously accepted. Gilles Deleuze describes this transformation from "paranoia" to "schizo-madness", concepts which are used as philosophical metaphors, describing perceptions of one's identity.

The contributions of Dominick LaCapra are equally vital in understanding the ethical and political stakes of trauma. His distinction between "acting out" and "working through" trauma elucidates the divergent paths taken by the novel's characters. While Mansoor struggles with a muted form of working through, seeking coherence through religion and activism, Ayub becomes the embodiment of acting out — his unresolved suffering leading to performative violence that perpetuates trauma rather than alleviating it. Mahajan, through his polyphonic and non-linear narrative, critiques the societal tendency to demand simplistic, redemptive narratives of trauma, insisting instead on a portrayal that resists closure and honors the complexity of suffering. Through its nuanced portrayal of fragmented psyches, ideological disillusionment, and the seductions of radicalism, Mahajan's novel offers a deeply ethical engagement with the aftermath of violence. By collapsing the distinctions between victim and perpetrator, and by foregrounding the psychic toll of invisibility and erasure, the novel not only reflects trauma but enacts it, compelling the reader to witness what society so often chooses to ignore. It is this commitment to complexity or the refusal of simplicity that marks Mahajan's work as both timely and timeless, and that makes trauma fiction a critical site for negotiating the tangled web of memory, power, and human vulnerability in the modern world.

The last chapter explored *The God of Small Things* as a profoundly multifaceted text, one that engages with trauma not merely as a psychological rupture but as a historically embedded, socially reproduced, and politically manipulated phenomenon. Through a critical synthesis of contemporary theoretical frameworks — ranging from Michel Foucault's biopolitics and Achille

Mbembe's necropolitics to Jacques Derrida's hauntology, R.D. Laing's ontological insecurity, and Jean Baudrillard's hyperreality — this chapter has argued that Roy's novel constitutes a radical meditation on the mechanisms of power, memory, and erasure in the postcolonial world. At the heart of this analysis is the assertion that trauma in *The God of Small Things* is never isolated or individual. Rather, it is intertwined with the legacies of colonialism, the rigidity of caste hierarchies, the coercive logic of gender roles, and the economic disposability of marginalized bodies. Roy's novel reveals that the production of trauma is not accidental but deliberate; it is the result of biopolitical and necropolitical regimes that determine who may live, who must die, and who is denied even the dignity of remembrance.

The conceptual tool of liminality further frames Estha and Rahel's condition not as a phase of transition but as a permanent state of suspension. Drawing from Victor Turner, Arpad Szakolczai, and contemporary theorists such as MacKay and Hadromi-Allouche, the chapter articulates how the twins' trauma arrests their development, leaving them in a perpetual in-between state—between past and future, memory and oblivion, silence and speech. Their return to Ayemenem is not a moment of catharsis but a haunting, a spectral encounter with a history that remains unresolved. This interpretation aligns with Derrida's hauntology, where the specter is not merely a remnant of the past but a structuring force in the present. Sophie Mol's spectral presence contrasts sharply with Velutha's erasure, further reinforcing the necropolitical logic of who is mourned and who is forgotten. Derrida's theories on mourning and spectrality are instrumental in unpacking the ethics of remembrance in Roy's novel. Sophie Mol's death is mythologized, preserved in family lore, and serves as a point of cohesion within the Ipe family's identity. In contrast, Velutha's death is systematically erased, his story buried to maintain the illusion of social purity. The politics of mourning, as Derrida contends, are inseparable from the politics of exclusion: who is allowed to be remembered, and who is condemned to oblivion. In *The God of Small Things*, mourning is not a universal right, but a privilege determined by caste, class, and ideology. Roy critiques not only the act of forgetting but the active labor that goes into maintaining silence.

One of the additional contributions this dissertation offers is the reframing of trauma's dialectic of memory and denial as an interdependent dynamic shaped as much by political and cultural infrastructures as by psychic processes. By reading post-9/11 literature, Indian post-terror narratives, and postcolonial caste fiction through a shared psychoanalytic and cultural framework,

this dissertation shows how trauma both resists and demands representation, and how its narratives enact the very fractures they depict. In doing so, it bridges disciplinary divides between psychoanalysis, postmodernism, and postcolonial theory, proposing a methodological model for trauma studies that moves beyond Eurocentric, victim-exclusive frameworks. In this way, it clarifies how identity, memory, and denial are co-constructed in trauma fiction and suggests a pathway for future scholarship. The insights drawn from DeLillo, Mahajan, and Roy, can be extended to non-Western literatures, oral traditions, and digital media narratives, especially those emerging from communities whose traumas remain under-represented in global discourse.

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