

## **The Weight Of Silence: ‘Trauma’ And Its Echoes In Selvadurai's Selective Queer Narratives**

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### **Abstract:**

Trauma refers to a deeply distressing and disturbing experience that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope and results in feelings of intense fear, helplessness, or horror, leading to the symptom of long-lasting anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and other kind of psychological distress and making an individual question their identity, impacting their sense of self, their relationships, and their mental and emotional health. Queer theory is employed as a theoretical framework to emphasize that trauma is not solely an individual problem but rather a product of societal and cultural factors, including homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormativity. The concept of intersectionality recognizes that individuals can experience multiple forms of discrimination, and this is especially true for Queer individuals who face a unique set of challenges in society. The question of how Queers experience trauma requires examining power dynamics and the ways in which voices and experiences of such individuals are recognized and valued within society. Despite this, there has been limited research on the discussion on Trauma of a Queer individuals and its impact on their self and society. This research paper explores the confluence of queer theory and trauma theory, shedding light on how conventionalism and expectations related to gender and sexuality contribute to exclusive formation of identity of LGBTQ+ individuals against the heteronormative rhetoric while investigating the traces in Selvadurai's writings. Secondly, it attempts to create space for Queer individuals to speak out and be heard, while also recognizing and addressing the structural barriers that limit their agency and power. Lastly, this research paper aims to highlight the ways in which experiences of trauma can be transformative and serve as a catalyst for change, leading to new and more inclusive understandings of gender and sexuality.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Sexuality, Gender, Queer, Homophobia, Societal Discrimination

### **Introduction**

Queering is the act of reversing heterosexuality as the norm. Queer Theory examines the history of cultural depictions of gay and lesbian people as aberrant, diseased, or criminal, emphasizing sexuality as an important area of critical analysis when dealing with cultural materials. The study of trauma theory looks at how literary texts process and represent traumatic events. Trauma theory is an effort to comprehend the various ways that traumatic events are shown, interpreted, exposed, and suppressed in a range of literary and historical works.

Trauma can be described as a deep wound, inflicted upon the psyche by a shattering or overwhelming experience. It is an emotional scar that marks the soul and can leave a lasting impact on a person's mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Trauma can be the result of a variety of experiences, including violence, abuse, loss, or other life-threatening events that can leave individuals feeling helpless, alone, and vulnerable. It is an experience that can shake one's sense of self, disrupt one's ability to cope with daily life, and leave one feeling haunted by memories or experiences, making individuals feeling disconnected, numb, or overwhelmed by emotions.

The word "trauma" derives from the ancient Greek word "tere," which means "a wound, a hurt; a defeat." The current definition, "physic wound, unpleasant experience that causes abnormal stress," has been in use since 1894 ("Trauma" n.p.). According to the American Psychological Association (APA), trauma is defined as "an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster." ("Trauma" n.p.)

Trauma theory is a branch of psychology and psychoanalysis that seeks to understand the impact of traumatic experiences on an individual's mental and emotional well-being. In order to give voice and meaning (and, thus, understanding) to the terrible incident that they are still finding difficult to reconcile with, survivors of traumatic events often attempt to document their experiences through testimony. While these are common human emotions that most individuals may experience from time to time, racism, homophobia, and heterosexism's impacts frequently lead to a more unfavorable topography of affects and emotions. As Sara Ahmed has argued, "such forms of discrimination can have negative effects, involving pain, anxiety, fear, depression and shame, all of which can restrict bodily and social mobility" (Ahmed Cultural Politics 154).

In her analysis of the sovereign subject, Wendy Brown draws our attention to the "wounded attachments" (Brown 52–77) that people who have traditionally been denied sovereignty have come to live with because of marginalization and

subjugation stemming from prejudice, sexism, and homophobia. There rises a contend that such wounded attachments produce wounded people who challenge the ontological and epistemological bounds of humanity and normalcy that the status quo demands. In turn, those wounds could give rise to unpleasant emotions like fury, hostility, and bitterness. In Brown's "*On the Genealogy of Morals*", she expands on Nietzsche's logics of resentment as a conflicting arena for identity politics. She notes that although resentment—dubbed "the moralizing revenge of the powerless"—implies anguish and suffering and keeps people from moving on, it is also based in reaction as it seeks to shift blame for its own suffering. As stated by Ann Cvetkovich, "the objective is to depathologize negative emotions so that they can be viewed as a positive source for political action rather than its antithesis" (Cvetkovich Depression 2). Heteronormativity is crucial to turn these unfavorable emotions and their broken yet depressing ties into a politics of potential and hope that subverts scholarly and popular discourses on racialization.

Trauma theory and queer theory are related in several ways, as both fields are concerned with the experiences of petit and stigmatized individuals, and the ways in which social norms and power structures impact individual experiences and identities.

The theories are interested in the ways in which individuals experience and respond to societal trauma. Trauma theory has traditionally focused on the experiences of survivors of violence, abuse, and other forms of extreme stress, while queer theory has centered on the experiences of LGBTQ+ people who face discrimination, marginalization, and violence because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Both fields emphasize the impact of societal norms and power structures on individual experiences and the ways in which these experiences can shape mental health and well-being.

They challenge traditional understandings of identity and subjectivity. Trauma theory has helped to disrupt traditional psychoanalytic models of the self, which often assumed a unified, stable identity. Similarly, queer theory has challenged normative assumptions about sexuality and gender, arguing that identity categories are fluid and context dependent. Both fields suggest that our experiences and identities are shaped by external factors and that traditional understandings of individuality may be limited or even harmful.

Both fields emphasize the importance of narrative and storytelling in healing and recovery. Trauma theory has highlighted the role of narrative in processing and making sense of traumatic experiences, while queer theory has emphasized the power of storytelling in creating and affirming alternative identities and perspectives. Both fields suggest that the process of storytelling can be a crucial tool for transforming individual and societal understandings of trauma and marginalization. The intersections between trauma theory and queer theory offer rich opportunities for further exploration and insight into the experiences of marginalized individuals and the ways in which societal norms and power structures shape individual and collective identities.

Shyam Selvadurai's literary canvas transcends mere storytelling; it meticulously stitches together threads of personal and collective trauma, particularly as they echo within the lives of queer individuals. Infused with the insights of trauma theory, his novels delve beyond the surface, unveiling the profound wounds inflicted by both internal battles and the unrelenting pressures of society. They become poignant explorations of narratives silenced by shame and societal norms, offering glimpses into the intricate journeys towards healing and self-discovery. Shyam Selvadurai is a distinct writer, who writes not only about the queer but also opens the space for them to express their psychological, mental, and 'self' creatively. Amidst the political atmosphere set in his novels, Selvadurai gives ample proposition for the distinction between what constitutes the normal and the 'other'. The wide range of his novel introspects inside the constructing notion of 'gender' dominant in society, along with the counter-narrative building up in the background. The collection of his works: *Funny Boy*, and *The Cinnamon Gardens* encapsulates the trauma and the search for 'self' in society, the luminous journey from the simplicity of his childhood days into the more intricately shaded world of the Adults - with its secrets, its injustice, and its capacity for violence.

### **Navigating the Labyrinth of Memory: Shyam Selvadurai's Fiction and the Echoes of Trauma**

Queer people often face unique and pervasive forms of trauma as a result of societal discrimination and marginalization. This trauma can take many forms, including physical and emotional abuse, rejection from family and community, harassment and violence, and internalized shame and. LGBTQ+ individuals may also face additional traumas related to their experiences of coming out, such as the loss of relationships and support systems, or the pressure to conform to heteronormative expectations.

One of the most profound forms of trauma that queer people may experience is the impact of internalized homophobia or transphobia. When individuals are constantly told by society that their identities and desires are shameful or immoral, it can be extremely difficult to develop a sense of self-acceptance and self-worth. This can lead to feelings of depression, anxiety, and hopelessness, as well as a heightened risk of suicidal ideation and attempts. Selvadurai's characters navigate a terrain laden with individual and collective traumas. Personal experiences of internalized homophobia, societal rejection, and the ever-present specter of violence mark their lives.

In "Funny Boy," Arjie's childhood innocence fractures upon the realization of his sexuality, leaving him grappling with shame and confusion. This individual trauma shapes his identity and relationships, mirroring the silencing of queer narratives and the pressure to conform within broader societal structures. In the chapter, 'Pigs can't fly' – Arjie's devotion to play "Bride-Bride" and his unbiased authority over the brides position in the game reflect his desire of transition, or an

attempt that challenges the heteronormative ideology, his innocence is kept at stake and when questioned by 'her Fatness' being name called as 'Pansy', 'A faggot', 'A sissy', clearly stated the wounding intentions and the direct attack on the personal preference of a seven year old boy. Later being confronted by the adults and being brought in front of the family, and his uncle's comment, "looks like you have a funny one here", incites self-doubt and shame, forcing the parents to make Arjie strictly adhere to the assigned gender roles drawing a divide between a girl's world and a boy's one with no space of representation in between. According to Vivienne Cass *Model of Homosexual Identity Formation*, there are six stages that lead up to recognition of the self as the 'other', starting with the state of 'Confusion' as the initial starting point. Arjie's state of confusion can be seen when he expresses,

"It was clear to me that I had done something wrong, but what it was I couldn't comprehend. I thought of what my father had said about turning out "funny." The word "funny" as I understood it meant either humorous or strange, as in the expression, "that's funny". Neither of these fitted the sense in which my father had used the word, for there had been a hint of disgust in his tone." (FB 17)

Trauma's disruptive nature often manifests in fragmented memories and unreliable narrators. Selvadurai masterfully utilizes this technique in "Funny Boy," where Arjie's fragmented narrative reflects his struggle to piece together his past and understand his identity. This narrative technique resonates with trauma theory's emphasis on the unreliability of memory and the challenges of reconciling with traumatic experiences.

The trauma that queer people experience is often characterized by a sense of otherness and marginalization, which can lead to feelings of isolation and despair. This trauma is often the result of systemic and interpersonal discrimination, which can include verbal and physical violence, harassment, and exclusion from societal norms and expectations.

One of the most significant forms of trauma that queer people face is the impact of heteronormativity and cisnormativity on their lives. Heteronormativity refers to the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm and that all individuals should identify as either male or female, while cisnormativity refers to the assumption that all individuals should identify with the gender they were assigned at birth. These norms are often deeply embedded in societal institutions and cultural values and can result in significant trauma for those who do not conform to these expectations.

Works like *Cinnamon Gardens* delve deeper, showcasing how internalized homophobia fuels self-destructive behaviors, trapping characters in a labyrinth of repression, shame and self-disgust intertwine, weaving a complex tapestry around the characters grappling with their sexual desires and identities. Through Balendran Navaratnam, a character in *Cinnamon Gardens*, Selvadurai investigates the topic of bisexuality and homosexuality. Balendran, a forty-year-old man, kept his homosexuality undercover. Married to his half-English cousin Sonia with a son studying in London, he lives in a world of his own due to his clandestine homosexuality.

The intensity of Balendran's feelings for Richard can be seen as his father, the Mudaliyar Navaratnam, informed him of the impending arrival of his past lover. Even after twenty years of separation, the name of Richard could bring out a very powerful reaction in him –

Balendran felt light-headed, felt the need to put his head between his legs, to have the blood enter his head again. But, at the same time, he had an equally strong need to maintain his dignity, his calm, in order not to betray in his father's presence the impact that name still had on him after all these years, the combination of regret and dismay that arose in him. (CG 31)

This abrupt change in their connection both indicates and emphasizes Balendran's gay affiliation. In their second meeting, there was a clear concretization of the implicit, abstract sexualization that had occurred in their first. Balendran is alternately gay, straight, and gay in the book. The linguistic connotations are sufficient to understand his dominating orientation, even though the heterosexual manifestations of his character have never been discussed directly. Lukshman, a figure in absentia, is the boy he and his wife Sonia had, starting the procreative phase of their marriage.

The essay *The Trauma of Coming Out: Developmental, Attachment, and Sexual Orientation Issues* by Neil Altmann explores the experiences of trauma that individuals in the LGBTQ+ community may face during the coming out process. Altmann argues that the process of coming out can be a traumatic experience, as individuals may face rejection, discrimination, and violence from family, friends, and society at large. This trauma can be compounded by the societal norms and expectations related to gender and sexuality that create an environment in which queer individuals are often marginalized and devalued. He quotes,

"From a developmental perspective, the coming out process is one of the most profound and identity-shaping experiences an individual may undertake. As such, it is a time when individuals may be especially vulnerable to traumatic experiences, particularly if they encounter rejection, hostility, or violence from others as a result of their sexual orientation. The fear of rejection and the experience of stigma and discrimination may result in shame, self-doubt, and low self-esteem, all of which can have a profound impact on an individual's emotional and psychological well-being."

He further adds,

"In addition, internalized homophobia and self-stigma can contribute to feelings of shame, guilt, and self-loathing. These feelings can lead to self-destructive behaviors, such as substance abuse, eating disorders, and suicidal ideation. The process of coming out and accepting one's sexual orientation can be a long and difficult journey, often marked by periods

of denial, anger, depression, and anxiety. In some cases, the trauma of coming out can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other mental health disorders.”

Altmann highlights the importance of attachment theory in understanding the trauma experienced by queer individuals during the coming out process. Attachment theory suggests that individuals develop attachment styles based on their early relationships with caregivers, which can shape their expectations and behaviors in later relationships. Altmann argues that for queer individuals, the coming out process may involve a rupture in attachment with family members or others who do not accept their sexual orientation or gender identity, leading to feelings of loss and trauma.

## Conclusion

In order to address the trauma that queer individuals experience, it is important to recognize the unique challenges that they face and to develop trauma-informed approaches to care and support. This may include providing safe and affirming spaces for individuals to access care, as well as developing culturally sensitive and responsive interventions that are tailored to the specific needs of queer communities. It is also important to work towards creating a more just and equitable society that recognizes and affirms the diversity of gender and sexuality, and that actively works to dismantle heteronormative and cisnormative power structures.

While Selvadurai's portrayal of trauma resonates with trauma theory, critiques highlight the potential neglect of broader socio-political contexts and systemic causes of oppression. The focus on individual experiences raises questions about the complexities of diverse queer experiences and the lack of representation of marginalized voices within the LGBTQ+ community.

As scholars delve deeper into Selvadurai's literary landscape, engaging critically with his work remains crucial. Acknowledging both the strengths and limitations of his narratives allows for a more nuanced understanding of how his fiction reflects the multifaceted and evolving experiences of trauma, identity, and resilience within the LGBTQ+ community.

This research paper format offers a structure for further exploration, inviting critical analysis and engagement with various theoretical frameworks and contemporary perspectives. By interrogating Selvadurai's complex tapestry and its resonance with trauma theory, we gain valuable insights into the human condition and the enduring quest for healing amidst the scars of trauma.

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