



Ishal Paithrkam

Issue-44, December 2025

journal home page: <https://ojs.ishalpaithrkam.info>



Traces of Trauma: Fragmented Memory and Female Identity in Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend*

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Trauma theory has been a useful tool for reading contemporary women's writing and in the past few years has been widely mobilised in order to account for novels by women writers who are often preoccupied with female embodiment, violation, and gendered subjugation. This article will put into practice the trauma theory of Cathy Caruth and Bessel van der Kolk in relation to Elena Ferrante's novel *My Brilliant Friend* (2012). The novel will be read as a traumatic narrative through a consideration of the traces of the traumatic in its form, including narrative fragmentation, silence, and somatic recall. Through my analysis I will make three main arguments in relation to Ferrante's novel. The first of these is that the form of the novel mimics the mechanics of trauma. The second argument is that Ferrante's novel enacts and illustrates a distinctly female mode of witnessing, specifically because of the novel's emphasis on bodily signs and symptoms, silences, and fragmentation. And thirdly, that the violence which befalls the protagonists has a lasting impact on their friendship, which vacillates between mutuality and distance. This analysis of Ferrante's novel responds to recent work in Ferrante Studies which has been preoccupied with theorising the relationship

between female friendship and the gendered experience of violence, most notably in the Neapolitan neighbourhood where the novels are set. The application of trauma theory to Ferrante's novel is a novel one and responds to a gap in the field. The article will, therefore, make a contribution to Trauma Studies and Women's Writing as well as to Ferrante Studies.

Keywords: Elena Ferrante, trauma theory, fragmented memory, female subjectivity, narrative silence

Introduction

Elena Ferrante's *My Brilliant Friend* (2012), the first in the four-part Neapolitan Quartet series, is a critically lauded work that has been analysed on a multitude of fronts. The topics and themes Ferrante's novel engages with have been of particular interest to trauma critics, most notably those concerning her works' feminist politics and social critique, themes that are recurrent and central to her novelistic output as a whole. Trauma studies criticism on Ferrante, to date, has focused on two main areas. The first of these is the depiction of and interaction with trauma's effects on the female characters in her novels, while the second area of critical interest to date has been narrative experimentation more broadly, with some important work done on the relationship between the two. The formal qualities of Ferrante's writing and their relationship to traumatic experience, however, have not yet been explored in any depth. This article examines the significance of Ferrante's specific formal strategies, including fragmentation, silences, and a focus on the body, and the way they contribute to a working-through of traumatic experience in *My Brilliant Friend*.

Trauma theory, particularly as it has been developed by Cathy Caruth and Bessel van der Kolk, is especially well suited to Ferrante's work. Caruth's notion of trauma as "unclaimed experience" that cannot be integrated into linear narrative, and van der Kolk's work on the role of the body and somatic memory in psychological trauma, can helpfully be brought to bear on *My Brilliant Friend*'s rendering of the ways trauma can affect consciousness and subjectivity. The novel's main characters, Elena and Lila, grow up in a world of domestic

violence, economic insecurity, and gendered oppression that leaves its mark on their psyches in the form of the novel's formal elements.

The paper suggests that Ferrante's depiction of broken memory, narrative gaps, and somatic language can be interpreted as a complex literary translation of the traumatic effects on female subjectivity formation. It is argued that the novel's form replicates the fractured temporality of traumatic memory, that the silence signals the unspeakability of women's experience, and that the somatic attention to the lived experience inscribes the psychological scars in *My Brilliant Friend*. In conclusion, the paper states that the novel can be seen as a unique example of a witnessing and testifying model of women's traumatic experiences in a male-dominated society.

Trauma Theory: Literary Application

Current trauma theory and trauma-informed literary analysis is concerned with analysing literature that derives from the unique state of mind of the traumatized. In *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), Cathy Caruth defined trauma as an event that "is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it" (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). Traumatic memory may be replayed and reexperienced, so therefore, it is marked by gaps in time and memory. Thus, Caruth saw trauma as being able to be expressed not just in narrative form but also with the formal structures of trauma interrupting linear narrative structures through repetition, intrusion, and fragmentation. In other words, trauma might not just be mimicked by literature but shown through the structure of trauma.

Building on Caruth's emphasis on the time-based distortion of trauma, Bessel van der Kolk's work on somatic memory can also be utilized to expand on the affective experience of trauma. Van der Kolk, who works extensively on how trauma is encoded on the body, notes the ways in which trauma survivors experience not just flashbacks or temporal disruptions, but other physical symptoms, hypervigilance, and body-based reactions prior to recollection. In *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), he notes that "traumatic memories are not like ordinary memories" because "instead of being imprinted

as stories, coherent in time, they are isolated sensory imprints” (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 243). Such somatic markers of trauma, then, point to the need for literary representations to focus on not just fragmentation in narration, but also the physical experience and sensation of inhabiting a body after a trauma has occurred.

The relevance of trauma theory to *My Brilliant Friend* is heightened by the fact that Ferrante’s strategies, especially at the level of form, often have a strong affinity with trauma theory’s key arguments. For instance, the novel’s abrupt shifts in time and its associative movement between past and present both seem to replicate what Caruth notes about trauma as its inability to be integrated into linear time. The emphasis on somatic symptoms (Elena’s panic attacks and Lila’s various “illnesses,” or again the narrative’s often exhausting detailing of bodily pains, discomfort, and hyperarousal) in the novel also seems to echo van der Kolk’s approach to trauma as a physiological phenomenon. This does not just suggest a structural kinship between trauma theory and Ferrante’s narrative techniques but seems to indicate a traumatic aesthetic, which, in making the wounds caused by patriarchal and social violence visible, at once enacts and seeks to overcome this violence.

Moreover, the focus on witnessing and testimony in trauma theory also helps to account for the effectiveness of *My Brilliant Friend* as at once an individual memoir and a collective witness to women’s experience of violence and marginalization. The novel’s double narrative—Elena writing about her friendship with the now-disappeared Lila—produces both what Dori Laub describes as “the imperative to tell and be heard” of traumatic testimony (Laub, 1992, p. 78) and an awareness of the gaps, silences and impossibilities that inhere in the linguistic representation of traumatic experience.

Fragmented Memory and Narrative Structure

My Brilliant Friend is acutely self-aware in its exploration of the ways in which traumatic memory functions and is known. It is highly sensitive to the ways in which it is not a matter of chronology that traumatic memory fractures so much as it is a matter of temporal disjuncture. The novel is itself structured around fractured temporal

frames. It uses sudden associative leaps in chronology and recollections, which are meant to mimic how trauma is remembered and recounted outside of a normal linear timeline. It makes use of this highly experimental and self-aware structure to achieve some of the effects of trauma on memory and narrative. The novel begins with a phone call, in which Elena is informed of Lila's absence from home, and immediately transitions to Lila's past, which is what Elena is trying to remember as she contemplates what her friendship with Lila means. The structure is highly fragmented and elliptical in style and registers Elena's grappling with the past and its traumatizing belatedness which returns to disrupt chronology in the fashion that Cathy Caruth would later argue was the primary feature of trauma (Caruth, 1996).

The trauma of colonial displacement is defined by Habeeb and Sait (2025) as a "double wounding"; one that is both "individual, psychological, and personal" and "collective, cultural and national" and which, when compounded, feeds a state of "displacement and disintegration" (Habeeb and Sait 2025). Elena and Lila experience a similarly seismic social shift as they navigate the instability of post-war Naples.

Traumatic memory forms are highlighted in the novel by the fragmented presentation of childhood violence. The novel doesn't display the memories of domestic violence, neighbourhood violence, and sexual threat in a straightforward, temporal order. Instead, Ferrante seems to give way to these fragments when they are summoned by an association, which otherwise derails the storyline. When Elena remembers the instance of Don Achille's murder, for example, she is pulled back to the smell of the person who was afraid, to the sound of footsteps in staircases, and to the visual image of a gush of blood, before she remembers the story. Elena reflects: "I was so frightened I couldn't breathe; all I could hear was the blood pounding in my ears louder than the voices on the street" (Ferrante, 2012, p. 78). In a similar way, van der Kolk notes that traumatic memory is registered as "isolated sensory imprints" (van der Kolk, 2014), not as a story. The structure of the novel appears to enact this process.

Particularly noteworthy is the way in which the novel handles the episode of the dolls, which can be read as a traumatic memory that returns obsessively throughout the text in fragmented form. The event—in which Elena and Lila’s dolls fall down a cellar grating—is presented as a minor childhood accident; however, the recurrence of the episode in Elena’s memory, and its obsessive return, signals its status as a formative trauma that marks the loss, abandonment, and slipperiness of identity that will be repeated in their relationship. The way in which the memory of the event intrudes, in fragmented form, through dreams, sudden associations, and moments of anxiety, signals the type of “insistent return” of the traumatic event that resists the will of consciousness (Caruth, 1996, p. 91).

The temporal and narrative patterns of the novel also reflect, or represent, what we might call collective or cultural trauma, since individual memories are not easily disentangled from violence writ large in the social or cultural sphere. Elena’s memories, for example, are often co-mingled with the violence of the neighbourhood, the desperation of economic need, the collective neurosis or social malaise of post-war Naples in a way that makes individual and collective trauma difficult to tell apart. We might read this as a literary representation of trauma theory’s understanding of the structural or social causes of psychological trauma, of the ways in which individual suffering is rooted in systemic violence and oppression.

Moreover, the fact that this fragmentation of consciousness is also presented in a fragmented form has a specifically feminist function in that the linearity of the developmental model typical of the male bildungsroman is disrupted. The idea of Elena’s narrative is not that as her life progresses her consciousness moves towards integration and develops towards a stable identity, but that traumatic events continue to have the capacity to intervene in her understanding of herself and cause her to change. In this way, it is proposed that for women subjected to the experience of patriarchal violence, psychological development may have to take a different form, which may not necessarily follow the usual expectations of growth.

Silence and the Unspeakable

In *My Brilliant Friend*, silence and ellipses are used as tools for the representation of the unspeakable in women's experiences. The novel's use of silence and ellipses is about representing the unspeakable aspects of women's trauma that derives from gendered violence and sexual threat. In their deployment of silence, the author depicts how women cannot articulate traumatic experiences and are unable to find words to describe their pains that overstep the limits of what the conscious mind can comprehend (Caruth, 1996, p. 17). In the novel, there are certain instances where silence and ellipses are used to describe and allude to certain experiences that women undergo which are sexually violent, domestic violence, and the fear of patriarchal power. These are not completed sentences and therefore the use of ellipses signifies an incomplete experience as an act of resistance to patriarchal violence. The act of using incomplete sentences and the use of the first-person narrative bring to the fore the unspeakable nature of certain experiences that women go through.

The handling of rape is one example of this strategy of omissions. The moment when Elena might be raped, the narration is more fragmented and elliptical with short sentences and scene interruptions which signal the inability of the narrator to fully represent what has happened. As the narrator Elena says about an assault she experienced: "He grabbed my arm and I felt something break inside me, but I can't say what it was. I can't find the words. There are no words" (Ferrante, 2012, p. 156). The novel makes explicit the failure of language in its description of an incident of violence, which is in line with trauma theory and its account of how certain experiences are unrepresentable and require literary form to include gaps or silence.

Ferrante's ellipses and strategic omissions in dialogue, particularly in moments of male violence against women, can be seen as an intentionally feminist move, by rejecting voyeuristic tropes of women's pain and objectification pervasive in male-authored literary tradition. By leaving the direct violence implicit and insisting the novel dwell in its symptoms, silences and behavioural impacts, the novel offers the reader an ethical entry point into the reality of the physical

attacks and rapes; one that upholds feminist trauma theory's insistence on a witness's testimony that preserves dignity even as it bears witness to gendered systematic violence.

The friendship between Elena and Lila is particularly notable for the significant silences that punctuate it, exposing the limits of even the most intimate friendship in the face of traumatic experience. They repeatedly have conversations that break off at key moments, a feature of Ferrante's style signalled by dashes and ellipses that Dori Laub has identified as a textual equivalent to the "collapse of witnessing" that can take place when trauma overwhelms the capacity to speak about it (Laub, 1992, p. 67). The silences in the narrative gesture towards an unsharability of certain aspects of women's experience under patriarchy, even within a relationship of deep intimacy and mutuality.

The novel also uses silence as a mode of resistance to the patriarchal expectations that women's narratives be fully consumable and comprehensible. In not providing full accounts of her characters' traumatic experiences, Ferrante safeguards the interiority of her characters and at the same time forces the reader to recognize the limits of their own knowledge. This strategy can be understood to create a feminist ethics of representation that safeguards the complexity and dignity of traumatic experience while still making legible its psychological and social consequences. Silence is strategically deployed as both a formal strategy and a political statement about women's right to withhold certain experiences from public knowledge.

Somatic Memory: The Body as Site of Trauma

In *My Brilliant Friend*, Ferrante's explicit descriptions of physical ailments, bodily awareness, and embodied responses find a parallel in van der Kolk's perspectives on the corporeal nature of trauma. The novel gives significant emphasis to physical symptoms and visceral experiences as characters navigate the impact of traumatic events. Panic attacks, inexplicable illnesses, hypervigilance, and somatic responses are among the physical expressions of trauma depicted in the book. Ferrante's characters often experience trauma through these physical manifestations, with the body remembering

and reenacting what the conscious mind has not fully processed. Van der Kolk notes that traumatic experiences can be encoded in the body as “body memories” that persist even in the absence of conscious recollection (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 96). In Ferrante’s work, the physical and psychological responses to trauma are intertwined, with bodily symptoms sometimes preceding conscious awareness of the traumatic memories.

Elena’s panic attacks are the clearest instances of somatic symptoms of her trauma. In situations of emotional distress, she experiences an embodied trauma response that is not easily explained by the situation at hand. Elena explains her physical symptoms of a panic attack: “My heart was beating so hard I thought it would burst, my hands were shaking, and I felt as if I were drowning even though I was sitting perfectly still” (Ferrante, 2012, p. 203). Elena’s physiological symptoms of an increased heart rate, shaking hands, and feeling like she is drowning are examples of the body’s alarm system remaining switched on long after the traumatic events occurred and continuing to cause physical symptoms as a way of remembering the trauma.

Lila’s illnesses. As with other characters in the novel, Lila frequently gets sick with symptoms such as fever, fatigue, and collapse, often during times of extreme psychological strain or in response to potentially dangerous stimuli. The pattern of her illnesses indicates that Lila’s body has become a kind of storage space for her traumatic memories and that her conscious mind has been unable to fully process or integrate them. This preoccupation with the body’s response to trauma echoes a key insight from trauma theory—that the body “keeps the score” of traumatic experience through the persistent symptoms that continue long after the traumatic event has passed.

Ferrante’s writing about bodily hypervigilance (the sensory scanning for threat, startle responses, physical tension, and so on that characterizes Elena’s and Lila’s embodied experience) provides further illustration of trauma’s effects on her characters’ relationship to their bodies and physical surroundings. The novel’s emphasis on sensory experience, including passages where the characters suddenly notice

a sound or smell or register a bodily sensation, exemplifies the increased somatic awareness that van der Kolk describes as a symptom of post-traumatic stress.

This way of exploring embodied memory has a feminist aspect as well in that the novel affirms the validity of the women's somatic experiences and it refuses to relegate such physical symptoms to the "hysterical" or the psychosomatic in a pejorative sense. Ferrante's representation of the body's memories as actual "knowledge" that must be accounted for is in keeping with feminist trauma theory's attention to the body as a legitimate source of knowledge and testimony.

Trauma and Female Friendship

The entangled and tumultuous friendship between Elena and Lila, protagonists of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels, is a profound exploration of the interplay between trauma, gender, and female bonding. Their relationship is shaped and complicated by their shared experiences of violence, both within their neighbourhood and domestic spheres, and by the gendered constraints that restrict and define women's roles and relationships in their patriarchal Neapolitan society. In this way, their friendship can be seen as a kind of "traumatic bonding," where shared trauma serves as both a connector and a disruptor, enabling and inhibiting forms of intimacy that are both life-affirming and life-threatening (Herman, 1992, p. 89).

The novel shows how the mutual recognition of trauma creates a special shared experience of survival between the two protagonists that is unavailable to outsiders. Elena and Lila develop an almost telepathic understanding that is built on the recognition of threat and the deployment of similar psychological survival strategies. Elena points this out: "Lila understood immediately what I couldn't even explain to myself—the fear that lived in my chest, the way my mother's voice could make me feel like I was disappearing" (Ferrante, 2012, p. 134). Mutual recognition of traumatic experience creates a special bond that goes beyond normal friendship, but also creates a pattern of intensity and volatility that reflects the unpredictable nature of traumatic relationships.

At the same time, trauma also emerges as a source of rivalry and even competition between friends. The fact that the friends react so differently to similar forms of trauma – Elena by running away through education, Lila by resisting through intellectual brilliance and then shutting down – engenders conflicts which repeatedly threaten the relationship. The novel shows how trauma produces what Caruth terms “the impossibility of knowing” that renders genuine communication difficult even between intimate friends (Caruth, 1996, p. 18). The traumatic experience of each friend is partially unavailable to the other, and the gaps in knowledge it entails generate forms of jealousy, resentment and misrecognition.

The competitiveness inherent in their friendship suggests the way in which patriarchal relations manufacture conflict between women even at the level of the most intimate relations. Their rivalry takes place over intellectual as well as romantic and class trajectories in a framework where both characters know that the prospects for a clean getaway from their trauma-laden environment are slim. This dearth of exits marks their friendship as a place of both solace and contestation, where mutual recognition is always pitted against the self-preservational tactics of each woman.

Trauma also shapes their friendship. On the one hand, it is through Elena that Lila is witnessed and has an outlet for her pain. But, as already noted, traumatic bonding can also become a problem, an obstacle to healthy development and an autonomous sense of self. Elena’s obsessive love of Lila is an example of what trauma theory has described as the way traumatic relationships are addictive and regressive: traumatic bonds are compulsively repeated because they recreate an intensely familiar pattern of relating that is mistaken for connection.

Conclusion

This study contributes to Ferrante scholarship by suggesting that the novel’s aesthetic choices can be understood as a response to the gendered trauma of patriarchal violence and social oppression. By engaging with recent advances in trauma studies, the analysis offers new insights into the significance of the novel’s temporal

fragmentation, its silences, its emphasis on the somatic, and its negotiation of traumatic bonding as strategies of form that register the long-term psychological impact of women's subordination to men. Ferrante's novel can thus be read as participating in a traumatic aesthetics that materializes the psychological fallout of women's lived experience within patriarchy.

Furthermore, this work underscores the value of trauma theory as a lens through which to read formal innovation in contemporary women's writing. It argues that Ferrante's Neapolitan novels anticipate and are in conversation with contemporary trauma theory and that her formal choices can be read as an attempt to grapple with, and potentially transcend, the patriarchal contexts in which her female characters live. The current study has used Caruth's unclaimed experience as well as van der Kolk's somatic memory to read the novel in an effort to develop trauma theory and prove its continued usefulness in feminist scholarship.

This study's engagement with *My Brilliant Friend* fills an existing gap in Ferrante scholarship and has contributed to the understanding of contemporary women writers and how they are working to establish an aesthetics that is both feminine and traumatic. The subject of further research could be the other novels in the Neapolitan Quartet, or a similar analysis could be attempted on a different contemporary woman writer to uncover how they are establishing a traumatic aesthetic. Given the success of the novel, this study's thesis of Ferrante's novel as a traumatic aesthetic also speaks to the value of trauma theory for understanding the most important aesthetic questions of our time: how we represent women's psychological experience of patriarchy.

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