

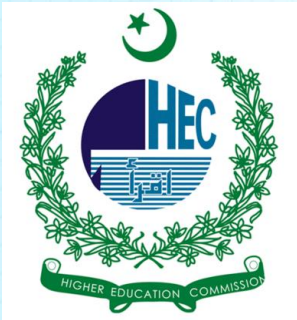
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**BEYOND THE FLESH: TRAUMA AND
POWERLESSNESS IN RIJULA DAS' *SMALL DEATHS***



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Abstract

This study documents the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of trauma as presented in Rijula Das' *Small Deaths* (2022), with particular emphasis on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a structuring framework for understanding the lived experiences of sex workers in Sonagachi, Kolkata's most prominent red-light district. The theoretical foundations are extracted from Cathy Caruth's formulations in trauma studies, most notably her conceptualization of a "catastrophic age". This research interrogates how Das implements narrative techniques to uncover the interior psychological landscapes of marginalized women entrapped within systemic cycles of exploitation, powerlessness, and enforced vulnerability. The study situates PTSD not merely as a clinical construct but as a profound literary lens through which recurring motifs of oppression, identity fragmentation, and existential loss are critically analyzed. The symptomatic clusters of trauma — *traumatic awakening*, *hyperarousal*, *intrusion*, *captivity*, and *disconnection*, are applied for the analysis. The research demonstrates how Das constructs characters whose psychological disintegration mirrors broader socio-structural failures. Furthermore, the analysis investigates the symbolic resonance of the novel's title, arguing that "small deaths" operates as a powerful metaphor encompassing emotional erosion, identity dissolution, and the perpetual negotiation with mortality experienced by disenfranchised women. The research method is based on close textual reading and trauma theory. This research contributes to the growing scholarly discourse on trauma literature within South Asian fictional traditions. It affirms that Das' work constitutes a significant intervention in representing invisible suffering through the transformative power of literary narration.

Keywords: *Small Deaths*, Rijula Das, PTSD, trauma theory, Sonagachi, marginalization, South Asian literature, Cathy Caruth

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature has long served as a profound medium through which the most upsetting dimensions of human experience are excavated, articulated, and brought into critical consciousness. Among the most compelling and urgent of these dimensions is trauma, a psychological and existential wound that transcends individual suffering to implicate entire communities, social structures, and historical formations. In contemporary literary criticism, trauma theory has emerged as one of the most generative and indispensable frameworks for engaging with narratives that foreground suffering, marginalization, and the fractured self. This research situates itself squarely within this theoretical tradition by undertaking a close and rigorous examination of Rijula Das' debut novel, *Small Deaths* (2022). The contemporary literary landscape is increasingly preoccupied with the representation of traumatic experience. The current era appears to be profoundly characterized by a "pervasive prevalence of traumatic conditions", suggesting that literature not only reflects but actively participates in the cultural processing of collective and individual wounds. (Miller and Tougaw 2002, p.12). It is within this expansive intellectual context that Das' novel assumes its particular urgency and scholarly relevance. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) constitutes the central theoretical and clinical framework through which this research approaches Das' narrative. As defined within the

parameters of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), PTSD is a complex psychological condition that may manifest in individuals who have either directly encountered or witnessed a traumatic event of exceptional severity. Distinguished by a constellation of persistent and debilitating symptoms organized into four primary clusters, intrusive recollections and flashbacks, deliberate avoidance of trauma-associated triggers, negative alterations in cognition and affective functioning, and heightened states of arousal and reactive volatility, PTSD represents far more than a clinical abstraction (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It is, in its lived dimensions, a catastrophic reorganization of selfhood, temporality, and relational capacity. The disorder does not discriminate by age or social position; it may be precipitated by natural disasters, sexual violence, physical assault, combat exposure, or any experience that overwhelms the individual's capacity for psychological integration. Within the socioeconomic and gendered context of Sonagachi's sex workers, where structural violence, bodily exploitation, and systematic dehumanization constitute the fabric of daily existence, the conditions for sustained and multi-layered PTSD are not merely present, they are institutionally embedded and culturally normalized.

The theoretical framework is extracted from Cathy Caruth's trauma studies which has profoundly reshaped the intersection of psychoanalytic theory and literary criticism. In her influential formulation of what she terms "a catastrophic age," Caruth (1997) argues that "trauma resists straightforward narrative assimilation precisely because the traumatic event overwhelms the structures of comprehension" available to the experiencing subject (p.14). Trauma, in Caruth's rendering, is not simply an event that happened but an event that continues to happen, recursively, intrusively, and beyond the conscious will of the survivor. Her protagonist, Lalee, a woman in her late twenties who was forcibly inducted into the sex trade by her own family during childhood, embodies the multiple, overlapping dimensions of traumatic experience that this research seeks to analyze. Lalee's internalized shame, her deeply conditioned resignation where "hope was a bad survival strategy in Sonagachi," (Das, 2022, p. 53), and her inability to confront her own reflection. The murder of her friend Maya, and the subsequent institutional indifference that greets this violent death, further intensifies the novel's engagement with hypervigilance, moral injury, and collective trauma. The title of the novel, *Small Deaths*, is itself a richly layered signifier. Derived from the French idiomatic expression *la petite mort*, the phrase simultaneously evokes the transient dissolution of selfhood associated with sexual experience and the slow, cumulative erosion of identity, dignity, and agency that characterizes the lives of its characters. As numerous scholars have recognized, the title operates across multiple registers: as symbolic loss, as metaphor for psychological transformation, and as an unflinching acknowledgment of mortality's omnipresence in the lives of those whom society has rendered disposable.

- 1.1. **Problem statement:** This study argues that Rijula Das' *Small Deaths* (2022), analyzed through Caruthian trauma theory and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder frameworks, reveals trauma not as an individual psychological affliction but as a structurally enforced, collectively endured condition, whereby the sex workers of Sonagachi experience perpetual psychological fragmentation, identity erosion, and existential powerlessness inscribed within institutionalized patriarchal violence.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical architecture of this research draws upon two foundational pillars

of contemporary trauma studies: the psychoanalytic and literary formulations of Cathy Caruth and the clinical-feminist framework advanced by Judith Lewis Herman. Together, these theoretical traditions furnish a comprehensive and methodologically robust apparatus through which the traumatic experiences of the sex workers in Rijula Das' *Small Deaths* (2022) rigorously examined, interpreted, and understood. Five key theoretical concepts: *traumatic awakening*, *hyperarousal*, *intrusion*, *captivity*, and *disconnection* are identified as directly and demonstrably operative within the novel's narrative and characterological architecture, each illuminating a distinct dimension of the psychological devastation that Das so unflinchingly portrays.

Traumatic Awakening is central to Caruth's theoretical contribution which is the reformulation of Freud's concept of traumatic neurosis. For Caruth, trauma is not merely an event experienced and subsequently remembered; it is a rupture in the very structure of consciousness that resists straightforward assimilation into narrative. Drawing upon Freud's foundational observations, Caruth (1996) argues that "trauma consists not only in having confronted death but in having survived precisely without knowing it" (p. 64). This paradox of survival without full cognitive registration is of profound relevance to the characters in *Small Deaths*, particularly Lalee, whose childhood induction into the sex trade by her own family constitutes a foundational traumatic rupture that continues to govern her psychological life in the novel's present tense.

Hyperarousal is another key concept utilized in this research. Herman's (1992) clinical taxonomy of PTSD identifies *hyperarousal* as the foundational neurophysiological response to traumatic experience, constituting a state of perpetual physiological and psychological alertness that fundamentally disrupts the survivor's capacity for ordinary functioning. As Herman (1992) elaborates, trauma survivors "scare instantly, respond furiously to minor aggravation, and experience insomnia at night" (p. 26), their nervous systems permanently recalibrated to anticipate threat. This condition is directly applicable to the world Das constructs in *Small Deaths*, wherein the sex workers of Sonagachi exist in a state of unrelenting vigilance, a survival imperative that has become so deeply internalized as to constitute a defining feature of identity.

Intrusion is another major symptomatic cluster identified by Herman. It is the involuntary and unbidden re-experiencing of traumatic memories that overwhelms the survivor's present-tense consciousness with the unprocessed residue of past suffering. Herman (1992) characterizes traumatic memories as "sensational in the arrangement of intense visuals" that "lack spoken narratives and settings" (p. 27), rendering them fragmentary, visceral, and resistant to the integrative functions of ordinary autobiographical memory.

Among the most theoretically illuminating of Herman's contributions for the purposes of this study is her analysis of *captivity* as the structural condition enabling prolonged and repeated trauma. Herman (1992) argues compellingly that "repeated trauma can only occur in conditions of captivity" and explicitly identifies "prearranged sensual employment institutes, such as brothels" as paradigmatic sites of such captivity (p. 54).

Herman's (1992) concept of *disconnection* addresses the profound social and existential rupture that trauma inflicts upon the survivor's relationship with community, kinship, and selfhood. Herman (1992) argues that traumatic events "damage the development of the identity, which is shaped and supported through

kinship" and "plunge the sufferer into existentialism" (p.37), producing in the survivor a devastating sense of irremediable alienation from the human community. This condition is powerfully encoded in Das' portrayal of Lalee, whose inability to confront her own reflection, "she couldn't look in the mirror, its spotless surface too exposing, too confronting for her to endure" (Das, 2022, p. 53), constitutes a profound emblemization of disconnection from selfhood. As Herman (1992) observes, people who have experienced profound trauma "often feel completely unconstrained, cast out, and unaccompanied" (p. 37), existing in a psychological liminal space between the living and the dead, a condition that Das renders with extraordinary literary empathy and sociological acuity.

Collectively, the theoretical concepts, *traumatic awakening*, *hyperarousal*, *intrusion*, *captivity*, and *disconnection*, constitute the interpretive matrix through which *Small Deaths* is analyzed. It reveals trauma not as a private psychological malfunction but as the predictable human consequence of systemic, institutionalized violence.

3. ANALYSIS

Das constructs a literary universe in which trauma is neither exceptional nor episodic but rather constitutes the very medium through which her characters breathe, suffer, and, with extraordinary resilience, survive. Cathy Caruth's theorization of traumatic awakening, rooted in Freud's observation that the traumatized subject is condemned to recursive re-experiencing of the originary wound, finds its most vivid and literarily significant manifestation in the nightmare sequences involving Tilu, the novel's male protagonist. Caruth (1996) argues that "trauma consists not only in having confronted death but in having survived precisely without knowing it" (p.64), suggesting that the traumatized psyche remains perpetually suspended between the moment of wounding and the present, unable to fully inhabit either. This theoretical proposition is dramatized with remarkable precision in Das' depiction of Tilu's nightmares, wherein the unconscious mind becomes the site of unresolved psychological terror. Tilu's dream, which begins with a poignant longing for the son, "God has not yet bestowed upon him," undergoes a violent disruption, shifting from the serene "banks of the Hooghly River" to an encounter with a "naked woman" whose horrifying appearance, "her hair flowed like a dark halo behind her; snakes crawled all over her body", precipitates an abrupt awakening saturated with unnamed dread (Das, 2022, p. 21). Das renders this traumatic awakening with extraordinary psychological fidelity. The terrifying specter grew larger and larger until Tilu lay dwarfed at her feet. He looked up to see Lalee's giant face on a dark, snake-wreathed body. She opened her mouth to swallow him, a giant red tongue obscuring his world" (Das, 2022, p. 21). The nightmare does not merely disturb Tilu's sleep; it reorganizes his waking consciousness, filling his head with "unnamed fears" and leaving him "sweating and whimpering softly, shaking his head to dislodge the dream" (Das, 2022, p. 21). As Caruth (1996) elaborates, traumatic awakening constitutes an "arousal into cognizance" (p. 64) that transforms the dreaming experience into an overwhelming rupture of reality, a formulation that Das embodies with striking literary authority. Furthermore, Mohamaya's act of recognizing a "young bride" from her village in the figure of Lalee, an "old-fashioned beauty, doe-eyed, long-haired, and fair-skinned" (Das, 2022, p. 16), enacts what Caruth (1995) identifies as the transmission of traumatic experience across the boundaries of individual subjectivity, wherein the wounds of others become the vehicle through which one's own buried traumas

resurface with devastating force (p. 11). Das, in this sense, appears to write in profound philosophical alignment with Caruth's theoretical architecture, embedding the dynamics of traumatic awakening within both individual and collective dimensions of the novel's experiential landscape.

Herman's (1992) clinical characterization of *hyperarousal* as a foundational and enduring neurophysiological consequence of traumatic exposure, wherein survivors "scare instantly, respond furiously to minor aggravation, and experience insomnia at night" (p.26), is rendered in *Small Deaths* with a vividness and psychological precision that attests to Das' extraordinary understanding of trauma's embodied dimensions. The character of Malini provides the novel's most sustained and dramatically powerful illustration of hyperarousal in action. Following the brutal murder of her colleague Maya, Malini's journey to the Burtolla police station enacts the complete physiological and psychological disintegration that Herman associates with acute hyperarousal. Das portrays Malini as behaving like a "madwoman" in public spaces (Das, 2022, p.27), her behavior stripped of social calculation and rational self-governance by the overwhelming force of her traumatic response. The passage that follows constitutes one of the novel's most clinically precise representations of hyperarousal:

"She found she could not move. The force that had propelled her since the morning, the vision of that cauterized flesh that had haunted her through the night, the irrepressible restlessness that had dragged her by the hair, had suddenly and without warning abandoned her completely" (Das, 2022, p. 28).

Malini's state, simultaneously compelled toward action and paralyzed by the overwhelming magnitude of her distress, perfectly embodies Herman's (1992) observation that traumatized individuals maintain no stable psychological "baseline" (p.24), their nervous systems oscillating between states of frantic hyper-activation and sudden, catastrophic collapse. Das confirms this theoretical alignment explicitly, describing Malini as "panicked at her inability to focus" and driven forward by a "relentless force" (Das, 2022, p. 27) that operates entirely beyond the boundaries of her conscious will. The novel's broader cast of characters, Lalee, Tilu, Maya, Amina, and Malini, are collectively portrayed as living in states of chronic *hyperarousal*, their psychological and physiological systems permanently recalibrated to anticipate violence, betrayal, and annihilation, a condition that Herman (1992) identifies as the defining "somatic legacy of prolonged traumatic exposure" (p. 26).

Another symptomatic cluster within Herman's taxonomy, *intrusion*, or the involuntary and unbidden re-experiencing of traumatic memories that fractures the continuity of present-tense consciousness, permeates *Small Deaths* at multiple levels of characterization and narrative organization. Herman (1992) characterizes traumatic memories as fundamentally "sensational in the arrangement of intense visuals" that "lack spoken narratives and settings" (p.27), rendering them fragmentary, overwhelming, and resistant to the integrative operations of ordinary autobiographical recollection. Das renders this theoretical proposition with extraordinary literary sophistication through her portrayal of Tilu's intrusive memories of Lalee. While smoking in her absence, Tilu "stepped sideways, separated from the tide of bodies" (Das, 2022, p.61), his present consciousness colonized by memories of his beloved. He contemplates that cigarettes must taste like "Lalee's lips" (Das, 2022, p.59) and finds himself unable to hold off the "flashes of memory" (Das, 2022, p. 200) that perpetually breach the boundaries between past and present.

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Herman's formulation of traumatic memory as an "indelible image" or "death imprint" (as cited in Herman, 1992, p. 27), drawn from Robert Jay Lifton's extensive clinical work with survivors of catastrophic events, finds its most devastating literary instantiation in Lalee's intrusive memories of the murdered Maya. After fulfilling the sexual demands of the "self-possessed" Mr. Ray, Lalee is abruptly flooded with the memory that Maya "was once alive but now she is buried under the ground" (Das, 2022, p. 106), and the recognition that she herself may be condemned to the same fate produces what Das explicitly terms the experience of "constant intrusion" (Das, 2022, p.147). This phrase, deployed within the novel's own lexical framework, establishes a direct and conscious correspondence between Das' literary project and Herman's clinical conceptualization, suggesting that Das deliberately employs the vocabulary of trauma theory as both a descriptive and critical instrument. Furthermore, Lalee's recurring recollection of "Mohamaya's severed throat and swollen face" (Das, 2022, p.154), erupting involuntarily at moments of extreme vulnerability, enacts what Herman (1992) describes as the traumatic memory's capacity to override rational cognition and plunge the survivor back into the full sensory immediacy of the originary horror. (p.27).

The concept of *captivity* possesses the most direct and structurally comprehensive applicability to the world Das constructs in *Small Deaths*. Herman (1992) argues with meticulous theoretical precision that "repeated trauma can only occur in conditions of captivity" and explicitly identifies "prearranged sensual employment institutes, such as brothels, and household settings" as paradigmatic sites of such captivity. (p.54). The Blue Lotus brothel, under the ruthless governance of Shefali Madam and her enforcer Rambo, functions in Das' novel as precisely such an institution: a space that simultaneously constitutes home, workplace, and prison for the women it contains, foreclosing the very possibility of autonomous selfhood through the systematic deployment of terror, economic dependency, and psychological coercion. Lalee's captive existence is rendered with particular dramatic force in the episode in which Rambo and Sonia leave her alone "to embroider her imagination, leaving the details to be mangled by her own greed, desire, desperation, and envy" (Das, 2022, p. 65). Here, captivity operates not merely at the physical level of bodily confinement but at the deeper level of psychological entrapment, wherein Lalee's own desires and fears become instruments of her continued subjugation. She is described as "incapable" of escaping this ill scenario and as allowing herself to be "caged" (Das, 2022, p. 147), Das' own deployment of the incarceration metaphor constituting a direct literary instantiation of Herman's theoretical framework. The episode in which Sonia "calmly adjusted Lalee's dress, redid her makeup, and invited Rambo back into the room" (Das, 2022, p.65) further illustrates Herman's (1992) observation that captivity enables the perpetrator to "forge a unique association" of control through mechanisms of "terrorization and seduction" (p. 55), wherein the victim's compliance is manufactured through the systematic erosion of resistance. Lalee's act of "locking herself in this beautiful soundless room" (Das, 2022, p.114) to escape Shefali Madam's telephone summons enacts a final, poignant paradox of captivity: the only freedom available to the captive is a self-imposed, temporary, and ultimately illusory confinement, a room within the room of her larger imprisonment. As Herman (1992) observes through Orwell's formulation, absolute domination demands not merely the surrender of the body but the complete colonization of the inner mind (p.55), and it is precisely this interior colonization that Das renders with

such devastating literary authority throughout *Small Deaths*.

The final theoretical construct is Herman's concept of *disconnection*. It is the profound rupturing of the survivor's relationship with community, kinship, and selfhood, achieves its most sustained and multidimensional literary expression in Das' portrayal of virtually every significant character in the novel. Herman (1992) argues that traumatic events "damage the development of the identity, which is shaped and supported through kinship" and "plunge the sufferer into existentialism" (p. 37), producing a catastrophic sense of irremediable alienation from the human community that Herman evocatively describes as a condition of belonging "more to the dead than to the living" (p. 37). Malini's condition following Maya's murder provides the novel's most visually arresting depiction of disconnection. Having delivered her account to the indifferent policemen, Malini is rendered by Das as walking "in a daze" (Das, 2022, p.27), her consciousness entirely severed from the social reality surrounding her: "Her head felt lighter, and she looked around at the staring, frowning, and sniggering male faces around her in white uniforms, smiling awkwardly. She found she could not move" (Das, 2022, p. 28). The extraordinary detail with which Das renders Malini's dissociated perceptions, the "chipped" nail, the "dirty" hem of her sari, the "rotten food" she cannot identify, enacts precisely the fragmented, derealised quality of consciousness that Herman (1992) associates with acute disconnection from the social world. (p. 37). Das deploys sensory minutiae not as aesthetic flourish but as psychological testimony, demonstrating through the granularity of Malini's perception how completely trauma has severed her subject from the continuity of meaningful social existence. Lalee's disconnection manifests through her relationship with Shefali Madam's authority, specifically in her impulse to ignore the Madam's call, to lock herself in a "soundless room," and to purchase "a few more minutes of peace and respite before dragging herself back to reality" (Das, 2022, p. 114). This voluntary, temporary disconnection from the institutional structures that govern her existence constitutes, paradoxically, both a symptom of trauma and a strategy of psychological survival, a duality that Herman (1992) captures in her observation that the "violation of human connection" produces traumatic symptoms that are simultaneously expressions of injury and instruments of self-preservation (p. 39). Herman (1992) further asserts that "the damage to relational life is not a secondary effect of trauma" but rather its central and defining consequence (p. 37), a theoretical position that Das appears to endorse through her sustained representation of disconnection as the organizing condition of life in Sonagachi.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has carefully examined Rijula Das' novel *Small Deaths* (2022) through the lens of trauma theory, using the ideas of Cathy Caruth and Judith Lewis Herman as guiding frameworks. The research has shown that trauma in this novel is not just a background element but the central reality that shapes the lives of every character. Through five key theoretical concepts, traumatic awakening, hyperarousal, intrusion, captivity, and disconnection, the study has explored how Das brings to life the pain and suffering of sex workers living in Sonagachi, one of Asia's largest red-light districts. The analysis has shown that Tilu's terrifying nightmares reflect Caruth's (1996) idea of traumatic awakening, where past wounds continue to haunt the present. Malini's uncontrollable and panicked behavior after Maya's murder clearly illustrates Herman's (1992) concept of hyperarousal. Lalee's repeated and unwanted memories of her murdered friend Mohamaya demonstrate the overwhelming power of intrusion.

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The Blue Lotus brothel, controlled by Shefali Madam, serves as a perfect example of Herman's concept of captivity, where women are trapped physically and psychologically with no real means of escape. Finally, the deep sense of isolation felt by almost every character in the novel powerfully reflects Herman's idea of disconnection, where trauma permanently damages a person's ability to connect with others and with themselves. Overall, this research confirms that *Small Deaths* is a deeply significant work of South Asian literature. Das uses her storytelling to give a voice to women whose suffering is largely ignored by society. The novel reminds its readers that literature has the unique power to expose injustice, honor the lives of the marginalized, and demand that the world pay attention to those it has chosen to forget.

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