

From Trauma To Triumph: Achieving Emancipation Through Art In Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*

K. Merlin Gifft^{1*}, Dr. M. Madhavan²

^{1*}Ph. D Research Scholar (Full time), Department of English, Annamalai University.

²Assistant Professor of English, Annamalai University.

ABSTRACT

Memory is one of the most fascinating and agonizing parts of the human mind. It can give oneself content memories as well as the most excruciating memories. Memories associated with a traumatic past can kill the person slowly with distorted memories of flashbacks of the traumatic event which has the power to torment the person's life. However, recovery is possible for the victim through effective coping strategies. Laurie Halse Anderson's widely acclaimed novel *Speak* offers a vivid depiction of the unspoken trauma of 14-year-old rape victim, Melinda Sordino and her victimization. The work not only focuses on Melinda's psychological trauma but also focuses on her journey toward recovery. The purpose of the study is to explore the impacts of trauma and discover how art therapy can benefit in healing the traumatic pain experienced by victims in the aftermath of trauma.

Keywords: Trauma, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), art therapy, rape, recovery, healing

The critically acclaimed, award-winning novel *Speak* narrates the story of a fourteen-year-old Melinda Sordino who is raped by her senior at the summer party. The traumatic event of rape left her almost mute and emotionally broken. Since her friends and peers are unaware of the reason why Melinda rings the cops and spoils the party, she is shunned by her peers. In the aftermath of the traumatic event, Melinda isolates herself from her friends and peers, even from her parents, and often hides away in an abandoned janitor's closet. The haunting memories of the rape continue to traumatize her psychologically and emotionally throughout the school year. *Speak* is a compelling exploration of trauma and the aftermath of sexual assault, and it vividly portrays the symptoms and impacts of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on its protagonist, Melinda Sordino. The novel delves into Melinda's internal struggles and her journey toward healing, shedding light on the psychological and emotional consequences of trauma.

Janet Alsup acknowledges the importance of the novel *Speak* in her review, "I argue that such books should be made available to students as often as possible because they may be a first, small step toward helping teenagers find their voices and come to terms with an intensely difficult phase of life." (Alsup 161)

Rape will always leave a victim with haunting memories of the traumatic incident and results in developing post-traumatic stress disorder. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event. In trauma novels, the protagonist is usually affected by some distressing event which includes forceful, disturbing thoughts and feelings related to their experience. They may relieve the event through flashbacks or nightmares. The protagonists are usually caught up with the symptoms of involuntary memories; and distressing dreams of the traumatic event. Victims of rape and accident survivors blamed themselves even though it's not their fault. It is a reaction to being exposed to a life-threatening event that exploits the minds of victims by inflicting pain and depression.

According to American Psychological Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Disorders*, PTSD affected person's response that, "must involve intense fear, helplessness or horror" (Roberts 21) The symptoms include intrusive thoughts such as distressing dreams and involuntary memories, flashbacks of traumatic events, anxiety, anger, guilt or shame, involving in self-harm behaviors and suicidal thoughts. For instance, when Melinda was assigned to a frog dissection in Biology class, it suddenly triggered her trauma, she can "feel the cut, smell the dirt and leaves" (81) associated with the night of her attack. As a result of the overwhelming impact of her traumatic memory, she passes out and knocks her head on the table. Also, Melinda's anger intensifies each time she encounters her rapist, perpetuating her vengeful thoughts and desire to kill him. However, she is unable to muster the courage to confront him directly. Instead, she engages in self-destructive behaviours, such as scratching her wrists with paper clips and brushing her teeth with excessive force until they bleed. These actions are manifestations of Melinda's profound self-loathing and internalized trauma. By inflicting physical pain upon herself, she attempts to externalize the deep emotional anguish she endures. Melinda's symptoms are severe and distressing, reflecting the acute impact of her psychological turmoil.

Traumatic events have the power to destroy and disrupt the psycho-social development of the individuals and deteriorate social supports and connections. The past painful memories can devastate the life of the victim by subjugating the present. Melinda resides in the speechless terror of trauma which results in the fragmentation of self, and shattering of societal relationships and social supports. The memories of the painful past devastate her in the present. From this point, Melinda's psycho-social development gets affected.

Melinda suffers from 'Selective-Mutism' as a result of rape. It is an anxiety disorder characterized by the person's inability to speak and mute themselves only in certain social situations. The fear of victim blaming and shame makes Melinda to avoid social interaction and she puts a self-imposed silence on herself. Along with her voice, Melinda also lost her identity. Altogether she alienates herself from others and starts referring to herself as an 'outcast', 'nobody', 'a clanless', 'a wounded zebra'.

People who get affected by trauma encounter severe psychological issues and undergo extreme inner turmoil. To hide from her peers and to be alone with her thoughts Melinda chooses an abandoned janitor's closet in her school. Whenever she feels afraid, annoyed, and depressed in school, she hides in that closet. The closet acts as a resolute place for her, the place where she can be herself. Melinda states "The closet is abandoned – it has no purpose, no name. It is the perfect place for me." (26) She considers her closet as a safe haven and it represents an emotional space where she hides from the world and from her own painful memories. This closet also becomes a metaphor for temporary neglect of her trauma. She fills the closet with her drawings and Maya Angelou's poster, the things which she is fond of.

To avoid the traumatic event haunting her, she prefers sleeping most of time, she says, "I just want to sleep" (165) in order to escape from the reality temporarily. Melinda presumes that silencing the memory will help to make her mental trauma disappear from her life, but she does not realize the fact that the repressed memory of the traumatic event is destroying her life slower and slower. She confesses to herself internally that "The whole point of not talking about it, of silencing the memory is to make it go away. It won't. I'll need brain surgery to cut it out of my head." (81-82)

The sexual assault experienced by Melinda makes her fall into depression. She is even traumatized to look at her own reflection in the mirror. She no longer recognizes her own self. She looks at the mirror and asks herself, "who was that girl? I had never seen her before" (136). As time goes on, she persistently avoids her own reflection. She flips the mirror in her bedroom to face the wall and covers the mirror in the janitor's closet with a poster of Maya Angelou. This avoidance of mirrors is a manifestation of Melinda's deep self-loathing. She is haunted by feelings of guilt and shame for not fighting back her rapist and failing to protect herself from the horrific experience of rape. As Melinda's sense of guilt slowly begins to consume and destroying her from within, she wants to confess everything,

I know my head isn't screwed on straight. I want to leave, transfer, wrap myself to another galaxy. I want to confess everything, hand over the guilt and mistake and anger to someone else. There is a beast in my gut, I can hear it scrapping away at the inside of my ribs. Even if I dump the memory, it will stay with me, staining me. My closet is a good thing, a quiet place that helps me hold these thoughts inside my head where no one can hear them. (51)

The only mirror that Melinda can tolerate is the three-way mirror in the shopping mall because it symbolizes her fragmented and distorted sense of self. The three-way mirror provides infinite reflections, each showing a different angle, which symbolize Melinda's inner turmoil and fractured identity. After the traumatic experience of rape, Melinda struggles with her self-image and self-worth. The multiple reflections in the three-way mirror can be seen as a metaphor for her shattered psyche, each representing a different part of her that she is trying to piece back together.

Trauma is a profound wound on the mind that is difficult to heal, often leaving an indelible mark on the victim's psyche. The impact of trauma is deep and complex, affecting not only the individual's mental health but also their physical well-being and social relationships. However, healing from such profound wounds is possible through the process of expressive therapies. 'Expressive Arts' is a discipline that employs the creative arts as a fundamental tool for exploration and transformation. This approach integrates various artistic modalities such as visual arts, music, dance, and drama to facilitate personal growth and healing. These expressive therapies encompass a range of therapeutic approaches that utilize creative arts as a means of healing. The core idea behind expressive therapies is that engaging in various forms of creative expression can facilitate healing. Therapists in this field believe that through creative process, individuals can explore and understand their emotions, feelings and the thought process.

Among these, 'Art therapy' stands out as a particularly powerful tool, bridging the gap between internal pain and external expression. The connection between art and trauma is deeply rooted in the ability of creative processes to convey unexplainable emotions and experiences that are difficult to articulate. Trauma often shatters an individual's sense of self and disrupts their ability to communicate their pain. Art provides a non-verbal language that can capture the nuances of their suffering. Through painting, drawing, sculpture, or other artistic forms, trauma survivors can externalize their internal chaos and make sense of their fragmented experiences. The act of creating art allows them to confront their trauma in a tangible form, providing a safe space to explore and express their emotions.

Hargrave and Nykaza states that, "Art therapy is also valuable to rape victim because victims of psychological trauma have difficulty in expressing their experiences directly and effectively through words." (Hargrave-Nykaza 54) Art therapy acts as a voice for trauma victims, giving them the means to express their pain and experiences when words are insufficient. For many victims, this is a crucial step in the healing process. The therapeutic use of art provides a safe and structured environment for victims to express and manage their feelings, and helping them regain a sense of normalcy. By translating their internal turmoil into visual form, the victims gain a sense of control and mastery over their experiences.

Observing Melinda, she is not an exceptional case. Melinda uses art as a substitute for her speech. The only place where Melinda finds solace is her art class. Art acts as a sanctuary for Melinda. In art class, she can express herself beyond the spoken word. She is assigned for a tree project for her yearlong assignment in art class. Drawing and painting trees helps her to lighten the pain in her. She uses art as a medium to express her suppressed pain and emotions. Melinda drenches

the paper with her unspoken trauma and feelings by drawing trees. In the beginning, she draws her trees struck by lightning, "I've been painting watercolors of trees that have been hit by lightning. I try to paint them so they are nearly dead, but not totally." (30-31) The idea of painting nearly dead trees symbolizes Melinda's half-deadened life after rape. As Melinda's life become hopeless, she engages herself in creating art works.

Melinda's art teacher Mr. Freeman inspires her mind by motivating her to pour out her emotions through art. He triggers the minds of students by saying, "Art is the place where you can find your soul, if you dare. Where you can touch that part of you that you've never dared to look at before." (10) Those words of Mr. Freeman instigate Melinda to find and pour her emotions out on a piece of art. She manifests all of her buried feelings of rage, anger, and anxiety in her sculpture which she made from Thanksgiving day's turkey bones:

I glue the bones to a block of wood, arranging the skeleton like a museum exhibit. I find knives and forks in the odds-'n'-ends bin and glue them so it looks like they are attacking the bones... I pop the head off a Barbie doll and set it inside the turkey's body. That feels right." (63)

The art represents Melinda's entrapment and her inability to speak. After seeing the art, Mr. Freeman states that, "This has meaning. Pain." (65) The art work also reflects Melinda's state of entanglement, in fact, it represents her rape site. Thus, art became a way-out for Melinda to express the inexpressible and unspoken trauma. Melinda diverted her traumatic memories of rape in art through the help of her art teacher Mr. Freeman.

In *Introduction to Art Therapy*, Rubin points out "So whether the traumatic events are unconscious or suppressed out of fear, art is an excellent avenue for 'telling without talking'" (Rubin 209) The expression of art is preverbal, in other words, it does not depend solely on words. Individuals who find difficulty in expressing intense pain and emotions may use art as a way to express their feelings as a way of coping. The use of art also facilitates the survivor's healing process. Expression of art can be used as an external manifestation of overwhelming emotions which eventually helps in coping with trauma. Freeman helps Melinda in achieving Post-Traumatic Growth by saying, "When people don't express themselves, they die one piece at a time." (122) These words articulate the sense of motivation in Melinda's mind and she pushes herself towards recovery.

When hope sprouts in Melinda, her artistic representations of trees transformed. She begins to paint trees that are vibrant and full of life, symbolizing her growth. This transformation in her artwork illustrates her progress in life and her way towards the path of healing. Melinda even describes herself as a 'seed' at the beginning of the recovery process, hoping that one day she will grow with full spirit. Her art project of drawing trees is a building factor of Melinda's recovery.

Tree is the most prevalent symbol employed by the author which appears in the beginning until the end of the story. The author of the novel Anderson intensely compares Melinda's art works with her life. In the beginning, she fails to paint trees with life and blooming, she is able to paint only dead trees with twisted twigs and branches which represents Melinda's mental state after the traumatic incident. She finally realized remaining silent and being voiceless only worsen her situation like dead trees, only voicing out about the victimization would contribute to her growth. Expression of art plays a crucial role in Melinda's healing process and gives her a sense of empowerment in the course of recovery.

Anderson vividly used symbolism of tree to represent the growth of Melinda. Melinda overhears a conversation between her father and nearby kid who enquires him for cutting the tree in the dooryard. Her father convinces the kid that he's not chopping down but he's saving it because, by cutting the damaged parts of the tree, it is possible for the tree to regenerate. At that very moment, Melinda understands that she must cut down the dead part of rape from her life in order to grow again. When this truth hits her hard, she prepares her mind to look forward to recovering from the trauma.

Recovery is the ultimate goal that a traumatized person wishes to reach. A leading Psychiatrist and pioneer in the field of therapeutic care, Judith Herman states, "The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment of the survivor and disconnection from others." (Herman 133) Hence recovery relies on both the empowerment of the survivor and establishing new connections. Melinda's healing emerges from involving herself in art class and trusting her art teacher, Mr. Freeman. He plays a major role in Melinda's development and he's the only person who supports and places faith in Melinda throughout the school year. Melinda sees him as a healer who helped her in finding her voice and the way to fight against the trauma. When Melinda moves towards the path of resilience, she gains control over her life and at one point she says, "I have to stay away from the closet, go to all my classes. I will make myself normal. Forget the rest of it." (125)

At one point in her course of recovery, Melinda decides to go back to the place where she was raped by Andy Evans. She admits that she has survived the traumatic event and that it might be easy to clear away all the 'dirt' of the past memories and find a small "clean part of me" (*Speak* 188) and she hopes that she will be able to nourish herself. As a result of the new grown hope as a newly painted tree, she prepared herself psychologically for the confrontation with Andy.

I have survived. I am here. Confused, screwed up, but here. So how can I find my way? Is there a chain saw of the soul, an axe I can take to my memories or fears? I dig my fingers into the dirt and squeeze. A small, clean part of me waits to warm and burst through the surface. Some quiet Melindagirl I haven't seen in months. That is the seed I will care for. (189)

Art plays a pivotal role in Melinda's journey by making her turn from internal struggle to external vocalization which helps in her standing up to her rapist, Andy, when he attempts to assault her for the second time in the janitor's closet.

Instead of escaping she chooses the right way to fight back her rapist. The resurrection of her ideal self emerges from newfound hope and confidence. By silencing her perpetrator with her screaming “NO” Melinda regained her voice and attained complete healing. Through this act of defiance, she not only reclaims her voice but also reconstructs her identity, transitioning from a silent victim to a resilient survivor.

Melinda finally realizes that she is no longer possessed by the traumatic past. The expression, “It wasn’t my fault. And I am not going to let it kill me. I can grow” (198) shows that Melinda finally gains self-confidence and successfully emancipates the trauma. She admits that her rapist, Andy is the one to blame for the rape incident. Getting her inner self rejuvenated, she is finely triggered herself to confront the real world around to encounter the perpetrator. As O’ Quinn states, accepting the change of life gives Melinda a sense of understanding of “refuse to be a victim, but emancipated by it.” (O’ Quinn 57)

Anderson’s portrayal of her protagonist from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder transforming into a Post-Traumatic Growth personality shows that the novelist has accomplished the goal of empowering the survivor. In the novel *Speak*, art emerges as a powerful coping mechanism for Melinda Sordino, providing a non-verbal outlet for her trauma and facilitating her healing journey. Anderson’s use of art therapy offers the readers a therapeutic value and allows them to experience for themselves to deal with trauma in their life the way that Melinda dealt with her trauma of rape. Anderson’s use of art as a catalyst in Melinda’s recovery not only helps her to rediscover herself but also allows the readers to deal with trauma by showing art as a coping factor.

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