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Reimagining the Self: Trauma, Creativity and Reconstruction of Identity in Stephen King's Duma Key and Misery

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Abstract

Trauma collapses the individual's identity, fragments the memory and haunts through nightmares. This paper analyses the reconstruction of identity surmounting traumatic events in Stephen King's Duma Key and Misery. The lives of the protagonists, Edgar Freemantle in Duma Key and Paul Sheldon in Misery are derailed by psychological distress. Paul's prolonged captivity and physical assault, and Edgar's physical injury and aphasia function as traumatic episodes that tear down the individual's self. Annie Wilkes (captor) in Misery and Perse (supernatural entity) in Duma Key function as an external force in destabilising the protagonist's identities and creating tension. While existing research has primarily examined these novels through the lens of psychological analysis, gothic fiction and disability studies, the creative process in reconstructing the identity after trauma is less examined.

This paper asserts that painting and writing act as a creative process that helps in transforming the individual from victim to survivor. Through psychoanalytical theories and with the help of trauma studies, the study analyses that creative arts of both novels run parallel to confront trauma and reconstruct the identities. This article illustrates the creative process as a central mechanism which helps traumatic experiences to witness and act as a testimony to reconstruct the identity.

Keywords: Trauma, Painting, Writing, Identity, Resilience

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I. Introduction

Identity is gradually shaped through the individual's memory, experience, and social circumstances. But traumatic experiences disrupt the continual process of identity construction, making it hard for the individual to return to the pre-traumatic state of self. Trauma plays a significant role in contemporary Gothic fiction as uncanny moments, eerie atmospheres, labyrinthine spaces, nightmares, and an unstable human psyche between internal consciousness and external force contribute to psychological fragmentation. Most of Stephen King's fiction portrays characters' unstable identities by blending psychological trauma with gothic elements. Among his works, Duma Key and Misery particularly focus on the construction of identity in the aftermath of traumatic events. Even though the novels are distinguished in their narrative structure, setting, and modes of horror, both present the fragmented self of the male protagonists through physical injuries and psychological trauma.

King's Duma Key interlinks memory, painting, and supernatural haunting through the life of Edgar Freemantle. Edgar's business life is permanently changed by a construction accident that cost him his right arm, neurological damage leading to aphasia, chronic pain, and also a separation from his wife, Pam, and daughters, Melinda and Ilse. In the process of rehabilitation and by listening to the advice of Dr. Kamen, his psychotherapist, Edgar moves to an island (Duma Key) in Florida and continues his lost hobby of painting as a part of his recovery. Initially, painting felt therapeutic to him, but gradually it became strange and dangerous. Edgar realises that his paintings foreshadow future events and reveal hidden suppressed truths connected to the island's dark past. In Misery, Paul Sheldon meets with a car accident and is rescued by 'his number-one fan', Annie Wilkes. Soon Paul becomes a hostage and endures physical assault and coercive demands from Annie. Her obsession with writing a new novel and resurrecting the fictional character reveals clear dominance over Paul. The physical violence not only shatters his bodily autonomy but also his identity. Both novels portray trauma sabotaging the protagonists' identity, while creative art emerges as a tool for survival. Existing scholarship on Stephen King's Duma Key has chiefly examined trauma, memory, supernatural horror, and psychological transformation, while studies of Misery have explored themes of violence, captivity, and gothic horror. This paper analyses the creative arts (writing and painting) through which the traumatized individuals try to understand and reconstruct their identities.

II. Theoretical Framework

The article applies a theoretical framework combining Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, Paul Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's testimony theory and Sigmund Freud's uncanny theory. This theoretical framework helps to examine the relationship between traumatic experiences, fractured identity and creative expression in Stephen King's Duma Key and Misery. It helps to unlock a perspective by providing a better understanding on how trauma fractures an individual's sense of self and how creative expression contributes in negotiating traumatic rupture. Cathy Caruth's Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History (1996) helps to understand that trauma is characterized by the insufficiency of the mind to process an event when it occurs, causing it to return repeatedly. From this point of view, trauma is not limited to the initial event and can go on to affect the individual later through nightmares. Paul Ricoeur's Oneself As Another (1992)

discusses the distinction between idem and ipse which provides insight for understanding identity reconstruction. According to Ricoeur, identity is not merely a set of fixed characteristics but rather an interpretation of the self which is continually developed over time through action. When this perspective is applied to King's novels, it enables the study to go beyond the idea that recovery involves restoring a pre-traumatic identity.

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History (1992) helps to interpret writing and painting as creative arts which act as a witness. Felman and Laub's method points out the difficulties of expressing experiences which resist clear narration and stresses the role of witness in the process of traumatic experiences. Even though testimony is not the same as artistic creation, their approach lay a foundation for investigating how writing and painting can externalise experiences that are hard to understand or communicate directly. Sigmund Freud's concept of uncanny is employed to examine the psychological conflict and trauma within the gothic landscapes of both novels. In his 1919 essay The Uncanny, Freud examines how repressed material, hidden fears, or unsettling forms of familiar objects make something unfamiliar. Therefore, the uncanny is helpful in understanding how known settings, items, and experiences take on menacing connotations. The combined framework supports a parallel character study of Edgar Freemantle and Paul Sheldon whose identities are molded through their experiences with trauma, artistic expression and reconstruction of identity.

III. Trauma and the Fractured Self

Trauma destabilises the identity of the protagonists in both Duma Key and Misery. King portrays trauma as a force that shatters the individual's self that once existed before the traumatic event. Edgar Freemantle and Paul Sheldon had built their own professional lives as business man and writer respectively. But the accidents fractured their selfhood and left them to feel depersonalised. Even though trauma of Paul is from the physical pain, violence and captivity while Edgar is from the physical injuries, aphasia, phantom itches, marriage issues and supernatural force, both narratives examine how trauma shapes the individual understanding their circumstances.

Edgar Freemantle's trauma is reflected by the episodes of anger and dissociative amnesia. The novel portrays the inability to recall the names of common objects and communicate what he wants, as a traumatic experience. Edgar forgets the Reba doll's name and a sudden outburst of anger towards it shows the frustration of his memory gap, "What's your name, you cunt? What's your name, you cheap rag-filled whore? Tell me your name! Tell me your name! Tell me your name or I'll cut out your eyes and chop off your nose and rip out your-" (King 2011a, 6). However he eventually recollects the name by associating it with the accident incident, demonstrating how traumatic memories are buried in the unconscious. Edgar struggling to understand his own condition illustrates Caruth's notion of not fully able to process the trauma. Due to emotional distress, he tried to choke his wife, Pam, but the inability to remember the incident reveals dissociative amnesia. Edgar had a sudden epiphany hit when he killed the dying dog, Gandalf, "For a moment I was in a darkness shot with that red; then I opened my eyes. I was clutching Gandalf to my chest with my left arm, and his eyes were staring up at my face"(King 2011a, 28). His waking nightmares of Gandalf staring at him reveals the unresolved guilt. Trauma attacks Edgar not through a singular event but through different patterns.

Paul Sheldon is a well known novelist who holds the authorship of the Misery series. His identity is dissociated after the car accident leaving him with a broken leg and dislocated pelvis. The injuries transform him from an independent writer to being totally dependent on Annie for food and medication, "she was crazy but he needed her"(King 2011b, 23). She soon transforms care into punishment by delaying the medication leaving Paul in extreme pain and blames him for her actions, "remember that you made that mess. Not me. It's nobody's fault but your own"(King 2011b, 27). The psychological endurance of Paul is accelerated when Annie abandons him for fifty one hours without food, water and medicine. The act of forcing him to drink filthy rinse water and Paul drinking his own urine out of thirst dismantles one's dignity and fractures the perception of himself to fulfil his bodily needs. The perpetration of Annie urging him to burn the manuscript of his new novel, Fast Cars, symbolically destroys Paul's identity as a writer and makes him into an identity she wants to construct for him. The consequences of prolonged captivity haunt him through nightmares like she pointing a shotgun at him. His recurring nightmares of Annie amputating his foot reveal how traumatic experience exceeds consciousness and return through involuntary actions from the lens of Caruth's trauma theory.

Both the reading of Duma Key and Misery exposes that the disruption of personal agency leads to the fractured self. Although King portrays divergent narrative in both novels, trauma plays a unified theme under different circumstances. Both characters confront the deficiency of their former identities in assimilating the altered realities. The contrasting experiences of Edgar and Paul exemplifies that traumatic wounds not only operate through immediate experience of trauma but also through the fracture of previously sustained sense of self. Ricoeur's concept of idem and ipse helps to understand the portrayal of trauma as a disruption of idem identity but creating possibility for ipse identity to heal the selfhood. The importance of this disruption becomes more complicated when examined through the protagonists' creative expression. In Misery, when Annie controls Paul's freedom, writing preserves his connection to his identity as an author. In Duma Key, when the disturbing supernatural realm complicates the line between creativity and reality, Edgar's paintings become a means of his transformed identity. In both the novels, creative expression offers the possibility of negotiating fractured identity and also pushing the protagonist to further conflict and uncertainty. Therefore King presents trauma not as an endpoint but as the condition where it leads to the creative awakening and reconstruction of identity.

IV. Creativity as a Site of Identity Reconstruction

In both the novels, creativity operates as a defense mechanism to negotiate trauma. In Duma Key, after moving into an island (Duma Key), Edgar reconnects with his lost hobby of painting as a part of his recovery. "My new hobby helped in my transition" (King 2011a, 59). His artistic impulses appear involuntary, as he unconsciously paints the repressed history of the island. Edgar's paintings are created by a sudden urge through a phantom itch, "..my right arm, the one that was no longer there, began to tingle…All at once I wanted to draw" (King 2011a, 77). His paintings only open him into a channel to experience even more psychological sufferings. In Misery, Annie forces Paul to resurrect the fictional character (Misery Chastain) through writing a new novel Misery's Return. Though Annie's action appears to be domineering, Paul utilised his creative writing as a coping strategy. He reconnects with his identity that Annie tried to suppress, "The gotta, as in: 'I think I'll stay up another

fifteen-twenty minutes, honey, I gotta see how this chapter comes out" (King 2011b, 265). Through Ricoeur's theory, it can be understood that Paul redefines himself by an agency transforming the disrupted idem identity into ipse selfhood.

Both forms of creativity allow the protagonists to move forward from their trauma but through different paths. Paul's writing helps him to reclaim his autonomy while Edgar's painting helps to foresee danger but ultimately falling into the trap of the supernatural force. Edgar uses the psychic power to remove the bullet in Wireman's brain by painting a portrait of a young pre-injury Wireman. Thus creative arts help the protagonists to interpret and configure rather than get them trapped in the wreckage of trauma. Even though writing and painting help Paul and Edgar to negotiate trauma, the creative practices differ in the degree of agency they offer. King presents creativity as a dynamic process in which it creates not an escape from trauma but a healing process from a fractured self to begin reconstructing the identity.

V. Uncanny in the Gothic Spaces

Stephen King transforms settings into gothic spaces that blur the boundary between external reality and internal thoughts. Freud's concept of uncanny provides a vital role in understanding the supernatural happenings in Duma Key. He argues that uncanny arises when familiar becomes strange and frightening. After the accident, Edgar's body feels strange to him as he lost his right arm, struggles to walk, and can't recall common words and also experiences sudden impulses out of Edgar's control. He stays at Big Pink, a house he compares to "the House of Usher", which acts as a liminal space where past and present, artistic creation and supernatural presences intersect (King 2011a, 43). Edgar's artworks gradually become unsettling, seeming to possess supernatural power and reveal ghostly presence and hidden pasts. Dolls are considered as kids toys but Reba (Edgar's anger management doll), Noveen (Elizabeth's doll) and a porcelain doll (vessel for Perse's supernatural presence) become a source of nightmares for both Edgar and Elizabeth. "Noveen's voice changed. It stopped being Adie's voice. It stopped being the voice of anyone Elizabeth knew" (King 2011a, 171). The concept of uncanny is evident in Duma Key, even Edgar's Big Pink and island's history demonstrate how repressed trauma returns through deformation of the familiar. The past events of the island and drowned twins find its way through the dreams and visions of Edgar and subconsciously through painting too. Ghost ship (Perse's hub) and recurring images of tennis ball and red picnic basket amplify the uncanny atmosphere. In Misery, Annie's isolated farmhouse, "seventy acres of open ground between the house and the edge of the forest", appears as a gothic space in which the isolation intensifies psychological confinement (King 2011b, 76). The transformation of Annie from the familiar caretaker to the unfamiliar perpetrator illustrates Freud's notion of uncanny. The imagined voice of the typewriter, "Maybe you broke your writing bone in that crash, too…only that bone isn't healing" illuminates the repressed psychological sufferings through an external familiar object (King 2011b, 125). Annie's history book of murders deepens the uncanny atmosphere revealing her psychotic behaviour has a history beyond Paul's captivity.

In both novels, the uncanny operates beyond the realm of Gothic atmosphere by complicating the protagonists' attempts to understand their altered identities. In Misery, Annie Wilkes's transformation from caregiver to tormentor unsettles the familiar association between domestic care and safety. Her

house becomes a space where protection conceals violence. In Duma Key, the 'uncanny' arises from the paintings of Edgar, whose disturbing portraits blur the boundaries between artistic expression and supernatural reality. Unlike Paul, whose fear develops through his direct encounter with another person's (Annie) unpredictable physical violence, Edgar confronts his fear that challenges his confidence in the supernatural realm. But both experiences destabilise the distinction between the familiar and the threatening, suggesting that the uncanny intensifies trauma by undermining the environments and assumptions through which individuals ordinarily establish security. Freud's framework therefore highlights how King uses Gothic elements to unsettle the boundaries of selfhood, agency, and safety. Ultimately, the uncanny reveals how trauma can transform familiar spaces and experiences into sources of estrangement. In both novels, uncertainty complicates identity reconstruction, as the protagonists must negotiate not only the consequences of traumatic experience but also the instability of the realities through which they understand themselves.

VI. Reimagining the Self: Fragmentation to Reconstruction

The reconstruction of identity following trauma requires a reconfiguration of the self in response to experiences that disrupt established forms of identity and self-understanding. It involves more than overcoming suffering from psychological loss. In Stephen King's Misery and Duma Key, this transitional process arises through the protagonists' attempts to negotiate the trauma between their pre-traumatic sense of self and their transformed circumstances. Trauma neither eliminates capacity for agency nor transformation but destabilises their established sense of self. The fragmentation resulting from trauma not only creates a tension between the desire to recover a lost identity and but also the necessity of accommodating irreversible change. Upon examining this tension through the relationship between trauma, creativity, and narrative identity, it highlights how reconstruction remains an uncertain process, redefining the self rather than simply restoring what has been lost. In Misery and Duma Key, both the protagonists reconstruct their identity by transcending cumulative traumas through psychological resilience. At the beginning of the novel, Edgar and Paul share a similar traumatic event of an accident causing them to endure physical injury but later experiences violence and loss due to external forces. The protagonists recover their identity by developing relationships with agency and creativity. Ricoeur elucidates that the trauma fractures the continuity of idem (the characteristics built before trauma) while ipse builds a way to reconfigure their old self. Therefore protagonists learn their capacity to interpret and reclaim their shattered identity through the process of reconstruction.

In Duma Key, Edgar's reconstruction of identity is complex as even though painting initially feels therapeutic but later destabilises his selfhood by unleashing a supernatural force, Perse. His paintings hold information beyond his conscious knowledge. The portraits of a male figure resembling Ilse' fiance, Tom Riley with a destroyed eye and resemblance of Ilse in 'Girl and Ship series' are from a sudden impulse to draw, which demonstrates the involvement of an external force. Edgar's denial in accepting lacks consciousness as the creative arts communicate before he could fully understand. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub state that testimony does not originate in conscious knowledge rather emerges through the forms of witness. In this context, Edgar's paintings operate as testimonial objects that bear witness before Edgar's conscious understanding. "The ghost-ship had turned a little

more; its name appeared to be the Perse" (King 2011a, 334). Naming the ship as Perse also indicates that the paintings possess knowledge without Edgar's conscious intention. His artistic creations exemplify the principle of Felman and Laub, that testimony often involves the rise of truth that the witness is not fully aware of.

Edgar's trauma remains active through persistent nightmares and ghostly presences in Big Pink. When he tries to stop Perse, she causes the deaths of Tom Riley, Dr. Kamen (psychotherapist) and Mary Ire (art critic), pushing him into the chronic state of continuous traumatic stress. The determined resistance is developed after the death of his beloved daughter Ilse, "The table is leaking. You will want to but you mustn't. Drown her back to sleep" (King 2011a, 445). His journey to Heron's Roost, fighting Perse's minions and the confrontation in drowning Perse in freshwater reveals the act of witness and resistance. Through constant traumatic experiences, Edgar reconstructs his identity by destroying Perse, recovering the island's suppressed history and configuring resilience through art. He did not restore pre-traumatic idem identity, rather he reclaimed the transformation of ipse selfhood.

In Misery, Annie seeks to destroy Paul's sense of autonomy by controlling his movement and medication. Her unpredictable acts of killing a rat to terrorise him and amputating his foot for hiding a knife reveals psychological dominance over him, "I'm closer to death than I've ever been in my life, he thought, because she means it" (King 2011b, 189). Caruth's notion of trauma which returns belatedly is exemplified through his recurring nightmares. After witnessing the murder of Duane Kushner (police officer), Paul carefully orchestrates his escape plan. His determined thought that Annie won't kill him until the novel is done, transforms captivity into a calculated resistance. Paul represses all his impulsive instincts to scream for help when two more police officers come to Annie's house, "They could only put you in jail…i know how to hurt you" (King 2011b, 323). His strategic silence demonstrates the desire to avenge Annie the way she hurt him. He creates an illusion of burning Misery's Return manuscript when she was on the urge of happiness, "Now I'm going to do a little trick with it. It's a good trick, I learned it from you" by symbolically reversing Annie's action on burning Fast Cars manuscript (King 2011a, 345). He violently fights with her which leads to her death, "The goddess was dead and he was free" (King 2011a, 349). Despite her death, Paul still hallucinates Annie chasing him with an axe. At the end of the novel, Paul discovers an inspiration for his new novel which signifies reconstruction of identity.

Both Paul and Edgar reconstruct their identity in two different ways. Edgar reconstructs it by interpreting the creativity's (painting) control over him while Paul reconstructs it by reclaiming his freedom using the creativity (writing). Yet both align with the Ricoeur's principle that identity shapes through transformation. Trauma fragments the identity of the individual while creativity emerges to witness and interpret the traumatic experiences. In both novels, Stephen King challengingly tries to exemplify the creative process of recovery that restores the traumatised individual to a former state of self. Instead, the protagonists' transformations expose the instability of identities constructed around professional roles, personal autonomy and bodily integrity. This parallel becomes particularly significant when examined through Paul Ricoeur's distinction between idem and ipse identity. Although traumatic experiences disrupt the continuity associated with idem, they do not necessarily eliminate the possibility of sustaining selfhood through transformation. Both novels reveal that identity remains through the protagonists' adaptation to circumstances that fundamentally alter their understanding of

themselves. Their struggles reveal that the capacity to act remains constrained by the consequences of traumatic experience. Therefore, identity reconstruction emerges as a negotiation between the desire for survival and the reimagining of the former self which cannot be recovered unchanged. The process gets complicated when creativity establishes a relationship between personal agency and vulnerability.

The fractured identity of the protagonists' engagements with the artistic expression of writing and painting not only produce healing but also exposes the contradictions involved in reconstructing the self. The attempt to regain control of their lost identity may reveal uncertainty, while the expression of psychological experiences reveal further dimensions of suffering. This ambivalence prevents reconstruction from becoming a simple narrative of overcoming adversity. Ultimately, Misery and Duma Key reflect the reimagining of the self that continues to evolve through interplay of trauma, creative expression, and personal agency. Their combined importance lies in showing that reconstruction requires neither erasure of past suffering nor returning to who one once was. Instead, it involves building a reshaped sense of one's identity that accepts the persistence of the past while adapting to the possibilities of the present reality. Thus King portrays identity not as a fixed entity that trauma can permanently shatter, but as an evolving process of reinterpretation in which the fragmented self can slowly find new meaning and regain a sense of continuity.

VII. Conclusion

Stephen King's Misery and Duma Key present the identity transformation from traumatic experiences. This article demonstrates that trauma not only fractures the individual's mind but also their identity as a person through two characters, Edgar Freemantle and Paul Sheldon. Their identity cannot simply return to them instead it must negotiate through agency and creativity. The uncanny experiences in the Gothic atmosphere complicates the transformation in reclaiming the identity. Annie's farmhouse in Misery and the island in Duma Key converts the familiar landscape into a horrifying atmosphere. In both the novels, uncanny blurs the boundary between familiar and unfamiliar, past and present, and reality and nightmares. Therefore gothic spaces act as an instrument to represent the fractured protagonists.

Creativity functions as an agency for the protagonists to negotiate trauma. Annie controls Paul's writing, but he gradually regains his authorship and builds resilience to survive and escape. Edgar's paintings expose repressed histories before he could understand. Creativity does not entirely heal trauma rather enables the protagonists to interpret. Incorporating Cathy Caruth's trauma theory shows that trauma is not experienced as a single moment but later returns through dreams, nightmares and fragmented memories. Edgar and Paul face psychological suffering from an accident and through distinct external forces. Drawing upon Freud's concept of uncanny elucidates the constant events of familiar turning to unfamiliar. Ricoeur's concept of identity helps in illuminating the transformation of protagonists from their fragmented self to reconstructed body. Felman and Laub's testimony theory helps in revealing how creative arts act as witnesses. Ultimately Duma Key and Misery elucidates trauma fragmenting the self, uncanny magnifying the fragmentation and creativity functioning as a space through which it can be negotiated. Therefore King's protagonists do not recover their pre-traumatic identities rather they reimagine themselves from the fractured self by the process of reconstruction.

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