



Reclaiming Voice through Traumatic Narratives: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of *The Way I Used to Be*

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ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the profound effects of sexual abuse on the protagonist, Eden, in Amber Smith's novel *The Way I Used to Be*. Through a psychoanalytic lens, this study examines Eden's trauma, coping mechanisms, and complex recovery process. The novel illustrates the devastating consequences of trauma on Eden's identity, relationships, and worldview. This research highlights the importance of supportive networks, self-care, and boundary-setting in the healing process. By examining Eden's journey, this analysis sheds light on the non-linear nature of trauma recovery and the resilience required to reclaim control.*

Keywords: Sexual Abuse, Trauma, psychoanalysis, Identity Formation, Resilience.

Introduction

Psychological trauma results from severely distressing events beyond the normal human experience, such as violence, rape, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, accidents, or significant losses. Trauma impacts individuals differently, influenced by factors like support networks, coping mechanisms, and pre-existing mental health conditions. Psychoanalytic theory deals with the function and development of the human mind. Psychoanalysis, founded by Sigmund Freud, believes that a person can be healed by making their mind unconscious during the healing period. Psychoanalysis in literature serves as a means to analyze a literary work psychologically. The uniqueness of Freud's exploration lies in his linking the unconscious with its decisive role in human life. The unconscious is the storage of traumatic experiences, emotions, unresolved conflicts, recognized desires, fears, and so on.

Psychoanalytic Reading: *The Way I Used To Be* by Amber Smith is a novel that tells about the traumatic experience of the protagonist, Eden McCrorey. A fourteen year old girl, Eden had been raped by her brother's friend while she was sleeping. It tells the story of the impact of sexual abuse she experienced. Besides that, it also demonstrates the strength of Eden as she navigates unacceptable disappointment and pain during her adolescence. This includes

her first love and first heartbreak, the breakdown and eventual rebuilding of friendships, and the journey of embracing her inner strength to survive pain and trauma. These experiences reveal the resilience she has concealed within her heart. In *The Way I Used To Be*, one prominent cause of trauma experienced by Eden's character is the continuous sexual abuse by Kevin. In the incident of sexual abuse, Eden's trauma is compounded not only by the abuse itself but also by Kevin's subsequent threats, leading her to confront the harsh reality.

I'm scared to look. But there they are: my days-of-the-week underwear in a ball on the floor. They were my Tuesdays, even though it was Saturday, because, well, who would ever know anyway? That's what I was thinking when I put them on yesterday. And now I know, for sure, it happened. It actually happened. And this pain in the center of my body, the depths of my insides, restarts its torture as if on cue. I throw the covers off. Kneecap-shaped bruises line my arms, my hips, my thighs. And the blood on the sheets, the comforter, my legs. (3)

Eden's family treats Kevin very well, without knowing what he has done to Eden. Kevin even uses all the things that belong to Eden, to make her disgusted, for what has been done to her. Kevin's presence is not only in every corner of her house but also imprints on her body and memory. Eden expects her brother to be more concerned, so that she can tell the abuse that Kevin has done. Later, Eden hopes to get defense from Caelin, who has always protected her well. At least by getting defense from Caelin, Eden can feel calmer, and her stress can be reduced. Her brother's protection helps her regain her sense of security and handle the situation better.

Eden hated her body and her own life. "My body is a torture chamber. It's a fucking crime scene. Hideous things have happened here, it's nothing to talk about, nothing to comment on, not out loud. Not ever. I won't hear it. I can't." (109-110). The line vividly depicts Eden's trauma with intense imagery, effectively conveying their suffering and isolation. Eden uses Josh as an escape to cover up the bad events with Kevin. "And suddenly the thought of having someone else there in place of him is something I required-wanted-needed, in the most severe of ways. And I don't really care who, anyone else at all will do. This guy, Josh, he's good enough. He did, after all, pick me a weed" (92). The above lines illustrate how Eden chooses Josh to replace Kevin's place in her mind.

Eden thinks that the memories of Kevin can be erased from her mind by spending time with other people. She made Josh as her friend, who had given her a dandelion. Eden feels the need to escape fantasy with someone else to take Kevin's place. Eden had sexual relations with fifteen different men. "I've been with fifteen different guys-sometimes it seems

like too many; other times, it seems like not nearly enough. But each one takes me just a little farther away. I'm so far now" (235). These relationships are used by Eden to cover up the former rape committed by Kevin.

Emotional Pain

Eden's emotional pain reaches a boiling point, prompting her to seek refuge in harmful habits. She turns to substance abuse, using alcohol and drugs to numb her emotions and temporarily escape the trauma. She also engages in self-destructive behaviours, such as reckless relationships and dangerous activities, in an attempt to distract herself from her emotional agony. Meanwhile, Eden's psychological struggles deepen, manifesting as dissociation and disconnection from her own thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. She experiences memory lapses and flashbacks, reliving the traumatic experience in vivid and terrifying detail. As her sense of identity begins to unravel, Eden faces an existential crisis, questioning her own values, beliefs, and sense of self. Her trust issues become pronounced, making it difficult for her to form and maintain healthy relationships or feel safe in her own skin.

Eden's feelings were a complex web of emotions, a tangled mess of pain, fear, and uncertainty. She felt like she was drowning in a sea of trauma, unable to find a lifeline to cling to. The rape had stolen her sense of security, leaving her feeling exposed and vulnerable. Eden's intense hatred serves as a coping mechanism for the pain she feels, indicating her struggle to process the feelings of hurt, betrayal, or loss. Her emotions often overwhelm her, leaving little room for other feelings. This pervasive resentment dominates her life, hindering her healing and fuelling her helplessness and frustration. Despite her efforts, Eden feels trapped, unable to escape this cycle of hatred.

The initial stages of Eden's journey are marked by isolation, but she gradually allows herself to build new relationships. Her friendship with Alex, a fellow art student, provides her a safe space to share her experiences without judgment. He offers a listening ear and unwavering support, reminding her that she is not alone in her struggles.

Recovering from trauma includes both emotional restoration and psychological growth. Eden tries negative ways to ease the burden of her trauma, "I bring the bottle to my mouth and finish off half the beer in one gulp" (189). Drinking beer became one of Eden's escape places to reduce the fear and stress caused by the trauma of sexual abuse. Eden heals from trauma through self-care and boundary-setting. She avoids dwelling on past pain, focuses on the present, and shields herself from toxic people who might drain her mental and emotional energy.

Conclusion

Throughout the novel, Eden's trauma shapes her relationships and worldview, pushing her into a state of isolation, where the overwhelming pain makes it nearly impossible to express what she feels to those around her. Her sense of safety, identity, and ability to trust others is shattered, and she is left grappling with intense feelings of shame, anger, and confusion. Eden's journey reflects the difficult reality of living with trauma, where healing is not a linear process but rather one fraught with setbacks, uncertainty, and emotional upheaval.

Recognizing the depth of Eden's suffering, everyone begins to see the small steps she takes towards healing. Though Eden remains deeply affected by the trauma, her ability to confront and feel the intensity of her emotions signals the beginning of her journey toward healing. The scars of her trauma will not fade quickly, but the author emphasizes the possibility of slowly reclaiming control, even as Eden navigates the long and complex process of recovery.

Reference

1. Smith, Amber. *The Way I Used to Be*. Oneworld Publications, 2016.