

To Read between the Shame: Trauma and Self-Bereavement in Clare Hall's *Broken Country*

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Abstract

Broken Country by Clare Leslie Hall cleverly depicts the post-traumatic disintegration of self-identity along with the phenomenon of self-bereavement using the classic conventions of trauma fiction, which includes narrative fragmentation and seemingly inexplicable motivations augmented by silences and a reticence for justifications. The story, which is largely dubbed as a tragic tale of love and passion, upon a close reading reveals something otherwise. It shows the debilitating and crippling effect of unchecked trauma and how its suppression and denial can lead to neurotic shame that further deteriorates one's self-esteem and ability to function. In the end, the novel reveals how characters suffering from such intense shame have to go through an extreme metamorphosis in the form of a grave and self-effacing sacrifice to discard this unrelenting garb of shame and start over.

Keywords: counterphobic shameguilt masochistic shame trauma

القراءة بين طيات الخجل: الصدمة والحداد على الذات في رواية "بلد مكسور" لكثير هول

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الملخص

تصوّر رواية "بلد مكسور" لكثير ليزلي هول ببراعة التفكك ما بعد الصدمة للهوية الذاتية إلى جانب ظاهرة فقدان الذات، مستخدمةً الأعراف الكلاسيكية لأدب الصدمة، والتي تشمل التجزئة السردية والدوافع التي تبدو غير قابلة للتفسير، معززةً بالصمت والإحجام عن التبريرات. تكشف القصة، التي توصف إلى حد كبير بأنها حكاية مأساوية عن الحب والعاطفة، عند قراءتها عن كثب عن شيء مغاير. فهي تُظهر التأثير المُنهك والمُثبِّل للصدمة غير المُعالَجة، وكيف يمكن أن يؤدي كبتها وإنكارها إلى خجل عصابي يزيد من تدهور تقدير الذات والقدرة على الأداء. في النهاية، تكشف الرواية كيف يتعين على الشخصيات التي تعاني من هذا الخجل الشديد أن تمر بتحول جذري على شكل تضحية جسيمة ومُثْكَرة للذات للتخلص من رداء الخجل المستمر هذا والبدء من جديد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الخجل المضاد للرهاب، الذنب، الخجل المازوخي، الصدمة

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I. Introduction

Like most trauma narratives, *Broken Country*, a 2025 novel written by Clare Leslie Hall, is a story of intense suffering that yields powerful feelings of guilt and shame. Also in line with other trauma narratives is the fact that *Broken Country* is not a linear, chronological read that neatly develops the plot and culminates in the perfect resolution, which ties together all of the gaps and wholes in the story. Trauma narratives in general, and *Broken Country*, in particular, do quite the opposite. Their means of storytelling are often fragmented, anti-chronological, and punctuated by fissures and cracks—pain left unsaid (Christa Schönfelder, 2013, pg. 28-30). However, because of the indescribability of traumatic pain, the resulting neurosis in the characters and the motivations behind their actions can often be misjudged.

This is easily the case with the novel *Broken Country*. At the outset, it is a novel that recounts the danger of intense passion and might even be described as glamorising cheating at the expense of others. However, trauma fiction is best read under the lens of trauma theory, according to which the real story/struggle of the characters unfolds not in what is said but what is unsaid. The analysis will reveal how the actual

underlying struggle in *Broken Country* is best understood not in the musings of Beth, the main narrator in the story, but through a close observation of the actions of its characters. It is only then that the readers see beyond the apparent glamorization of love, lust and spousal betrayal and uncover the intense overhaul of one's identity and sense of self that leads one to making such fatalistic errors.

Research problems

For a novel where characters never say what they feel and feel what can never be said, it becomes imperative that the novel seeks answers to the following questions:

- 1) How does Frank tacitly accept his wife's adulterous love affair without making her suffer the consequences? Is guilt alone enough for a self-respecting husband to forgive the emotional and moral sacrilege of this nature?
- 2) If trauma fiction does not retain the ability to voice the real struggle/pain of the characters, how does *Broken Country* reveal the actual psychological underpinnings that inform the plot of the novel?

Significance of the Study

As Christa Schönfelder put it, the real merit of most trauma fiction lies in its ability to understand the nuances and complexity of traumatic pain by extending the action beyond the realm of the real and into the realm of the imaginary, which can be both flexible and expansive. This allows readers to understand possibilities and motives that are less apparent in real life (Schönfelder, 2013, pg. 28). This analysis is a great example of how trauma in literature can serve as a viable tool to uncover the human psychology and the neurotic aberrations that occur in the wake of a severe tragedy, and how those transgressions that one would never allow in their healthily unified state of mind become acceptable once that state of mind is ruptured and broken.

Framework of the Study

This study utilises the musings of various researchers about trauma theory in fiction; chief of which are the deliberations of Wilsdon et al and William A. Martin, according to whom trauma can sometimes generate overwhelming (also called masochistic shame), and it is this extreme shame that leads to an overhaul of one's entire sense of self and identity. Not only that, but this shame is also responsible for further inaptitude in the traumatised person to uphold the cultural and societal moral standards and expectations, further reinforcing this shame in the individual and creating a vicious cycle. This framework guides the analysis of the 2025 novel *Broken Country*, written by New York Times best-selling author, Clare Leslie Hall.

II. Literature Review

In their research titled "Post-traumatic Guilt and Shame", Wilson et. al call shame and guilt the "janus-faced" (Wilson et al, 2007, pg. 123) partners that manifest together and are often enmeshed in inextricable ways. In common parlance, the ideas of shame and guilt are lumped together but Wilson et al, in their research, painstakingly deliberate on how the two are, in fact, quite distinct concepts and manifest in distinguishable ways (Wilson et al, 2007, pg. 122-141). The researchers believe that between guilt and shame, the latter is a more complicated feeling to grapple with since it involves a reorganisation of one's entire identity; ie, their self and ego. When one suffers from shame, the pivotal point of the resulting feelings remains around disgrace, dishonour, loss of integrity, virtue and self-esteem.

In their research "A Cognitive Model of Social Phobia", Clark and Wells describe certain behaviours emanated by most people experiencing shame after trauma. Chief among these is the desire to disappear, but other indicators can include submissive or downcast body language; avoiding eye contact, and mentally disengaging from what is happening around (Clark and Wells, 1995, pg. 69-71). Other researchers, such as Feichel and Wurmser, also suggest that trauma, coupled with shame, leads the subject to adopt an avoidant attitude where they do not wish to engage with the past (Wurmser, 1987, pg. 64-65).

Wilson et al. speak of how the concept of shame is not exclusive to specific cultures and can be experienced both in the presence of an audience and in its absence. How well a person copes with shame boils down to the ways that they adapt to post-traumatic stress. Shame reactions, like other mental experiences, are not limited in their forms of manifestations but range on a continuous spectrum from mild embarrassment to severe humiliation. The chief difference between the feelings of guilt and shame is that even in situations where one may not deem themselves directly responsible for the trauma, they can still experience immense guilt shame is a more severe emotion and usually experienced when a person is directly responsible for the trauma in some way (Wilson, 2007, pg. 125).

Shame can be a crippling experience for those who suffer from it. In her book *The Shame Experience*, Susan Miller states that the reason why shame is so debilitating to one's identity is that it violates one's true nature. Drawing on Freudian concepts, Miller deliberates how shame can cause a massive rift between the ego and the ego ideal and hence appears as a constant state of tension (Miller, 1985, pg. 38-45). So while, as Tom Hayes puts it, the ideal ego comprise the perfect integration of societal, cultural, and parental

values, along with fantasies of one's grandiose immersion in the moral values, all of these can be ruptured by the reassembly of one's actual ego as dishonoured and disrepute (Hayes, 2004, pg. 144).

Researchers Wilson et. al also elucidate how shame can be external and internal, where the former can lead to social anxiety and a crippling preoccupation with how they are viewed by others; at the same time, it can also be categorised as negative and positive. When one experiences negative forms of shame, they suffer from what is called "shame-anxiety" (Wilson, 2005, pg. 125). The person suffering these ways experiences bouts of depression, diminutive stature, along with feelings of disgust, weakness and inadequacy. But at times, shame can be used to trigger positive reinforcement among individuals. It can act as a guardian of values and prevent individuals from engaging in dangerous self-exhibition and curiosity (Wilson et al., 2005, p. 27).

Wilson et al. also speak about the eight dimensions of post-traumatic shame. Chief among them are the loss of self-worth and a certain sense of wholeness, loss of ability in upholding culturally defined values, a lowering of one's perception in other people's eyes; feelings of powerlessness; desire to self-obliterate and alienate; extreme consciousness over disappointing others; loss of self-respect. These traits vary quite distinctly from feelings of posttraumatic guilt, which can include feelings of self-recrimination; survivor's guilt; failure for enactment from bystanding; guilt over acts of transgression; situational and moral guilt from similarly failed enactments (Wilson et al, 2005 pg. 28-30).

As far as shame is concerned, the inability to uphold cultural values and the loss of self are key reactions that shape the facets of one's daily struggles as they try to navigate life. For people experiencing such intense shame, it becomes common to further descend into shameful actions that are the result of them losing their self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy. This, in turn, leads them to fall through the social and cultural expectations, further crippling their self-worth. Post-traumatic stress, therefore, can function in extremely sinister ways enmeshing a person until they completely lose track of their sense of self enabling extreme depression and suicidal thoughts.

In his study titled "Shame: The Underside of Narcissism", Morrison speaks of the various reactions and defence mechanisms one adopts in the wake of post-traumatic shame, suggesting that one of the most common responses in the wake of post-traumatic shame is the adoption of a stupor-like state where the mind appears to forget parts of one's own identity and life history (Morrison, 1990, pg. 350). Wilson et al draw on other research pieces to speak on the "counterphobic" reaction to shame, where one assumes an aura of shamelessness in order to stave off humiliation and one's own vulnerability. Omnipotence defence to post-traumatic shame is the idea originally introduced by Tangney et al, according to whom, some people experiencing intense shame can instead adopt attitudes of extreme irascibility, anger and narcissistic rage (Tangney et al. 2003, New York Guild).

In "Theorizing Trauma: Romantic and Postmodern Perspectives on Mental Wounds", Christa Schönfelder speak about how trauma as a concept has escaped disciplinary constrictions to cross various fields and discourses to the point where the term has become something quite nebulous and difficult to define in any tangible way. (Schönfelder, 2013, pg. 28). Schönfelder comments on the importance of literary trauma, stating that literary approaches to trauma provide a more flexible field of discourse when discussing the former's implications and manifestations. One can see literary trauma studies as supplementing historical trauma studies in that the imaginative realm has the ability to fictionalise and symbolise people and events, which in turn helps to explore problems of existential nature as well as the phenomenon of vulnerability and moral dilemmas from previously unexplored angles. Fiction has the ability to engage with trauma in a way that is much more nuanced, which is then historicized, metaphorized and personalised in revealing ways. This spurs the readers to engage with the characters in a way that is both sympathetic and critical. They can self-identify with the characters but also reflect on their actions in more minute ways.

An important concept explored in Schönfelder's research is the apparent paradox of narrativising trauma in literature. Since many describe trauma as something nebulous; something that defies form and structure; it becomes an almost paradoxical task to communicate that which negates the "ordinary process of remembering and narrating" (Schönfelder, 2013, pg. 29). Trauma literature therefore raises important questions about the possibility of "narrating the unnarratable" (Schönfelder, 2013, pg. 29). It almost becomes a challenge of one's linguistic and narrative knowledge, which is why the anti-narrative tension actually remains at the core of many trauma fictions and the Hall's novel *Broken Country* is an apt example of that. In fact, according to Schönfelder, at the core of trauma theory is the tension in trauma narratives between wounds and words; comprehending the incomprehensible and the interrelations between words in trauma fiction and their significance. One of the earliest people to highlight the inability of narratives to narrativise trauma was put forward in the now-famous publication "Trauma and Unclaimed Experience" by Cathy Caruth. While Caruth doesn't claim the complete inability of trauma fiction to tell the story, but maintains that the true nature of trauma will eventually be distorted. The moment trauma is narrativised using the medium of language, it somewhat strips the actual intensity and quality of suffering (Caruth, 1991, pg. 184-185).

Caruth therefore puts great emphasis on the cultural custodians of trauma to represent it in its truest incomprehensible form. Interestingly, Caruth claims that the real danger of trauma lies not in one's inability to

understand it but in the ability to understand too much. The ideal would be for trauma narratives to actually, textually perform trauma through inexplicable gaps and unforeseen silences; the collapse of language and crippling of comprehension (Caruth, 1991, pg. 184-185). The idea is reminiscent of other similar studies. For example, Geoffery, Whitehead and Vickory all speak of the need for trauma fiction to not simply tell the trauma but to perform it for the readers; to incorporate the patterns and structures that become part of grasping with trauma in the mode of storytelling. Nevertheless, these researchers also agree that some degree of verbosity is essential to make clear the challenges of trauma and supplement understanding for those who fail to identify with such intense experiences and suffering.

This sentiment is evoked in Emanuel Shapiro's research titled "Trauma, Shame, and Group Psychotherapy: A Self Psychology Perspective" which draws on Freud's work to profess that psychological trauma stems from actual traumatic events, but the brain's most immediate defensive function is to launch itself into a state of suppression to regain some sort of mental equilibrium and homeostasis. But trauma that is suppressed in comprehension, never really goes away and is manifested through other neurodivergent behaviours and attitudes (Shapiro, 1999, pg. 51).

In "To Grapple with Another Man's Shame", William A. Martin claims that trauma and shame became the core of British modernist literature in the previous century. Trauma theory focuses on creating realistic simulations of the traumatised individuals who experience the urgent need to give a verbal definition, a language to their experience. According to Martin, trauma theory, with its inexplicable gaps and fragmented narration, compounds with shame theory, and tries to give meaning to the experiences of the traumatised individual in as essential a form as possible. (Martin, 2001, pg. 231).

Drawing on the works of Wurmser, Martin also deliberates on a related concept of masochistic shame. Masochism, when induced by trauma, becomes a tool to counter shame. In this type of masochism, a person seeks complete and utter self-abasement and humiliation in order to regain love and respect. Masochism, when it stems from trauma, can take three distinct forms: outer masochism, inner (or moral) masochism, and masochism concealed behind a narcissistic façade. These various forms of masochism stem from a "shame affect" cycle, which constitutes the behavioural and material evidence of the trauma that is unutterable and non-elucidated. Modern and contemporary trauma fiction often strives to elucidate this trauma through its fragmented structure, an example of which is the text of *Broken Country*, as the analysis will reveal shortly.

The current corpus on trauma and shame, therefore, seems to be pointing towards the interconnectedness of masochistic shame and trauma. The former is the product of the latter but also reinforces it, creating a vicious shame-effect cycle. It is this devastating nexus that becomes responsible for the ensuing tragedy in the novel. As Wurmser puts it, the brutality of trauma can be surprisingly severe, becoming part of the inner world of the characters where it takes the form of self-bereavement, self-punishment and overwhelming shame.

Analysis

If, as Williams A. Martin suggests, shame and trauma underscore the majority of the modern British fiction and writing (Martin, 2001, pg. 231), then *Broken Country* fits right at the core of the British literary repertoire. *Broken Country* is a novel whose main conflict is completely obfuscated by the shame that follows the characters for a great portion of the novel. However, it is only in bits and pieces that the shame of its characters surfaces in full force.

Like most examples of trauma fiction, the novel *Broken Country* is written in fragmented bits that make it difficult to grapple with the psychological underpinnings of the characters when they make their questionable decisions. On the surface, it might appear that the book glamorises cheating and adultery. It definitely remains the most plausible theme when the majority of the time the narrator Beth spends justifying her secret rendezvous with the good-looking and now famous ex-boyfriend from her childhood, Gabriel, even as it becomes very apparent that her husband is not only aware of her adulterous affairs but that it is also eating him up. However, the underbelly of the questionable surface story is much more complex than what meets the eye. This complexity, nevertheless, is obscured due to the fact that it is a trauma fiction and written in the classic style of fragmentation and reticence.

Most of the time, what the characters feel, that is, the ego, is left unuttered, and what is uttered is only the superego. In truth, the main characters, Beth, Frank and Jimmy are all victims of the same traumatic incident which has altered them in different ways. And until we do not observe the characters and their motivations in the light of this sinister knowledge, our assessment of them and their real motivations will be incomplete and most possibly incorrect.

Broken Country is a story that follows the protagonist Beth as she recalls her journey from young adulthood, during which she was tethered to Gabriel, who she thought would be the love of her life, to marital life with Frank Johnson, who turns out to be an excellent and committed husband to Beth. Gabriel eventually goes on to become a famous writer in London, while Beth and Frank fall into the routine of a happily settled married couple in the countryside. Things, however, take a sudden turn for the couple when Gabriel returns to

his countryside establishment with his young son, Leo, and all of a sudden Beth finds herself gravitating towards this man from her past and away from her husband, even as she tries to fight it. When Frank becomes aware of her dalliances with her ex-flame, he tries to seek refuge by drowning his grief in alcohol. His brother Jimmy, however, is less inert and blows up in extreme rage, which leads to the inevitable tragedy of his death towards the end.

On the surface, then, this seems like a regular tale of cheating and retribution until one realises that *Broken Country* is a trauma fiction and what is of the most significance is what is left unsaid and what is said may not even be the characters' true experiences. Reducing characters to the status of a cheating wife or a cuckold husband is a gross oversimplification and largely untrue. All three characters, Beth, Frank, and Jimmy, were victims of trauma and experienced its manifestations in different ways. The following sections of the analysis will depict how Frank's traumatic reaction was that of shame, Jimmy's reaction was counterphobic, and Beth experienced the trauma of loss in its most crude and essential state. The actions of the characters, morally questionable as they were, can most authentically be understood in the light of this theory.

Post-Traumatic Shame and Frank's Loss of Self

Frank is arguably the most misunderstood character in *Broken Country*. This is chiefly because, as readers, we mostly get to see Frank through the eyes of Beth, who herself is a victim of traumatic loss. Once the reader becomes familiar with the nature of the tragedy that once engulfed this couple and Frank's and Beth's roles in it, we begin seeing Frank as a victim of traumatic guilt. Beth entrusts Frank and Jimmy with looking after Bobby, her son, whom she conceived with her ex Gabriel, as they try to bring down an old tree. She even has misgivings that the men might be too preoccupied with the felling process, making it unsafe to leave Bobby in their care. Frank reassures her that he is perfectly capable of felling the tree as well as looking after Bobby, but it proves otherwise when Bobby is suddenly crushed under the weight of the chopped tree as it lands on him. Since Beth is both one recounting the tragedy as well as the main narrator through whom we see most characters, our assessment of them is basically her assessment of the men (her father-in-law, her husband Frank, and her brother-in-law Jimmy) in the wake of their inability to protect her child. Because the men failed to keep their promise to Beth, the latter assumes that they are riled with a certain sense of guilt that makes them behave a certain way. And because, as readers, we are disposed to her judgment, it is easy to adopt this narrative. The truth, as stated earlier, is a lot more complex.

What Frank is feeling is not post-traumatic guilt but post-traumatic shame. While most people may lump the feelings of guilt and shame together in the same pot, and indeed they are often interconnected, where one feeds the other, they are in fact quite distinct and manifest in different ways. As the Literature Review section explained, between guilt and shame, the latter is a more sinister and crippling emotion to deal with because it leads to a complete overhaul of identity in the worst ways. Characters suffering from post-traumatic shame not only lose their sense of self but also lose their grasp on the socially and culturally acceptable standards since they think they are incapable and undeserving. This theory then puts into perspective Frank's passive submission to his wife's adultery even when it boggles the minds of others around him.

At one point, Jimmy rightfully wonders derisively about Frank's passivity and lack of self-respect and because the readers never get direct access to Frank's inner turmoil, the simplest explanation is that he is turning a blind eye to his wife's adultery because, in his mind, he has already punished her enough. In other words, he is rendered inert because of his guilt. His inertia, however, is the result of his shame. This is not to deny that Frank feels guilty for not protecting Bobby and probably self-recriminates all the time but because the child was not his—a secret that was only known to Beth and Frank—he would not be able to experience the loss in the same way that Beth would, since out of the two, he was not the biological parent. In his mind, his wife Beth probably sees the loss as hers alone. While the outsiders might attribute the loss of Bobby to both Beth and Frank in equal measure, Frank alone understands that when he failed to save Bobby, he failed to save Beth and Gabriel's child, even if Beth does not see it this way. The feelings, therefore, that Frank experiences after the tragedy as far more intense than what Jimmy experiences and almost distinct from what Beth experiences. While Jimmy's post-traumatic reactions are fits of rage and outbursts usually exacerbated by alcohol, Frank's responses suggest that he is feeling shame more than guilt, grief or rage.

Most, if not all, of the reactions of Frank, especially once he becomes aware of his wife's secret affair with her past flame and the biological father of her child, fit Wilsdon's seven-dimensional assessment of post-traumatic shame. Starting with the loss of one's sense of self, dignity or self-esteem. Jimmy's question, "You're going to allow her to screw that creep and get into bed with you afterwards, as if nothing's happened?" (Hall, 2025, pg. 191) is a jab at Frank's inability to fight for his honour. How can Frank, as a man, know of the affairs of his adulterous wife and just accept it? In what world is that the hallmark of a self-respecting man like Frank? The only possible justification is that the intense shame he experiences in failing to protect Bobby eschews his sense of self in a way that what remains with him are feelings of humiliation and dishonour. Beth's moral transgressions fail to rouse him because by the time he's become aware of them, he is already numb to feelings of humiliation.

Another dimension of post-traumatic shame that Wilson et al spoke of in their research is the failure to uphold cultural and moral values. As a husband, it is Frank's duty to prevent Beth from engaging in her immoral dalliance, no matter the backstory to her pain. However, Frank is unable to live up to the cultural, societal and moral expectations due to his own self-abasement. In his mind, he cannot uphold these cultural values because his dishonour will not allow him to. Cultural standards and the moral code of conduct is designed for functioning members of society who can continue to contribute towards healthy social customs. Frank appears to be experiencing that intense traumatic shame where he sees himself as an outcast to this morally sustained society of functioning adults. It is almost as though when he begins drowning himself into alcoholism, it is not to wipe out his grief over losing his wife to her past lover but a case of self-bereavement. He is, in fact, subconsciously mourning the loss of his own self and better sense of judgment.

The most excruciating struggle in all of this, for Frank at least, is that this posttraumatic shame is unutterable. There is no way in which he can use language to describe the crippling effects of the shame he is experiencing because trauma in itself is undescribable and nebulous. This is the brutality of trauma that Wurmser speaks of, which results in overwhelming shame. For the outsiders, it looks as though Frank is ashamed of his wife's dalliance, but it is, in fact, quite the opposite. His acceptance of her dalliances is actually what makes him feel better and secure some kind of moral high ground. Knowing that his wife is equally inept to uphold the cultural and moral standards perhaps assuages his own inadequacy. Every time his wife transgresses, he knows that he is not alone in his shame, which becomes his means of survival, a way to counter his shame. While Beth assumes that Frank is silent on account of his guilt, he is actually looking at her transgressions as opportunities to climb out of the vicious cycle of self-abasement but what he does not understand is that his tacit acceptance of his wife's adultery on account of his own shame is only further exacerbating his condition of lowered self-esteem and self-bereavement.

It is safe to say, therefore, that Frank's reaction to his trauma assumes the guise of masochistic shame where the more he allows himself to be humiliated, the more he feels vindicated. The opposite of this kind of shame is what Jimmy, Frank's younger brother, experiences, which Wilson et al termed the counterphobic reaction to shame.

Jimmy's Rage and Violent Outbursts as Forms of Counterphobic Shame

Like Frank, Jimmy also experiences the symptoms of posttraumatic reactions, but they are markedly different from the way Frank experiences them. This can be slightly tricky, but Jimmy was always prone to alcoholism and picking arguments at the bar, which is why his further descent into raging fits and alcoholism went unnoticed. In fact, Beth never attributes the tragedy of her lost child to the erratic behaviours of her brother-in-law. The truth is that she never ostensibly attributes the responsibility of this tragedy to either brother, but this is more due to the complexity of the trauma and the inability of characters to verbally explain their perceptions than her actual feelings about it.

Nowhere throughout the text does Beth actually ever say that she assumes Frank feels guilty for what happened to Bobby. The biggest giveaway, however, is the poem in the epilogue dedicated to Frank. In the poem, Frank is being goaded by a child speaker to let go of his grief for him, that he did not feel the pain because "it was instant" (Hall, 2025, pg. 258) and the "sorrow was all your own" (Hall, 2025, pg. 258). It is this sorrow that the child alluded to, which takes the guise of masochistic shame for Frank. On the other hand, Jimmy's sorrow is seldom alluded to with regard to the tragedy with Bobby. Everytime Jimmy picks a fight at the bar, or there is an ugly episode of physical outbursts from Jimmy, his family perceives it as a manifestation of his suppressed anger and grief over the loss of his mother, who also died by accident on the farm long ago. Once again, this might be attributed to trauma's inability to voice itself, since, as with Frank, it is only through Beth that we hear of Jimmy's fluctuating mental conditions. It is quite possible that due to the tendency to avoid recalling traumatic experiences, Beth makes a point of misattributing Jimmy's increasing frustrations and anger to something that happened quite a long time ago.

It is also worth noticing that Jimmy was the person who assisted Beth at the time of Bobby's birth. Beth's water broke earlier than expected, and with the phone lines disconnected because of the storm, she could not seek help from anyone or visit the hospital, leaving her with no choice but to deliver the baby at home. Fortunately for her, Jimmy arrives just in time, and although still a child himself, he helps her with the delivery as much as possible. In that moment, Beth describes Jimmy as being so much more than a child; as being suddenly transformed into someone reliable and dependable and kept being that way.

The change is apparent in Jimmy too. He's still in trouble at school from time to time, but I have noticed a new confidence in him. Jimmy has grown up, or perhaps it is more that ever since he stepped in and calmly delivered our son, averting disaster without once giving in to panic, I have found myself looking up to him. He is someone who can thrive in a crisis. (Hall, 2025, pg. 106)

How is it that someone like Jimmy, who had the mental wherewithal to deal with his sister-in-law's delivery singlehandedly as a child himself, suddenly reverts to a depleted mental state as an adult? Every time Jimmy partakes in a brawl, Beth and Frank de facto attribute the underlying cause of his instability to be his

mother's untimely death, not minding the fact that, with time, his outbursts became more violent and frequent than otherwise. This explanation is inconsistent when one compares how Jimmy had lived a whole decade as the responsible older uncle that Bobby could look up to. He had shouldered that responsibility wonderfully until he lost Bobby; after which he reverted to being childlike in his temperament, behaviour and mannerism.

A more plausible and consistent explanation is in the theory of counterphobic reaction to trauma. Jimmy's frequent outbursts and uncontrolled rage, which are often exacerbated by alcohol, are ways to avoid confronting his failure and the possibility of extreme shame that is already haunting Frank. Jimmy appears to be using the emotion of rage to replace the one associated with shame and guilt. This perfectly sets up the stage for the climax of the novel where Jimmy pulls out a gun on Frank for violating the sanctity of marriage and starting an affair with a married woman. He feels justifiably angry, but his extreme measures are a sign of how he has a tendency to rely on violence when faced with hurtful situations.

Both Frank's shame and Jimmy's counterphobic reaction to shame are manifestations of posttraumatic neurosis, and it is due to this intense and overwhelming sense of shame experienced by Frank that Beth is unable to give a name to that he tacitly accepts his wife's adulterous affair and even forgives her. Not only that, but when his brother is killed by Gabriel's eleven-year-old son, Leo, he not only forgives the family but even takes the blame for the murder, thereby being sentenced to eight years in prison. This self-effacing act on the part of Frank seems like an immense sacrifice to the outsiders, but to Frank, it comes naturally simply because he had already been in a constant state of self-bereavement as it was. In his mind, he was already not the same Frank anymore, and the actual physical act of locking himself up in prison away from the judgmental and prying eyes of the world might have served as solace. This theory is further reinforced by the fact that during his time in prison, he forbids his wife and daughter from paying him any visit out of sheer shame. Since the narration is unable to give voice to his actual dilemma, in a letter to his wife, Frank comes closest to admitting it.

"I have this picture in my head, and it's the thing that sustains me, every single day... That's when I see you with Grace, for the very first time... and it feels so pure, Beth. I don't want this place in your head or hers." (Hall, 2025, pg.

This scene perfectly encapsulates the intensity of the shame that Frank experiences and to atone for which he sacrifices eight years of his life in prison. These years in prison will allow him a metamorphosis of sorts. A shedding of the skin, a chance to hatch out from the crippling shell of his past mistakes and be born anew. It is this complete metamorphosis that he so desired from the beginning; a chance to truly atone for his inability to save Beth's son, whom he had grown to love as his own. It is hence understandable why Frank is so against his wife visiting him in prison. He does not want his wife and daughter to see him during the stage of his metamorphosis, since to Frank it's an image of shame or discarding shame that he fears will be stuck with Beth and their daughter Grace. The image he wishes for them to see is that of the new and successfully transformed man, who, through some miracle of fate and destiny, found a way to atone for his crippling shame.

III. Conclusion

Broken Country is a story of unhealed trauma and the aftermath of suffering indescribable pain. It attempts to do exactly what trauma fiction is wont to do... capture the intensity of trauma not with language because that is impossible, but through the apparently incomprehensible actions of the characters. The more these actions are incomprehensible and the narrative punctuated with fissures and pauses, the more the writer is effectively able to "describe" trauma.

This analysis set out to answer two main questions regarding what compels a self-respecting husband like Frank to quietly accept the cheating affair of his wife without offering her any repercussions, as well as the difficulty of describing trauma on account of its nebulousness.

The analysis reveals that what appears to be Frank's resignation over his wife's scandals, driven by his guilt for not being able to save her child, is actually a manifestation of his extreme shame. More than guilt itself, it is the overwhelming shame that has crippled his sense of identity, his self-esteem, as well as his ability to uphold societal and cultural standards. Seeking some form of retribution from a cheating wife, or at least an attempt to prevent her from continuing to engage in such acts, is part of the cultural expectation from a husband, but Frank's crippling sense of self and inability to uphold these standards have resulted in his inability or even acceptance of his wife's scandalous affair. It is also possible that he sees these engagements of his wife as carving an opportunity to reduce both of them to the same plane of existential shame so that he is no longer alone in his suffering. This contrasts strongly with Jimmy's reaction to Beth's scandal, who pulls out a gun to murder Gabriel, the man his sister-in-law has an affair with. This reaction of Jimmy, which, albeit violent, is more commensurate with the social expectation of how men would react in such a situation. Frank, however, is rendered inept and unable to act in any decisive way and allows the scandal to unfold as long as Jimmy does not decide to intervene.

However, this psychological trauma and masochistic shame that Frank experiences is something that the author never verbally expresses in her writing. We can only see it in Frank's dissolution into silence; his late

excursions into the pub to drown his consciousness with alcohol; the fragmented reversion of the narration to the trauma of losing Bobby, while simultaneously depicting the rift between the couple; in the great decision to sacrifice eight years of his life in prison; and in the urgent request to not let his wife and daughter seem him in prison during those eight years because what he in fact was undergoing then was a complete identity metamorphosis where he could finally shed the garb of shame and bask in the glory of the new social equilibrium that he managed to create for himself through enduring all of his shame and making the greatest sacrifice he could.

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