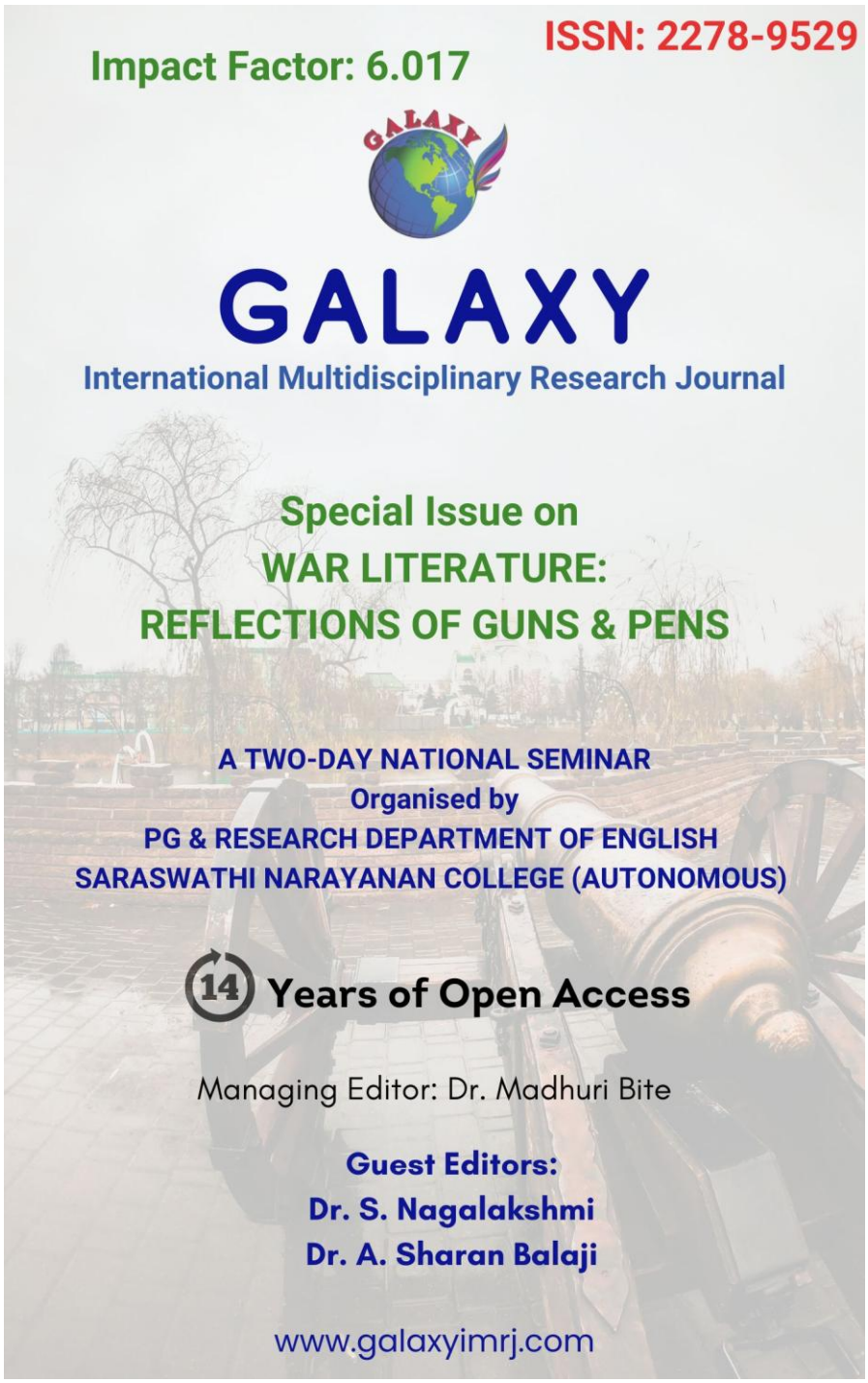


About Us: http://www.galaxyimrj.com/about-us/
Archive: http://www.galaxyimrj.com/archive/
Contact Us: http://www.galaxyimrj.com/contact-us/
Editorial Board: http://www.galaxyimrj.com/editorial-board/
Submission: http://www.galaxyimrj.com/submission/
FAQ: http://www.galaxyimrj.com/faq/

Unveiling the Horrors of Past: A Study of Memory, Trauma and Fragmented Narrative in Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong*

Nayan Tara
Second Year M.A. English,
Student of St. Joseph's University,
Bangalore.

Abstract:

Sebastian Faulks' fourth novel *Birdsong* unfolds the gruesome tale of the first world war and its aftermath that has scarred the memories of the affected. Through the lives of Stephen Wraysford and his family Faulks' tries to remind the world about the war and its aftereffects. This paper aims to look into the representation of memory, trauma and fragmented narrative in the novel using the theoretical framework of Cathy Caruth and Marianne Hirsch. The present study will also look into how trauma is passed on to future generations. The paper will look into the concept of memory and trauma not only through Stephen Wraysford and Elizabeth, but also through experiences of other soldiers in the novel. The study will also look into the portrayal of gruesome imagery of war in the novel.

Keywords: Memory, Trauma, World War l, Fragmented Narrative, Postmemory.

Human psyche is a complex matter. It holds the power to memorize good and bad memories, and sometimes even the power to forget it. Memories allow people to recall events and happenings of one's life, while trauma disrupts the painful memories. When an individual deals with any sort of distressing event that alters how they live and disrupts their life is trauma. Trauma and memory are so deeply intertwined that it affects how individuals view their pasts. Trauma impacts memory in several ways than one could fathom and it affects the memories of

individual in different ways such as, some may forget the painful memories, some may alter their memories subconsciously to protect them from the pain and some may develop Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Wars have always left people's life in shambles. The first World War that happened in 1914 was a huge traumatic event that marked the history with gore and blood. Many writers have come forward to portray the gruesome war and it's after effects in their literary works even though they were not directly part of the war, this was to remind the future generation about the history of the land and the sacrifices of their ancestors. One such writer is Sebastian Faulks. Faulks through his novel *Birdsong* skillfully portrays the physical and psychological effects of war through Stephen Wraysford and his fellow soldiers.

This paper aims to look into the representation of memory, trauma and fragmented narrative in the novel *Birdsong* using the theoretical framework of Cathy Caruth and Marianne Hirsch. The present study will also look into how trauma is passed on to future generations. The paper will look into the concept of memory and trauma not only through Stephen Wraysford and Elizabeth, but also through experiences of other soldiers in the novel. The study will also look into the portrayal of gruesome imagery of war in the novel.

Elsie Hamel in her article "Literary Imaging of World War l" looks into the symbolism of nature in war novels like Pat Barker's *Regeneration*, *The Ghost Road*, *The Eye in the Door* and Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong*. The article also looks into the representation of colour in these novels and its significance.

Lisa Hruda in her thesis " How the effects of trauma are incorporated into literary texts of the world" looks at the symbolic representation of trauma in war literature along with other factors. The article has also focused on pre- war traumatic experience and it's affects in war trauma. It also looks into the theme of abandonment, greif, healing and isolation in war novels.

Anna Branach-Kallas in her article "Crypts, Phantoms and Cultural Trauma: A Hauntological Approach to Recent British First World War Fiction" looks into 20th century world war novels using the theoretical framework of Maria Torok and Nicholas Abraham. Kallas in this article proposes the idea of world war as phantom in selected novels. This article also provides a comparative analysis of the war novels.

The articles taken into consideration have mostly looked into the symbolism of trauma and nature, historical accuracies and hauntological study of war. The present study will be focusing on the relation between memory, trauma and fragmented narratives using the theoretical frameworks of Cathy Caruth and Marianne Hirsch.

The study treats Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* as primary source. The secondary sources are theoretical framework of Cathy Caruth, Marianne Hirsch and the relevant articles based on the primary source. A theoretical research study is done focusing solely upon the relation between memory, trauma and fragmented narratives.

In the historical novel *Birdsong*, Faulks explores the traumatic nature of war. The novel is written in a non linear structure where it shifts between five timeliness 1910, 1916, 1978, 1918 and 1979. The war narrative begins in 1916. The novel deals with the life of Stephen Wraysford, a war soldier and Elizabeth Benson, Stephen's granddaughter. The novel also deals with the idea of unspoken trauma in individuals and family. The narrative structure of the novel is very peculiar, it resembles how an individual's traumatic memory shifts back and forth as in a constant time loop. This what Hirsch describes as the "uneasy oscillation between continuity and fracture" (Hirsch 106). The narratives continuously shifts between the one who was directly affected by the war and the other who was indirectly affected by being family.

War does not provide anyone joy, certainly not to the soldiers who sacrifice their life for bloodshed and it is certainly proved right when Stephen who is a lieutenant now got

accustomed to the "sight of blood and smell of torn human flesh" (162). Faulks portrays a gruesome imagery to the readers with "blood" and "torn flesh" yet this was the reality of soldiers who fought wars. The rustic smell of blood would churn any normal person, yet the soldiers were made accustomed to this sight so much that they drifted away from normalcy and turned themselves into a cold shell that is devoid of emotions. Stephen notes in his diary "I can not imagine what it means to be at peace" (421), this line shows the intensity of the sufferings of the people affected by the war. The soldiers got so accustomed to the noise of shelling, blood curling screams and gunshots that they view "peace" as a faraway dream that is impossible to achieve. The war had taken away so much from them that they don't remember what their life was like before the war. Some of the soldiers had even restored to suicide because they could do not hold on to their hope of a better future. The war had shattered their spirits and hope to live.

When Doughlas, a soldier of Stephen's Battalion's body is shattered and pieces of flesh is shattered on Stephen he goes on about his day as if a traumatic incident as such never happened but later on the trauma festers and he starts imagining blood: "There is still blood though no one sees" (421). This aligns with Cathy Caruth's idea of "belatedness", in which she says:

> The repetitions of the traumatic event—which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight— thus suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing (Caruth 92)

When Stephen is covered in Doughlas's blood, he does not get the time to process what had happened so the incident has developed into a trauma where he kept seeing blood later on, even though it was just a fragment of his imagination. The psychological impact of this incident had

taken a toll on him. The trauma has disrupted his memory making him feel that the blood he sees is real and it is invisible to others because no one notices it. The image of blood he sees is an action that is outside of his consciousness where he is reliving the trauma.

Many soldiers had resorted to alcohol during the time of war to numb their senses, Faulks also uses this element to show the effects of war through Michael Weir, Stephen's best friend and fellow soldier. He is unable "to talk sensibly until the liquor had put some strength and reason into him" (285). Weir resorts to alcohol for the courage to be in the battle field, he find it hard to be sober when there is always explosions and gunshots around him. The war has led to the abuse of consumption of alcohol, where the soldiers are so dependent on it that they view alcohol as a necessity to survival. Alcohol had provided the soldiers with temporary relief from mental and physical exhaustion, that they formed a dependency to alcohol to cease the traumatic memories.

In *Birdsong*, Faulks gives a vivid image of the tunnels, Lisa Hruda in her article notes that tunnel in the novel is a metaphor for subconscious mind (Hruda 20). The visual imagery of a tunnel is always a dark place. Tunnels create claustrophobia, it is also a metaphor for traumatic memories. As tunnels, painful memories also resembles darkness. Faulks is great in depicting gruesome imageries, when Stephen notices the man next to his hospital bed whose "fluid leapt from his flesh like some victorious spirit… (185). Faulks time and again points to the horrible aftermath of war where people suffer mentally and physically.

Towards the end of the 1918 narrative, Stephen and Jack Firebrace another soldier gets stuck in a tunnel due to a shelling where they are severely injured. When Jack succumbs to his wounds; Stephen still didn't lose his hope for survival, he pictured a "world inhabited by women, where people moved in peace…" (481). Stephen wanted the war to be over so that he could be with his family and be normal again, that is when he was rescued by the German

soldiers, the one whom he had fought against for four years. Once he was out of the tunnel, he came to know that the war was finally over, although he did not know how to get his life back, he was glad that the war was finally over. One of the German soldier Joseph Levi and Jack Firebrace was buried together "because the war was over" (485). This line emphasize the futility of war, the people who fought against each other for several years are now together in the war. The war was the factor that made them divided and against each other but once it was over there was no resentment just; shared sorrow of losing loved one's to the war.

In 1978 narrative, the novel follows the life of Elizabeth Benson, Stephen's granddaughter who has never met Stephen nor knew anything about him other than him being a war veteran from her mother Francoise. Elizabeth never bothered knowing about it but when she finds an article about the world war "it seemed to touch an area of disquiet and curiosity that was connected to her own life and its choices" (250). This unsettling feeling in Elizabeth is what Marianne Hirsch call as postmemory. Hirsch defines postmemory as "the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before…" (Hirsch 106). Although Elizabeth had never met her grandfather she feels deeply connected to the World War, so much so that she tries to read her grandfather's coded journal and interviewing his fellow soldiers who fought in the war alongside him. She can fix this puzzle of her grandfather's life only through the patience and quest to find the truth.

When Elizabeth meets Bernan, Stephen's fellow soldier in a nursing home, she finds out that he had suffered psychological damage as an aftereffect of the war and that he was abandoned by his family. She feels deeply connected to him and his sufferings "what she could not do,… was restore poor Bernan's life or take away the pity of the past" (405). The Elizabeth who did not pay much attention to what happened with her grandfather had transformed into someone is deeply involved in knowing the life and sufferings of her grandfather and his fellow soldiers. When Elizabeth finally decodes her grandfather's journal she is finally able to get a

picture of what had happened during the war. Through his journal she learns that Stephen had promised Jack to name his son John after Jack's late son John, but Stephen never had a son so the promise remained unfulfilled. But when Elizabeth gives birth to a son, she names him John to honor her grandfather's promise. This act can also be viewed as her peace offering with the past that she had neglected for so long. This act is her acknowledgment and her testament to the daily remembrance of her past.

After finishing the journal Elizabeth had came to know through her mother that her grandfather had never spoken about the war, he acted as if it never happened. Stephen resorted to silence as coping mechanism. It is this unspoken, unsettling silence had what made Elizabeth to dig through the past to find the closure that she needed. As Caruth argues "it may be the future generation that 'cure' the trauma" (Caruth 136). The novel ends with the line "to be heard by those still living (503). Through this line Faulks put forwards that the tales of the gruesome World War should not be limited to the soldiers and direct witnesses of the war. It should be heard and acknowledged by the future generations.

The findings of the study reveals that memory, trauma and fragmented narratives are interconnected. The study has examined how painful events can have a belated reaction due to not really comprehending the situation and how subconsciously remembering this memory can cause to trauma. The paper has also noted that how fragmented narratives resembles the structure of trauma where it oscillates between the past and the present. Through Marianne Hirsch and Cathy Caruth's theories its clear that the future generations too suffer when there is an unresolved trauma in the family. Sebastian Faulks through his novel had given a series of macabre images that depicts the gruesome nature of war. Faulks through this novel put forwards the notion that the World War should be discussed globally and also acknowledging and making amends with the past is the best way to move forward.

Works Cited:

Primary Source:

Faulks, Sebastian. *Birdsong*. Vintage, 1994.

Secondary Sources:

Branach-Kallas, Anna. "Crypts, Phantoms, and Cultural Trauma: A Hauntological Approach to Recent British First World War Fiction." *AVANT. Pismo Awangardy Filozoficzno-Naukowej*, vol 8. no. 2, 2017, pp. 89-100.

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Hamel, Elsie. "Literary Imaging of World War I." vol.7, 1999, Pp 59-67.

Hirsch, Marianne. "The generation of postmemory." *Poetics today*, 2008, pp103-128.

Hruda, Lisa. " How the Effects of War are Incorporated into Literary Texts." *Trauma in British literature of the First and Second World Wars* (2012), pp. 20-40.