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**Representing Traumatic Memory: Unreliable Narrator and Magic Realism in  
Brunonia Barry's Novel *'The Lace Reader'***

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**Abstract**

Loss of memory due to a certain traumatic event can be a major setback in a person's life. Many authors have tried to depict the issue of memory affected by trauma in their novels through unreliable narration. Briefly, unreliable narrators might be confused with characteristics such as deceit or cunning. However, the author's idea is to create a complex character from whose lens the reader can experience the perplexity of the psychological wound, as the character experiences persistent flashbacks of memory to make sense of the present. One such attempt is made by a contemporary American author Brunonia Barry in her bestseller novel *The Lace Reader* published in 2006. The novel is set in Salem, Massachusetts and refers to the memory of Salem witch trials, the infamous historical event that took place in 1692. Today, the city is famous for tourism and proudly recognised as "the witch city."

The plot of the novel builds upon the theme of collective and personal memory of the city and the protagonist. The paper, therefore, will be an attempt to study how the narrator's memory is continually challenged as she struggles to make sense of her traumatic past and her present living in a city known for mourning the dead and their injustices.

**Keywords:** Salem Witch Trials, PTSD, Memory, Trauma, Magic Realism

"My name is Towner Whitney. No, that's not exactly true. My real first name is Sophya. Never believe me. I lie all the time. I am a crazy woman...That last part is true (Barry 3)." The novel starts with the narrator who is also the protagonist of the novel, *The Lace Reader*, warning readers that she should not be trusted and that she is a crazy woman. At the first glance, such confession can baffle the reader and affect his/her understanding of the story. Moving forward, the reader becomes cautious of the narrator's intention as she describes her past, the people she knows, and her relationships with them. Such confession

can shock the reader who is just in the beginning phase of reading. Gradually the story gives references to domestic violence, child abuse, and rape, as the reader reads further, things start to fall into place. It is crucial to note the setting of the story which is the modern-day Salem, Massachusetts in North America infamous for its 1692 witch trials that remain a vital part of their culture in different forms even today. As explained by Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka in an article “Cultural memory, is a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive frame- work of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation” (126). The cultural memory of Salem’s witch hunts is visible in the novel and at each instance makes readers aware of the town’s history.

The legacy of the Salem witch trials in the novel also helps in giving validity to the atmosphere of revival of magical religions in America. “Wicca was a religion as much as any other, and it has its course of study and ritual before you could call yourself a member.” “The truth is there were no witches in old Salem, but they thrived here in great numbers now” (Barry 170). The collective memory of the city and the individual memory of the protagonist run parallel without disturbing each other. Collective memory in a society is a part of shared knowledge about their past and culture practices which influences emergence, transformation, and extinction of social identities (Collective Memory).

The novel therefore uses elements of magical realism. The author crafts a fictitious skill and calls it Lace reading which refers to a special yet uncanny power to read a person’s future by studying the intricate patterns of the lace. The lace reading becomes a part of a community that provides shelter and comfort to women victim of domestic violence or abuse. The gendered atmosphere also finds meaning in Salem’s history of women’s persecution as witches. The author makes sure to depict the contemporary followers of witchcraft in America in the positive light while depicting the stern believers of Calvinism as a threat to women. “The Calvinists are making it their goal to rid Salem of the witches” (Barry 170).

The intricate patterns of the lace are also symbolic and act as a metaphor for the protagonist’s memory as they both have gaps which allows the lace readers and the readers of the book to carefully look for meanings between them. It is towards the end, that the reader comes to know that Towner has been suffering from Dissociative Amnesia and Schizophrenia because of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. PTSD can develop because of certain traumatic events such as those perceived as threatening to one’s own life, witnessing violence, or hearing about it such as an unexpected violent death of a close person. Events such as sexual and physical assault, being held as hostages, imprisonment, terrorism, torture, disasters, accidents, diagnosed with life-threatening illness, etc. can be perceived as traumatic for both

adults and children (Rothschild 23). While in Dissociative Amnesia, a patient who has suffered long-term trauma forgets important memories that are related to upsetting or distressing events. However, the person with time can regain their memory.

It acts as a defense mechanism that affects the patient's memory, consciousness, identity, perception, and emotions (Dissociative Amnesia). "My night terrors pictured Lyndley's father, Cal Boynton, being ripped apart by dogs. I had begun by this time to realize that this last image was hallucination, though when I had been admitted, I actually believed that the dogs had ripped Cal apart, that he was dead. The doctors called it some kind of wish-fulfilment fantasy" (Barry 51). Somatic disturbances that are relating to the body are an important symptom of PTSD. Towner has no memory of her childhood abuse, but as soon as she returns to her hometown and meets Cal, her father, her body reacts. "He stops in front of my aunt. "Hello, Emma," he says to my aunt. She stiffens, "And hello, Sophya," he says to me without turning, without having to look at me, "welcome home." The ground spins, and Beezer grabs my arm" (Barry 70). Here both Emma, the wife of Cal and Towner's mother and Towner are victim of Cal's abuse. The stiffening response of Emma's body on seeing Cal is a PTSD response:

One area of interest with regard to the HPA axis and cortisol is the freezing response to traumatic threat. When death may be imminent, escape is impossible, or the traumatic threat is prolonged, the limbic system can simultaneously activate the PNS, causing a state of freezing called tonic immobility—like a mouse going dead when caught by a cat, or stiff, like a deer caught in headlights (Gallup & Maser, 1977).

(Rothschild 26)

While Towner's mind may have forgotten or blocked the traumatic memory her body remembers. Babette Rothschild in his influential work *The Body Remembers: Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment* discusses the impact of trauma on the body. Traumatic arousal can influence the memory (25). In her work, she explains memory:

In general, memory has to do with the recording, storage, and recall of information perceived from the internal and external environments. All of the senses are integral to how the world is perceived. The brain processes perceptions and stores them as thoughts, emotions, images, sensations, and behavioral impulses. When these stored items are recalled, that is memory. (46)

Schizophrenia is a chronic, severe mental disorder that affects the way a person thinks, acts, expresses emotions, perceives reality, and relates to others. People suffering from this condition could appear to have lost touch with reality. The world may feel like a

jumble of confusing thoughts, images, and sounds. In the novel, Towner introduces the reader to Lyndley, as her twin sister who is a part of her delusion and thus her mental condition. It is revealed at the ending of the novel that Towner was raped when she was thirteen by her father, Cal. Her mind invents a twin sister to protect and escape from her reality while she is assaulted and the episode of rape somehow becomes distorted and dissociated from her memory. Neither she remembers herself being raped, nor she remembers Emma and Cal as her parents. She believes May, her mother's cousin to be her real mother, and Eva her grandmother as her aunt. She attempts suicide by jumping into the river believing herself to be the cause of her sister's death who is an imaginary construct.

The novel contains elements of magic realism which illustrates Towner's false beliefs and episodes of hallucinations. As a literary style, "Magical realism has the potential to be the alternative narrative and an instrument of the oppressed with its imaginative power and magical ability to capture the painful qualities of traumatic experiences and to convert traumatic memories into narrative memories" (Abdullah 20). She keeps seeing Eva's ghost following her, giving advice and commentaries on situations. An understanding, therefore, is created between the reader who instantly perceives instances such as Towner's ability to see Eva's ghost as not supernatural but another psychotic episode of schizophrenia. The people she knows do not interfere with her false beliefs such as her imaginary sister, believing her aunt to be her mother, and having no reliable memory of her parents.

Flashback in the novel serves not only as a simple narrative technique but rather becomes a museum of the narrator's experiences of her memory as she grapples with her sense of reality and identity. As a part of PTSD, they can contain extremely disturbing replaying of traumatic memories sometimes with explicit recall and sometimes not. Further, the individual can feel them so intensely that he/she may not be able to distinguish between the current reality and the past (Rothschild 68). These flashbacks, also a symptom of Dissociative amnesia allow the patient to relive for a short span of time a part of their traumatic past which causes further alienation from the reality and present. The constant shifting of time becomes symbolic of Towner's confusing memory as she faces difficulty remembering events of her life from the past and making meaning of them and herself in the present. What readers may find challenging is to navigate between the complexity of what is true in Towner's narration which includes her vivid dreams, episodes of hallucinations, and false memory. Even Towner seems conscious of what she knows and believes might not be completely true, perhaps because of her experiences with people who have had a hard time comprehending her.

Later, she seeks medical help. Living with such a condition can make it extremely difficult for the patient to distinguish between their own beliefs and life experiences as we

see with Towner. Further, she believes that she can read people's minds.

“My head is reeling with the noise of everything in this room that is not being said. I have no strength to push away people's thoughts. I can hear all their unspoken questions: Why the hell did she come back? How crazy she is?” (Barry 81).

### **Conclusion**

Most of the incidents during the first half of the novel may seem extremely confusing and hard to believe owing to the history of the town that remains in the collective and cultural memory of the people and place, magical realism, the art of lace reading, future predictions by many characters, and Towner's mental illness. In the author's words, “Essentially, the *Lace Reader* is a book about perception, and the reader's perception is as important as Towner's” (Barry 398). According to Eva Davenport in her article “Magical Realism: A Literary Approach to Empathy and the Marginalized Experience,” the use of magical realism in literature or any art form, becomes a tool to develop empathy in the readers by understanding the nuances of such conditions, especially for those who have not experienced such trauma or illness (7). In the novel, magical realism allows readers to feel the kind of delusions and hallucinations that protagonist goes through. The literary style helps the readers to understand and make better sense of the protagonist's psychological wounds by experiencing similar confusion. As the reader enters the second part, much of the events and atmosphere start to make sense. Towner has invented a twin sister yet she does not remember her real parents instead she believes her aunt to be her mother while Cal and Emma to be Lyndley's parents. She makes false stories in her mind about her being given for adoption to her aunt to make meaning. “Who is Lyndley, really?” Eva asked me when I was finished ranting, she often asked strange questions like that, so it didn't surprise me. It wasn't the answer I'd wanted, though, so I didn't try to answer it then. Instead, I just gave her a very frustrating look. ‘Think about it’ was all she said” (Barry 225). “Most of Lyndley's life had occurred in places far away from me. So, when Eva asked me who Lyndley really was, I thought about it a number of ways before I tried to answer the question, and I found, in the end, that I just couldn't answer” (Barry 226).

The disorientation and confusion in her mind are reflected in her narration, which seems unreliable yet makes sense when the reader empathizes with the narrator's mental health. Considering that she invents an identical sister, the reader can understand how her mind protected her by blocking the traumatic memory of being raped by her father by inventing a twin sister who offers her comfort and solace. She has no memory of her twin sister before the age of 13. Whereas Towner does not remember her rape, she remains suspected of Lyndley's possible sexual abuse. “When Lyndley arrived that summer, there

was something different about her. Something I couldn't put my finger on" (Barry 224). This is important since she may have forgotten the rape and its culprit, but on seeing Cal again after 15 years, she immediately experiences disgust and hatred against him. She may have forgotten her traumatic past because of dissociative amnesia, yet she seems to remember certain emotions associated with it. Additionally, Eva's ghost contributes to Towner's retrieval of memory. It appears many times to either comment or give advice which gradually helps Towner to face her fears and help prevent a potential witch panic provoked by Cal and his followers. The novel ends and the reader finally get clarity. The journey of the readers, therefore, becomes crucial as they become a part of the protagonist's life. They appreciate the story from her perspective while experiencing the same perplexity and challenges in distinguishing between reality and trauma responses.

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