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**Speaking the Unspeakable: The Construction and Presentation of Narratives in
Literary and Popular Trauma Novels**

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requirements for the degree of**

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Abstract

Speaking the Unspeakable: The Construction and Presentation of Narratives in Literary and Popular Trauma Novels

Focusing on *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Housekeeping* (1980) by Marilynne Robinson, *The Secret Life of Bees* (2002) by Sue Monk Kidd and *Cat's Eye* (1988) by Margaret Atwood, my thesis considers a range of contemporary portrayals of trauma within novels featuring girls or women as autodiegetic narrators. These texts are examined in dialogue with theories of representations of trauma in literature from contemporary trauma critics Roger Luckhurst and Michelle Balaev, theories of memory taken from Paul Antze and Michael Lambek, and readings of clinical psychiatrists Judith Herman Lewis and Lenore Terr. The 1972 work *Survival* by Margaret Atwood is critical in my interpretations of the protagonists as they attempt to heal from their trauma and become accommodated into society.

I commence the thesis with an overview of the history of the medical study of trauma and the complementary study of representations of trauma in literature. Through a study of prominent critic Cathy Caruth's investigations into Freud, I establish the signs of symptoms of trauma, and their typical presentation in a novel. In the work of contemporary theorists I establish the typical features of a trauma novel; however, I aim to establish that a wider range of techniques is utilized, examining the concepts of narrative closure, psychic integration, temporal disruption, and the reconciliation with flawed maternal and paternal figures.

The thesis is structured in four chapters, each examining within a novel the relationship between the types of trauma suffered, the presentation of the traumatic symptoms, and the healing process of the protagonists. Each chapter is structured around a significant relationship, their titles reflective of the faults of the perpetrator of the trauma, for example *The Sins of the Father*, where analysis of the effects of these flawed relationships takes place. Kambili's narration in *Purple Hibiscus* shows the effects of colonisation on the formation of identity; *Housekeeping* demonstrates the continuing

effects of abandonment; *The Secret Life of Bees* demonstrates the necessity of truth to overcome repressed traumatic memories; and *Cat's Eye* demonstrates the ongoing effects of repressed memory on the formation of character. Together these novels form a coherent argument that representations of trauma have become an organising concept for female identity in the late twentieth century.

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