



Resilient Voices: Healing from Trauma through Art Therapy in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*

Merlin Gifta. K

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Urumu Dhanalakshmi College, Tiruchirappalli

Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu



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Abstract

*Young Adult Literature (YAL) holds a profound significance in shaping the values and outlook of adolescents by offering them an indispensable bridge between their own experiences and the broader world. Through relatable characters and compelling narratives, YAL helps young adults to confront their own challenges and find the strength to overcome them. In addition, YAL also offers therapeutic values to adolescents by addressing a wide range of emotional, psychological, and social issues. Laurie Halse Anderson's groundbreaking novel *Speak* crafts a powerful narrative that embodies the essence of Young Adult Literature's role in the lives of adolescents. The work narrates the gripping tale of Melinda Sordino, a high school freshman who is raped at the summer party. Because of the traumatic event of rape, she lost her voice and suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress disorder (PTSD). She blames herself for the rape and suffers from guilt consciousness and suicidal thoughts, even though it is not her fault. Through Melinda's experiences, the narrative masterfully explores the multifaceted effects of trauma on an individual's psyche by shedding light on the intricate interplay between emotional wounds and the healing process. The study explores the ways in which the author portrays Melinda's struggle to find her voice, reclaim her identity, and navigate the path to recovery. Through Melinda's journey, the work adeptly addresses the themes of isolation, identity, self-discovery, and the recovery process. This study seeks to examine the multifaceted effects of trauma experienced by the protagonist. Furthermore, the study attempts to unravel trauma victim's transformative healing process through an in-depth exploration of effective coping mechanisms and strategies.*

Keywords: trauma, PTSD, speak, rape, victim, pain, depression, anxiety, coping, therapy, recovery, healing

Young Adult Literature (YA literature) is a genre of fiction specifically written for teenagers and young adults, typically aged between 12 and 18 years old. YA literature holds a mirror to the experiences, challenges, and emotions of young people, offering a compass through the uncharted territories of adolescence. By encountering diverse characters and their journeys, young readers gain insight into their own identities and the world around them. YA literature plays a crucial role in the lives of young adults, offering them valuable tools to confront life's

adversities and traumas while providing therapeutic benefits that guide them through the labyrinth of adolescence. YA literature often provides guidance and coping strategies for handling real-life issues. Whether it's dealing with bullying, loss, mental health, or family problems, young readers can find valuable insights and solutions within the pages of these books. Many YA novels emphasize resilience, hope, and the possibility of healing and personal growth after trauma.



Laurie Halse Anderson's novel *Speak* is a poignant example of a work of fiction that serves as a therapeutic tool for readers. *Speak* provides readers with a path to healing and understanding, making it an important and valuable literary work. The narrative revolves around the life of Melinda Sordino, a high school freshman who becomes isolated after a traumatic experience of rape at the summer party. As the effect of rape, her trauma escalates, so she begins to skip school and withdraw from her parents. Melinda's trauma stems from her past sexual assault event which overpowers her in her present. The novel explores how this traumatic event affects her emotionally and mentally. She becomes selectively mute, unable to speak about what happened to her. The psychological impairment of rape happens to Melinda in the form of selective-mutism.

Laurie Halse Anderson present us the victim who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a severe mental health condition that can develop in the aftermath of a traumatic event. PTSD manifests through a range of symptoms that can disrupt an individual's life including intrusive memories, nightmares, flashbacks, avoidance of reminders, negative changes in mood and thinking, and heightened reactions. In Melinda's case, the traumatic event that triggers her PTSD is the sexual assault she endures at the party.

Melinda experiences intrusive memories and flashbacks of the assault. For instance, she thinks back her rape incident, when she felt very anxious and scared and wanted to find a phone at the party to call the cops. This memory takes place in a washroom when she is teased by her peers. Melinda even dreams about the place where she was raped by her senior, Andy Evans. These vivid distressing recollections make it difficult for her to concentrate in school and maintain stable relationships. The reader witnesses her struggles as she battles those traumatic flashbacks.

Another symptom is "Avoiding reminders of the traumatic event associated with the traumatic event which brings distressing memories." (Johnson 148)

Melinda's avoidance behavior is the classic symptom of PTSD. She avoids places and people associated with the traumatic event, further limiting her social interactions. She sometimes unconsciously slips her mind to think of the event but she tries so hard to avoid those memories, "I am not going to think about it. It was ugly, but it's over, and I'm not going to think about it." (*Speak* 5)

Moreover, she experienced "Arousal and reactive symptom may include being irritable and having angry outbursts; behaving in self-destructive ways or being easily startled or sleeping." (Johnson 148) Melinda always feels irritable towards her teachers and peers because they always look her as an absurd person. The insult she receives from the people around her makes her feel that she is left alone in the world which eventually makes her to develop anxiety and act irritable towards people. Her anger increases whenever she sees her rapist, Andy Evans. She self-harms her by scratching her wrist with paper clips and she brushes her teeth hardly until blood comes out. These behaviours reflect Melinda's hatred towards her own self. She tries to express the pain physically which she experiences emotionally. Her isolation perpetuates her emotional distress and amplifies her feelings of anxiety and outbursts.

After the assault, Melinda retreats into a world of silence, refusing to speak about the incident of her incident or feelings. Her silence is a kind of coping mechanism to protect herself from the overwhelming pain and shame associated with the trauma. To avoid the traumatic event haunting her, she preferred sleeping most of time, she says, "I just want to sleep" (165) in order to escape from the reality temporarily. She presumes that silencing the memory will help to make her mental trauma disappear from her life, but she does not realize the fact that the repressed memory of the traumatic event is destroying her life slower and slower. "The whole point of not talking about it, of silencing the memory is to make it go away. It won't. I'll need brain surgery to cut it out of my head." (81-82) This mask of silence makes Melinda to alienate herself from her friends and family. In the beginning stage of trauma, Melinda



uses negative coping methods of sleep and silence to controls her traumatic pain.

Melinda's sense of self is profoundly impacted by her trauma and subsequent PTSD. She loses her voice, both metaphorically and literally, as she struggles to express herself and communicate her feelings. Her self-esteem plummets, and she sees herself as a "nobody," and "outcast" further exacerbating her emotional turmoil. At the school Melinda's occupies the abandoned janitor's closet as a resting place for her. Whenever she feels afraid, annoyed and depressed in school she would run and hide there. It is a resolute place for her. Melinda thinks that the closet is the suitable place for her concealed self to be isolated from her peers. The closet space is a safe place where Melinda is able to feel comfortable and she could feel herself recovering. She says that, "The closet is abandoned – it has no purpose, no name. It is the perfect place for me." (*Speak* 26) Melinda's closet represents her way of hiding and neglecting her trauma. She fills the closet with her unspoken emotions and pains. It is the place where Melinda hides her unexplainable trauma.

Melinda realizes the fact that her real self is lost, which is revealed when she avoids looking at the mirror whenever she encounters it. She flips the side of the mirror by facing the wall in her bedroom and also in her personal space closet in school. All Melinda could see in the mirror was, "Two muddy circle eyes under black-dash eyebrows, piggy- nose nostrils, and a chewed-up horror of a mouth. It looks like my mouth belongs to someone else, someone I don't even know." (*Speak* 17) Melinda's description of the features of her own face is an act of self-alienation and fragmentation. Don Latham says in his critical analysis, "In repudiating mirrors, Melinda is repudiating the illusion of the self as an integrated whole. She does not like who she is right now and more importantly, she can no longer accept the illusion that she is a whole, integrated self." (Latham 374) The only mirror that Melinda tolerates is the three-way mirror in the dressing room at the department store. The reason Melinda finds comfortable in this mirror was the way it reflects her

image infinitely which symbolizes her shattered state.

In art class, Melinda explores her innermost trauma through art works which projects her psychological state. In the beginning, Melinda draws her trees struck by lightning, "I've been painting watercolors of trees that have been hit by lightning. I try to paint them so they are nearly dead, but not totally." (30-31) The idea of painting nearly dead trees symbolizes Melinda's half-deadened life after rape. At one point Melinda involves in cubist sketch, as Tannert-Smith points out, "this multidimensional representation beyond surface reflection" (Smith 399). Her cubist sketch serves as powerful symbol that reflects her emotional state and the trauma, she's experienced. The sketch itself is fragment and disjointed, much like Melinda's sense of self and inability to articulate her trauma. The cubist style, characterized by abstract and fragmented forms, mirrors Melinda's struggle to piece together her shattered sense of identity and voice. It symbolizes her emotional fragmentation.

The positive coping mechanisms that Melinda adapts to fight her trauma is Art. Many critics believe that art therapy is a powerful medium through which trauma victims, can express their pain and emotions. This therapeutic approach harnesses the creativity process to help individuals communicate and process their trauma when words fail them. Melinda finds solace and tranquillity in her art class, considering it the only activity that brings her peace and relaxation. As she walks towards the path towards healing Melinda starts to paint a tree which is "breathing" which symbolizes her positive growth after trauma.

Her art teacher Mr. Freeman's motivational speeches play a pivotal role in Melinda's journey, helping her to discover a way for expressing her inner turmoil and pain through the medium of art. By channelling her traumatic experiences into her artwork, she initiates a slow but crucial process of healing and recovery. At the heart of psychological trauma lies a profound sense of disempowerment. Recovery from such trauma is fundamentally built upon the idea of empowering the survivor. Judith



Herman, a renowned American psychiatrist, emphasizes this principle by stating, "The first principle of recovery is the empowerment of the survivor. She must be the arbiter of her own recovery" (Herman 133). This means that the survivor, in this case, Melinda, should have agency and control over her healing journey. It's about giving her support to navigate her path to recovery on her terms.

At one point Melinda gathers courage to revisit the place of her rape incident as a part of her healing journey. By visiting the place of the traumatic event, she mourns for her old self and there is some hope sprouts in Melinda. She starts to feel relieved and she is even ready to quit her hiding closet: "I don't want to hang out in my little hidey-hole anymore... I don't feel like hiding anymore" (192). From that point onward Melinda starts to see herself as a survivor rather than a victim. She feels alive after confronting her worst traumatic memories and she decides that there is no need for her to hide anymore. Don Latham signifies that "Melinda's decision to move out of her closet reflects the fact that, metaphorically, she has already come out of the closet as a rape victim." (Latham 379)

While vacating things from closet, Melinda is cornered by her perpetrator, Andy. He locks the door and tries to rape her for the second time. But this time she does not stay silent, Melinda stands against her rapist and screams, "NNNOOO!!!... I scream, scream... I'm screaming loud enough to make a whole school crumble." (194). By silencing her rapist with "No" Melinda regains her strength and voice and makes her rapist speechless. When the whole school comes to know about what really happened, she earns their respect and she reconnects with her peers. Melinda realizes that she is no longer possessed by the traumatic past. She assures herself, "I'm not going to let it kill me. I can grow." (198). It displays Melinda's regaining of her self-confidence and her recreation of her identity. By bravely fighting against her perpetrator, Melinda succeeds in rebuilding her life and achieves healing.

Through her art, Melinda takes a significant step towards reclaiming that control, using her creative

expression as a means of processing and confronting her painful experiences. This process is an essential part of her journey towards healing and recovery. Throughout the novel, Melinda gradually works on her tree drawings, paralleling her journey towards healing and self-discovery. As her art evolves, Melinda starts to understand herself emotionally which contributes her to confront her past. She confronts the fact that she was raped and realizes, there is no point of running away from those traumatic memories and accept the fact that, "IT happened. There is no avoiding it, no forgetting. No running away, or flying, or burying, or hiding. Andy Evans raped me in August when I was drunk and too young to know what was happening. It wasn't my fault. He hurt me. It wasn't my fault. And I'm not going to let it kill me. I can grow." (198)

Melinda realizes that she is no longer possessed by the traumatic past. She assures herself, "I'm not going to let it kill me. I can grow." (198) It displays Melinda's regaining of her self-confidence and her recreation of her identity. *Melinda ultimately finds a way to express her feelings and experience through art, which plays a crucial role in her healing process. Anderson emphasizes the importance of speaking out about trauma and the healing process that can follow.*

Melinda's discovery of art as a means of self-expression is a significant theme in the novel. This demonstrates the therapeutic power of creativity and self-expression as a means of healing Melinda's struggles with her trauma allow readers who have faced similar experiences to see themselves in her, fostering a sense of empathy and understanding. This identification can be a powerful first step toward healing as readers realize they are not alone in their experiences.

Melinda's journey towards healing and recovery is at the heart of the novel, showcasing the resilience and strength it takes to confront and overcome the devastating effects of trauma. Art therapy serves as a powerful tool which offers solace and empowerment to those who have endured trauma, offering a means of transforming pain into a pathway towards resilience and recovery. The journey towards self-



empowerment is a central aspect of the healing process. *Speak* offers a message of hope, emphasizing that it is possible to heal and reclaim one's sense of self after trauma. Anderson's *Speak* inspire young readers to believe in their capacity to rise above life's challenges, by instilling a sense of hope and empowerment.

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Declaration

I declare that this paper is solely written by myself and it has not been presented or published elsewhere.