

Witnessing Pain and Reclaiming Self: Trauma, Memory and Resilience in Zadie Smith's The Embassy of Cambodia and The Autograph Man

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Abstract: The proposed paper examines how trauma, memory and resilience interact in *The Embassy of Cambodia* (2013) and *The Autograph Man* (2002), interrogating the ways personal and cultural wounds are narrated and navigated within contemporary urban spaces. Zadie Smith, a British novelist of Jamaican and English heritage, is known for her depictions of multicultural London, weaving themes of identity, race and belonging into formally innovative narratives. Adopting a comparative close-reading framework grounded in trauma theory (psychoanalytic and cultural memory paradigms) and postcolonial urban criticism, the study analyses narrative structure, voice and inter textual strategies in both texts. The analysis reveals that Smith's narratives eschew reductive binaries of victim/survivor by depicting trauma as both destabilizing fracture and site for emergent agency. Memory operates simultaneously as burden and resource, mediated through urban textures, commodified personae and cultural archives. Resilience is shown to be nonlinear manifest in acts of narration, self-representation and communal tethering which do not erase trauma but reframe and coexist with it. Smith's work models a "responsive resilience" where subjectivity is remade through memory's tension with trauma. The study suggests integrating such ambivalent recovery modes into literary pedagogy and expanding research into reader-response, media's role in collective memory and comparative postcolonial trauma narratives.

Keywords: Trauma; Memory; Resilience; Postcolonial Identity; Alienation and Cultural Memory.

Introduction

Literature, as both art and social document, reflects and refracts the complexities of human experience. It provides a narrative space where history, memory and imagination converge, allowing readers to grapple with questions of identity, morality and survival. Through various genres and forms, literature engages with the universal human condition while remaining grounded in specific cultural and historical contexts, making it a vital medium for preserving and interrogating collective memory. Zadie Smith, one of the most prominent contemporary British novelists, has garnered critical acclaim for her explorations of multiculturalism, identity and the intricacies of urban life. Born in London to a Jamaican mother and English father, Smith's writing bridges cultural boundaries, fusing postcolonial themes with stylistic experimentation. Her work is situated within multicultural perspective shaped by postcolonial realities and diasporic identities. Her works are often celebrated for their wit, structural innovation and ability to capture the rhythms of diverse voices. Her oeuvre includes *White Teeth* (2000), *The Autograph Man* (2002), *On Beauty* (2005), *NW* (2012), *Swing Time* (2016), *The Fraud* (2024) as well as short stories such as *The Embassy of Cambodia* (2013) and *Two Men arrive in a Village* (2016). *White Teeth* (2000) explores multi-generational immigrant life in London, tracing the interconnected fates of two families while examining race, faith and colonial legacy with humour and narrative complexity. It presents a vibrant, chaotic portrait of contemporary Britain grappling with its imperial past and hybrid present. *The Autograph Man* explores celebrity culture, personal loss and existential search

evokes historical trauma and geopolitical memory. It captures the paradox of public image versus private emptiness, framing the narratives as studies in the tension between surface and depth. *The Embassy of Cambodia* is a novella that subtly engages with themes of displacement, trauma and social inequality. It evokes historical trauma and geopolitical memory, contrasting with the mundane routines of everyday life.

Literature Review

Her fiction has drawn considerable scholarly attention for its engagement with themes of diaspora, identity and trauma particularly focused on trauma not through overt dramatic exposition but through silence, narrative fragmentation and structural exclusion. In *The Embassy of Cambodia*, this subtle rendering of trauma has been described as a literary engagement with what Maria Root (2014) terms "insidious trauma" a form of psychic violence that arises not from a singular, catastrophic event, but from sustained experiences of marginalization, displacement and exploitation. Ulrike Tancke (2014) similarly observes that Smith's narrative strategy avoids explicit confessional tropes and instead portrays trauma through structural erasure and emotional detachment, often encoded in silence and ellipsis. Fatou, the protagonist of *The Embassy of Cambodia*, is a migrant domestic worker whose past is never fully disclosed. However, the text hints at multiple layers of trauma, including sexual abuse and cultural exile. Caruth's (1996) concept of belatedness and the notion that trauma is experienced too late to be fully grasped at the moment of occurrence finds resonance in Fatou's fragmented recollections and her stoic silence. As Tancke (2014) notes, "Fatou's unspoken experiences represent the unspeakable: trauma not only eludes language but resists representation." This aligns with Caruth's theory that trauma can only be understood through its indirect traces, often emerging in repetition or silence.

In the broader context of postcolonial trauma, Kate Schick (2019) emphasizes the importance of recognizing multidirectional memory in post-imperial narratives, where personal trauma intersects with historical atrocities such as genocide, slavery and forced migration. Fatou's fleeting references to events like the Rwandan genocide, the Cambodian killing fields and the Holocaust reflect what Rothberg (2009) describes as the non-competitive logic of memory, where different histories of suffering coexist and interact. Smith refuses to prioritize one form of pain over another, instead creating a polyphonic narrative that critiques the hierarchies of historical remembrance. In *The Autograph Man*, trauma operates differently less as a silent presence and more as a postmodern fragmentation of identity. Alex-Li Tandem's obsessive pursuit of celebrity autographs functions as a compulsive displacement of his unresolved grief over his father's death. Caroline Brown (2016) argues that the novel is "a critique of postmodern detachment and the commodification of trauma," where grief is mediated through popular culture rather than intimate memory. This detachment can be interpreted through Freud's (1917) notion of melancholia, wherein loss is not acknowledged or mourned, but internalized, producing emotional numbness and repetitive behaviours. While *The Autograph Man* has received less scholarly engagement than Smith's other works, it has been discussed as a reflection of post-9/11 anxiety, racial hybridity and spiritual crisis (Head, 2008). A few studies have applied a trauma-theoretical lens to Alex's behaviour. His emotional numbness, identity confusion and obsessive routines align with LaCapra's (2001) distinction between "acting out" and "working through." Alex appears suspended in a state of repetitive performance, suggesting that trauma has not been assimilated into conscious understanding but is instead relived through compulsion.

Homi Bhabha's (1994) postcolonial theories of hybridity and the "third space" further illuminate both Fatou's and Alex's identities. Fatou, as a stateless migrant from Côte d'Ivoire, inhabits a liminal position within British society, neither fully included nor excluded. Her existence in the shadow of privilege working in a London suburb while being denied autonomy or recognition reflects Bhabha's notion of cultural in-betweenness. Similarly, Alex's mixed Jewish-Chinese British identity renders him culturally unanchored, fragmented across conflicting heritages. Both characters, then, exhibit trauma as a symptom of cultural displacement and the psychic toll of postcolonial hybridity. While *The Embassy of Cambodia* has been widely examined through the prisms of silence, postcolonial oppression and global memory politics (Tancke, 2014; Schick, 2019; Root, 2014), *The Autograph Man* has often been dismissed as structurally incoherent or thematically elusive. The few studies that do exist (Brown, 2016; Head, 2008) tend to overlook its potential as a trauma narrative. Moreover, comparative studies of these two texts are exceedingly rare, even though both explore trauma through radically different formal and thematic strategies. This article seeks to fill that gap by offering a comparative, theory-driven examination of *The Embassy of Cambodia* and *The Autograph Man* focusing on how trauma, memory and resilience are not only represented but structurally encoded into the narrative form and character construction. In doing so, the study contributes to broader conversations on literary

trauma, diasporic identity and the ethics of representation in postcolonial literature.

Theoretical Framework

Zadie Smith's *The Embassy of Cambodia* (2013) and *The Autograph Man* (2002) invite a theoretical framework capable of addressing the interwoven dynamics of trauma, fractured memory and resilient subjectivity. This study employs an integrated paradigm drawing on Trauma Theory (Caruth, LaCapra), Postcolonial Theory (Bhabha) and Freudian Psychoanalysis. Rather than functioning as discrete interpretive lenses, these approaches operate as an interdependent apparatus, illuminating the political, temporal and psychic dislocations in Smith's narratives. Cathy Caruth's conception of trauma as an "unclaimed experience" frames *The Embassy of Cambodia*, where Fatou's history is revealed through absence and elliptical memory, underscoring trauma's resistance to direct articulation. The swimming pool she secretly visits becomes a liminal site both sanctuary and symbolic reclamation of agency. LaCapra's distinction between "acting out" and "working through" informs the reading of Alex-Li Tandem in *The Autograph Man*, whose obsessive pursuit of celebrity ephemera signals unresolved mourning and psychic stasis. Bhabha's notions of hybridity, liminality and the "Third Space" contextualize the protagonists' diasporic alienation. Fatou's ambiguous origins and socio-political invisibility and Alex's dual Jewish-Chinese heritage and cultural mimicry, exemplify postcolonial fragmentation and identity negotiation under erasure. Freudian constructs melancholia, repression, the uncanny and repetition compulsion further elucidate the protagonists' unresolved losses. Both characters exhibit cyclical behaviours and temporal arrest, embodying trauma as an ambient condition rather than a singular rupture. Through this synthesis, Smith's fiction emerges as a postcolonial trauma aesthetic in which resilience is neither redemptive nor absolute but a muted persistence a "resilient silence" that resists closure and redefines survival in fractured modernity.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretative methodology, rooted in close textual analysis, to examine how trauma, memory and resilience are represented in Zadie Smith's *The Embassy of Cambodia* and *The Autograph Man*. The analysis is grounded in literary theory and adopts a comparative approach, enabling a nuanced exploration of both the thematic and formal dimensions of the texts rather than treating trauma as a static subject, this study approaches literature as a performative space where trauma is reconstructed, mediated and rendered through narrative structure, silences and symbolic language. The study engages critically with theoretical paradigms drawn from trauma studies, postcolonial theory and psychoanalysis. Cathy Caruth's concept of trauma as an unclaimed and belated experience informs the reading of silence and dislocation in *The Embassy of Cambodia*, while Dominick LaCapra's framework distinguishing between "acting out" and "working through" is applied to the cyclical patterns of grief and repression in *The Autograph Man*. Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theory, particularly his notions of hybridity and third space, facilitates a reading of diasporic identity as inherently fragmented and trauma-laden, while Freudian psychoanalysis provides tools to understand the inner logic of repression, melancholia and displacement that shape the protagonists' behaviour and worldview. The primary data is derived from the selected texts and supported by a curated selection of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed criticism and theoretical scholarship. This interpretative method allows for a layered, interdisciplinary reading that does not seek resolution or closure, but rather explores how her fiction embodies trauma and resilience as lived, ongoing conditions within postcolonial subjectivities. The methodology thus positions Smith's narratives as complex, ethically charged engagements with the enduring legacies of historical and personal rupture.

Discussion

This discussion integrates the key theoretical strands of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra's Trauma Theory, Homi K. Bhabha's Postcolonial Theory and Freudian Psychoanalysis. Together, they offer a layered account of psychic rupture, cultural dislocation and repetitive survival in Zadie Smith's *The Embassy of Cambodia* and *The Autograph Man*. Caruth defines trauma as an event that escapes full comprehension at the moment of occurrence. The wound returns later in fragmented form. LaCapra adds a vital distinction. He separates "acting out" from "working through." Acting out keeps the subject trapped in repetition. Working through allows transformation and integration. In *The Autograph Man*, Alex-Li Tandem repeats behaviours

tied to his father's death. He collects celebrity memorabilia. He searches for meaning in public image. He does not process loss. He acts out. His compulsions keep him in stasis. He fails to work through grief. In *The Embassy of Cambodia*, Fatou's past appears as absence. Her trauma does not surface in direct speech. It surfaces in silences and small gestures. The pool becomes a place of temporary control. Her pain returns indirectly. The narratives show trauma as deferred and unclaimed. The characters live under its pressure. They cannot name it clearly. They feel it again and again.

Bhabha's ideas of hybridity, liminality and the "Third Space" explain the cultural and identity tensions the protagonists endure. Fatou occupies a space between visibility and erasure. Her origins remain ambiguous. She exists in a suspended zone. Her identity does not settle. It shifts under social pressure. Alex carries mixed Jewish-Chinese heritage. He moves between sacred and profane worlds. He borrows religious language to make sense of fame. He mimics cultural signs without firm grounding. His identity shows the ambivalence of mimicry. He becomes almost the same, but not quite. These conditions fragment selfhood. They resist closure. Freud contributes key concepts: melancholia, the uncanny and the compulsion to repeat. Alex's mourning morphs into melancholia. He internalizes loss. He punishes his self through emotional paralysis. His past returns in uncanny echoes. Objects and moments feel both familiar and strange. Fatou's routine acts carry latent dread. Her everyday places become sites of estrangement. Both characters repeat patterns that prevent forward movement. The compulsion to repeat shows trauma's grip. It interrupts linear time. Smith's fiction does not offer clear resolution. It shows endurance. The protagonists live with persistent wounding. They negotiate identity under inherited and personal injury. Their survival depends on small, iterative acts. These acts do not erase damage. They sustain fragile continuity. This synthesis frames resilience not as recovery but as ongoing navigation within a field of dislocation.

The Embassy of Cambodia and The Autograph Man

The Embassy of Cambodia and *The Autograph Man* both explore fractured subjectivities in contemporary urban settings. In *The Embassy of Cambodia*, a young Londoner becomes entangled with Fatou, a woman whose past is obscured by silence and displacement. Her trauma remains unspoken; it surfaces through absence, gestures and the liminal refuge of a secret swimming pool. The narrative navigates social invisibility, class tension and the quiet persistence of unresolved wounds. *The Autograph Man* follows Alex-Li Tandem, a celebrity-obsessed man caught between cultural inheritance and personal loss. His pursuit of fame and memorabilia serves as a defence against mourning his father and negotiating his mixed Jewish-Chinese identity. The novel juxtaposes the sacred and the profane, revealing a protagonist locked in repetition, unable to integrate grief or stabilize a coherent sense of self. Both texts avoid neat resolutions; they foreground endurance amid ongoing psychic and cultural dislocation.

Trauma, Memory and Resilience

Trauma appears in these narratives not as spectacle but as withheld history. It resists direct representation and returns through repetition, absence and behavioural stasis. Fatou's suffering in *The Embassy of Cambodia* is conveyed through gaps and everyday routines that carry latent disturbance. Alex's unresolved mourning in *The Autograph Man* manifests in compulsive collecting and identity oscillation. The characters live under trauma's imprint, unable to fully name or move beyond it. Memory operates as both burden and structural force. It fails to deliver coherent narratives; instead, it fractures time and collapses past into present. Fatou's recollections emerge elliptically, shaping her agency without explicit articulation. Alex's memories, entwined with loss, become melancholic internalizations, producing emotional paralysis. In both cases, memory mediates identity, anchoring the protagonists in a suspended relation to their histories. Resilience in these novels is not triumphant recovery. It is tenacious continuation within constraint. The characters do not overcome trauma; they adapt around it. Fatou claims fleeting agency in private spaces. Alex persists through ironic self-fashioning and ritual, even as he remains stuck. Their survival consists of incremental acts that sustain a fragile continuity. This resilience tolerates ambiguity and refuses teleological closure, registering endurance as ongoing negotiation rather than resolution.

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Trauma as the Lingering Presence of Loss

In *The Embassy of Cambodia*, trauma operates through absence and suspended agency. Fatou's history is never narrated directly. Her past returns in small gestures, silences and fragmented self-perception. She even questions her own status: "It was not the first time that Fatou had wondered if she herself was a slave, but this story, brief as it was, confirmed in her own mind that she was not." (EC, 256) That moment holds the weight of inherited and internalized subjection. The uncertainty about her own position in the world becomes a cavity where trauma resides. Her secret visits to the pool gesture toward temporary control, yet the trauma reasserts itself through repetition of constrained movement and muted self-negotiation. The story frames loss not as a one-time rupture but as an ongoing pressure that shapes perception and limits speech. In *The Autograph Man*, Alex-Li Tandem lives under the unresolved death of his father. He seeks immortality through signatures and fame, hoping to bypass absence by collecting its simulacra. He behaves as if the past continually presses into the present; he remains "stuck in a state of arrested development after his father's sudden death," (EC, 342) unable to process grief meaningfully. His obsession with celebrity autographs functions as an attempt to "cheat Death of its satisfaction: obscurity." The pursuit becomes ritualized repetition. He acts out loss instead of working through it. His compulsive cycles enforce the persistence of trauma and block any movement toward integration.

Both novels exemplify trauma's return as an unassimilated wound. Caruth explains that a traumatic wound "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known." This condition forces the past to reappear indirectly, shaping behaviour and identity without clear narrative resolution. Fatou and Alex-Li each carry histories that they cannot fully articulate. Their survival depends on managing the echo of loss rather than resolving it. The characters repeat patterns, avoid explicit naming of pain and inhabit temporal discontinuities where the past collapses into present conduct. The trauma remains present not as a dramatic disclosure but as a structural stasis that constrains meaning and agency. Their endurance is a lived persistence within that stasis. The interconnected traumatic elements in both works reveal loss as a lingering architecture of subjectivity. Each protagonist negotiates identity under its weight, showing that trauma sustains itself not through spectacle, but through quiet recurrence and suppressed voice.

Memory as a Disorienting Force

In *The Embassy of Cambodia*, memory fragments collapse time and unsettle coherence. Fatou's recollections of collective loss surface in fleeting, almost dismissive form. When she thinks of the nine children who drowned in the sea at Accra, Smith writes, "Everyone carried on like before." That sentence registers memory not as a stabilizing archive but as a disorienting echo, one that is acknowledged and immediately marginalized by social routines. The past intrudes without full presence; its weight is felt more in the absence of elaboration than in explicit narration. Fatou's personal history similarly resists linear retrieval. Her past exists elliptically, shaping her sense of self without ever settling into a coherent story. This instability renders memory a space in which identity drifts and the attempt to orient oneself in time becomes fraught and uncertain.

In *The Autograph Man*, Alex-Li Tandem's relationship with memory is equally destabilizing. He confronts death and absence through cyclical attempts to pin permanence onto ephemeral celebrity, as if capturing signatures could anchor the passage of time. His insistence on immortality is voiced in a rhetorical despair: "As if impermanence were not the golden rule! And can I get Death's autograph, too?" (AM, 157) That exclamation reveals his compulsion to relive loss while failing to integrate it. His memories of his father recur not as resolved narratives but as melancholic loops that fracture his present and displace his capacity for forward movement. The novel stages remembrance as a restless process, where past grief bleeds into contemporary performance and undermines any stable sense of continuity. The interconnection of memory across both works emerges in their shared refusal of singular or redemptive recall. Smith foregrounds memory as a contested, multidirectional field where personal and collective histories press against one another. *The Embassy of Cambodia* explicitly enacts this through juxtaposition: "*The Embassy of Cambodia* juxtaposes two disturbing histories, Fatou's and Cambodia's genocidal past, which operate according to a multidirectional understanding of memory." That framing collapses hierarchy between traumatic recollections and situates individual suffering within a larger, entangled archive. In *The Autograph Man*, memory's instability is framed as both private mourning and a broader cultural negotiation; as one critic observes, the novel is "an exercise in memory and remembrance and the complications that follow the repression of painful loss." Together, the texts depict memory not as retrieval but as navigation through competing, overlapping temporalities. The protagonists inherit fragmented pasts and attempt to orient themselves within them; each act of remembering both clarifies and confuses, producing a dislocation that is structural rather than incidental. Thus, both narratives show that memory unsettles identity and time. It

denies therapeutic closure and demands continual negotiation. The past is never fully present and never wholly absent. It lingers as fractured echo, shaping desire, agency and self-perception in ways that keep the characters suspended between what has been lost and what remains to be lived.

Resilience as an Ongoing Force

In *The Embassy of Cambodia*, Fatou's survival is a quiet persistence rather than dramatic recovery. Her capacity to teach herself to swim under adverse conditions marks a recurrent assertion of agency. As McCarthy notes, "Fatou loves to swim and her ability to teach herself to swim in less-than-ideal circumstances in Ghana highlights her resilience." The pool functions as a disciplined space where she temporarily reclaims bodily autonomy and steadies herself against social erasure. Her name, meaning "the one who abstains," signals both vulnerability and enduring self-possession; scholarship observes that she is "the vulnerable as well as resilient protagonist" who has learned to fend for herself across borders. Fatou does not transcend trauma; she adapts around it, creating routines and secret refuges that sustain her. This endurance is modest, iterative and persists despite systemic invisibility. In *The Autograph Man*, Alex-Li Tandem's resilience emerges unevenly. He repeatedly fails to integrate loss yet continues the ritualized pursuit of meaning through autographs and performance. His persistence in seeking connection whether through celebrity signatures or participation in Jewish mourning rituals signals a fraught survival. Critics note that his struggle with identity and grief is "juxtaposed with the modern pursuit of authenticity in autographs," underscoring an ongoing quest for belonging rather than closure. Eventually, through engagement with Zen-inflected reflection and the Mourner's Kaddish, he begins to accept mortality, a shift scholars describe as a slow opening toward engagement with loss. "It is through Zen Buddhism that Alex eventually accepts death in general and is finally able to participate in Kaddish." (AM, 278) His resilience is not triumphant; it is tentative adaptation, enacted in moments of self-awareness amid continued disorientation.

Both works share a depiction of resilience as sustained negotiation. Fatou and Alex do not achieve redemption; they persist. Their survival depends on repeated small acts that maintain coherence without resolving underlying fractures. The two narratives link private endurance to broader cultural and historical pressures, showing resilience as response rather than mastery. As observed in critical readings, Fatou's movement across borders and her guarded self-reliance position her within a postcolonial persistence that survives while remaining marked by displacement. Alex's gradual facing of grief reflects resilience that tolerates contradiction and delay, sustaining identity through ritual even when meaning remains unstable. Their interlinked tenacity illustrates that resilience functions as ongoing force one that sustains life in the wake of trauma and memory without promising repair. Together, the texts portray endurance as a structural condition of subjectivity: characters adapt, recalibrate and continue, showing resilience as the daily negotiation of persistence amid unresolved wounds.

Conclusion

Thus the two novels present trauma in contrasting modalities while converging on its persistent presence. In *The Embassy of Cambodia*, trauma is internalized, withheld and embodied through absence; it surfaces as a structural constraint on agency, experienced in silence and small, recurring gestures. In *The Autograph Man*, trauma is externalized through compulsive performance, repetition and the failure to process loss manifesting as "acting out" rather than integration. Together, they show that trauma does not resolve into narrative closure. It remains a shaping current: in Fatou as an invisible weight that structures survival and in Alex as a publicized spectacle that masks immobilization. This comparison refines the study's understanding of trauma as both hidden and performative and as a force that arrests and frames subjectivity differently according to social positionality and cultural mediation. Memory functions in both works as a destabilizer rather than an anchor. Fatou's recollections arrive elliptically and refuse linear coherence, making identity a drifting negotiation between past and present. Alex's memory loops in melancholic cycles, trapping him in temporal feedback that undermines progression. The shared quality is fragmentation; the difference lies in articulation. Fatou's memory is quiet and structural, while Alex's is loud yet unintegrated, staged through obsession. Their interconnected memory dynamics demonstrate how recollection can both shape and disorient selfhood, collapsing chronology and making the past persistently present without offering reconciliation.

Resilience in these narratives is not a climactic recovery but a sustained, adaptive practice. Fatou survives through guarded routines and reclaimed moments of agency, showing endurance within systemic marginalization. Alex's eventual, hesitant engagement with grief—mediated through ritual and reflection reveals resilience as gradual opening rather than decisive healing. The two portrayals converge in depicting

survival as ongoing negotiation: small acts, provisional adjustments and continued being in the face of unresolved wounding. This reframes resilience away from triumphalism to the quiet persistence of subjects who continue despite structural and psychic fractures. The study concludes that Zadie Smith's fiction stages a postcolonial trauma aesthetic in which trauma, memory and resilience are entangled layers of experience. Her characters neither fully articulate their wounds nor escape them; instead, they inhabit them, adapt around them and continue. The comparison of the two works reveals how cultural hybridity, identity ambiguity and grief mediate the shape of psychic rupture and endurance. The research thus argues for reading resilience as embedded in dislocation and memory as a disorienting field, with trauma as a lingering architecture of subjectivity. Such a framework challenges reductive models of healing and posits survival itself as the central, complex achievement of her protagonists.

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