

**When the Past Bleeds into the Crime: A Psychological Study of
Trauma's Role in Shaping Investigative and Criminal Psyches in
Sharp Objects and *In the Woods***



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28th December (Fall 2025)

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Investigative and Criminal Psyches in *Sharp Objects* and *In the Woods***

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.



A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Anika Tahsin", is written over a faint, circular, textured background. The signature is slanted and includes a large, sweeping underline.

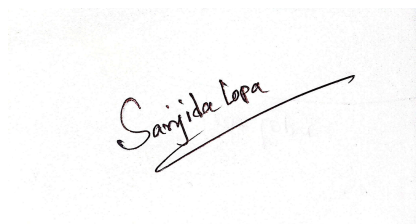
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DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light-colored, slightly textured background. The signature reads "Sanjida Lopa" in a cursive script, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the 21st century's contemporary literature in how it depicts characters shaped by trauma through analysing Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* (2006) and Tana French's *In the Woods* (2007). Applying Cathy Spatz Widom's concepts on cycle of violence and Judith Lewis Herman's ideas of trauma shaping criminal behavior, the study aims to examine how unresolved trauma manifests as criminal behavior as well as highly impacts on criminal investigation focusing on the boundary between the victims and the perpetrators depicted in these contemporary crime fictions. The result of this analysis would show that unresolved trauma immensely functions as a core psychological dictation in *Sharp Objects* and *In the Woods*. Drawing on Widom's violence framework and Herman's trauma theory this study also reveals how emotional neglect, familial abuse and disrupted caregiving environments create crumbled identities, compulsive behavioral patterns and impaired judgements that illuminate in both criminals and investigators. The analysis further establishes that the crimes committed in these narratives are not the isolated moral deviation but the termination of preserved psychological wounds rooted in dysfunctional family dynamics. This research contributes to a profound understanding of how these contemporary crime fictions imply the long-lasting effect of memory, violence, and family systems on culpability, justice and human deputation by foregrounding trauma as an engaged continuum rather than a background estate.

Keywords: Trauma, Violence, Investigation, Criminal Behavior, Psychological dictation, Familial abuse, Disrupted caregiving, Perpetrators, Dysfunctional family

Chapter 1

Introduction

Contemporary crime fictions have long been related to not only the acts of crime itself but also to the psychological conditions that surround them. Traditionally, this particular genre has privileged objectivity, rationality and resolution displaying investigators as detached observers who restore order by disclosing the truth. However, by foregrounding the emotional, psychological, and traumatic dimensions, these crime narratives challenge this assumption increasingly. Modern crime fiction manifests how crime arises from deeply strung histories of memory, abuse and familial dysfunction rather than representing violence as an incoherent moral deviation. Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects* (2006) and Tana French's *In the Woods* (2007) illustrate this shift by concentrating trauma as a central force that shapes not only the very process of investigation itself but also the criminal attitude.

These novels overturn the traditional binary between criminal and investigator by disclosing how unresolved past trauma occupies judgement, perception, and ethical decision-making. In *Sharp Objects* journalist Camille Preaker's return to her hometown to cover a series of child murders pushes her to face a history of self-harm, familial abuse, and emotional neglect. In the same way, detective Rob Ryan's professional identity is firmly undermined by a repressed trauma tied to a disappearance in the very woods where he investigates a murder in the present in *In the Woods*. In both texts, the childhood memory from the past does not remain latent; rather, it intrudes into the present violently, destabilizing the characters' psychological integrity and obscuring the boundaries between responsibility and victimhood. In these

narratives, crime becomes extremely inseparable from memory, and investigation becomes an emotionally filled confrontation with unresolved trauma.

Despite both these novels' psychological depth, the existing scholarship has often critically approached those through fragmented lenses. Explorations on *Sharp Objects* often focus on its gothic environment, sensational aspects of violence or the representation of femininity, framing Camille Preaker's behavior as an individual pathology rather than as a coherent trauma response embodied by prolonged familial abuse. Likewise, critical discussions of *In the Woods* frequently underline its unreliable narration, its thematic engagement with memory and loss, or its subversion of detective fiction, yet those tend to deal with Rob Ryan's trauma as a narrative complication rather than a constructive force. While trauma is recognized occasionally in such readings, rarely it is theorized methodically or connected to the wider psychological frameworks that explore how trauma operates across both criminal and investigative domains.

This paper examines to address the critical gap through foregrounding trauma as the core analytical framework by which both novels can be understood. Applying Judith L. Herman's trauma theory, articulated in *Trauma and Recovery*, this paper conceptualizes trauma as a rupture of psychology that overwhelms general coping mechanisms and fragments perception, identity and memory. Reemerging through intrusive memory, compulsive reenactment, and emotional dysregulation, her framework permits for a thorough understanding of the way trauma persists beyond the original circumstance. Trauma theory exposes how investigative authority is compromised by psychological wounds when it is applied to both novels. transforming the act of discovery into a site of reiteration rather than accomplishment when it is applied to *Sharp Objects* and *In the Woods*.

In addition to Herman's theory, this study also employs Cathy Spatz Widom's cycle of violence framework to explore early victimization enhancing the risk of criminal behavior and adult psychological dysfunction. Her research challenges the simplistic thoughts about criminality by depicting that violence emerges often from sustained exposure to neglect and dysfunctional environments. This thesis offers an interdisciplinary approach that connects psychological research and literary criticism by bringing the trauma theory and the cycle of violence framework together. It also examines both groups within the same traumatic continuum rather than isolating criminals as divergent others and investigators as rational agents. Investigators are depicted as psychologically vulnerable subjects whose ability is destabilized by personal history, while criminals are recognized as products of prolonged psychological wounds rooted in their family and not as monsters. Traditional concerns of justice and moral clarity and crime fiction hierarchies are challenged by this very approach.

The primary vision of this study is to analyze how unresolved trauma influences criminal investigation and manifests as criminal behavior in *Sharp Objects* and *In the Woods*. The analysis is structured through three interconnected concerns to accomplish this objective: trauma's influence on investigative judgements, the role of trauma shaping the criminal attitude, and the impacts of dysfunctional family systems on psychological growth. This research examines the way trauma destabilizes identity, disrupts narrative authority and preserves cycles of violence across generations.

This study is guided by the core research question which is: "In what ways does childhood trauma function in shaping investigative and criminal psyches in Flynn's *Sharp Objects* and French's *In the Woods*?" This question is directly linked to the objective of this

study and would thus be answered through psychoanalytical dissection of the characters in the novels, supported by the mentioned theoretical frameworks.

Ultimately, by offering a unified psychological reading on contemporary crime fiction that integrates investigators, criminals and family dynamics within the similar traumatic frameworks, this thesis contributes to existing scholarships. It also challenges the conventional genre expectations by disclosing how justice remains elusive when the past continues to bleed into the present and how the promise of resolution is undermined by the existence of trauma. Thus, this research concentrates not only on the broader importance of trauma-related approaches to literary crime fictions but also depicts the critical understanding of *Sharp Objects* and *In the Woods*.

Chapter 02

Methodology

This study exerts a qualitative textual analysis to explore the way of trauma shaping both the investigative process and criminal behavior in *In the Woods* and *Sharp Objects*. The research counts on close reading of character psychology, narrative events and representations of trauma within both novels which is supported by two foundational trauma theories that are Widom's Cycle of Violence Theory and Judith Herman's clinical framework of psychological trauma. Herman's affirmation that trauma causes a "fundamental reorganization of the victim's worldview" guides the examination of how Camille Preaker's and Rob Ryan's investigative identities are destabilized by unresolved childhood wounds. Widom's theory provides the criminological foundation for understanding characters like Amma and Rosalind Devlin demonstrating the fact that early victimization flourishes the likelihood of later violent as well as self-destructive actions.

From both novels, the primary data is drawn directly, focusing on scenes where past trauma influences present behavior directly. For example, *Sharp Objects* reveals how familial abuse creates violent identity formation in Amma while *In the Woods* explicitly ties Rob's investigative collapses to the resurfacing of his childhood disappearance. Secondary theoretical texts including *Trauma and Recovery*, "Cycle of Violence" and contemporary psychological scholarship are used to interpret these narrative styles. This methodology allows for a compact psychological reading that represents how trauma bleeds into and shapes both investigative failure and criminal reinforcement.

Chapter 03

Literature Review

Major themes like childhood trauma, dysfunctional family and criminal behavior in crime fiction often shape psychological perceptions and character analysis. *In the Woods* by Tana French and *Sharp Objects* by Gillian Flynn present complex characters who navigate the consequences of trauma-driven fragmentation and pathological upbringing. A psychological lens, particularly theories on trauma like complex trauma theory and cycle of violence theory, provides a framework to understand the criminal behavior connected to these characters. This literature review examines existing research on various perceptions and critiques of Flynn's and French's narratives. By analyzing these works according to the thematic relevance in this paper, it aims to contribute to discussions on how these novels reflect and reinforce psychological attitudes toward unnatural behavior. The secondary sources provided, arranged thematically, also help further critically analyze the effect of the outcomes shaped by trauma, as well as solidify the theoretical lens of this research.

To begin with, the article "Sharp Objects by Gillian Flynn: Persistence of Patriarchal Motherhood and the Nascence 'Odd' Monstrous-Feminine" written by Tamir and Elfra, examines the persistence of patriarchal motherhood in *Sharp Objects* and it expand beyond traditional female monstrosity to introduce a new perspective on the monstrous-feminine. It employs textual analysis exploring female monstrosity by using feminist literary criticism and the monstrous-feminine theory. This study finds the enforcement of oppressive gender norms by patriarchal motherhood, manifesting female monstrosity in both subtle and explicit ways. My thesis analyzes Amma and Rosalind's character along with their parents causing trauma in them,

in a similar vein, and Tamir and Elfra's analytical point add to the same observation regarding character writing affected by the trauma.

Similarly, Sreenivas and Gokani's study "Women with Conditions: Locating Mental Illness in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*" explores the portrayal of mental illness in *Sharp Objects*, focusing on the psychological conditions of the female characters, especially the protagonist, Camille. They apply feminist theory and psychoanalytic theory to examine how mental illness is used to shape female identities, their relationship with trauma and social perceptions. Sreenivas and Gokani's examination of the female protagonist in Flynn's novel has similarities with the character analysis implemented in this thesis. Also, this paper finds that characters of Flynn's book are intricately stuck to their psychological wars and these conditions become the tools to explore deeper issues of trauma, and the behavior caused by it in the protagonist.

Likewise, Qodariyah, Rohman and Natalia use Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory in their paper. "The Major Characters in Gillian Flynn's Novel *Sharp Objects* (A Psychoanalysis Freud)" to examine the psychological discords of the major characters in Gillian Flynn's novel *Sharp Objects*. The authors identify two kinds of conflicts which are approach-avoidance and avoidance-avoidance through qualitative content analysis and these discords grow from inconsistencies among the id, ego and superego leading to complex behaviors of the characters. My thesis similarly also explores the writing of characters portrayed with complex behavior. Thus this study could also examine the characters as their roles and actions are significant in both novels.

Moreover, "Gillian Flynn's Small Town Crime Fiction" by Dechene examines the subversion of conventional crime narratives in small-town settings, analyzing Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*, *Dark Places* and *Gone Girl*. Within the context of rural noir, this study focuses on the themes like deviance, social stigma and psychological complexity through the characters and the storylines. Dechene explores how the characters of these novels, morally indistinct and often flawed, present the sociological as well as psychological lens to comprehend the interplay between crime and social structures in simultaneous fiction. His observations provide insightful information on examining the characters' portrayal.

Then again, the study. "Melancholia and Traumatic Reenactment in Contemporary American Fiction: A Caruthian Reading of Gillian Flynn's Novels" by Monfared, Zarei and Heravi uses Cathy Caruth's trauma theory to examine the themes of melancholia in *Sharp Objects*, *Dark Places* and *Gone Girl*. The authors analyze how the characters from these books relive past traumas through fragmented memories, hallucinations and nightmares and they also employ a literary and psychoanalytic approach exploring how the protagonists unconsciously reenact traumatic experiences through self-harm, violence and psychological phenomena. The key findings of this paper indicate that the cyclical nature of trauma and melancholia shape identity formations and relationships which will greatly be helpful giving insights on the relationship between complex behavior and the characters' trauma.

Similarly, in "The Criminal Poetics of the Detecting Body in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*" Szarvas examines the perplexed relationship between crime detection and the female body in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects*. Applying a feminist narratological approach, this paper analyzes how the protagonist's bodily scars and self-harm serve as a palimpsest of memory, violence and investigation. The findings of this study, challenging common ideologies of the

detective figure, highlight the body's role as both a tool for revealing hidden truths and ground of inscriptions. Szarvas's observations provide important information on how the protagonists' trauma influences their crime investigation as my thesis also examines this fact.

Furthermore, in "Analysis of Psychological Thrill in the Novels - *Dark Places* by Gillian Flynn, *Red Dragon* by Thomas Harris and *Sharp Objects* by Gillian Flynn" Sinha analyzes how Flynn and Harris use literary techniques to create suspense, anxiety and psychological distress in *Dark Places*, *Sharp Objects* and *Red Dragon* using a comparative and thematic approach. This study can be used to highlight the fact that crime fictions often reflect personal anxieties around mental illness and violence. Sinha's observation of the characters in this paper can be helpful to my paper as their complex behavior is highly related to the psychological distress that they have possessed in their childhood.

Deidre Flynn talks about how Tana French constructs peripheral and liminal places as significant psychological and narrative sites *In the Woods* and *The Likeness* in her paper "Crime on the Periphery: Tana French's Criminal Geography." By positioning crimes within edgelands-spaces that are geographically, psychologically and socially ambiguous, Flynn argues that French's fictions differ from the known Irish rural-urban binary. These settings, mentioned as "raw and rough" and filled with "hidden histories," her analysis shows how the woodland in *In the Woods* operates as an interfacial zone present and past, urban and rural, mirroring the fragmented psyche of characters shaped by early traumatic experience. As my research examines how dysfunctional environments and childhood trauma influence characters' psychological development, Flynn's emphasis on place as an embodiment of psychological disturbance contributes to my argument about the role of trauma-driven fragmentation in shaping criminal behavior.

By contrast, Fabiola Fliegel's master thesis, "Character Interrelation in Tana Frenche's Novel's: An Analysis of *In the Woods*, *The Likeness* and *Faithful Place*" explores the unique narrative technique of reusing side characters as protagonists in subsequent novels by Tana French employing a combination of genre based, character based and narrative based analytical approaches to examine how these interrelations put an impact on the character development and perception. Fliegel emphasizes on noting the prior knowledge of a character affects the impact of the narrative and the depth of psychological insight. This thesis highlights how positioning of narrative and interrelation between characters can expose underlying psychological dimensions by analyzing Rob Ryan, Cassie Maddox and Frank Mackey. It also underscores the significance of genre conventions in interpreting character behavior. All these observations are particularly relevant to my paper as it examines how personal histories, past experiences and character interrelations shape behavior and decision-making.

Lastly, Franca Leitner's paper, "Haunting Humans? Nonhuman Animals in Tana French's *In the Woods* (2007) and *Broken Harbour* (2012)," explores the significance of nonhuman animals in French's novels as a lens to critique ecological degradation and the loss of natural spaces in contemporary Ireland. Leitner uses ecocritical and literary analysis to establish the argument on the spectral presence of animals; whether seen, heard or implied, which reflects both human disregard for nature and environmental consequences. For example, the ambiguous existence of an animal mirrors Ryan's unresolved childhood trauma while symbolizing the devastation of the Knocknaree woods during the Celtic Tiger era. This article helps give insights to my paper by illustrating the way the narrative styles and symbolic elements such as animals or environmental motifs can be employed to convey trauma, neglect and societal failure.

In conclusion, all the articles mentioned here would provide a structural basis on how the characters function in their surroundings. Most of these articles do not have the comparison of both novels with each other. Also, most of them focus only on either the criminals or the investigators, but not both of the groups. Yet, these articles assist in the research as they will provide the foundation to understand the psychological perceptions which contribute to the actions that are operated by the characters. Therefore, it would allow the research to be conducted through focusing on the psychological aspects in *Sharp Objects* and *In the Woods*. Thus, the researcher can contribute more knowledge about complex behavior and the conditions human among us may have through the characters in these two books.

Chapter 4.1

The Past Shadowing the Search: Trauma's Influence on Investigators

The role that is played by the investigator in crime fiction is generally considered as grounded in emotional distance, logical judgement and the disciplined detachment important to crime without being consumed by it. Yet *Sharp Objects* and *In the Woods* break this convention by setting investigators whose identities are fractured long before their investigation begins. Their sense of self directly interrupts with their job, eventually entwining their pasts with the crimes they try to solve. This sense is basically shaped by their childhood trauma, the lingering fractures of repressed memory and familial dysfunction. Through the lens of Widom's framework of early victimization as a reason to later dysfunction and Judith's Herman's recognition of trauma as a phenomenon of fragmentation, recurring reenactment and disconnection, these two texts present crime-investigation not wholly as a procedural act but as a psychologically fickle process. In each novel, the investigators, Camille and Rob, are not an external observer of the crime rather its product; someone whose profession cannot be separated from the childhood trauma that shadows their investigation, perception and emotional stability. By digging events from both texts, the aim of this chapter is to make the fact very clear that Camille Preaker and Rob Ryan portray the complexities of trauma-imposed investigators whose personal wounds distort the investigative gaze of them, allowing the books to examine how fragmented self cannot wholly detach from the violence it wants to perceive.

Rob Ryan's self is inseparable from the riddle he seeks to solve in *In the Woods*. His past trauma, marked by the disappearance of Ryan's two closest friends and the erasure of his memory, generates a silent force throughout the book which shapes his emotional responses and

investigative decisions long before he understands it. According to Judith Herman, traumatic memory “does not fade like ordinary experience but persists in fragments, sensations, and emotional states that intrude into the present” (Herman 33-34). Ryan’s trauma is certainly this; not a memory he can verbally enunciate, but a void that bursts into his life through anger, fear, dissociation and avoidance. When he comes back to Knocknaree, he does not get into the case as an outside observer but as a survivor reenacting the site of his unresolved trauma. Throughout the whole novel, his reactions such as panic at the woods, compulsive lying, emotional withdrawal, self-sabotage show how internally the past directs his present functioning. Herman’s argument that “trauma owns the survivor’s present” becomes obvious in Ryan’s inability to control emotional stability as the mystery unfolds. He becomes overwhelmed by the sensory triggers and emotional leakage that wrench his professional judgement.

Also, the relationship between Rob and Cassie Maddox further shows how trauma can destabilize interpersonal dynamics in highly stressed investigative contexts. Widom notes that survivors of childhood trauma often struggle with emotional regulation, developing coping patterns that dangle between dependency and avoidance (Widom 160-161). Rob illustrates this contrariness as he heavily depends on Cassie for grounding her emotional steadiness, yet pulls away from her the moment when intimacy was about to expose his vulnerability. The failure of him maintaining a boundary with Cassie is not a lapse in professional judgement; rather it reflects an underlying trauma-induced pattern where emotional closeness evokes shame, fear and the instinct to elude. The investigation gets affected directly by this instability as Rob’s emotional dependency leads him to be confused about his needs with the investigation itself, showing Herman’s argument that “survivors often reexperience the past in relationships,” bringing unresolved wounds into new events where they interrupt with rational decision-making

(Herman 37). His ultimate downfall, losing Maddox, the case, and his identity as a detective, reveals how thoroughly his past trauma undermines his ability to function within an investigative role that needs clarity, trust and emotional balance. In *Sharp Objects* Camille Preaker's physical relationships with Richard and later with John also align in this argument in exactly the same way Rob's relationship does.

However, if Rob Ryan's trauma expresses through dissociation and repression, Camille Preaker represents the opposite pole in *Sharp Objects*; a survivor whose trauma floods rather than disappears. Camille does not hide herself from her past through refusal; she bears it engraved into her skin, each self-inflicted word an attempt to embody an internal injury she cannot express otherwise. Herman argues that survivors who make trauma inward often develop fragmented identities held together by compulsive behaviors" (Herman 35). This self-harm done by Camille becomes this adhesive: a way of controlling psyche continuity in the face of overwhelming emotional differentiation. While returning to Wind Gap as reporter, she not only brings her notebook but also a body that maps her history of pain. Camille's investigation is inseparable from her trauma because the people, the small town and the emotive atmosphere of Wind Gap reactivate every wound she has tried to hide. Instead of investigating the crime from the outside, she is pulled into a pathological labyrinth where the investigation becomes a confrontation with her own fragmented self.

The psychological entanglements between trauma and investigative functioning are further highlighted by the interactions of Camille with her mother and sister. Herman's concept of "traumatic reenactment"; the unconscious redoing of harmful relational patterns becomes central to her struggle (Herman 52-54). She merely does not interview Wind Gap's inhabitants; she reenters the emotional warzone of her own childhood. Her mother Adora Crellin's oppressive

caregiving, rooted in pathological manipulation and psychological control, places Camille back into the figure of a powerless child once she was. Widom explains that survivors who return to the environments where their trauma occurred often experience “renewed emotional dysregulation,” which impairs judgement and decision-making (Widom 160). Camille’s relapses into self-harm, drinking and emotional vulnerability reflect this regression. Her investigative detachment collapses, replaced by a desperate need for validation, understanding and belonging; needs that make her capable of misinterpretation and pathological manipulation. When she needs to analyze the evidence, she does find herself directing the aftermath of her childhood, often being confused on emotional insight with investigative lucidity.

What individualizes Camille’s childhood trauma from Ryan’s is the degree to which her investigative process mirrors her internal psychological journey. She walks into her trauma willingly, even compulsively while Rob Ryan tries to avoid confronting the past. Herman suggests that some trauma survivors seek to “master the past by retracing its path,” believing that revisiting old wounds will grant them control and closure (Herman 44). In spite of recognizing its danger, Camille decides to stay in Wind Gap which reflects its impulse. She is directed into the investigation not because of journalistic goals but because solving the murders means facing the emotional pattern that happened to shape her life. Her connection to the victims; young girls whose weakness echoes her own past, deepens this psychological entanglement. Camille gets close to them, not as a journalist or a reporter but as a survivor which transforms the investigation into a significant attempt to rewrite the story of her own struggle.

Despite the dissimulation, Rob Ryan and Camille Preaker share a central psychological reality; their trauma makes them unfaithful investigators. Herman asserts that trauma “disrupts the survivor’s ability to interpret present reality accurately,” which often leads to emotional

distortion and cognitive misperception (Herman 49). Ryan misreads the intentions of suspects, he projects his fear onto the evidence, and also, he makes decisions based on unresolved childhood fear rather than rational thinking. Again, Camille misreads emotional cues, gets confused personal resonance with objective insight, and also, becomes entangled in social dynamics of Wind Gap in many ways that cloud her investigative judgement. Both these characters disclose how trauma interrupts with perception; it does not just simply stay in memory but occupies the interpretive system that investigators depend on to solve crime. Their failures which are Rob's constant collapse and Camille's near-death show how internally trauma undermines the capability to serve as an objective observer. Widom's research shows that survivors who exhibit emotional instability often struggle with professional positions that demand reasoning, compartmentalization, and emotional restraint (Widom 160). Rob's inability to maintain his professional boundary and Camille's inability to protect her own self emotionally, represent the border reality Widom identifies; that trauma fundamentally destabilizes adult functioning when left unaddressed. Both their investigative breakdowns are not personal weakness but symptoms of unresolved emotional wounds that control their behavior.

Eventually, *Sharp Objects* and *In the Woods* portray two investigators whose psychological injuries predetermine the failure to detach their personal history from their professional duty. The investigations of them become extensions of their trauma rather than escaping from it. Tana French and Gillian Flynn craft narratives in which the search for the truth is overshadowed by the shadows of the characters' past trauma, proving Herman's argument that shapes not only memory but identity, perception and behavior. Through Rob Ryan and Camille Preaker, the novels represent a haunting reality; that the most dangerous obstacles in an

investigation may not come from the crime itself, but may come from the investigator's own unresolved trauma or unhealed wounds.

Chapter 4.2

Trauma-Driven Formation of Criminal Behavior

Criminal actions or behavior is often framed as a deliberate choice of morality or the product of innate misery in literature. However, *Sharp Objects* and *In the Woods* show up a far more psychological complex picture of crime; one that roots violent behavior not in a very simple grudge, but in the inner structural injuries of childhood trauma. Both in these novels, the individuals committing violence do so not because they get broken suddenly but because they were shaped, piece by piece, within emotionally destabilizing and oppressive surroundings. Their crimes flow out as the culmination of years of toxicity in relationships, psychological fragmentation, and maladaptive survival techniques. Drawing upon Judith Herman's principle understanding of how trauma distorts emotional regulation, identity and moral developing system, along with Cathy Widom's "Cycle of Violence" (1989) research showing the exploratory links between childhood victimization and later aggression, this chapter argues that the criminal or the perpetrators in both novels represent trauma-driven criminals. Following the previous chapter, this chapter particularly aims at exploring the concept that the violence occurring by them is not arbitrary; it is the final point of a developmental trajectory covered by chaos, humiliation, fear, and the adapted mechanisms of emotional control and dominance.

In *Sharp Objects*, one of the clearest examples of trauma-driven criminal formation appears through the toxic dynamic between the mother character named Adora Crellin and her daughters. Though Adora's takes the form of medicalized caregiving, it is rooted in heavy psychological control and deep emotional manipulation; a behavior that is classified as "coercive trauma" by Herman, in which a caregiver replaces nurturing with intrusion and dominance

(Herman 47-49). Adora's strike of violence is intimate, disguised and quiet. She does not cause any harm to her children due to explosive rage but through the formalistic performance of "care" turning maternal authority into a device of power. Herman asserts that trauma inflicted by caregivers is uncommonly devastating because it "creates a disorder of attachment," making the child learn that love is inseparable from harm and dependence (Herman 56). This is the surrounding where Amma is grown up; a house in which vulnerability is manufactured, emotional autonomy is punished and sickness is rewarded. Under these situations, Amma's personality gets fractured into a dual identity; a submissive daughter at home as she calls herself Adora's "doll" and manipulative aggressor in the social sphere as calls herself "other things" outside the house. This homicidal behavior of Amma is not an excursion rather, it is the logical expansion of a childhood where power is learned not through love, affection or safety but through domination and emotional performance.

The violence that is committed by Amma is not spontaneous. Widom's research on developmental consequences caused by childhood trauma demonstrates that "children exposed to emotional manipulation, coercive control and inconsistent parenting often develop behavioral issues that include impulsivity, hostility and aggression" (Widom 162). These children lack stable attachment struggling to internalize emotional regulation or empathy. This is highly exemplified in Amma; her craving for attention and her jealousy of girls who assimilate freedom or maternal affection her mother never gave her strike into violent motivations. Under her performative innocence lies years of pathological neglect emphasized by Adora's suffocating harm, producing a psyche that wants to regain control through cruelty. Widom underlines that trauma survivors often reenact the abusive dynamics they were exposed to, not due to their choice but because these patterns become embedded in their relational schema (Widom 163).

From Adora, Amma learns that the power is persevered by domination disguised as affection, and she remakes this dynamic within her friendships, ultimately escalating to murder. Her violence reflects the pathological structure of her upbringing as she creates dependency, isolates her victim and eventually punishes them when they fail to abide by her emotional needs.

The mother, Adora herself portrays an older generation of the similar traumatic cycle. Although the story of the book never fully articulates the nature of her past or childhood, her compulsive need to manufacture sickness in her children suggests the unresolved trauma of her own. Herman states that trauma survivors may not adopt caregiving roles that allow them to “reverse the power dynamic of their own victimization,” asserting control where they once experienced helplessness (Herman 75-77). As Adora was suffering from ‘Munchausen by Proxy syndrome’ (a syndrome which usually a mother ascribes on another to achieve sympathy and attention, her meticulous poisoning, performed under the form of nurturing reflects a desire to regain control over her own pathological wounds by injecting vulnerability in others. The maternal violence she shows is methodical, obsessive and ritualized; not an impulsive reaction but the manifestation of deeply intimated emotional distortions rooted in earlier unresolved pain. The criminal performance Adora emphasizes is therefore not a standalone emotion but a symptom of a trauma cycle that distorts, shapes and ultimately ruins the emotional bond of her family.

The formation of criminal behavior is more scattered, embedded in *In the Woods* as it is not only in individuals but in the entire community signed by secrecy, silencing, and generational tension. While the book’s central crime keeps several interpretations disclosed, its thematic focus on psychological instability, environmental neglects, and pathological deprivation gives a framework for understanding the criminals’ violent actions through a trauma-informed lens. The

crimes come not from unspeakable evil but from the broken relational and structural surroundings of Knocknaree; a town drenched in political pressure, failing institutions and hidden histories of harm. Rosalind, who kills her own sister Katy, belongs to a family where her father is an activist in the political field and her mother is an extremely religious person. Widom's cycle of violence research emphasizes that community disintegration and childhood exposure to fear of instability heavily increase the likelihood of later antisocial behavior (Widom 161-162). Knocknaree embodies these conditions; the children who are raised there are exposed to unresolved past violence, secrecy and adults who depend on silence rather than emotional communication. These environments produce psychological landscapes ripe for distortion, where individuals learn to navigate fear through aggression.

Emotional detachment is a consistent theme in *In the Woods*; an inability or unwillingness to sympathize with other individuals. Herman identifies emotional numbing as a core result of complex trauma, noting that survivors may experience "a restricted range of affect, particularly in their capacity for empathy, intimacy and moral reasoning" (Herman 63). The criminal, Rosalind in the novel, reflects this pathological compression. Her decisions are marked by extreme coldness, a lack of guilt and an inability to comprehend the emotional weight of her behavior. This detachment is merely not moral failing but a psychological adaptation formed within environments where emotional expressions were unsafe, punished or neglected. Trauma shapes a self that becomes detached from the pain of others, allowing crime to occur not because the perpetrator wants harm, but because she cannot fully conceptualize it; and then violence becomes an extension of pathological fragmentation.

The criminals exhibit a profound need for control across both these novels; one of the hallmark traits Herman associates with trauma survivors who were once rendered powerless.

According to Herman, “survivors may attempt to reclaim agency through exertions of dominance or compulsive control,” especially when their past was marked by helplessness (Herman 94). This requirement manifests differently in each criminal. Adora’s control takes a form of maternal outrage, Amma’s through lethal jealousy and social manipulation, and Rosalind’s through calculated actions that allow them to feel powerful in a world where their individual identities feel unstable. These behaviors of control simply are not expressions of dominance; they are psychological attempts to restore an internal sense of coherence destroyed by past trauma. Violence becomes a way of asserting identity in the face of fragmentation.

Reenactment is another pattern that emerges from Herman and Widom’s framework; the return of trauma through behavior. Herman explains that trauma survivors often unconsciously seek to “repeat the past” in an effort to master it (Herman 54). This is evident in Amma’s crimes which mimic the systems of her mother’s emotional abuse, she isolates, punishes and controls girls who reflect the parts of herself she envies. Rosalind in *In the Woods* similarly reenacts emotional wounds within the killing she commits. Instead of healing, trauma reappears as replication which pulls the survivors into cycles that mirror the pain they endured once. What is striking in these both novels is that the criminals are not monstrous in the cultural sense. They are intelligent, smart, charming, socially functional and seemingly ordinary. Widom explains that many trauma-affected offenders display no outward signs of emotion until their behavior escalates, because trauma’s impact often stays hidden under socially acceptable masks (Widom 162). The girlish innocence of Amma, the genteel femininity of Adora and the outward normalcy of Rosalind illustrate this phenomenon. This external reflection helps to hide an internal world shaped by the pain, showing that violent behavior can originate in people whom society fails to

acknowledge as harmful because of their pain; and thus, their psychological instability has been invisibly contained for a very long period.

A significant insight from Herman and Widom that is very crucial to understand trauma-driven criminal formation is that trauma does not produce violence in isolated individuals; it requires and surrounds that reinforces emotional suppression, tolerates abuse and normalizes manipulation. Both in *Sharp Objects* and *In the Woods*, the families and societies surrounding the perpetrators serve as incubators for absurd coping mechanisms. Herman notes that traumatic family systems depend on denial, secrecy and distorted communication, creating conditions where the damage remains unspoken and is therefore expressed through behavior (Herman 58). Widom also similarly emphasizes that environments lacking pathological accountability increase likelihood of maladaptive development (Widom 162). The crimes in these books are therefore not individual pathology rather, it is systemic where it grows from the soil in which the characters were raised.

Eventually, *Sharp Objects* and *In the Woods* represent that criminal actions or behavior often is the final product of trauma that has been left unacknowledged. The criminals in these two narratives show how heavily unresolved childhood wounds can destroy identity, emotional functioning and moral understanding. Through Herman's insights into trauma's long-term psychological aftermaths and Widom's empirical research on victimization's developmental impacts, the books illustrate that violence is not a spontaneous disturbance but the predictable result of emotional dynamics made by control, fear and silencing. Trauma shapes the perpetrators not by luck but by distortion, forming identities that cannot integrate stability, moral empathy or connection. Their crimes reveal not internal evil but the extended smudge of environments that make them suffer long before the injured others.

Chapter 4.3

Trauma, Family Dynamics and the Formation of Psychological Dysfunction

Trauma is transmitted and structured through relationships, especially those formed within the family and it does not emerge in isolation. In *Sharp Objects* and *In the Woods*, the origins of psychological dysfunction are planted years before the crimes of the present narrative are disclosed. Both books express the family as merely not a background place but as the psychological blueprint from which identity, emotional regulation and behavior are generated. The family becomes the very site where trauma is absorbed, recreated, transmitted and mirrored across generations. By drawing on Judith Herman's work on traumatic family dynamics and Cathy Spatz Widom's research on how early victimization can shape later psychological vulnerability, this particular chapter argues that dysfunction demonstrated in each novel simply is not personal; it is systemic, amplifying from lineage of unresolved wounds, relational chaos and silent suffering. Being highly connected with previous two chapters, this chapter aims to examine the fact that environments of family of the characters produce the emotional tectonics from which both protagonists as well as investigators and perpetrators arise, representing that trauma is not an event but actually a relational pattern flown down through the intimate channels of family life.

In the novel *Sharp Objects*, the Crellin Family assimilates Herman's definition of a "traumatogenic family," one in which the household operates through control, secrecy, coercive caregiving and emotional repression rather than nurturing support. Herman asserts that trauma inflicted in the family is uncommonly damaging because it interrupts the child's earliest developmental tasks: forming secure attachment, understanding emotional safety and creating

stable internal representations of self and others (Herman 28-30). Adora's caregiving, characterized by medicalized abuse, conditional affection and manipulation, becomes the core force of shaping Camille and Amma's psychological landscapes. Her behavior represents what Herman classifies as "the use of caregiving to exert dominance," where the caregiver puts themselves as the sole moderator of safety and harm (Herman 70-72). This movement of maternal authority teaches the children that affection is a performance of dependency, silence and vulnerability. This results in a fragmented identity marked by self-harm and profound emotional instability for Camille. Herman explains that children raised in controlling and abusive families often internalize the belief that their worth is tied to their ability to endure suffering quietly (Herman 104). Camille's self-harm becomes the physical exposition of this internalized belief; her skin becomes the paper upon which decades of emotional invalidation are engraved. Her words are inscribed into her skin because they cannot be spoken loudly in a home where the emotional authenticity was punished and the truth was forbidden. The psychological dysfunction she bears into her adulthood is therefore not a corruption but the predictable aftermath of a surrounding where emotional suffering was normalized and personality was suppressed. Her inability to control emotional boundaries, her necessity returning to Wind Gap, and her fragmented sense of own identity all stem from the inner internalized family systems that shaped her from very childhood.

Amma's dysfunction, while separate, springs from the exact same root. Widom's research explores that children exposed to emotional manipulation, inconsistent caregiving, or psychological abuse often develop "distorted self-regulation systems," leading to volatile emotions, impulsivity, and identity confusion (Widom 164). Amma's dual personality; the obedient, needy child conflicted with the dominating, violent adolescent, is a direct reflection of

her mother's contradictory parenting. Amma is forced into childlike nature, her freedom stripped away by her mother's force on controlling her body by poison and emotional suffocation. Outside the home, Amma becomes the perpetrator of the same system: she controls her friends, even dominates them, seeks out situations where she can impose her wishes, and practices her learned power through psychological and bodily manipulation. Widom states that trauma does not always create passive victims; it often "replicates itself through learned patterns of dominance," especially in environments where they observe harm as a figure of relational currency (Widom 165-166). Amma recreates the emotional violence of home surroundings because it is the only relational language she has learned since childhood. Her performance of cruelty, jealousy and ultimately murder, are merely not her personal decisions rather, they are reenactments of the family's traumatic structure.

The mother, Adora's own psychological dysfunction cannot be different from this generational cycle. Although the novel barely reveals about her upbringing, her compulsive requirement to produce fragility in her daughters reflects Herman's insight that trauma survivors may not adopt caregiving roles "that reproduce the power dynamics of their own victimization" (Herman 105). Through her performance of maternal struggles, Adora manages control not only over her children's bodies but also over their emotional identities. She creates a family dynamic where her daughters' understanding of reality is distorted fundamentally, teaching them not to trust their internal experiences and depend on her for emotional truth. This kind of trauma, rooted in relational disorientation, is extremely destabilized. According to Herman, such environments produce children who "cannot distinguish danger from safety, or self from other," leading to lifelong hesitation, emotional volatility, and skeptical sense to reenacting trauma in

adulthood. (Herman 98). Adora thus represents a character who is both a victim and a perpetrator in a cycle of inherited dysfunction; a cycle that Camille and Amma continue in different ways.

In *In the Woods*, the dysfunction of family manifests no less destructively but more craftily. Rob's childhood trauma, marked by the disappearance of his two close friends and the subsequent emotional neglect by his parents, produces the foundation for his adult psychological instability. Herman states that when trauma occurs during childhood, "the effects are cumulative and pervasive," shaping personality, behavior, and emotional resilience (Herman 8-10). Rob Ryan's parents retreat into sorrow after the traumatic event, leaving him internally abandoned at the moment when he needed the security the most. This withdrawal teaches him that emotional sharing is dangerous and that his own needs to be suppressed for the stability of the people around him. And as an adult, he reflects this dynamic by suppressing his memories, relying on intellectual detachments and distancing himself emotionally from others as his fundamental coping mechanism. His inability to operate his emotions during the investigation, his unorganized mood shifts, and his self-sabotaging behavior all arise from a childhood where emotional requirements were left unfulfilled.

Research done by Widom does provide further insight into Rob Ryan's dysfunction and the fact how children who are exposed to trauma and emotional neglect often struggle with trust, self-concept and intimacy in adulthood (Widom 160). The relationships between Camille Preaker and Richard, later John, can be fallen under this. Also, the relationship between Rob and Cassie demonstrates this. Camille and Rob Ryan both reflect the immense inconsistency which they experienced in their childhood while pulsating between deep dependency and sudden emotional withdrawal. This style of dysfunctional attachment affects not only their relationships but their work; the entire investigation, since their emotional fluidity covers their rational thinking on

judgement and prevents them from understanding the evidence objectivity. The incapability of their family to acknowledge or give validation to their trauma produces a fragmented-self, an internal void that they bear into the very adulthood. This fluidity becomes the inner force that later shapes the characters' failure as an investigator. Those are not just occupational faults but the outpouring of their emotional disorientation and childhood abandonment.

In *In the Woods*, Rosalind's family and the community members in Knocknaree also represent how dysfunction can shape behavior. The Devlin family as well as the parents in Knocknaree raise their children in an environment which is marked by political restlessness, secrecy and emotional suppression. Herman's insight of the "conspiracy of silence" in traumatized communities describes this system: traumatic truths are ignored, minimized, or declined, creating a collective psychological dysfunction (Herman 9-10). The town's and Rosalind Devlin's political and religious parents' refusal to recognize the past harms, corruption around the archeological site and the disappearance of the children, reflects the dysfunctional families who use to bury painful reality rather than face them. Children who are grown up in such environments learn that their pathological experiences are irrational and invalid, that their fear cannot be demonstrated, and that their pain would not be recognized. Widom's findings illustrate that these environments foster heightened vulnerability to anxiety, aggression and emotional dysregulation (Widom 165). This is how the criminal attitude that is produced from Knocknaree is not personal; it is woven into the fabric of the family and community's collective dysfunction.

Both *Sharp Objects* and *In the Woods* illustrate that trauma does not just simply destroy individuals rather, it shapes family dynamics and social surroundings creating the conditions where psychological instability becomes the norm rather than the exception. In *Sharp Objects*

Crellin home and in *In the Woods* the Devlin home both are a closed system of emotional harm as well as neglect where roles are rigid, feelings are manipulated and the personality is suppressed. Herman explains that children raised in such systems often internalize distorted beliefs about themselves and their emotional needs, leading to fragmentation of identity and difficulty forming stable relationships in adulthood (Herman 61-63). Rob Ryan and Camille embody this fragmentation through self-punishment while Amma and Rosalind express it through aggression and later committing crime. In both novels, the dysfunction becomes a legacy which transforms the innocent children into pathologically drained and damaged adults, some of whom later become criminals and others become investigators who even cannot escape the shadow of their very own pasts.

Lastly, both *Sharp Objects* and *In the Woods* disclose that the family is the first and foremost place of psychological construction as well as the destruction. Trauma imposed in the family becomes the blueprint for how the characters can relate to themselves with others, shaping their pathological resilience or vulnerability to later harm. Herman and Widom's combined insights help to understand that the novels demonstrate that psychological dysfunction rises merely not from traumatic events, but from the pathological ecosystems where those circumstances occur. Trauma greatly becomes a force that structures identity or personality, distorts moral thinking and shapes attitude across generations. Whether a person becomes a criminal, a victim or a damages investigator depends simply not on the trauma itself but on how the family environment responds to it, whether with suppression, denial, manipulation or emotional neglect. In these narratives, the childhood's legacy, shaping their destiny long before the crimes unfold, lives not behind the characters but within them.

Chapter 05

Conclusion

To conclude, through a psychological lens, this paper has explored *Sharp Objects* and *In the Woods* to examine how unresolved trauma influences in both shaping criminal behavior and the process of investigation. By applying Widom's cycle of violence framework alongside Herman's theory on trauma, the research has shown that childhood trauma as well as multigenerational trauma operate as a central force that governs memory, agency and perception and not as a secondary narrative detail within both novels. The analysis discloses that violence in these novels cannot be acknowledged in isolation from early life, as it repeatedly emerges from sustained psychological wounds rooted in dysfunctional environments.

This thesis has also shown the way trauma profoundly disrupts the role of investigator through close textual analysis, challenging the conventional assumption of objectivity within this kind of fiction. In *Sharp Objects* the protagonist Camille's role as a journalist is inseparable from her personal history and abuse, self-harm and neglect, presenting both her observer and participant within the traumatic landscape she seeks to document. Similarly, in *In the Woods* the protagonist Rob Ryan's inability to integrate his past destabilizes his authority as a detective, leading to damaged judgement, narrative unreliability and emotional hesitation. These findings suggest that investigation can become a site of psychological confrontation, where undermining the promise of rational resolution, the past repeatedly intrudes upon the present.

This paper further shows that in both novels, the criminal behavior is internally formed by trauma which is sustained within the family structure. Rather than representing the criminals as inherently deviant, these novels manifest crime as the highest stage of trauma, where damage

is recreated across generations. Analysis of this paper highlights how silence, control and manipulation in relationships can contribute to producing fragmented identity.

While this thesis is based on literary analysis, its findings extend beyond the range of these novels examined. This study offers a model to analyze contemporary crime fiction that shifts beyond aesthetic thoughts and genre traditions by integrating criminological psychology and trauma theory. It also suggests that trauma-related readings can deepen critical acknowledgement of crime narratives by disclosing how truth and resolution are left-aside when psychological injuries remain unrecognized. Furthermore, this study contributes to existing discussions about the moral reflection of crime by highlighting the need of understanding trauma as a structural strength rather than just a narrative device.

Ultimately, this paper validates that *Sharp Objects* and *In the Woods* challenge the base of conventional crime fiction by revealing how the past continually bleeds into the present. The research depicts that crime is merely not punished or solved but psychologically inherited by placing investigators, criminals and family dynamics within the same traumatic framework. By doing so, this thesis offers a more humanized and thorough approach to literature that confronts memory, violence and responsibility, finding trauma as a main lens through which contemporary crime fictions can be acknowledged.

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