

On the Trauma Narrative of Ishmael Chambers in *Snow Falling on Cedars*

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Abstract

Employing Cathy Caruth's trauma theory as its framework, this paper analyzes how the traumatic narrative of Ishmael Chambers in *Snow Falling on Cedars* embodies belatedness, unspeakability, and transmission. The study finds that Ishmael's trauma consistently resists integration into linear narrative, externalizing instead through literary forms such as bodily memory, narrative disruption, and repetitive imagery. The paper argues that, through the text's handling of time, the body, and the ethics of passing on what cannot be spoken, the novel constructs a symbolic space for the transmission of Ishmael's traumatic memory.

Keywords

Snow Falling on Cedars; trauma; belatedness; unspeakability; transmission.

1. Introduction

David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1994) is set on San Piedro Island in the Pacific Northwest. The narrator, Ishmael Chambers, runs the island's newspaper. He lost his left arm at Tarawa, his father while he was overseas and his first love, Hatsue Imada, when her Japanese American family was sent to Manzanar. In the winter of 1954, the observer on the murder trial of Hatsue's husband, Kabuo Miyamoto, forces him back into all three losses. He stumbles upon a coast guard log that could clear Kabuo, and for a full day he sits on it, caught between resentment and the weight of what he knows. Torn between evidence and emotion, he ultimately chooses to reveal the truth as an act of redemption and reconciliation.

2. Theoretical Basis

First, in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), Caruth argues that trauma is not fully registered when it occurs. It returns afterward, often against the person's will, as flashbacks or bodily symptoms. She borrows Freud's term "Nachträglichkeit"—belatedness—to name this pattern. The event, she writes, "is not experienced in any normal way at the time of its occurrence; it is only later, in its repeated return, that it becomes available to consciousness" (Caruth, 1996: 17). In the novel, this means the past does not stay in the past; it cuts into the trial scenes without warning. Second, because the experience overwhelms the person's defenses at the moment of impact, it gets stored in the body and bypasses the part of the mind that turns events into stories. Caruth calls this unspeakability—not the absence of representation, but the need for other kinds of representation beyond ordinary speech (Caruth, 1996). Ishmael's phantom limb, his sweating, his inability to write are not just symptoms; they become the novel's alternative language.

Third, transmission describes how trauma passes between people. Caruth develops it through Odysseus's weeping when he hears his own story told back to him: the listener takes in another's wound and, in doing so, establishes both a connection and a burden (Caruth, 1996).

Transmission means that trauma is not a closed loop; it can move, and it can carry an ethical demand.

Fourth, these three features feed into traumatic narrative itself. Caruth defines traumatic narrative as a delayed, fragmented, involuntary discourse that repeats and bears witness to an event that cannot be fully grasped at the time of its occurrence (Caruth, 1996). In other words, the way the story is told—its breaks, its silences, its refusal of linear resolution—is not a stylistic overlay but part of what the story means. The novel's form carries the wound. These four dimensions structure the analysis that follows.

3. The Reverberation of Belatedness

The central paradox of trauma lies in its temporal dislocation—events do not fully experience at their occurrence but return belatedly through flashbacks and narrative ruptures.

Guterson's narrative strategy profoundly resonates with this structure of belatedness. Mimicking the atemporality of traumatic memory, the novel's thirty-two chapters unfold in a spiral pattern rather than linear chronology: the present of the trial (December 1954) serves as the narrative axis, yet it is repeatedly interrupted by intrusions from 1942 (the war, first love), 1945 (postwar return), and September 1954 (the murder). Sitting in the court, Ishmael's trauma—his loss of left arm in the Battle of Tarawa, his father's death in 1944 and the ending of the love affair with Hatsue—returns to him throughout the trial, triggered by sensory details in the courtroom. The courtroom itself becomes a site of intrusion thereby—the prosecuting attorney's rhetoric linking Kabuo to Japanese military brutality sets off Ishmael's phantom limb pain. Moreover, the snow outside the windows triggers a memory of Tarawa's beaches:

The reckless water, the frenzied wind, the snow, the downed trees, the boats dashed against their sunken docks—it was harsh and beautiful and disorderly. He was reminded for a moment of Tarawa atoll and its seawall and the palms that lay in rows on their side, knocked down by the compression from the naval guns. (Guterson, 1994: 376)

The courtroom's incursions thus do more than summon discrete memories—they reactivate belatedness as a persistent psychic condition, which in turn shapes how the narrative approaches the war's central wound. The fresh snowfall seems to restart Ishmael's battle memory, turning belatedness from a single event into a continuous condition. In the following, the pre-combat hours are described in detail: Ishmael talking with fellow Marine Ernest Testaverde, writing and tearing up a letter to Hatsue, drinking from his canteen. Then the landing order comes: "All marines lay topside to your debarkation stations!" (Guterson, 1994: 208). And the scene breaks off. The loss of his arm—the core for this story—is never narrated directly. It remains a gap. The text gives readers only the before and the after. Caruth would call this the "core event" of trauma, the moment that bypassed conscious registration and can only return later through symptoms.

Those symptoms center on the body. In the cold courtroom, Ishmael's missing arm hurts: "the stump of his amputated arm throbbed, or more precisely it was as if the arm were there again but half-numb, a phantom limb" (Guterson, 1994: 310). He grabs the empty sleeve with his right hand. The pain is not a metaphor but the body's way of carrying what the mind cannot narrate—what Ramachandran and Blakeslee (1998) describe as a somatosensory trace recoded by pain memory and what Caruth reads as "absent presence," a memory that is simultaneously lost and persistently felt.

Involuntary memory also breaks into the narrative without transitional markers. After the text describes the accused man watching snow through the courthouse windows, it slides directly into a recollection of Arthur: "His father, Arthur, had been a logger at Ishmael's age. Wearing a handlebar mustache and calf-high caulk boots, frayed suspenders and woolen long johns, he'd

labored in the service of the Port Jefferson Mill Company for four and a half years" (Guterson, 1994: 27). This free indirect discourse slips into Ishmael's consciousness without announcement. The father's death and Ishmael's war trauma become linked through emotional intensity, forming a cluster of associations that bypass deliberate recall: Arthur Chambers died in 1944 while Ishmael remained in the Pacific. "Ishmael went back to San Pedro for the funeral and to tie up his father's business affairs; he stayed to run his father's paper" (Guterson, 1994:312). His father had left him during the war. This blocked mourning causes the father's spectral return—Ishmael dreams of Arthur at the printing press, sleeves rolled to the elbows, as if death never occurred (Guterson, 1994).

This pattern of uncompleted mourning extends beyond Arthur Chambers to Ishmael's relationship with Hatsue. The separation from Hatsue similarly exhibits belated structure. In March 1942, Hatsue was evacuated to Manzanar, following the forced removal of Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor. Ishmael and Hatsue met one last time in the cedar tree and agreed to exchange letters under false names to keep their bond alive. But when Ishmael tried to become physically intimate with her, Hatsue pushed him away, realizing with absolute clarity that everything about them was "wrong"—but Ishmael entirely failed to grasp that this rejection signified an ending. However, this ending was never fully experienced: Ishmael refused Hatsue's separation letter in April 1942, instead, in the weeks that followed, he continued writing to false addresses, maintaining the relationship in imagination. In other words, his refusal of the letter and his continued writing were the same gesture—a ritual of denial that kept the loss at bay by preserving the posture of a relationship whose actual termination he could not accept. Only upon discovering Hatsue's marriage to Kabuo Miyamoto was this trauma experienced belatedly. Rather than depicting Ishmael's direct reaction, the novel presents his response indirectly through Hatsue's perspective—she recalls seeing him at the dock upon her return from Manzanar and later learns from others of his withdrawn, embittered existence.

Ishmael's fixation upon Hatsue and his mourning for the father become entangled through waiting: waiting for the father's return from death through dreams, waiting for Hatsue's return from marriage through fantasy. This fixation is trauma's temporal predicament—the past never becomes past, consequently the future cannot begin. Through Ishmael attempted to transform his physical disabilities and the emotional void into a manipulable, repeatable form of work through his father's printing press, so as to substitute the mourning of his major traumas of losing his left arm and losing Hatsue, he fails — the printing press can neither help him reconstruct the complete self-shattered by war nor recover the love taken away by history and racial division; instead, it traps him in a stagnant state of repetitive control over the past. For twelve postwar years, Ishmael cathects emotional energy upon these deferred objects, establishing no new intimate relationships.

Until the novel's conclusion, Ishmael remains trapped in repetition compulsion: annual visits to the cedar tree, unsendable letters, inability to concentrate during trial. This unclaimed experience constitutes the traumatic subject's condition—not absence of memory but rupture between memory and cognition; not forgetting but the past's intrusive return (Caruth, 1996). This double belatedness—the belatedness of war and of love, the belatedness of bodily loss and of emotional loss—constitutes the novel's central tension and establishes the foundation for the transmission of trauma.

4. Unspeakable Narrative

Cathy Caruth argues that traumatic experience cannot be captured by ordinary language because it occurs before cognitive integration—stimulus impacts the nervous system before the subject establishes defense mechanisms. This prematurity results in traumatic memory

being stored in sensory-somatic form rather than narrative-symbolic form: it returns as intrusion, not as recollection (Caruth, 1996). Ishmael Chambers's condition manifests this unspeakability most dramatically through silence and aphasia, through the failure of his professional discourse, and ultimately through the body's substitution for failed language.

Ishmael's professional identity as a journalist—predicated upon recording, reporting, and witnessing—stands in sharp contradiction with his traumatic symptoms. The novel systematically presents his “inability to write”(Guterson, 1994:404): on the first day of the trial, “he found himself unable to write anything”; his notebook remains blank, “only meaningless scribbles”(Guterson, 1994:399); This paralysis of expressive capacity, rather than merely a symptom, forms a stark contrast with his professional role as a writer. He attempts to compose reports on the trial, but his mind refuses to arrange words into sentences. Ishmael's journalistic training—objectivity, clarity, narrative coherence—precisely conflicts with trauma's non-objectivity, chaos, and fragmentation. This language failure must be understood through his trauma. Caruth emphasizes that traumatic experience occurs pre-symbolically, therefore resisting direct linguistic capture (Caruth,1996). His inability to write is not skill deficiency but the manifestation of incommensurability between symbolic system and traumatic real.

More symptomatic is Ishmael's aphasia. In court, when Sheriff Art Moran reveals case details, Ishmael finds himself “unable to form questions” (Guterson, 1994:35); when attempting to speak with Hatsue, he just repeats “Don't be like this” (Guterson, 1994:5), instead of articulating complex emotion. This aphasia indicates that traumatic memory is stored in the body-sensory system rather than the language-symbolic system, therefore inaccessible through verbal extraction (Van der Kolk and van der Hart, 1995). The silence here is not chosen absence but compelled failure: language as medium collapses under the pressure of traumatic excess.

When Ishmael fails to articulate his traumatic experience through verbal language, the body becomes alternative medium for traumatic expression. His phantom limb pain is not merely medical symptom but carries unspoken traumatic memory. In the novel, phantom pain possesses narrative function: it marks moments of traumatic return, interrupting linear narration. Whenever Ishmael attempts normal functioning—as journalist covering the trial, as citizen participating in community life—phantom pain emerges as traumatic punctuation, reminding him of his estrangement from the normal world. His manner of handling the phantom—“pinned-up sleeve” (Guterson, 1994:26)—constitutes a variant of self-embrace: he attempts to comfort the no-longer-existent limb, this gesture metaphorizing his attachment to lost love. Caruth stresses that trauma's unspeakability does not equal unrepresentability; rather, it demands development of alternative representational modes (Caruth, 1996). Ishmael's body becomes precisely such a mode: phantom pain as unspeakable speech, encoding the double loss of war and love through pain's grammar.

This bodily narrative operates beyond conscious intention, producing meaning through symptom rather than sign. Guterson's narrative strategy reinforces this bodily turn: when Ishmael's words fail, the text shifts to physical description—the sweat on his forehead, the trembling of his hand, the involuntary grasping of the empty sleeve. These somatic details carry what dialogue cannot bear. The body thus becomes not metaphor but metonymy—not a substitute for language but its necessary supplement, the material ground upon which all signification rests and which trauma forces into visibility.

This unspeakability has profound implications for witnessing. Ishmael cannot testify to his own trauma through words; yet his body testifies despite him, involuntarily, repeatedly. The phantom pain's return during the trial—precisely when he should be observing, recording, narrating—marks the body's refusal to be silenced, its insistence upon being heard even when language fails. This is not the talking cure of psychoanalysis but its inverse: a cure that cannot talk, that must find other modes of transmission. The novel suggests that trauma demands not interpretation but bearing witness to the failure of interpretation, not speech but attention to

what speech cannot capture. In this sense, Ishmael's aphasia and somatic symptoms constitute not merely individual pathology but the structural condition of traumatic experience itself—its resistance to integration, its persistence beyond narrative, its demand for forms of recognition that exceed ordinary understanding.

5. The Transmission and Witnessing of Trauma

The belatedness and unspeakability of trauma do not imply its incommunicability. On the contrary, while trauma resists symbolization, it simultaneously demands transmission—this paradox constitutes its fundamental structure: the very unspeakability necessitates witnessing. The most productive concept in Cathy Caruth's theory is precisely the transmission of trauma—traumatic history can be transmitted between subjects through unexpected discovery, a transmission possessing duality: it is both connection and contagion; both the establishment of relation and the assumption of deeper suffering and responsibility (Caruth, 1996).

Ishmael Chambers's transformation from being trapped in self-trauma to bearing historical witness fully demonstrates this mechanism: the unexpected discovery of the lighthouse log breaks his compulsive repetition, while his final testimony transforms individual pain into public memory. In this context, historical witnessing is the act by which private suffering becomes legible to others and enters the collective record—it is the point where trauma ceases to be merely an individual affliction and becomes a shared historical events.

For twelve years after the war, Ishmael lives inside a set of repetitions: the cedar tree, the unsent letters, the blank notebook. Each repetition is simultaneously an attempt to access the inaccessible past and a defense against truly encountering it. Repetition allows him to remain a man in waiting rather than a man who must learn to live with what is. The loop finally breaks by an accident. While organizing his late father's belongings at the lighthouse, Ishmael accidentally comes across the shipping log that contains records for September 15 and 16 of 1954, revealing that a large ship passed through the channel on the night of Carl Heine's death, creating a wake that could have caused his boat to capsize—thereby exonerating Kabuo Miyamoto. This crucial evidence breaks his cycle of compulsive repetition and shifting his attention from his own trauma to the other's trauma. Yet the discovery itself is not yet historical witnessing—it is merely the condition for it. Witnessing requires an additional act: the conscious decision to transmit what has been found to a public forum, transforming private knowledge into shared historical record.

Ishmael's first reaction to the discovery is denial and escape, attempting to forget this finding. This reaction reveals the paradox of traumatic transmission: it demands that the subject bear the other's pain, but the subject may refuse this demand. Ishmael's concealment lasts for days; only at the novel's conclusion does he choose to testify—this delay marks not moral failure but the unintegrability of trauma: he cannot bear the other's pain when he has not yet claimed his own. The lighthouse log as material evidence precedes subjective will, forcibly presenting historical violence before him, breaking the protective shell of his self-enclosure. The delay also reveals that historical witnessing is not a natural or automatic outcome of exposure to another's suffering; it is a difficult ethical achievement that requires the witness to first acknowledge his own woundedness before he can speak for another's.

Nevertheless, testimony is not a resolution or cure of trauma, but an acknowledgment of its unresolvability and a transmission of the unspeakable into public memory while preserving its fundamental rupture. Ishmael's statement in court—submitting the lighthouse log as evidence—is not a heroic act, but a historical witnessing: though he does not understand Kabuo Miyamoto's trauma, he acknowledges the reality of this trauma and transmits it to the legal system and historical record. Historical witnessing here denotes the act of testimony that converts private suffering into public memory—the moment when individual pain ceases to be

merely personal and becomes part of collective historical consciousness. This transformation is the final form trauma takes in the novel: not its healing, but its elevation to historical events. Ishmael's testimony does not resolve his trauma; rather, it repositions his wound within a larger historical field, so that his own loss now stands alongside the historical violence inflicted upon Japanese Americans, and both become visible together.

Most chapters in the novel strictly limit themselves to Ishmael's perspective, but in the testimony scene, the narration suddenly shifts to omniscient perspective, presenting the reactions of judge, jury and Hatsue. This shift of narrative voice marks Ishmael's emergence from the enclosure of the traumatic subject into the public space of historical witnessing. Yet this transgression is limited: the novel refuses to provide Ishmael's psychological activity during testimony; readers can only observe his behavior from the outside. This narrative reserve respects the unrepresentability of trauma—even when Ishmael chooses to testify, his subjective experience remains impenetrable, and transmission itself becomes the meaning.

In the novel, most chapters present an open structure, emphasizing the continuity rather than finality of traumatic transmission. Kabuo Miyamoto is acquitted, but the historical trauma of Japanese Americans is not thereby resolved; Ishmael submits the evidence, but his phantom limb pain as unclaimed experience persists. Though Ishmael's testimony thing is accompanied by the transgression of narrative perspective. Ishmael's transmission does not bring cure for personal trauma, but transforms it into the form of historical witnessing. He will continue to carry phantom limb pain, war memory, and the grief of lost love, but these memories are now connected with the other's trauma. This connection is not integration—trauma is not woven into coherent life narrative—but juxtaposition: different traumatic memories coexist, illuminate each other, but maintain their respective heterogeneity. In this open structure, historical witnessing does not promise closure. Rather, it establishes a permanent ethical relation between self and other, past and present, private pain and public memory. The witness remains wounded, but his wound now speaks not only for himself but for a history that demands acknowledgment.

Through this open structure, Guterson demonstrates: the value of traumatic transmission lies not in resolving trauma, but in transforming individual pain into historical witness, making repressed historical violence enter public memory. Ishmael walks out of the courtroom, alone through the snow—this gesture marks the transformation from being trapped in the past to bearing historical responsibility. The novel refuses illusion of redemption. Snow continues falling, covering everything, both purifying and concealing; phantom limb pain will continue its attacks, as the body's stubborn memory of history. This state of non-cure is precisely the ethical dimension of traumatic transmission—not curing through understanding, but bearing through witnessing; not eliminating pain, but making pain visible, transmissible, part of collective memory. Historical witnessing is the final articulation of trauma in the novel: a wounded man, unable to heal himself, nonetheless makes his wound speak for a larger history. The value of this narrative technique appears here: it is not the site of trauma's resolution, but the space of trauma's transmission, providing representational possibility for the unspeakable, opening channels from individual pain to historical understanding.

6. Conclusion

This essay has analyzed the belatedness, unspeakability, and transmission of Ishmael Chambers's trauma narrative, revealing how Guterson externalizes traumatic experience through formal strategies. This formalized presentation operates on three dimensions: in purpose, it resists the integrative violence of linear narrative, safeguarding trauma's heterogeneity and compelling readers to experience cognitive rupture and suspended meaning; in significance, it constructs an alternative public sphere where bodily narrative, imagistic

systems, and nonlinear structures render repressed wartime and racial violence visible without simplifying its complexity; in function, it summons reader's ethical response to wartime and racial violence—acknowledging the limits of understanding becomes the starting point for respecting otherness.

The novel refuses the closed loop of trauma-telling-cure, guarding trauma's unresolvability through its open ending. In an era of proliferating trauma culture, this narrative technique reminds readers: the act of witnessing must persist even if cure never arrives; the gesture of acknowledgment remains indispensable even if full understanding remains impossible.

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