



Literature, Trauma and Fantasy: Constructing a Psychological Hierarchy of Suffering

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Abstract

This study explores how contemporary literature constructs a psychological hierarchy of suffering by positioning major trauma as more significant than minor emotional discomfort. Experiences such as war, systemic violence, political oppression, displacement, and terminal illness are frequently represented as psychologically overwhelming and narratively central, whereas everyday emotional states like loneliness, insecurity, jealousy, romantic confusion, and social anxiety are often softened through imagination, fantasy, or emotional distancing. Through a comparative analysis of *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins and *A Monster Calls* by Patrick Ness, together with broader developments in contemporary literary writing, this research argues that literature does not simply mirror suffering but actively organizes it into levels of seriousness and legitimacy.

Drawing on trauma theory and psychological understandings of imagination as a coping mechanism, the paper demonstrates that fantasy primarily operates as a strategy



for managing minor emotional discomfort, while trauma resists containment and demands confrontation, acknowledgement, and meaning-making (Caruth 4; Herman 1).

Ultimately, the study reveals that literary narratives shape cultural perception by ranking certain forms of suffering as morally central while rendering others emotionally negotiable.

Keywords: Trauma, Fantasy, Minor Emotional Discomfort, Hierarchy of Suffering, Psychological Coping, Contemporary Literature, Narrative Representation, Literary Psychology.

Introduction

Human existence is inseparable from experiences of suffering, and literature has long served as one of the most profound mediums through which pain, loss, instability, and longing are explored. Across historical periods—from classical epics to modern psychological fiction—narratives are frequently structured around moments of rupture that disrupt emotional continuity and social order. However, a closer examination of literary representation reveals that not all forms of suffering receive equal narrative importance.

Major traumatic experiences, including war, political violence, slavery, genocide, systemic oppression, displacement, and irreversible personal loss, often occupy the



structural core of literary narratives. These events are portrayed as transformative, identity-altering, and morally significant. They shape character psychology, determine thematic depth, and demand ethical engagement from readers. Trauma thus becomes the central axis around which narrative meaning is organized (Caruth 4).

In contrast, minor emotional discomforts such as loneliness, jealousy, insecurity, romantic dissatisfaction, professional frustration, and quiet emotional uncertainty rarely receive comparable narrative gravity. Although present, these experiences are frequently aestheticized, softened, or redirected into imagination and symbolic reflection. Rather than destabilizing the narrative world, they function as emotional undercurrents that coexist with larger conflicts.

This research argues that literature constructs a psychological hierarchy of suffering in which catastrophic trauma is elevated as monumental, while everyday emotional distress is rendered manageable through imaginative transformation. Such a hierarchy reflects both psychological processes and cultural assumptions regarding what constitutes “serious” pain. By examining selected contemporary texts, particularly *The Hunger Games* and *A Monster Calls*, this study investigates how literature organizes suffering and why certain experiences are granted greater narrative authority than others.

Theoretical Framework: Trauma and Psychological Representation

In psychological discourse, trauma refers to experiences that exceed an



individual's ability to cope, producing enduring disruptions in memory, identity, and emotional regulation. Unlike ordinary sadness or disappointment, trauma fractures perception and often returns involuntarily through intrusive memories and emotional disturbances. As a result, trauma destabilizes the internal coherence of the self and challenges an individual's capacity to construct a continuous personal narrative (Caruth 4).

Within literary studies, trauma theory emphasizes that catastrophic experiences resist straightforward representation. Because trauma interrupts internal continuity, narrative becomes a means of reconstructing order by transforming chaotic experience into meaning. Literature therefore functions as a space in which unbearable experiences can be processed symbolically. Trauma narratives carry moral seriousness because they demand recognition, ethical engagement, and witness from readers. They confront audiences with suffering that cannot be trivialized or easily resolved.

By contrast, minor emotional discomfort does not shatter identity. It produces tension and unease but does not overwhelm psychological functioning. Individuals remain capable of continuing everyday life despite emotional dissatisfaction. This difference in intensity between trauma and discomfort becomes central to understanding literature's hierarchical organization of suffering. Trauma destabilizes narrative structure itself, whereas discomfort operates within it.



Understanding Minor Emotional Discomfort

Minor emotional discomfort includes experiences such as loneliness, romantic uncertainty, jealousy, insecurity, dissatisfaction, and social anxiety. These emotional states are persistent yet not catastrophic. They do not threaten survival or identity stability, but they create ongoing internal unease. Psychologically, discomfort often emerges from a misalignment between desire and reality—between expectations and outcomes, or between self-image and social perception.

Unlike trauma, discomfort develops gradually. It lacks dramatic visibility and often remains socially unnoticed. Because individuals continue functioning despite these feelings, minor discomfort rarely demands urgent recognition or intervention. Literature frequently transforms such experiences through aestheticization. Romantic longing becomes poetic reflection, dissatisfaction becomes introspective depth, and emotional insecurity becomes narrative complexity.

This aesthetic transformation suggests that literature treats discomfort as narratively useful but not narratively central. Rather than confronting it as a moral crisis, literary narratives often redirect discomfort into imagination, symbolism, or reflective interiority. Consequently, minor emotional unease becomes an emotional undercurrent rather than a structural force within narrative architecture.

Systemic Trauma in *The Hunger Games*



In *The Hunger Games*, trauma operates at an institutional and systemic level. The dystopian nation of Panem transforms violence into a public spectacle, converting survival into performance and death into entertainment. The annual games function as mechanisms of psychological domination designed to reinforce political authority and maintain social control. Violence is therefore not accidental but structurally embedded within the social order.

Katniss Everdeen's psychological subjectivity develops within this environment of cumulative trauma. The loss of her father, chronic hunger, economic deprivation, and the constant threat of state violence produce emotional guardedness and hyper-vigilance. Trauma shapes her worldview, emotional responses, and survival instincts. The spectacle of violence defines the narrative universe and establishes the moral seriousness of the text (Collins).

Within this traumatic framework, the romantic ambiguity between Katniss, Peeta, and Gale represents a form of minor emotional discomfort. Katniss's uncertainty about her emotions is deeply entangled with survival strategy.

"I haven't even begun to separate out my feelings about Peeta. It's too tangled up with my own survival instincts." (Collins 261–62).

Expressions of affection are frequently performative, shaped by the expectations of the Capitol audience rather than by authentic emotional clarity. Love becomes a staged



performance rather than a purely personal experience. Emotional confusion is absorbed into spectacle and illusion.

"Remember, we're madly in love, so it's all right to kiss me anytime you feel like it."
(Collins 135).

Political trauma consistently overshadows romantic uncertainty. The narrative prioritizes systemic oppression, rebellion, and survival over emotional resolution. Consequently, the novel clearly illustrates the hierarchy of suffering: institutional violence dominates narrative attention, while romantic unease remains secondary and negotiable.

Personal Trauma in *A Monster Calls*

In *A Monster Calls*, trauma emerges in an intimate and personal form rather than through political structures. The impending death of Conor's mother creates anticipatory grief that profoundly destabilizes his psychological state. His recurring nightmare symbolizes suppressed fear, guilt, and emotional conflict, demonstrating how trauma intrudes into consciousness and shapes emotional isolation and anger (Ness).

"You think I want to go with you? To see your stories? You think I want to know what's in my own head? I don't want to know!" (Ness 28).

Although Conor experiences bullying, loneliness, and social alienation, these forms of discomfort remain subordinate to the central trauma of illness. They intensify



his emotional burden but do not define the narrative's primary focus. The mother's illness remains psychologically monumental, structuring both the emotional atmosphere and narrative progression.

Fantasy enters the narrative through the figure of the Monster, which functions as a symbolic projection of Conor's internal struggle. Through storytelling, Conor gradually confronts suppressed truths and articulates emotions that he cannot otherwise express. In this context, fantasy does not operate as escape but as mediated confrontation. It creates a protective psychological space in which overwhelming emotions can be processed without direct collapse.

"Stories don't always have to spell out the morals... Sometimes a story is just a story." (Ness 108).

Thus, both *The Hunger Games* and *A Monster Calls* demonstrate that trauma commands narrative authority even when fantasy elements are present. Fantasy may assist emotional processing, but it does not displace trauma's centrality.

Fantasy and Imagination as Coping Mechanisms

Fantasy operates as a psychological mediator between emotional discomfort and lived reality because it creates an intermediate mental space in which tension can be processed without direct confrontation. When individuals experience dissatisfaction—whether through insecurity, romantic uncertainty, or emotional confusion—the mind



often turns toward imagination as a compensatory mechanism. Through symbolic construction, fantasy provides temporary fulfilment of unmet desires and reduces internal distress. It does not eliminate discomfort but reshapes it into a more manageable form. Imagination therefore functions simultaneously as protection and transformation, allowing emotional relief while maintaining distance from painful reality.

In *The Hunger Games*, fantasy appears through romantic performance and narrative construction. Katniss and Peeta's relationship is staged for survival, blurring the boundary between authentic emotion and calculated display. The performance of love becomes a strategic illusion designed to influence public perception. Within this context, fantasy regulates personal discomfort by converting emotional ambiguity into spectacle. Katniss avoids directly confronting her feelings by embedding them within the role she must perform. Imagination becomes intertwined with political strategy, demonstrating how fantasy can displace vulnerability without resolving it (Collins).

In *A Monster Calls*, fantasy takes the form of therapeutic storytelling. The Monster's visits provide Conor with a symbolic framework through which he can approach painful truths indirectly. Rather than denying trauma, fantasy creates a safe psychological space for emotional articulation. The stories told by the Monster dismantle simplistic moral binaries and compel Conor to confront his guilt and fear. Here, imagination functions not as escape but as mediation, bridging the gap between overwhelming reality and emotional comprehension (Ness).



However, fantasy primarily regulates minor emotional discomfort rather than catastrophic trauma. Trauma resists aesthetic softening because it destabilizes identity and demands acknowledgement. While imagination may delay confrontation, it cannot permanently contain overwhelming loss or systemic violence. Trauma insists upon narrative seriousness, shaping plot, tone, and character development in ways that cannot easily be displaced. Literature therefore distinguishes between the imaginative handling of everyday distress and the ethical engagement required by catastrophic suffering.

Fantasy may cushion dissatisfaction, but trauma restructures narrative reality itself. Through this distinction, literature reinforces its hierarchy of suffering, granting imaginative flexibility to minor unease while reserving moral gravity for profound rupture.

Three Psychological Outcomes of Minor Emotional Discomfort

Minor emotional discomfort, although less intense than trauma, generates internal tension that requires psychological response. Literary narratives frequently represent three major outcomes through which individuals manage such discomfort: transformative growth, emotional decline, and imaginative retreat. These responses illustrate the fundamental difference between discomfort and trauma in narrative treatment.

The first outcome involves positive transformation. When characters confront dissatisfaction through reflection and emotional engagement, discomfort becomes a



catalyst for maturity and self-awareness. Through introspection and acceptance, individuals develop deeper psychological insight. In *A Monster Calls*, Conor's emotional unease gradually contributes to his acceptance of grief. His discomfort does not disappear but evolves into understanding. Literature often presents this trajectory as growth through confrontation, where emotional tension produces development rather than avoidance (Ness).

"You know that it's true... You know that you want it to be true... You want it to be over." (Ness 174)

The second outcome involves negative emotional decline. When discomfort is repeatedly suppressed or ignored, it may accumulate into withdrawal, emotional stagnation, and altered self-perception. Small insecurities and disappointments gradually reshape an individual's sense of identity and trust. In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss's unresolved emotional ambiguity contributes to her guardedness and reluctance to embrace vulnerability. Literature frequently portrays such decline not as dramatic collapse but as quiet detachment, where individuals continue functioning outwardly while withdrawing internally (Collins).

"I feel like I owe Peeta something, and I don't know what... I'm afraid I might cry." (Collins 135).

The third outcome is imaginative or fantastical retreat. Instead of confronting or succumbing to discomfort, individuals redirect emotional tension into fantasy.



Imagination becomes a symbolic resolution to dissatisfaction. In *The Hunger Games*, romantic performance allows Katniss to manage emotional ambiguity without fully resolving it. In *A Monster Calls*, fantasy provides Conor with a structured environment to process emotional truth. Literature often privileges this outcome because imagination preserves emotional complexity while avoiding definitive closure.

Together, these responses reinforce the hierarchy of suffering. Trauma demands confrontation and structural transformation, whereas discomfort permits flexibility. Through growth, decline, or fantasy, minor distress remains narratively negotiable, confirming literature's tendency to assign greater seriousness to catastrophic trauma.

Contemporary Literature and the Centrality of Trauma

Contemporary fiction demonstrates an increasing concern with psychological depth, particularly through sustained engagement with trauma, memory, and emotional fragmentation. Modern writers frequently shift attention from external action toward the interior emotional landscapes of characters, revealing the intersection between historical forces and personal consciousness. This shift reflects a broader literary awareness that trauma is not merely an event but an ongoing psychological condition that reshapes identity across time.

In the works of Toni Morrison, trauma often appears as an inherited and generational burden that continues to influence identity long after the original violence



has occurred. Her narratives suggest that historical brutality does not remain confined to the past but echoes within memory and interpersonal relationships, demonstrating the persistence of psychological wounds across generations (Morrison).

“Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world.” (Morrison 36).

Kazuo Ishiguro, by contrast, frequently explores repression and emotional avoidance. His characters construct fragile narratives of self-deception in order to survive unresolved loss. Rather than confronting pain directly, they exist within controlled emotional restraint, revealing how repression itself becomes a psychological consequence of trauma (Ishiguro).

“What is the point in worrying oneself too much about what might or might not happen until it is certain? ... I can't even say I am wholeheartedly behind our present course of action.” (Ishiguro 243).

Ian McEwan complicates the function of imagination by illustrating how misinterpretation and narrative projection can produce irreversible consequences. In his fiction, imagination is not merely a refuge but a force capable of distorting reality and altering lives permanently (McEwan).

Similarly, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie situates intimate emotional struggles within broader political upheaval. Personal instability and romantic longing exist in her



narratives, yet they remain overshadowed by war, displacement, and national conflict.

Individual emotions are therefore inseparable from collective trauma (Adichie).

“Olanna felt the slow sadness of missing a person who was still there... But the war was louder, the war was hungrier.” (Adichie 245).

Across these writers, large-scale trauma dominates narrative architecture. Historical violence and social instability shape plot progression, define character psychology, and determine thematic seriousness. Minor emotional discomforts remain present, but they function as secondary undercurrents rather than central conflicts. This broader literary pattern reinforces the hierarchy identified in the primary texts of this study: catastrophic trauma commands narrative authority, while everyday emotional unease remains acknowledged but subordinated.

Literature as Moral and Emotional Educator

Literature does more than represent events; it actively shapes perception and organizes emotional experience. When narratives consistently position trauma as central and minor discomfort as secondary, they subtly guide readers in evaluating the seriousness of different forms of suffering. Catastrophic experiences—war, death, political violence, and irreversible loss—acquire moral urgency and narrative gravity. They are framed as transformative and deserving of collective recognition.

“I want to do something, right here, right now, to make this world a better place. But it's



too big. It feels like too much for one person.” (Collins 172).

In contrast, everyday dissatisfaction such as loneliness, insecurity, romantic confusion, and quiet frustration often appears manageable or aesthetically refined. Through repetition across literary traditions, this structural distinction encourages readers to associate the scale of suffering with its legitimacy. The more visible and disruptive the pain, the more serious it appears within the literary imagination.

This hierarchy also carries broader cultural implications. When literature repeatedly foregrounds dramatic catastrophe, societies may learn to prioritize visible and public suffering over quieter psychological distress. Structural violence and historical trauma demand recognition, yet subtle emotional unease may be dismissed as trivial. Readers may internalize the belief that their own minor discomforts lack importance because they do not possess dramatic magnitude.

At the same time, literature performs a compensatory psychological function. By aestheticizing discomfort and transforming it into imaginative experience, it provides emotional refuge. Through identification with characters and immersion in narrative worlds, readers can process dissatisfaction indirectly. Imagination becomes a protective space in which emotional tension is acknowledged without overwhelming the self.

“Stories are wild creatures... When you let them loose, who knows what you might end up believing.” (Ness 48)

Literature therefore performs a dual role: it serves as an ethical witness to



catastrophic suffering while also providing symbolic strategies for managing everyday emotional tension. In balancing these functions, literature does not merely reflect human experience—it actively shapes how individuals interpret and rank forms of pain.

Summation

This study has demonstrated that literature constructs a psychological hierarchy of suffering by positioning major trauma as narratively central and morally transformative, while representing minor emotional discomfort as flexible, aesthetic, and symbolically negotiable. Through an integrated analysis of *The Hunger Games* and *A Monster Calls*, together with broader contemporary literary patterns, the research shows that not all suffering receives equal representation within narrative structures.

Catastrophic experiences such as political oppression, systemic violence, and terminal illness shape narrative architecture, redefine character identity, and demand ethical engagement from readers. Trauma destabilizes perception and insists upon confrontation and meaning-making, reorganizing both fictional worlds and the consciousness of characters who inhabit them (Caruth 4; Herman 1).

By contrast, minor emotional discomfort—romantic uncertainty, insecurity, loneliness, and dissatisfaction—operates differently within literary structures. Although psychologically meaningful, these experiences rarely restructure the narrative world. Instead, they are mediated through imagination, emotional distancing, performance, or



symbolic transformation. In *The Hunger Games*, romantic ambiguity becomes absorbed into performative survival under systemic oppression, while in *A Monster Calls*, social discomfort intensifies grief but remains subordinate to the trauma of illness (Collins; Ness).

The research further demonstrates that minor discomfort generates multiple psychological responses, including growth, withdrawal, and imaginative retreat, whereas trauma demands structural narrative seriousness. This distinction reinforces the hierarchy of suffering embedded within contemporary literature. By repeatedly foregrounding catastrophic rupture and subordinating everyday dissatisfaction, literature shapes how readers interpret the scale and legitimacy of emotional pain.

Ultimately, literature does more than depict suffering—it organizes it. Through narrative emphasis, symbolic mediation, and thematic prioritization, literary works influence cultural consciousness and emotional perception. They teach readers which forms of pain demand confrontation and remembrance and which can be processed through imagination. In doing so, literature plays a formative role in shaping how individuals understand the magnitude, meaning, and moral weight of human suffering.

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