

The trauma of the main character in *the Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris

¹Damar Asa Pramudy*, ²Karina Hanum Luthfia

^{1,2}Universitas Negeri Semarang, Indonesia

***Corresponding Author**

damarasa@students.unnes.ac.id

Received: 05 September 2024 Revised: 27 September 2024 Accepted: 28 September 2024 Published: 27 February 2025

Abstract

*This research attempts to see the forms of trauma experienced by the main character of the novel *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* and how he responds to it. Methodologically, this research was under a descriptively qualitative method supported by the psychological approach of post-memory. The primary data was from *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* novel. The technique to collect the data used a heuristic reasoning technique. The findings of the study found that there are two forms of trauma, namely physical and psychological trauma. Physical trauma is in the form of injuries, vomiting, and trembling, while psychological trauma is in the form of fear, nervousness, anger, and sadness. There are four main characters' responses in this novel: emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and physical. The emotional response in this novel is in the form of panic, refusal, and avoidance, and the cognitive response in this novel is in the form of difficulties in concentrating. The behavioral response in this novel is in the form of avoiding people and talking about the experiences. The physical response is related to the physical act committed by someone who suffers from the trauma. The physical response in this novel is in the form of losing the body's strength. By examining these layers of trauma and response, the study underscores the complex interplay between body and mind in the aftermath of profound suffering. This analysis offers a deeper understanding of how trauma shapes human behavior and emotions, providing insight into the broader psychological impacts of extreme adversity.*

Keywords: Heather Morris, main characters, novel, response, trauma

INTRODUCTION

The Tattooist of Auschwitz, a novel by Heather Morris, is about the life of the prisoners in World War II that were put in the Auschwitz camp by Nazis Germany as well as their sorrowful lives. Heather Morris, the author of this novel, tells the story of Lale Sokolov, the main character, who experiences the world war directly. It was Lale Sokolov who experienced the torture, suffering, and cruelty of war. Heather Morris tried to convey the stories and experiences in this novel. She obtained memories about the events in an affiliated manner by listening to the stories of the leading actor, Lale Sokolov, who experienced World War II; so, she is called the post-generation. The post-generation can be

How to Cite (APA Style):

Pramudy, DA. and Luthfia, KH.(2025). The trauma of the main character in the *Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris. *EduLite: Journal of English Education, Literature, and Culture*, 10 (1), 177-190. <http://dx.doi.org/10.30659/e.10.1.177-190>

received, and knowledge of the event is transmitted into history or the mouth (Hoffman, 2004).

Postmemory is a theory introduced by Marianne Hirsch in her book *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* and *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after The Holocaust* (Hirsch, 2012). There are three essential findings from those two books, namely that the narration of trauma can be inherited; even though the memory is received incompletely, the post-generation can have imaginative investment, projection, and creation in inheriting trauma from the first generation. The post-generation can show the trauma narration and ideology perspective.

The basic reason why the researchers selected this novel as a research object is because (1) this novel is a post-memory work created by the post-generation, so we need to acknowledge the forms of the trauma; (2) this novel is adapted from the true story so that it can be a significant lesson for the readers; (3) this novel took place in war that means it has similarity with Indonesia; and (4) this novel is translated into Indonesian which means it is highly read by Indonesian.

The main character in the novel was employed as a tattooist by chance by Nazi Germany in the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp. He almost saw the prisoners being abused every time and even murdered until it caused him trauma. This research attempts to see the forms of trauma experienced by the main character of this novel and see how the main character responds to it.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Past trauma, especially experienced during childhood, profoundly impacts the psychological development of individuals later in life. As trauma studies advance, the concept of postmemory has emerged to explain the transmission of memories and their effects on subsequent generations. Literature often explores trauma through characters and narratives that reflect collective or personal memory.

The psychological impact of trauma

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on understanding the lasting impact of childhood trauma on mental health. Anggadewi (2020) highlights how traumatic experiences during childhood can lead to emotional and behavioral disorders during adolescence. It emphasizes the importance of a deep understanding of early childhood trauma, as it is often the root cause of psychological issues later in life. Similarly, trauma, from a broader perspective, focuses on trauma caused by conflicts and natural disasters, such as post-conflict and tsunami events (Hatta, 2016). It centers on the psychological recovery of individuals following traumatic events, offering critical insights into the healing process and strategies for overcoming trauma. Trauma-healing strategies are essential for others, particularly children (Mendatu, 2010). His book provides essential guidance for practitioners and the general public in understanding how trauma affects individuals and how healing can be effectively achieved. These studies emphasize the critical need for comprehensive trauma recovery frameworks that address both individual and collective healing.

Postmemory in literature

In literary studies, postmemory is frequently used to explore the transmission of traumatic memories across generations. According to Hirsch (2012), postmemory refers to memories experienced by second or subsequent generations who did not live through the traumatic events themselves but are affected by the stories, images, or objects passed down from those who did. The next generation inherits trauma and memory through fictional narratives (Fernanda, 2017). It focuses on the tension between memories and present identity, with trauma playing a central role in shaping the characters' experiences. Assa (2019) emphasizes the significance of traumatic memory in constructing narratives that reinforce a sense of identity amid dark historical events. Postmemory is portrayed through the trauma experienced by characters involved in political events. Nugroho (2022) explores postmemory in the novel *Next Year in Havana* by Chanel Cleeton. Nugroho discusses how the novel presents reconciliation between the generation that directly experienced trauma and the subsequent generation that inherited the memory of it. It illustrates how literature serves as a medium to bridge the generational gap in understanding collective trauma.

Traumatic memory in fiction

Several other studies also highlight the importance of traumatic memory in fiction. Trauma is a part of individual life and affects society collectively (Pangestuti, 2020). She suggests that the trauma felt by society can be passed down from generation to generation through local narratives and stories. Santoso (2021) also examines how personal and social trauma is reflected in fictional narratives. His work focuses on how the protagonist experiences internal and external conflicts due to past trauma.

METHODS

Methodologically, this research used a qualitative approach, which is elaborated descriptively. Gay et al. (2012) asserted that descriptive research involves collecting data to test hypotheses or to answer research questions concerning the current status of the object of the study. Theoretically, this research used a postmemory approach. Postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation about the power, trauma, or events that occurred before the generation was born that were passed on to them to make the trauma like their own trauma (Hirsch, 2012). This research was conducted in three stages: pre-research, implementation, and post-research. The pre-research stage is the formulation stage, which is every problem that wants to be solved; research implementation is the core of the research process; and the post-research is a report.

The focus of this research is on the forms of trauma experienced by the main character and his response to the trauma in *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*, a novel by Heather Morris. The material object is in the form of data, namely phrases, sentence fragments, a sentence, sentences, and discourse that are assumed to contain trauma forms and responses. The data was obtained from the data resources in the form of a novel, *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* novel, by Heather Morris (Morris, 2018). This research used a heuristic reasoning

How to Cite (APA Style):

Pramudy, DA. and Luthfia, KH.(2025). The trauma of the main character in the Tattooist of Auschwitz by Heather Morris. *EduLite: Journal of English Education, Literature, and Culture*, 10 (1), 177-190. <http://dx.doi.org/10.30659/e.10.1.177-190>

technique to collect the data. Heuristic reasoning is often based on induction or analogy (Polya, 1973). The data obtained then was analyzed using the hermeneutic technique, namely the study of comprehension, particularly text comprehension (Palmer, 1969).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The forms of the main character's trauma

Physical trauma

There are three types of physical trauma, namely injury, vomit, and trembling. The three of them are named physical trauma because they happened to Lale's physicalness and could be seen by others. It means that the trauma left visible marks or could be seen by others. Lale first experienced injury in the form of a tattoo on his arm. All prisoners owned this tattoo because it showed the identity of Nazi Germany prisoners. When Lale and his friends arrived at Auschwitz Two-Birkenau, they were put into the lines to be tattooed. Lale then received the number 32407 on his skin. The evidence that Lale received a tattoo can be seen in the following quote.

The tattooing has taken only seconds, but Lale's shock makes time stand still. He grasps his arm, staring at the number. How can someone do this to another human being? He wonders if for the rest of his life, be it short or long, he will be defined by this moment, this irregular number: 32407. (Morris, 2018, p.12)

The second injury was a wound on Lale's body. The wound was located in his back. He was injured because he was caught smuggling jewelry and food. It started when the officers saw jewelry and food on Lale's bed. When they asked him where the jewelry and money came from, he could not answer and said that he obtained those things from other prisoners he did not know. Since Lale did not admit where he received it, he was put in the Bloc 11. Bloc 11 was known as a torturing place for prisoners who were considered to be committing mistakes. In Bloc 11, Lale had to face the torture by Jakub.

Jakub had been known well by Lale. On the one hand, he was confused as he had to do the job of a Nazi that was torturing Lale until he admitted where he obtained the smuggled things, but on the other side, Jakub did not have the heart to torture Lale. If the job were not executed, Jakub himself would be tortured by Nazi Germany. Finally, Lale and Jakub agreed to only speak in Yiddish, and Jakub pretended to torture Lale until he fainted. This event can be seen in the following quote.

*'Give us the names of the prisoners who steal for you!' Jakub says, firm and menacing.
The officers look on, standing casually.
Lale shakes his head, whimpering, 'I don't know.' Jakub strikes Lale ten more times. Blood runs down his legs. The two officers begin to pay more attention and step closer. Jakub jersk Lale's head back and snarls at him, 'Talk!' He whispers in his ear, 'Say you don't know and then faint.' And then louder, 'Give us the name!'
'I never ask! I don't know. You have to believe me ...'
...
'He is a weak Jew. If he knew the names, he would've told us to buy now.' (Morris, 2018, pp. 178-179)*

He kicks Lale's legs as he dangles from the chains. The second physical trauma suffered by Lale is vomit. Lale vomited because he saw a lot of corpses strewn about after he heard a lot of people screaming due to chemical poison. One day, Lale saw a truck of prisoners stop next to a van. Nazi then forced them to undress themselves out of the truck and entered the van. After the van was full, they closed the door, dropped a chemical tube, and closed it again. Since he could not stand up, Lale knelt and vomited when the van stopped. When the officer opened the van, there were piles of corpses falling, and Lale fainted. This event can be seen in the following quote.

"Lale drops to his knees, retching. He remains there, sick in the dirt, as the screams fade. When the van is still and quiet, the doors are opened. Dead men fall out like blocks of stone. A group of prisoners is marched out from beyond the other corner of the building. The truck backs up, and the prisoners begin transferring their bodies onto it, staggering under the weight while trying to hide their distress. Lale has witnessed an unimaginable act. He staggers to his feet, standing on the threshold of hell, an inferno of feelings raging inside him. The next morning, he cannot rise. He is burning up." (Morris, 2018).

The third physical trauma experienced by Lale was trembling. One day, Baretzki asked Lale to work, but Lale saw a closed space in a housing area. The area was full of undressed females chosen by Mengele, and the fence surrounding it was not electrified, so those females would not decide to kill themselves by getting electrocuted. Lale started tattooing those females while Mengele checked them and decided which ones he would keep. Mengele stood beside Lale and said, "One day, tätowierer, I will take you." Thinking about what had happened to all the females standing there hours before, Lale was trembling, kneeling, and out of breath. This kind of condition can be seen in the following quote.

"Lale looks back, and there it is. That tight pull of the lips constitutes a sick smile. Once again, a chill throughout his body. His hands shake. Lale picks up his pace, hurrying to a small table where another nurse sits with identification cards at the ready. She makes room for him to set up. He tries to control the shaking in his hands as he lines up his tools and ink bottles. He looks over at Mengele, who has another frightened girl in front of him and is running his hands over her hair and down her breasts." (Morris, 2018, p.128)

Lale's physical trauma is manifested through injury, vomiting, and trembling, which offer clear, visible signs of his suffering. The tattoo on his arm, marking him as prisoner 32407, is a literal inscription of his subjugation by the Nazi regime. The act of marking prisoners with tattoos is not just a physical injury but a profound psychological assault that strips the individual of personal identity and autonomy. Holocaust survivors experience trauma not just as bodily harm but as a rupture of selfhood, where the victim is objectified and reduced to a number. Lale's injury, therefore, is not only a mark of physical harm but also symbolizes his dehumanization within the camp system (Dashorst et al., 2019; Ribeiro, 2011). Lale's experience of vomiting and trembling can be seen as bodily responses to psychological shock (van der Kolk, 2014) research in *The Body Keeps the Score*. Van der Kolk notes that trauma is often stored in the body, manifesting as involuntary physical reactions such as nausea, shaking, or even fainting, as seen when Lale confronts the horrors of

How to Cite (APA Style):

Pramudy, DA. and Luthfia, KH.(2025). The trauma of the main character in the Tattooist of Auschwitz by Heather Morris. *EduLite: Journal of English Education, Literature, and Culture*, 10 (1), 177-190. <http://dx.doi.org/10.30659/e.10.1.177-190>

mass murder. The scene where he vomits after witnessing prisoners being gassed can be analyzed through this lens, suggesting that the trauma he experiences overwhelms his capacity for cognitive processing, leaving his body to express the horror.

Psychological Trauma

The psychological trauma experienced by Lale is in the form of fear, nervousness, anger, and sadness. The fear he experienced is the fear of prisoner shooting carried out by the officers. Lale saw the officers shoot three prisoners who were defecating. Then, he was afraid because he could be fired at another time. Three prisoners were sitting in a ditch, and they were defecating and talking. Lale was walking closer to them but stopped as he saw two officers approaching them. While he was still hiding, he saw the officers looking at the three prisoners, and then they took out their guns and shot them. This can be seen in the following quote:

“In unison, the officers flick their cigarettes up into the air, whip their rifles around, and open fire. The bodies of the Lale’s breath catch in his throat. He presses his back against the building as the officers pass him. He catches the profile of one of them – a boy, just a bloody kid.” (Morris, 2018)

The second psychological trauma experienced by Lale is nervousness. One day, when he was making a tattoo, Lale noticed the scary Josef Mengele walking in the prisoner’s line. He then came to Lale, stood beside him, checked his work, whistled, and smiled weirdly. Seeing that, Lale was very nervous and accidentally pricked a female with his tattoo needle, and she screamed. Lale immediately cleaned the blood and felt Mengele’s presence behind him. Mengele asked if Lale was a Tätowierer, and he answered Mengele’s question hesitantly. Lale wanted to wash the blood stain on his shirt when he decided to keep it as a reminder of how dangerous this doctor was.

“Lale goes back to work. A little while later, he hears the whistling start up behind him, and the sound shoots such a shock and fear through his body that he slips and stabs the young woman he is tattooing. She cries out. Lale wipes the blood that trickles down her arm. Mengele steps closer.” (Morris, 2018, p.112)

The third psychological trauma experienced by Lale is anger because he sees his friends murdered. Lale’s emotions during his three years of detention appeared when Baretzki brought Lale’s gypsy friends to the gas room. He saw piles of corpses, and he was affected by the terrifying gas odor. Baretzki was known as an officer who murdered a lot of prisoners. He showed the corpses’ tattoos to Lale and asked why the numbers were the same. After explaining the issue, Lale left the crematorium. When Baretzki asked whether he was okay, he answered he was “not okay.” Lale was angry because Baretzki killed a lot of his friends. Lale’s anger can be seen in the following quote.

“Without asking for permission, Lale gets up and leaves the building. Baretzki catches up with him outside, where he is doubled over and breathing deeply. Baretzki, wait a moment or two. ‘Are you all right?’ ‘No. I’m not fucking all right. You bastards. How many more of us must you kill?’ ‘You’re upset. I can see that.’ (Morris, 2018, p.143)

The fourth psychological trauma experienced by Lale is sadness. He heard the conversation about the prisoners receiving additional food and blankets for some days because the Red Cross would come to check the camp's condition. However, Lale was unsure that the Red Cross would come to the camp. The sadness that appeared as Lale thought that the International Red Cross would not come can be seen in the following quote.

'I'll tell you then. You're all going to be given extra rations and blankets next week for a few days. The Red Cross is coming to inspect your holiday camp.' Lale thinks hard. What does this mean? Will the outside world finally see what is happening here? He works to keep his emotions in check in front of Baretzki (Morris, 2018, p.132).

Lale's psychological trauma manifests in the forms of fear, nervousness, anger, and sadness, emotions which are typical responses to extreme stress and danger. These emotional responses are deeply intertwined with his experiences of survival. His fear of being shot reflects a constant state of hypervigilance described as a hallmark of trauma (Sartika, 2020; Shoukat et al., 2020). Trauma is not simply a recollection of past events but a continual, repetitive experience of those events in the present (Caruth, 1996). Lale's nervousness, especially when facing figures like Mengele, illustrates this idea of persistent trauma, as his body and mind are always primed for danger. Anger, particularly towards his captors like Baretzki, can be viewed as a response to the powerlessness that trauma survivors often feel. Anger is a natural reaction to the betrayal of trust and safety, especially in situations of prolonged abuse or captivity (Zagaria et al., 2024). Lale's anger towards the S.S. officers who killed his friends is not just a personal reaction but represents a broader moral outrage at the systemic cruelty of the holocaust.

The main character's responses to the *Emotional responses*

The emotional responses Lale experiences are in the form of panic, refusal, and avoidance.

Panic

Lale panics when the officers know he is smuggling some things with Victor's help. One day, when Lale returned to his room, he found two officers were already in his room. The officers had known the piles of jewelry and money he had smuggled through Victor and Yuri. The officers then took their guns and took Lale to the higher officer. When he asked him where he could obtain so many valuables, Lale panicked and said he received those things from the prisoners he did not know. Houstek angrily ordered the officers to take Lale to Bloc 11, a famous bloc around the camp as a "torturing bloc." During his panic, Lale thought that he would not survive, and he said goodbye to Gita and her family in his mind. The following quote shows his panic because he was caught to keep the smuggled things.

Back in darkness, Lale ponders his fate. He resolves to speak no name. It is now a matter of who kills him: a bored S.S. officer whose supper is getting cold or Jakub, carrying out a just killing to save others. A sense of calm comes over him as he resigns himself to death.

How to Cite (APA Style):

Pramudy, DA. and Luthfia, KH.(2025). The trauma of the main character in the *Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris. *EduLite: Journal of English Education, Literature, and Culture*, 10 (1), 177-190. <http://dx.doi.org/10.30659/e.10.1.177-190>

“Will someone tell Gita what happened to him, he wonders, or will she spend the rest of her life never knowing?” (Morris, 2018, p.175)

Refusal

The response of refusal he experienced is by refusing to say the smuggling source. When he was caught having so many smuggled things, Lale declined to say who helped him to smuggle the things. The refusal was conducted by constantly saying, "he did not know their names" when the officers asked him. It happened when, one day, Lale was surprised that Jakub was standing in front of the door. According to Jakub, Lale was moved to Bloc 11 because he was caught for receiving smuggled things. Jakub also told him that he was sent to Bloc 11 to beat Lale so he could admit who helped him in smuggling action. Jakub said, "Just like you, Tätowierer, I have done what I need to survive. I am a murderer, Lale." Jakub left after instructing Lale to speak in Yiddish, the language they only know. Previously, Jakub asked Lale to keep refusing, and he would pretend to beat him. Then, he kept whipping Lale. At one point, he bowed and whispered to Lale and asked him to say one more time that he did not know the names of the prisoners who helped him before he pretended to faint. This event can be seen in the following quote.

'Give us the names of the prisoners who steal for you!' Jakub says, firm and menacing. The officers look on, standing casually. Lale shakes his head, whimpering. 'I don't know.' Jakub strikes Lale ten more times. Blood runs down his legs. The two officers begin to pay more attention and step closer. Jakub jerks Lale's head back and snarls at him, 'Talk!' He whispers in his ear, 'Say you don't know and then faint.' And then louder, 'Give us the names!' 'I never ask! I don't know. You have to believe me ...' (Morris, 2018, pp.178-179)

Avoidance

The avoidant response experienced by Lale when he avoided the shooting. While returning to his bloc, Lale heard a flying airplane above him and saw the prisoners running around the field, screaming excitedly because the airplane had the U.S.A. Air Force badge. The prisoners screamed at the aircraft, and they pointed to the crematorium, trying to remind them about the terrifying event that happened there. However, after the plane circled for some time, they flew away. After it disappeared, the Nazis shot the prisoners from their watchtower and killed any visible people there. Lale was hiding behind the wall, almost avoiding death. Lale's avoidance of the officers' shooting can be seen in the following quote.

“On its third pass over Birkenau, the plane gains height and flies off. The prisoners continue to shout. Many drops to their knees, devastated that their cries have been ignored. Lale begins to back up against a nearby building, only just in time. Bullets rain down from the towers onto those in the compound, hitting dozens of people too slow to move to safety.” (Morris, 2018, p.163)

Lale's emotional responses reflect the complexity of trauma. His refusal to divulge the names of his smuggling accomplices demonstrates an ethical resistance to dehumanization. The *Drowned and the Saved* (Baird, 2005) discusses how prisoners in concentration camps were often forced into impossible moral decisions. Yet, some, like Lale, retained a sense of agency in choosing not to collaborate fully with their oppressors. Lale's refusal to

cooperate with his torturers can be seen as an act of defiance and an attempt to preserve his moral integrity, even in the face of unbearable pressure. His cognitive response, marked by concentration difficulties while tattooing, particularly when under the gaze of Mengele, reflects the intrusive nature of trauma. The inability to focus, often triggered by the presence of a threatening figure, supports the view that trauma interferes with normal cognitive functioning (Hickman et al., 2021; Hosny et al., 2023; Laricchiuta et al., 2023). Trauma often disrupts memory and attention, as the brain becomes overwhelmed by stress hormones like cortisol, impairing its ability to process information. Lale's struggle to maintain focus while working under Mengele's supervision exemplifies this cognitive dissonance, where the trauma continually invades his present reality.

Cognitive Response

The cognitive response experienced is in the form of concentration difficulties. When Lale was doing his job, tattooing a prisoner, doctor Mengele was walking around him and whistling. It made Lale scared. As a consequence, he pushed the needle hard into the prisoner's arm and caused her to scream. Lale immediately cleaned the blood and felt Mengele's presence behind his back. Mengele asked him whether something was wrong and whether Lale was a *tätowierer*, and he answered hesitantly. Mengele stared at Lale stiffly with lifeless eyes and a weird smile before leaving. That night, Lale was going to wash the blood stain on his shirt, but then he decided to keep it as a reminder of how dangerous this doctor was. The difficulties of concentration experienced by Lale can be seen in the following quote.

"Lale goes back to work. A little while later, he hears the whistling start up behind him, and the sound shoots such a shock of fear through his body that he slips and stabs the young woman he is tattooing. She cries out. Lale wipes the blood that trickles down her arm. Mengele steps closer" (Morris, 2018, p.113)

Behavioral Responses

The behavioral responses experienced by Lale are in the form of (1) avoiding victory in football and (2) avoiding talking about experiences. Avoiding victory in football happened when he was asked to make a football team to play with commissioned officers. When Lale was playing with the football team, he told them they should never let themselves win even though they had played the game professionally. They had to avoid victory from the commissioned officers. According to him, it would be dangerous if their team won because it would humiliate the commissioned officers' team. It was proven that after their team had succeeded in scoring a goal, they opened fire. Therefore, they avoided scoring a goal in the next round to avoid the calamity. Their efforts to avoid scoring a goal in football can be seen in the following quote.

"Ten minutes into the games, the prisoners have scored two goals to nil. While Lale enjoys the goals, common sense prevails when he looks at the angry faces of the S.S. He subtly lets his players know to slow it down for the remainder of the half. They have had moments of glory, and it is time to let the S.S. into the game. The half ends two all. While the S.S. are given drinks during the short break, Lale and his team gather to discuss tactics. Eventually, Lale impresses them and tells them that they cannot

How to Cite (APA Style):

Pramudy, DA. and Luthfia, KH.(2025). The trauma of the main character in the Tattooist of Auschwitz by Heather Morris. *EduLite: Journal of English Education, Literature, and Culture*, 10 (1), 177-190. <http://dx.doi.org/10.30659/e.10.1.177-190>

win this game. It is agreed that to help boost morale for the watching prisoners, two more goals can be scored, as long as they lose by one goal in the end” (Morris, 2018, pp. 121-122)

The second behavioral response experienced by Lale is to avoid talking about experiences. When Lale went home, he met his sister, Goldie. As she saw Lale, Goldie fainted. After waking up from the faint, Goldie and Lale were sitting down in their house, and Goldie told him that the Nazis had taken their parents, and she did not know how their lives were then. Next, their brother joined the resistance fighters and was killed in the war, leaving a wife and children who the Nazis also took.

On the other hand, Goldie married a Russian who was still out of town for business. The news about other relatives of Lale was so sad, but the fact that Goldie was still alive was important. It meant that he still had a little hope in his life. Lale himself refused to tell Goldie what had happened to him. Instead, he told her that he worked in a camp in Poland. However, he told her about Gita and explained how he loved her. Hearing this, Goldie told Lale to search for her even though he did not know where she came from. The following quote shows his avoidance of discussing what he experienced with Goldie and his neighbors.

“Lale follows her into the kitchen, not wanting to let her out of his sight, as she prepares a meal for them. After they have eaten, they talk late into the night. As much as Goldie pushes Lale for information about where he has been for the past three years, he will only say he has been in a work camp in Poland and that he is now home” (Morris, 2018, p. 249)

Physical Response

The physical response experienced by Lale is in the form of losing body strength. Lale lost his body strength since he saw many murderers. At that time, Lale saw Nazis force a big group of undressed prisoners to get out of the truck. The officers pushed the prisoners to the bus until it was full and dropped a gas tube in it. Instantly, the bus was full of chemical gas and started to shake. Lale heard screams. He then knelt and vomited. When the officers opened the door, piles of corpses fell, and Lale fainted. When he woke up, he walked to Bloc 7 but could not get up the next day as he suffered a fever. The event that made Lale faint can be seen in the following quote.

“Lale drops to his knees, retching. He remains there, sick in the dirt, as the screams fade. When the van is still and quiet, the doors are opened. Dead men fall out like blocks of stone. A group of prisoners is marched out from beyond the other corner of the building. The truck backs up, and the prisoners begin transferring their bodies onto it, staggering under the weight while trying to hide their distress. Lale has witnessed an unimaginable act. He staggers to his feet, standing on the threshold of hell, an inferno of feelings raging inside him. The next morning, he cannot rise. He is burning up” (Morris, 2018, p.30)

Lale's behavioral responses, including his strategic avoidance of victory in the football match with S.S. officers, highlight a survival mechanism shaped by trauma. This act of avoidance can be linked to the concept of learned helplessness, where individuals exposed to repeated traumatic experiences may alter their behavior to avoid further harm. In this case, Lale understands that winning the game could provoke violence, so he deliberately orchestrates a loss to ensure his team's survival. This behavior aligns with the findings of Stallman

(2021), who explored how individuals in situations of extreme stress may develop coping mechanisms to reduce the likelihood of additional harm.

Additionally, Lale's avoidance of discussing his experiences with his sister after the war reflects the broader phenomenon of "trauma silence," where survivors often choose not to disclose their suffering, either due to the pain of recollection or fear of being misunderstood. Holocaust survivor literature frequently touches upon this silence, with Crockett (2020) emphasizing how survivors often find it difficult to articulate their experiences because the events they lived through defy normal comprehension. Lale's reluctance to share his experiences with his sister thus mirrors the broader narrative of post-traumatic silence common among survivors of genocide and war.

When we compare Lale's trauma with other studies of Holocaust survivors, certain universal patterns emerge. Research by Fossion et al. (2015) shows that trauma from Holocaust survivors can be passed down to subsequent generations, influencing not only the individuals who directly experienced the trauma but also their descendants. Although *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* does not directly address this generational transmission, Lale's silence about his trauma may have an implicit impact on those around him, particularly in shaping how they understand his past. Moreover, studies of trauma in literature suggest that trauma narratives often resist conventional storytelling techniques, instead fragmenting time and perspective to reflect the disorientation felt by the survivor. While *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* follows a more linear narrative structure, the repeated revisiting of traumatic moments mirrors this fragmentation, reinforcing the idea that trauma is not a single event but a continuous, intrusive presence in the survivor's life.

This research highlights the multifaceted nature of trauma as experienced by the main character in *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*. The character's journey reflects physical and psychological scars, manifesting in distinct emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and physical responses. By examining these layers of trauma and response, the study underscores the complex interplay between body and mind in the aftermath of profound suffering. This analysis offers a deeper understanding of how trauma shapes human behavior and emotions, providing insight into the broader psychological impacts of extreme adversity.

CONCLUSION

This research provides valuable insights into the dual forms of trauma, physical and psychological, experienced by the main character in *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*. Through a qualitative, descriptive approach, the study reveals that trauma manifests not only in the body through symptoms like injuries and trembling but also affects the psyche, leading to fear, anger, and sadness. The character's responses to trauma are multifaceted, encompassing emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and physical dimensions. These findings emphasize the intricate relationship between mind and body in processing traumatic experiences, offering a comprehensive understanding of how extreme adversity shapes human responses and behavior. For future research, it is suggested to explore other literary works dealing with trauma, comparing how different characters, settings, or cultural contexts shape the experience and expression

How to Cite (APA Style):

Pramudy, DA. and Luthfia, KH.(2025). The trauma of the main character in the *Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris. *EduLite: Journal of English Education, Literature, and Culture*, 10 (1), 177-190. <http://dx.doi.org/10.30659/e.10.1.177-190>

of trauma. Additionally, incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives, such as psychological and sociological frameworks, could enrich the analysis and offer a more holistic understanding of trauma. Other researchers could also consider longitudinal studies of trauma representation in literature to examine how trauma responses evolve, providing deeper insights into recovery and resilience.

AUTHOR STATEMENTS

Damar Asa Pramudya: Conceptualization, data collection, and analysis, writing the abstract, introduction, method, findings and discussion, conclusion, and corresponding author. **Karina Hanum Luthfia:** Supervision, draft revision, proofreading, editing, and manuscript refining.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The present researchers would like to express their deep gratitude and sincere thanks to Universitas Negeri Semarang, who has supported this research.

REFERENCES

- Anggadewi, B. E. T. (2020). Dampak psikologis trauma masa kanak-kanak pada remaja. *Solution: Journal of Counseling and Personal Development*, 2(2), 1–7.
- Baird, M. L. (2005). "The Gray Zone" as a complex of tensions: Primo Levi on holocaust survival. In S. G. Pugliese (Ed.), *The Legacy of Primo Levi* (pp. 193–206). Palgrave Macmillan US. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403981592_18
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Crockett, T. E. (2020). The silence of fragmentation ethical representations of trauma in young adult holocaust literature. *Barnboken*, 43, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.14811/clr.v43i0.487>
- Dashorst, P., Mooren, T. M., Kleber, R. J., de Jong, P. J., & Huntjens, R. J. C. (2019). Intergenerational consequences of the holocaust on offspring mental health: a systematic review of associated factors and mechanisms. *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 10(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2019.1654065>
- Assa, E. P. (2019). Postmemory dalam novel *Tapol* karya Ngarto Februana. *Jurnal Ilmu Sastra*, 7(1), 17–31. <https://doi.org/10.22146/poetika.43130>
- Fernanda, A. (2017). Transmisi memori dan trauma dalam *Mother Land* karya Dmetri Kakmi: Kajian postmemory. *Jurnal POETIKA*, 5(2), 82–95. <https://doi.org/10.22146/poetika.30937>
- Fossion, P., Leys, C., Vandeleur, C., Kempnaers, C., Braun, S., Verbanck, P., & Linkowski, P. (2015). Transgenerational transmission of trauma in families of Holocaust survivors: The consequences of extreme family functioning on resilience, sense of coherence, anxiety and depression. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 171, 48–53. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2014.08.054>
- Gay, L., Mills, G. E., & Airasian, P. (2012). *Educational research*. Pearson Education.
- Hatta, K. (2016). *Trauma dan pemulihannya*. Dakwah Ar-Raniry Press.
- Hickman, C., Marks, E., Pihkala, P., Clayton, S., Lewandowski, R. E., Mayall, E. E., Wray, B., Mellor, C., & van Susteren, L. (2021). Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a

- global survey. *The Lancet Planetary Health*, 5(12), e863–e873.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196\(21\)00278-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2542-5196(21)00278-3)
- Hirsch, Marianne. (2012). *The generation of postmemory: Writing and visual culture after the holocaust*. Columbia University Press.
- Hoffman, R. V. (2004). *Organic chemistry*. Wiley.
- Hosny, N., Bovey, M., Dutray, F., & Heim, E. (2023). How is trauma-related distress experienced and expressed in populations from the Greater Middle East and North Africa? A systematic review of qualitative literature. In *S.S.M. - Mental Health* (Vol. 4). Elsevier Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmmh.2023.100258>
- Laricchiuta, D., Panuccio, A., Picerni, E., Biondo, D., Genovesi, B., & Petrosini, L. (2023). The body keeps the score: The neurobiological profile of traumatized adolescents. In *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* (Vol. 145). Elsevier Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2023.105033>
- Mendatu, A. (2010). *Pemulihan trauma: Strategi penyembuhan trauma untuk diri sendiri, anak, dan orang lain di sekitar anda*. Panduan. [https://search-jogialib.jogjaprovo.go.id/Record/jogjakotalib-11691](https://search.jogialib.jogjaprovo.go.id/Record/jogjakotalib-11691)
- Morris, Heather. (2018). *The Tattooist of Auschwitz: A novel*. Bonnier Books U.K. Limited.
- Nugroho, A. R. (2022). Postmemory: Transmisi memori dan rekonsiliasi dalam novel *Next Year in Havana* karya Chanel Cleeton. *Aksara*, 34(1), 61–72. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.29255/aksara.v34i1.828.61-72>
- Palmer, R. E. (1969). *Hermeneutics: Interpretation theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer*. Northwestern University Press.
- Pangestuti, F. (2020). Memori traumatis dalam novel lentera Batukaru karya Putu Setia: Kajian Postmemori. *Febriana*, 7(4). <https://ejournal.unesa.ac.id/index.php/bapala/article/view/36257>
- Polya, G. (1973). *How to solve it: A new aspect of mathematical method*. Princeton University Press.
- Ribeiro, A. S. (2011). Memory, identity, and representation: The limits of theory and the construction of testimony. *RCCS Annual Review*, 3(3). <https://doi.org/10.4000/rccsar.260>
- Santoso, J. (2021). Narasi trauma: Kajian Postmemory novel *Tiba Sebelum Berangkat* karya Faisal Oddang. *Arif: Jurnal Sastra Dan Kearifan Lokal*, 1(1), 39–55. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.21009/Arif.011.03>
- Sartika, E. (2020). Traumatic experiences in Eka Kurniawan's novel *Seperti Dendam, Rindu Harus Dibayar Tuntas*. *Jurnal Ilmu Sastra*, 8(2), 121–138. <https://doi.org/10.22146/poetika.55895>
- Shoukat, L., Waheed, S., & Arshad, K. (2020). An analysis of personal and collective trauma in Khaled Hosseini's novel *Sea Prayer*. *Journal of English Education*, 6(2), 117–130. <https://doi.org/10.30606/jee>
- Stallman, H. M., Beaudequin, D., Hermens, D. F., & Eisenberg, D. (2021). Modelling the relationship between healthy and unhealthy coping strategies to understand overwhelming distress: A Bayesian network approach. *Journal of Affective Disorders Reports*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadr.2020.100054>
- van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma. In *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. Viking.

How to Cite (APA Style):

Pramudy, DA. and Luthfia, KH.(2025). The trauma of the main character in the Tattooist of Auschwitz by Heather Morris. *EduLite: Journal of English Education, Literature, and Culture*, 10 (1), 177-190. <http://dx.doi.org/10.30659/e.10.1.177-190>

Zagaria, A., Baggio, T., Rodella, L., & Leto, K. (2024). Toward a definition of Attachment Trauma: integrating attachment and trauma studies. In *European Journal of Trauma and Dissociation* (Vol. 8, Issue 3). Elsevier Masson s.r.l. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejtd.2024.100416>

Conflict of Interest Statement: The authors declare that the research was conducted without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Copyright © 2025. **Pramudy and Luthfia**. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). The use, distribution or reproduction in other forums is permitted, provided the original author(s) and the copyright owner(s) are credited and that the original publication in this journal is cited, in accordance with accepted academic practice. No use, distribution or reproduction is permitted which does not comply with these terms.