



EXPLORING CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND SUFFERING IN ADELINE YEN MAH'S *CHINESE CINDERELLA*: A TRAUMA THEORY ANALYSIS

Rabia Khalid, **Samarah Nazar ***Shagufta Gulnaz, *Faiqa Qadeer**
1, *2,3,4 Department of English, University of Sialkot, Sialkot, Punjab, Pakistan

Email: rabiakhalid.im@gmail.com , sam.imtiaz1010@gmail.com,
shaguftabbas81@gmail.com, faiqaqadeer0@gmail.com

Corresponding author: Samarah Nazar, sam.imtiaz1010@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the issues of childhood trauma and emotional struggles in Adeline Yen Mah's memoir, *Chinese Cinderella*. It is constantly praised as a story of resilience. The narrative is also well-known for showing deep mental wounds due to years of familial abuse and rejection. Cathy Caruth's famous trauma theory is used in the study. It is taken as principle framework. This article highlights how Adeline's painful stories are mediated via memory, repetition, and fragmented storytelling. The researcher addresses two key questions. Through close textual evaluation, the findings show how trauma disrupts the shape of time and memory. This paper also says that *Chinese Cinderella* by Adeline Yen Mah isn't only a personal tale of survival. It is an effective illustration of how trauma shapes identity and emotional life. This paper also additionally contributes to trauma literature with the aid of imparting a targeted exploration of psychological pain in an autobiographical text.

Keywords: Trauma, Memory, Neglect, Rejection, Trauma theory, Repetition

Introduction

Chinese Cinderella: The True Story of an Unwanted Daughter tells the story of Adeline Yen Mah's early childhood days in 1940s China. The bad thing about her family was that they were emotionally abusive. Mah's mother died shortly after giving birth. It leads to Adeline being blamed for her mother's demise. Adeline's father, siblings, and especially her cruel stepmother viewed her with contempt and hate. Through all this relentless neglect and humiliation, Adeline was able to find comfort in writing and academics. It eventually led her to study abroad after bearing a lot to prove herself. Her story unfolds as a sharp memoir showcasing the disregard and rejection from her family (Mah, 1999). Adeline Yen Mah's *Chinese Cinderella: The True Story of an Unwanted Daughter* was published in 1999. Many readers see it as a tale of strength and the success story of a girl coming from an unloving family. Mah has worked hard all her life. She excels in school and academics. She eventually finds her voice and freedom by writing. But something deeper in the story connects with the reader. It is not just her achievements, but it is the pain, the rejection, the emotional hurt that shaped her from the start. Her story speaks to many children who face neglect at home. They feel the same loneliness and the same silence. But unlike Mah, most never get the chance to put their pain into words (Eve, n.d.)

Trauma studies have become more common in literature. They help us see how people deal with pain and how that pain shows up in stories. These studies explore how both personal and shared sufferings are remembered. They also help explain how trauma shapes the way we tell our stories. In both psychology and literature, trauma is seen as something that overwhelms a person. It goes beyond what the mind can handle. It blocks normal emotional responses. It makes memory feel broken or unclear. A traumatic event can shake someone's sense of feeling



safe. It can leave a deep scar on the mind. That's why trauma is not easy to process. It can stay buried and return in unexpected ways (Hogg et al., 2023). Cathy Caruth is one of the most important scholars in trauma studies. She explains trauma as something so intense that a person cannot fully understand it when it happens. The mind cannot take it all in. She says that the experience returns later and scares the victim. It comes back through flashbacks memories or the way people tell their stories (*Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, 1996). Caruth believes that literature offers a space for pain that words often fail to express.

Through trauma theory, this study explores the deep emotional wounds in *Chinese Cinderella*. It shows how Adeline's story is not just about her life. It is also a record of her pain. Her writing becomes a way to release what was once hidden. Trauma theory helps us see how stories like hers carry the weight of suffering. Through literary analysis, we begin to understand how people use storytelling. They use it not just to share but to survive as individuals and as part of a larger world (Shakir, 2025). In psychoanalysis, trauma theory helps us understand how people react when their world falls apart. It looks at what happens when someone goes through something so painful that it affects both their thoughts and their emotional state. This theory allows researchers to study how these experiences shape the behaviors of people after deep distress (Clayton, 2024).

Although *Chinese Cinderella* is widely read in the classrooms as a good read of children's literature. There is still little academic attention given to it from a trauma theory perspective. A lot of the existing research tends to focus on themes like cultural identity and family relationships. One study, for example, looked at the historical elements in Mah's autobiography. It explored how personal life and history often run side by side and shape individual experiences in complex ways (Parveen, 2021). Another study examined *Chinese Cinderella* through a linguistic lens by focusing on the use of speech acts within the narrative. It explored how language in the novel reflects power dynamics, emotional expression, and the complexities of family communication (Purwati, 2022). There is still a lack of detailed analysis of *Chinese Cinderella* through the lens of trauma theory. Filling this gap can help readers see Adeline's story more deeply. It also brings attention to the quiet emotional struggles many children face due to such families, but they rarely speak about it.

This study explores Adeline's painful experiences of neglect and rejection as shown in her memoir, *Chinese Cinderella*. These experiences are examined as forms of childhood trauma by showing how they shaped her emotional world. The narrative's use of memory and repetition is the key. It brings back moments of suffering again and again. It reveals how deeply those wounds still affect her. This research views *Chinese Cinderella* not just as a case of survival. It is a moving reflection of former pain and silent grief. It brings to light the deeper emotional wounds hidden beneath Adeline's story. The study opens up important discussions about child neglect and the emotional trauma that happens.

Statement of the Problem

Every illuminating story has a dark aspect attached to it. *Chinese Cinderella* is one such story. It is often seen as a story of the strength and success of Adeline. Many readers focus on how Adeline overcame her struggles and moved on in life. Her deep emotional pain, which is caused by rejection and neglect from her family, is often overlooked in studies. There has been little academic work that explores this pain as trauma. This study aims to fill that gap by showing how her story reflects the ever lasting impact of her childhood suffering.

Research Objectives



- i. To analyze how Adeline Yen Mah's *Chinese Cinderella* portrays her experiences of neglect and rejection as forms of childhood trauma.
- ii. To examine how memory and repetition in the narrative reveal Adeline's ongoing psychological suffering.

Research Questions

1. How does Adeline Yen Mah's *Chinese Cinderella* portray her experiences of neglect and rejection as forms of childhood trauma?
2. How do memory and repetition in the narrative reveal Adeline's ongoing psychological suffering?

Significance of the Study

This study matters on both a literary and social level. Studying the novel *Chinese Cinderella* via trauma theory brings out the hidden emotional wounds behind Adeline's story of success. On a broader level, this research sheds light on the silent struggles of children who grow up with families offering only neglect and rejection. It asks for more empathy and awareness. In literary studies, this research also helps to fill an important gap. It applies Cathy Caruth's trauma theory to a popular but underexplored text. So, this study adds a fresh addition into both Asian autobiographical writing and trauma literature. It is more than just a story of resilience and coping up. *Chinese Cinderella* becomes a deep and moving record of the silent pain of a child blamed for her mother's death. This analysis also motivates the readers to see the book as a powerful reminder of how childhood suffering can leave lasting marks on an innocent child's mind.

Delimitations of the Study

This study focuses only on Adeline Yen Mah's *Chinese Cinderella* as the main text. It uses Cathy Caruth's trauma theory as its main lens. It does not examine Mah's other works. It doesn't go deep into broader cultural or historical settings. The analysis is also limited to childhood trauma and emotional suffering. It does not explore resilience or healing in detail. The focus is kept narrow and sharp to look closely and carefully at the emotional pain reflected in Adeline's story.

Literature Review

Since the late 20th century, scholars have started to see trauma as a special way of telling stories. It breaks the usual order of events and focuses more on memory, silence, and broken moments (Shakir, 2025). In psychoanalysis, trauma theory helps researchers understand how people react when their lives fall apart. It looks at how painful events can disturb both their thoughts and emotional well-being (Clayton, 2024). Michelle Balaev (2012) points out that trauma breaks the flow of identity by deeply disrupting memory and how stories are told. This fear makes it hard for survivors to fully express and tell what happened. It can lead to fragmented narratives that resist traditional storytelling. Her work expands trauma theory by supporting a wider range of psychological and literary ways to understand how trauma appears in literature. The fragmented narrative in *The Kitchen God's Wife* also shows the deep emotional wounds carried by Winnie. The broken structure mirrors her struggle to speak about painful memories. It also helps her slowly heal and rebuild family connections (The Trauma and Fragmentation Narrative, 2023). Parul Sehgal (2022), writing in *The New Yorker*, observes that the growing use of the "trauma plot" in storytelling has become so common that it sometimes reduces fully complex lives to just stories about pain (Sehgal, 2022). But despite her concern, the patterns we see in trauma narratives like memory loops, silences, and repeated



images still play an important role. They don't just tell the trauma but they perform it through the very structure of the story.

Cathy Caruth's influential approach is often used in research. In her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth explains that trauma is not fully felt and understood when it happens. The survivors often relive it again later via painful memories, dreams, or flashbacks. As she writes, "Trauma is rooted in an event that is experienced too soon, or too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (Caruth, 1996). Trauma often returns in ways that feel out of proportion to the moment it first happened. It lingers by showing up in narrative gaps and silences. These moments reveal pain that the narrator cannot fully explain. When normal storytelling breaks down, it signals the weight of something too overwhelming to express clearly. Cathy Caruth's approach has become central to trauma studies in literature. Her work connects the psychological impact of trauma with the ways it shapes language and narrative form (Caruth, 1996).

Memoirs often give voice to the quiet pain of childhood trauma, especially when that trauma involves emotional abuse. The act of writing becomes its kind of witness, speaking for what couldn't be spoken at the time. Studies in psychology have shown that traumatic memories are stored differently. They are often rooted in raw emotion and sensation and hard to fit into a clear or consistent life story (Rubin et al., 2008). Studies of childhood memoir in literature like Marianne Hirsch's *Family Frames* (1997) and Dominick LaCapra's *Writing History Writing Trauma* (2001) show how language tries to bridge the space between what happened and what can be expressed. Writing becomes more than just telling a story. It turns into a reflection of the trauma itself. Memoirs by survivors of childhood neglect or abuse often echo Cathy Caruth's idea of unclaimed experience (Caruth 1996). They return to the same painful moments. They hold onto silences. They stay with certain images again and again. These patterns show the writer's deep need to express what once felt impossible to say. These narrative patterns are not just about style or creativity. They are a form of survival. Writing becomes a way to witness what happened only when it feels safe enough. It helps bring childhood trauma out into the open instead of keeping it buried in silence.

Chinese Cinderella is a young adult version of Adeline Yen Mah's earlier memoir, *Falling Leaves*, published in 1997. The focus mostly stays on the sharp contrast between cultures. Adeline's pain as a daughter in a strict Chinese household, her lonely life at boarding schools, and her rise through education often take center stage (Parveen, 2021). Parveen argues that the text blends memory with national history, using personal storytelling to reflect social changes in China. LitCharts, 2025, also highlights Adeline's resilience and her search for self-worth while facing emotional neglect and shame from her family. These include the lasting impact of withheld affection, a lost sense of identity, and repeated verbal humiliation. The use of silence, repetition, and structure reveals that the pain goes beyond the surface. Very few have used trauma theory to explore how this suffering is present in both the story and the way it is told.

Traumatic experiences often include a shaky or uncertain voice, repeated memories, sudden shifts in time, and quiet moments where words seem to stop. English Studies explains some core ideas of trauma theory, such as broken or unclear memory, the importance of silence, the difficulty of fully showing pain through language, and the moral responsibility of telling and hearing painful stories (Caruth 1996). Analysis of writers whose work deals with trauma often uses methods that uncover distinctive patterns in their writing. These patterns include gaps in the text and moments of mental collapse that places where the narrative breaks down.



According to literary trauma theory, these absent spaces in the narrative mirror emotional rupture and disrupted memory (LaCapra, 2001). Trauma often shapes not just memory but also the structure of a person's life story. Van der Kolk (2014) explains that traumatic events are stored in the brain as strong sensations and emotions, not as clear stories. This leads to broken memories, physical reactions, and gaps in a person's narrative. These silences are not flaws. Instead, they show how powerful the trauma was and how hard it is to put that pain into words (Van der Kolk, 2014). In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, for instance, the narrative unfolds through associative memory instead of a clear timeline. Repetition acts as a powerful tool to show how trauma refuses to remain in the past (Morrison, 1987; Caruth, 1996).

Despite the rich emotional content of Adeline's narrative, the application of trauma theory to *Chinese Cinderella* remains limited. One existing study has examined the historical elements in Mah's autobiographical writing, focusing on how personal life and historical context run parallel and influence one another. This approach offers valuable insight into the socio-cultural backdrop of Mah's experiences but does not delve deeply into the psychological impact of trauma or the formal markers of suffering within the text (Parveen, 2021). Another study analyzed the speech acts used in *Chinese Cinderella*, exploring the narrative through a linguistic lens. (Purwati, 2022). Some studies on female dependence in literature, like the one on *Little Women* by Asriyanti, Arafah, and Abbas (2022), focus mainly on psychoanalytic ideas such as the Cinderella Complex. A similar pattern appears in analyses of *Chinese Cinderella*, where family issues and Freudian theories are often the main focus. This can lead to overlooking deeper psychological and structural aspects of trauma in the story. Critical reviews, student essays, and classroom guides often highlight themes of identity, culture clash, and resilience, yet seldom refer to trauma as a theoretical category. Recognizing these gaps suggests a critical opportunity to read *Chinese Cinderella* not simply as a story of survival, but as a narrative shaped by unclaimed childhood trauma. While prior work contextualizes the social and cultural dynamics that shaped Adeline's childhood, the trauma centered reading seeks to understand the psychological architecture of her suffering under the surface of academic success or diaspora identity.

Psychological literature supports the idea that childhood emotional neglect can leave lasting effects that is often more damaging than physical abuse. A study published in the *South African Journal of Psychiatry* by Xiao et al. (2017) found that parental rejection strongly influences behavioral and emotional outcomes in Chinese adolescents, even when there is no physical harm involved. Similarly, theoretical critiques of trauma models, such as those by Cloitre et al. (2013), call for the recognition of complex PTSD. These views show how long term emotional abuse affects both identity and memory. When we apply this to *Chinese Cinderella*, it deepens our understanding of Adeline's story. Her repeated thoughts about rejection, shame, and the need to succeed can be seen as signs of complex trauma.

One powerful element of trauma literature is its ability to generate empathy. In doing so, they evoke a moral and emotional response from the audience (Vickroy, 2002). Caruth says that trauma testimony has an ethical value. Speaking the unspeakable becomes a moral act. In *Chinese Cinderella*, Adeline repeats stories of rejection. Her longing, loneliness, and shame are not just memories. Her memoir is not just about culture or family. It shows the quiet pain of a child who could not speak. Trauma theory helps us read it differently. Instead of only praising her strength, we are asked to witness her suffering. This review places *Chinese Cinderella* within trauma theory and childhood memoir. Most studies focus on identity and overcoming hardship. But they often overlook how trauma, especially emotional neglect, is



shown in the story. By using Caruth's ideas like delayed response, repeated memory, and silent pain, this study fills that gap.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach by utilizing textual analysis as the core method for exploring representations of trauma and suffering in *Chinese Cinderella*. "Qualitative research is characterized by its purpose, that is related to understanding the social life aspects, and its methods generally produce words as data for analysis, rather than numbers" (Patton, 2002, p.2). This study aims to explore the emotional and psychological depth of Adeline's experiences. It closely reads selected passages from her memoir, focusing on language, story patterns, and symbols. The analysis uses literary trauma theory, especially Cathy Caruth's ideas of delayed experience, repetition, and unprocessed memory. The main data includes chosen parts of the memoir, while supporting material comes from academic research on trauma and childhood experiences in life writing.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on trauma theory, first shaped by Cathy Caruth and later developed by scholars like Dominick La Capra, Michelle Balaev, and E. Ann Kaplan. Trauma theory helps us understand how painful experiences leave lasting emotional and psychological effects, especially when those experiences are reflected in the way a story is told and remembered. In her important book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth (1996) explains that trauma doesn't always make sense when it first happens. She shows that trauma isn't something that just fades over time. It keeps coming back. This idea helps us understand *Chinese Cinderella* better.

Building on Caruth's ideas, Dominick LaCapra (2001) explains two responses to trauma: acting out and working through. Acting out means reliving the trauma without fully understanding it. Working through means trying to process it by telling the story. In *Chinese Cinderella*, Adeline moves between these two. Sometimes, she recalls events with raw emotion. Other times, she reflects on them with calm and distance. Michelle Balaev (2014) adds that trauma is not just personal. It is shaped by culture, family, and society. Her view fits *Chinese Cinderella* well. Adeline's pain comes from strict traditions, gender roles, and rejection. Her trauma grows out of the world she lives in. E. Ann Kaplan (2005) adds a gendered view to trauma theory. She shows how women often express trauma through silence, withdrawal, or indirect language, especially in autobiographical writing. In her book *Trauma Culture*, Kaplan explains that women often express trauma through silence, pulling back, or using indirect language, especially in personal or cultural stories. In *Chinese Cinderella*, Adeline's quiet tone, lack of open rebellion, and inward pain reflect this idea. Her silence becomes a way to survive. This study uses these ideas to go beyond just showing Adeline's pain. It explores how memory, voice, and repetition reveal her trauma. This theoretical framework allows for a text-sensitive approach to analyzing Mah's memoir.

Data Analysis

Exploring Neglect and Rejection as Childhood Trauma in *Chinese Cinderella*

Adeline Yen Mah's memoir, *Chinese Cinderella: The True Story of an Unwanted Daughter* (1999) shows a painful childhood full of neglect and emotional hurt. The very first chapter reveals the emotional weight Adeline has carried since infancy. In the very start of the story, when Adeline was just four years old, her elder sister said to her that "If you had not been born, Mama would still be alive. She died because of you" (Mah, 1999, p.25). These words were spoken by a sibling and are not an isolated moment of cruelty but a repeated reminder of how



she is perceived within the family. She is considered responsible for a death and undeserving of love and nurture. Her identity from this early point becomes inseparable from the feelings of guilt and unworthiness. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory explains that trauma is not just about what happened, but about how the experience keeps returning in the mind. It often reappears later in unexpected ways, showing its lasting impact (Caruth, 1996). In Adeline's case, family interactions keep bringing back the pain by making the emotional wound feel fresh again.

Her stepmother, Niang, treats her harshly. One key moment of rejection happens when Adeline wins a major writing contest. Instead of celebrating her success, her step mother responds with cold, impersonal instructions saying "*The problem is that you have bad blood from your mother. You don't deserve to be housed and fed here. Girls like you should be sent away. You don't belong in this house!*" (Mah, 1999, p. 215). This sentence has no warmth or pride. Her achievement is taken over, not celebrated. What could have been a happy moment turns into another sign of emotional distance. Her stepmother's coldness shows a pattern. Adeline is only noticed when it benefits her father. This repeats the kind of pain Caruth talks about, where trauma is not fully felt at once but comes back again and again through moments like these, quiet, hurtful, and never really resolved.

Neglect is not just emotional, but also it is practical, physical, and deeply symbolic. In one scene, Adeline is forgotten after school. "*One by one they were greeted and led away by their anxiously hovering mothers. Eventually, I was the only one left. Nobody had come for me*" (Mah, 1999, p. 71). This moment clearly shows the emotional neglect Adeline often feels. Her physical loneliness matches how she feels inside, scared, ignored, and unseen. Judith Herman explains that trauma in children often comes from going through overwhelming experiences again and again without any power to stop them (Herman, 1992). Cathy Caruth (1996) adds that trauma is not just about the painful moment itself, but how that pain keeps returning later on. For Adeline, the trauma comes from constantly being left behind, literally and emotionally, without explanation or care.

The trauma is also compounded by the treatment she receives from her siblings, who often mimic the cruelty of the adults around them. In one instance, Adeline shared her achievement with her siblings, but they brutally ignored her and left. "*Big Sister was coming toward me with a scowl. My three brothers followed her example. Then they all ran out, leaving me quite alone with my silver medal, staring at my empty bowl!*" (Mah, 1999, p. 41). This scene shows how Adeline's joy is crushed by rejection. Her siblings ignore her and walk away, leaving her alone with her medal and an empty bowl. The silence in this moment is painful. Cathy Caruth explains that trauma is not only about the painful event itself, but how the pain returns again and again in memory (Caruth, 1996). For Adeline, the silence in this moment speaks louder than words. Her joy is erased, and her presence is once again made invisible. Even in moments of success, she is reminded that she does not belong. The rejection is not loud, but it is powerful.

Adeline's longing for her father's approval further complicates her trauma. Despite being constantly hurt, she continues to seek his affection. When she gets a medal for leading the class, she intentionally wears it to the dining table so her father might notice. He finally saw it. "*This was the first time anyone could remember Father singling me out or saying anything to me. Everyone looked at my medal. Is the left side of your chest heavier?*" Father continued, beaming with pride. "*Are you tilting?*" (Mah, 1999, p. 41). This moment stands out because Adeline finally receives a rare glimpse of approval from her father. Caruth (1996) explains that trauma is not just the result of a painful event but also how it continues to resurface



unexpectedly. The father's praise, while seemingly kind, feels unfamiliar and brief, reminding Adeline more of her usual invisibility than offering lasting comfort. Her words carry a childlike hope, layered with years of unmet emotional needs. The trauma is not just in the neglect she suffers, but in her continuous and unanswered yearning for validation.

Importantly, *Chinese Cinderella* also reveals how trauma is built through contrast. Adeline performs well at school and finds temporary acceptance among classmates. These moments of joy and recognition stand in stark contrast to the coldness of home. She gets medals from school, but at home, she is treated like waste. "*Congratulations! First week at school and you get a medal! Not bad!*" *While I was basking in Third Brother's praise, I suddenly felt a hard blow across the back of my head. I turned around to see Second Brother glowering at me*" (Mah, 1999, p. 61). This abusive act amplifies her emotional injury. It's not that she is unlovable. It's that she is unloved. Cathy Caruth (1996) explains that trauma deeply affects a person's sense of self. It stays in the mind as a powerful image or memory that the person cannot fully escape or control. In Adeline's case, she is haunted by the belief that she is a burden. It becomes the root of her trauma.

In short, Adeline's childhood in *Chinese Cinderella* shows how deep trauma can form through constant neglect and rejection. Caruth's (1996) ideas help us see these as not just single events but part of a bigger pattern that shapes who she is and how she sees the world. Her trauma is silent and ongoing, but its effects on her mind and emotions are strong and lasting.

Memory and Repetition as Reflections of Ongoing Suffering in *Chinese Cinderella*

In *Chinese Cinderella*, Adeline Yen Mah does not just share her story. She lives through it again. The way she repeats moments of pain and rejection shows how those memories still live inside her. This is what Cathy Caruth (1996) says is at the center of trauma. It is not just about the painful event itself, but how it keeps coming back. Adeline's story follows this pattern. She does not just remember things. She feels them again, lives them again, and tells them as if they never really left her.

One of the clearest examples of repetition comes from how often Adeline recalls moments when she was emotionally and physically abandoned. "*No one had come to pick me up. Trembling with fear, I walked alone into the Shanghai streets*" (Mah, 1999, p. 72). This memory comes early in the story and shows the start of the emotional neglect Adeline faces. These moments repeat again and again. The same feelings of fear, loneliness, and being unseen keep coming back. Cathy Caruth (1996) explains that this return of painful memories is a key part of trauma. Trauma lives in these repeated moments of isolation and fear, imprinting itself in memory until it is expressed. Adeline's solitary walk into the streets is a clear example of this process in action.

Caruth (1996) argues that trauma often breaks the connection between past and present. Instead of staying in the past, traumatic memories come back unexpectedly, as if the event is still happening. In *Chinese Cinderella*, Adeline experiences this through her emotional responses. Even small situations trigger powerful reactions. For example, when a teacher praises her, but her mind doesn't simply feel proud of her hard work. She thinks: "*My triumph will become Father's triumph! I must study harder and keep wearing this medal so I can go on pleasing Father*" (Mah, 1999, p.40). This moment is supposed to be joyful, but trauma has taught her not to trust happiness. She repeats patterns of fear even when the situation changes.

The emotional repetition in Adeline's writing also shows how trauma affects the way victims see themselves. Adeline repeats harmful beliefs told to her by others, especially her family. "*You're bad luck. If you hadn't been born, Mama would still be alive*" (Mah, 1999, p.



6). This sentence was said to her when she was very young. She does not just remember it. She starts to believe it. The lie turns into an emotional truth. It shapes how she sees herself for many years. Cathy Caruth explains that trauma can become part of one's identity. It is not because the event was true or fair, but because the memory refuses to fade (Caruth, 1996).

The emotional abuse she faces makes even her thoughts feel dangerous and painful. *"I imagined Niang introducing me to a strange man and ordering me to marry him. The thought filled me with horror and fear. Niang turned to Father and announced in a loud voice that I was looking uglier and uglier as I grew older and taller. Oh, the misery of it all! I felt I was being skinned alive"* (Mah, 1999, p. 382). This moment shows how deeply Adeline is affected by Niang's cruelty. The fear of being forced into something against her will and the shame of being insulted in front of her father leave a lasting mark. According to Cathy Caruth (1996), trauma is not just about what happens but how it stays with a person. Adeline's imagination and fear blend together here, showing how the mind holds on to pain in vivid and haunting ways.

Repetition also shows up in Adeline's descriptions of physical spaces. The family home is often described as a place where she doesn't belong. *"Nobody mentioned a word about being dismissed by my parents from my house"* (Mah, 1999, p.136). She repeats this idea of distance and isolation often. The same goes for how she is treated at meals, placed far away from the others, or ignored altogether. These spatial images become symbols of how she feels emotionally shut out and unwanted. Trauma often links feelings with places, and returning to those places, even in memory, brings the feelings back. This is what trauma theorists like Judith Herman (1992) call traumatic reenactment, where people unconsciously return to the scene of the pain, over and over again.

One of the most haunting moments of repetition is when Adeline compares herself to her pet duck, PLT. In one scene, PLT is chosen for a dog fight by her brother and eventually dies. Adeline says: *"I found immense consolation in the knowledge that PLT was staying right by me. I picked up my bird lovingly and for a moment seemed to see my grief reflected in its round dark eyes."* (Mah, 1999, p.170). The duck's death is symbolic. PLT was innocent and powerless like Adeline. This memory stays with her not just because of the animal's death, but because it reflects her own. Cathy Caruth (1996) explains that trauma often seeks expression in indirect ways through symbols, objects, or quiet moments. PLT becomes that symbol for Adeline. The bird reflects her grief and gives her a way to hold on to something loving in a life full of rejection.

I only remember her a little. Things were much nicer when she was alive. You made her go away." (Mah, 1999, p.24). This line reflects a deep emotional wound. Adeline barely remembers her real mother, but she still feels the loss. When her sister says, *"You made her go away,"* it shows how she links her mother's absence to her current suffering. This moment reveals a child's quiet pain and confusion about loss. From a trauma perspective, Cathy Caruth (1996) explains that trauma often centers on events that are not fully understood when they happen. Adeline's fading memory of her mother, mixed with blame, reflects how trauma can be tied to both loss and the inability to process it. The pain lingers not just in the memory, but in how that memory returns with confusion and emotional weight.

In *Chinese Cinderella*, memory is not just a tool to tell a story. It is actually the story. Adeline's memories come in waves, often returning to the same themes, the same fears, and the same disappointments. This repetition mirrors what Cathy Caruth describes as the "belatedness" of trauma. The idea is that trauma is always experienced too late through its



return. Adeline's memoir is a living map of how trauma continues to affect her long after the events have passed. Adeline's ongoing suffering is not just in what happened to her. It is what continues to live in her memory. Through repetition of situations, we see how trauma doesn't fade with time. It stays by reshaping itself and reappearing.

Conclusion

Adeline Yen Mah's *Chinese Cinderella* is more than a personal story. It is a reflection of how childhood trauma shapes a person's life. We have quoted many instances that led her to such a painful childhood. Cathy Caruth's trauma theory ideas, such as memory and repetition, show us that the pain never fades. It returns again and again in silence, rejection, and small moments of emotional hurt. Her trauma is not loud. It is quiet and hidden in daily life. Her need for love, her fear of being alone, and her memories all show how deep her wounds are. These wounds affect how she sees herself and others. This study helped us see that *Chinese Cinderella* is about surviving pain. Adeline fights back by telling her story to the world. She shows the affected children that sharing their pain can be the first step toward healing and moving on.

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