International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences
Vol-11, Issue-6; November-December, 2026

Peer-Reviewed Journal
Journal Home Page Available: https://ijels.com/
Journal DOI: 10.22161/ijels

Pain of the Past: Unmasking the Notion of Trauma from *Fun Home*

Anagha M G

Guest Lecturer, Department of English, NSS College Nilamel, Kollam, Kerala, India

Received: 14 Oct 2026; Received in revised form: 10 Nov 2026; Accepted: 14 Nov 2026; Available online: 18 Nov 2026
©2026 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Abstract— *This article titled "Pain of the Past: Unmasking the Notion of Trauma from Fun Home", is an attempt to study the linguistic hybridity of graphic narratives and its scope in effectively conveying the inconceivable reality of traumatic self. The material selected for study, Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic by Alison Bechdel, is a graphic memoir of psychological intricacy and uncommon richness. The research reinforces the fact that the graphic narratives, with its artistic richness create space to explore deep-seated nature of trauma. The study is conducted with the textual analysis of the memoir Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic by Alison Bechdel, with the aid of theoretical insights offered by the trauma theories, mainly based on the theories of Cathy Caruth. The linguisitc- formal aspects of comics is interpreted from the textual analysis of Scott McCloud's Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art, a work on comics. The paper disclose the multi-layered trauma from the memoir to examine how the author tried to present the pain of the past in the form of a hybrid narrative.*

Keywords— ***Trauma, Graphic narratives, Comics, Memoir, Hybrid narrative.***

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature has been influential in the lives of humans as it has the power to portray what a man's inner life is like. It gives room for memories, reflection, retrospection, foreshadowing, flashbacks and dreadful memories that are tinged with suffering, wound and trauma. In recent decades, "trauma theory" has emerged as a discrete but influential approach to literary criticism. It has become a relevant and pivotal subject connecting so many disciplines that allows us to "read the wound" with the aid of literature. It aids to effectively represent the unspeakable reality of lived traumatic experiences.

Graphic narratives are one of the most dynamic and captivating forms of storytelling, a genre of literature that combines textual elements and visual art. Graphic narratives, as its name implies, is a text that communicates story via graphics and illustrations. "The format of the graphic novel presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills. The reading of the graphic novel is an act of both aesthetic perception and intellectual pursuit". (Eisner 8). Hillary Chute, in her work *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*, argues that the "rich visual-verbal form of comics" is an ideal way to "represent trauma productively and ethically". (3)

This paper attempts to analyze the hybrid language of graphic narratives to disclose the multi-layered trauma from the graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel. The study highlights on how effectively the language of the graphic memoir could represent the unspeakable reality of traumatic self. By unraveling the narrative techniques employed, the study hopes to gain a richer understanding of the transformative power of memoirs and their ability to bring hidden narratives to light. It looks into the graphic representations in deducing meaning, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of the emotional nuances and psychological complexities from the text. The study reinforces the fact that the graphic narratives, with its artistic richness create space to explore deep-seated nature of trauma. *Fun Home*, a 2006 graphic memoir, was a bestseller and commercial success. The memoir was subsequently adapted as a musical that won

numerous awards and appreciation. The New York Times Book Review has observed it as "a pioneering work pushing two genres- comics and memoir- in multiple new directions." As part of a greater shift towards serious academic involvement in the study of comics or sequential art, *Fun Home* has been a major topic in the field of biography studies and cultural studies. As a graphic memoir, it is an autobiographical work with a conglomeration of writings and illustrations. It took many years for Alison to develop this text, and it can be seen as a way for her to process the complex emotions she was experiencing as a result of her father's death, her own sexuality, and her coming to terms with family secrets that threatened to sabotage her sense of belonging and her memories of childhood. This introspective piece of work shows how literature can be cathartic for both writer and the reader. Her recollections are shown in the comic panels, with her retrospective remarks added in text boxes and as captions. When transposing one's own painful past into comic book form, it's clear that for Bechdel, the more based in reality the drawings can be, the more honest the story can be as well. The title embodies the pun "tragicomic" in the sense that it uses a comic book form to tell a tragic story.

The study is conducted with the textual analysis of the memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* by Alison Bechdel, with the aid of theoretical insights offered by the trauma theories, mainly based on the theories of Cathy Caruth. The linguistitc- formal aspects of comics is interpreted from the textual analysis of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, a work on comics.

Fun Home documents Alison's account of her family's complicated history, in a more personal level. Bechdel family carries secrets, primarily Alison's Father who conceals his homosexual desires from the children and the public. Bruce keeps the secret covered, but finds other methods to express his queerness, mainly through the aesthetic of his home, or through Alison. However, on the contrary, Alison was being pressurized by her own parents to follow a stereotypical heteronormative notion of childhood, wherein sexuality is viewed as illicit and something to be ashamed of. Although Alison has countless memories on her childhood to relish upon, it is also packed with abuse and neglect that traps her in a pit of secrets and guilt. There are various catastrophic events that Bechdel lists in the memoir and this can analysed through a trauma-based lens. It delves into the way in which Bechdel uses her memory and try to present the pain of traumatic life in the form of graphic narrative.

After having gained perspective, Alison was able to disclose and publicly affirm her lesbian identity. Like her parents, Alison managed to lie and hide her secrets on homosexuality till her puberty, but upon entering her college, she learns more about queer culture and knowledge, thereby refusing to hide her identity in contrast to her father. In fact, the contradiction is in such a way that Bruce becomes the only person who shows any sign of understanding and support when Alison comes out as an adult. Despite hiding his own sexuality, he tried to provide her snippets on the knowledge of queer culture, which itself suggests that although Bruce feared of his identity, he tried not to completely conceal himself or his children knowing about the queer culture. Yet, while Alison is free to live openly as a lesbian at the end of *Fun Home*, her father passes away, with his community believing he was a straight, "perfect" family man.

Alison, through this memoir, navigates through her traumatic childhood while growing up with the "secrets" and "violence" of the Bechdel family, particularly Bruce's rage against his wife and kids. The most threatening presence is Bruce's guilt or shame about his sexuality, which shows up in a different way, mainly the way his family including his daughter is being treated. The graphic memoir demonstrates the contrast between the idealized version of Bruce and the suffering and dysfunction that actually exists behind that image. Through Alison's observations, she draws connections from happy family moments to the trauma caused by her father. Each and every picture of Alison's family that she provides in the memoir has a tint of trauma and pain. Therefore, there exists no perfect moment, nor is it a "fun home". The house itself turns into a source of constant stress, as it can never properly conceal the shame of homosexuality or the stigma associated with homosexuality, especially for the children who live there. Through Bruce Bechdel, it is evident that this shame whilst living in the closet not only impacts that individual alone, but others as well.

Bechdel uses the Gothic Restoration family home to show the contradicting and intricate ways trauma affects the family. Although Bruce's wife and kids are a way to maintain the house's heteronormative facade, the children frequently get punished when that image is ruined. Bechdel shows how Bruce's homosexuality is kept hidden in the family home, which causes conflict for the kids who live there. The house symbolically presents an interesting contrast, where, on one side, Bruce hides his homosexuality by projecting the picture of a heteronormative home with a mother, father and three children. At the same time, it serves as a vehicle for his self-expression, by rebuilding a decadent home with a feminine aesthetic. Alison observes, "He would perform, as Daedalus did, dazzling displays of artfulness (Bechdel 9)". She acknowledges his mastery over

crafting beauty, and compares him to the mythological inventor Daedalus. Most people admired his skill in this, but failed to see the torture Bruce experienced emotionally and psychologically, due to his fixation with image. This can be connected to the illicit nature of his sexuality. Alison, on the other hand, was able to identify the contradictions in this image that others failed to see. Bruce was able to create a "happy family" through his art, but in real life, he distances himself from that. Alison, who longs for love and guidance from her father, gets disappointed every time as Bruce always stands out from the concept of an "ideal family". In many instances, he creates some family moments, but removes himself from that once it is done. For example, taking a photograph of the family before church, being a church-going man, who sits in the front row of the church. But this is just an attempt of Bruce to fit in the heteronormative vision of family man. Alison states, "He appeared to be an ideal husband and father, for example. But would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys". (Bechdel17). Throughout the memoir, Alison makes literary allusions to better understand her family, especially her father, and this comparison to fictional characters is an effort to make sense of their chaos and pain. But it is clear that no work of fiction is ever enough truly comprehend her past and the complicated relationships within a family. Moreover, Bechdel's choice to tell and retell the same events in light of new information is a kind of therapeutic method of comprehending a painful childhood.

Alison traces her father's indifferent treatment towards his children and the way it impacted the psyche of her as a kid. Emotional neglect is one of the worst thing a child could ever experience. She writes, "I grew to resent the way my father treated his furniture like children, and his children like furniture."(Bechdel14). Alison always longed for love and acceptance from her parents but always received punishments and neglect. This can create a huge impact in developing serious traumatic symptoms, affecting her ability to lead a functional life. Bechdel includes a lengthy section that discusses her childhood Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). One of Bechdel's compulsions, she says, is perfectly lining up her sneakers. She designates her mother as the right shoe and her father as the left shoe. She makes an effort to arrange them properly so as not to favor one parent over the other. She says, "It took several painstaking minutes to line up my shoes exactly, so as to show neither one preference. (The left one was my father, the right one was my mother." (Bechdel 137).

She recounts that actual OCD began when she was ten. She used to count the number of drops flowing from a leaky bathtub. "First it involved a lot of counting. Trying to manipulate the slightly leaky bathtub faucet with my toe so that it would stop on an even number of drips. Odd numbers and multiplies of thirteen were to be avoided at all costs." (Bechdel 135). Many studies have solidified the link between Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) and childhood trauma. People with OCD experience obsession (upsetting and intrusive thoughts) and compulsions (repetitious actions intended to reduce or eliminate the obsession). Numerous psychological studies have identified that, the more who are exposed to stressful circumstances, the more they are likely to develop obsessions. Even though its causes are unknown, OCD may be triggered by traumatic events, particularly childhood trauma.

Alison mentions about her development of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder through her diary entries. Whenever she attempted to write each time, a kind of self-doubt coated her For instance, she should write, "I think" between each statement. It even got worse when she would scribble "I think" over each entry. Cvetkovich suggests that "…Alison's efforts to witness in a world of silences, secrets, and repressions lead to various forms of writer's block, censorship, and unrepresentability". (Cvetkovich 121). She encounters a world that she cannot trust, and as a result, her diary becomes filled with modifiers. A trauma victim cannot comprehend the traumatic event so it is impossible to convey the inexplicable. Her compulsive disorder was a manifestation of her own childhood unhappiness.

Alison as an adult exhibits compulsion. The memoir's repeating of certain episodes signals a sense of distress and lack of comprehension. The scene where mother reveals about her father's sexuality is repeated several times in the text. This indicates that this particular event is something that has stayed with her since then. In trauma fiction, repetition is an essential part and "repetition mimics the symptoms of trauma: it indicates on a formal level the haunting return of the event and the disruption of chronology characterizes a traumatized individual's mind." (Adami 74). Bruce can be considered as a less than model parent, the one who is abusive to his wife Helen, ignoring his family and rather just focus on furniture restoration. The anger outbursts suggest that it is destructive not only for themselves, but for their whole family. "The dialectic of trauma operates not only in the survivor's inner life but also in her close relationships that fluctuate between extremes." (Herman 56). The requirement for some consistency seems to be crucial in a household where father is prone to unreasonable outbursts. She can at least recognize a pattern in her own everyday habits and behaviours. This forced sense of repetition is unmistakably a sign of her lonely family life and the stressful atmosphere in which she lives.

"Repetition is the mute language of the abused child". (Herman 110).

It is clear from the lives of Alison and Bruce that queerness can lead to psychological trauma due to various factors like social prejudice, marginalization, discrimination and many more. The indifferent treatment from the society can be a major aspect in the development of trauma symptoms. The experiences of being treated as the "other" or "abnormal" can lead to create a sense of internalized self-hatred, leading to create a wound in human mind. In this case, Bruce knows about the society's treatment regarding homosexuality and is sure that he won't be accepted by any. He managed to keep it as a secret fearing the evil consequences of coming out. Bruce portrayed himself as a perfect, ideal man image in front of the public. In reality, the society did not marginalize or categorize him as the "other" due to this, but Bruce always felt a sense of discrimination and marginalization within him because he was himself haunted by his identity. He categorized himself as abnormal and had a feeling that his life is not worth living. This sense of discrimination within himself created a chronic stress and anxiety in him. Moreover, his concern was less about the society and more about his family. Bruce was much fixated on thinking about the rejection and conflict within his own family if they identify his queerness. He fears that coming out can result in rejection and strained relationships. One who feels a loss of acceptance within one's own family can be deeply painful and traumatic, leading to feel isolated, abandoned and betrayed. Homophobia cannot only be related to the outer society, but it exists within oneself, the aspects of internalized homophobia. It can be a direct result of growing up in a society that perpetuates negative stereotypes against this community. Internalized self-hatred and the urge to conform to societal expectations can cause remarkable agony and distress which may result in developing the symptoms of trauma. A variety of reactions or symptoms are usually associated with trauma, which mainly includes confusion, sadness, anxiety, and many more. A person can feel worthless due to his fragmented psyche and this can be evidently seen in Bruce when he says that he is "bad" and not good like Alison. This was when Alison was thirteen, the time when her father's secret almost surfaced. She writes in her diary entry that time, "Dad's gonna go to a psychiatrist. He says it's because he's bad and wants to be good or something." (Bechdel 153). The diary entry she wrote at the age of thirteen explicitly reveals how the shame regarding his sexuality has traumatized him psychologically and the visit to the psychiatrist was an attempt to turn himself to a "good" person. This conversation happened even before Alison's coming out as a lesbian, and hence he says, "I'm bad, not good like you." (Bechdel 153).

The notion of "good" for Bruce is in contrast to his own sexual identity, which is one of the major reasons for his traumatized nature. Alison condemns, "I suppose that a lifetime spent hiding one's erotic truth could have a cumulative renunciatory effect. Sexual shame is in itself a kind of death."(Bechdel 228). This sexual shame affected Bruce's psyche to a great extent and made him end his life.

As Bruce suppresses his own identity by living as a heterosexual man in front of the society, he develops a sense of internal struggle. The suppression of his true identity along with his constant fear of being discovered results in internal conflict and thereby becomes a traumatic individual. This kind of trauma he faces results from the weight of his hidden, repressed identity. As he always hides his true self and queer desires, he fails to find an emotional connection with those around him which creates a sense of disconnection and estrangement from his own family. His traumatic self can be a result of his unfulfilled longings and desires. Bruce keeps relationship with many men during different course of life, but unfortunately, he needs to do this in secret. Freudian theory suggests that the suppressed desires will come out in one way or the other, but will have a huge psychological impact within oneself. Bruce's hidden desires and the inability to follow it openly contribute to a sense of emotional turmoil and longing. These suppressed desires can ultimately lead Bruce to develop himself as a traumatic individual. It is true that Bruce due to all these, end up being in a tragic scenario. The memoir explores Bruce's death and Alison is in a constant search to know the exact reason of him to commit suicide. His struggle with queer identity and family dynamics can be related to his tragic death and the impact of Bruce's unresolved trauma could be the factor that may have contributed to his tragic end.

Alison explores the significance of discovering queer literature that mainly details about queerness and sexuality. This exploration of books helped her to identify her own sexual interests and experiences. Literature helped her to understand different perspectives on sexual identities which serves as a catalyst for own self-acceptance and coming out. Her decision to come out as a lesbian could be a direct or indirect influences from textbooks she read. Even though Bruce, for his entire life lived as a "perfect man" before the society, concealing his homosexuality, Alison comes out as a lesbian once she reaches her puberty. There is a close link between the coming out process and the internal and emotional struggle within oneself associated with it. These pivotal moments can be accompanied by a mixed range of emotions, either in a positive or negative terms. For many queer individuals, this process of coming out can be both liberating and traumatic. It could lead to

ruptures in familial relationships, rejection from family, which in turn results in emotional distress and psychological trauma. Alison writes, "I had imagined my confession as an emancipation from my parents, but instead I was pulled back into their orbit."(Bechdel 59).

Freud and Breuer, in *Studies in Hysteria*, emphasize that the original event was not traumatic in itself but only in its remembrance. It is only after a present event calls forth the previously repressed event that the past event can become known in the process of remembering. Considering the case of Alison, her remembrance about her father's death becomes more traumatic than the event itself. Her writing of the memoir can be regarded as a process of remembering the repressed events that resulted from the dysfunctional family life and the death of her loved one. Alison mentions that, in retrospect, their family was a sham and that her house was not a real home. Bruce appears to have experienced certain repercussions due his repressed identity. For instance, Alison once talks to him about the gay group picketing the movie *Cruising* as it contains some sort of bad stereotypes. "I dropped the subject. Partly because of his derision, but mostly because of the fear in his eyes." (Bechdel 219).

Cathy Caruth, in her pioneering work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* states that in Freudian perspective, trauma is described as the successive movement from an event to its repression to its return. Since traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time. Moreover, it is not experienced as a mere repression, but as a temporal delay that carries the individual beyond the shock of first moment. (17). Hence the repressed element in Bruce might have returned with this dialogue of Alison. His traumatized identity is evident from the fear in his eyes. Bruce's death, as Alison suspects might be a kind of suicide resulting from the series of shocks that Bruce experiences. Many contemporary events called forth the previously repressed event of Bruce, which in turn fragmented the psyche of the already traumatized individual. It was only four months earlier that Alison had made an announcement to her parents that she was a lesbian. Her father used to express his femininity through his own daughter and on knowing about the homosexual identity of his daughter, the repressed psyche got triggered within him. This repeated suffering of the event made him feel isolated and disoriented, finally culminating in his ending.

Caruth poses the question that, is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experiences of having surviving it. She suggests that trauma, is a kind of double telling, which is an oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life. That is, it is the oscillation between the story of unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival. (7). This oscillation between the crisis of death and life is evident in the case of Bruce. Alison pictures the death of her father not as a new catastrophe. "Dad's death was not a new catastrophe but an old one that had been unfolding very slowly for a long time". (Bechdel83). She suspects that her father had timed his death within his mind. This highlights the fact that Bruce was oscillating between the crisis of death and life. However, certain contemporary events brought forth the repressed events of the past in Bruce's life that might have carried the individual beyond the shock.

The traumatic legacy is passed on to Alison as well, who was the direct witness of all these catastrophes. She has developed some traits that are typical of trauma sufferers since the stress she has experienced has had such a negative impact on her sense of self. Alison's childhood was a longing for affection and attention from her parents, but she does not receive it. She has experienced loneliness as her family members have all a tendency to isolate themselves. Bruce makes us realize about the queer perspectives on trauma that homophobia and heteronormativity results in psychic trauma in individual lives. Traumatic events are unbearable in horror and intensity and they usually exists as memories. Thus, she uses her memory and try to present the pain of past in the form of a graphic, visual narrative. As readers, we experience both Bechdel's pain and her father's trauma, in addition to her own trauma. Literature, according to Cathy Caruth opens a window on traumatic experience because it teaches readers to listen to what can be told in indirect and surprising ways. Alison views the graphic memoir as a means to convey the fragmented psyche of her father and herself in rather indirect ways.

This article detailed the various catastrophic events that Alison documented in the memoir, which is analysed through a trauma-based lens. From a book that primarily dealt with themes like sexual orientation, suicide, dysfunctional family life, the study mainly focused to unveil the layers of multi-faceted trauma from the text to understand the way it fragments the psyche of individuals and looked into how graphic memoir stands as an effective way to convey the traumatic selves in indirect ways.

REFERENCES

[1] Bechdel, Alison, and Hillary Chute. "An Interview with Alison Bechdel." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 52, no. 4, 2006, pp. 1004–1013, www.jstor.org/stable/26286681.

[2] Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Jonathan Cape, 2006.

[3] Carpenter, Leanne, and Man Cheung Chung. "Childhood Trauma in Obsessive Compulsive Disorder: The Roles of Alexithymia and Attachment." *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, vol. 84, no. 4, 25 Feb. 2011, pp. 367–388, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8341.2010.02003.x.

[4] Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. https://hemi.nyu.edu/hemi/images/courses/spring-2009/caruthintro.pdf.

[5] ---. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. https://joaocamillopenna.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/caruth-unclaimed-experience.pdf.

[6] Dugaje Manohar. Re-mapping Colonial Violence: A Postcolonial Study of Coetzee's Life and Times of Michael K. MRS Journal of Arts, Humanities and Literature. Issue-12 Volume-2 2025. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17879881

[7] Krishnan Divya., Dugaje Manohar. Capturing the Ekphrastic Gaze: An Analysis of Visual Perception in Jose Saramago's Manual of Painting and Calligraphy. Think India Journal. Vol-26-Issue-04. April. 2023. https://thinkindiaquarterly.org/index.php/think-india/article/view/20427

[8] McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York, Harper Perennial,1994. https://www.labster8.net/wpcontent/uploads/2019/08/McCloudUnderstandingComicsCH1.pdf