



Shattered Yet Strong: Interpreting *Small Beauty* with Judith Herman's Theory of Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD)

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Abstract

This paper explores jia qing wilson-yang's *Small Beauty* protagonist Mei's story, which revolves around Judith Herman's theory of Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) derived from her seminal work *Trauma and Recovery* (1992). Herman's framework provides a lens to analyze Mei's journey as a transgender woman of color, the psychological effects of her constant and interpersonal traumatic experiences, while navigating through the system of violence and oppression. Throughout the novel, Mei deals with a series of severe challenges, such as societal and familial rejections, discrimination, sexual assault, and struggles with internalized shame. As a transgender woman of color, she is marginalized by a society that is tightly knitted with racism, sexism, and transphobia, causing her a sense of isolation and vulnerability. Herman's theory helps to understand how Mei intersects with the symptoms of complex psychological traumas, how Mei uses avoidance and emotional numbing as a coping mechanism in response to the overwhelming intensity of her trauma, and how she struggles to navigate her identity and relationships that are altered due to effects of trauma. *Small Beauty* unveils the complex interconnections between trauma, identity, and resilience and offers insights into ways in which support from either chosen family members or close circle supports healing from trauma and reclaiming agency and identity.

Keywords

Judith Herman, C-PTSD, trauma, transgender identity, resilience

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Judith Herman's theory of complex post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD) further extends the traditional understanding of PTSD. Herman affirms that the start techniques of psychological domination are established on "the systematic, repetitive inflictions of psychological trauma" (Herman 77); it primarily explores interpersonal trauma such as domestic violence, systematic oppression, captivity, childhood abuse, etc., whereas PTSD focuses more on the aftermath of a single traumatic event, such as an accident, combat, physical assault, or a natural disaster. Although PTSD and C-PTSD share core symptoms, such as flashbacks, nightmares, and avoidance of trauma, hypervigilance, C-PTSD reflects further upon a separate set of symptoms, such as alterations in self-perception and relationships, feelings of worthlessness, shame, and guilt, distorted sense of identity and difficulties in forming and maintain relationships. According to her, C-PTSD focuses on the role of interpersonal trauma that shapes one's psychological functioning. It disrupts one's sense of safety, autonomy, and identity, causing constant vulnerability, hypervigilance, and difficulties establishing boundaries and acknowledging one's needs. Moreover, it also leads to interpersonal abuse and oppression.

Herman states that trauma makes people step back from close relationships and also seek them simultaneously because of the lack of trust, feelings of "shame, guilt, and inferiority," and constant finding ways to avoid social gatherings that could turn into a reminder of the traumatic experience a person had, however, the same traumatic event could also lead a person to need protective attachment (Herman 40). Similarly, at the novel's beginning, Annette confronts Mei for not talking to anyone in the last two months since she arrived at Herbertsville after the death of her cousin,

Sandy, who was her last family member. Although Mei feels ashamed for doing so, she tries to deny it, but Annette catches her lying immediately. Unable to connect with others or express her grief, she decided to talk on the phone with Annette rather than anyone else in person:

Since Sandy died, she is rarely out of her head long enough to maintain an in-person conversation. Phone calls are different. The physical absence of the other person creates a feeling of safety. No eyes to scan for reactions, no revealing hand movements. Just a sound. (wilson-yang 61)

Mei spends two months in isolation in Sandy's house after his death; if not for Hazel, Sandy's dog, she would not have stepped out of the house at all. Herman comments that "traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life," not all traumatic experiences "involve a threat to life our bodily integrity or a close personal encounter with violence and death." The experience makes humans deal with the "extremities of helplessness and terror and involves the responses of catastrophe" (Herman 33). In other words, Herman says, some events that may not seem inherently dangerous or life-threatening can still be traumatic for people; for some, it can trigger extreme emotional and mental responses such as feelings of helplessness and terror.

Furthermore, Herman affirms that there are two phases of the psychological breaking of the victim; the first phase is when the victim goes through the state of "robotization," which means shutting down emotions. The second stage is when "the victim loses the will to live." It does not necessarily mean committing suicide but also an approach of complete passivity turning into the stage of "living dead" (Herman 85). Mei, by suppressing emotions, being unable to deal with Sandy's death, and getting exhausted with the constant search for the community to belong and be accepted, is overwhelmed by everything around her, therefore, decides to kill herself by taking Valium and Tylenol 3s together. Regardless of her decision to take her own life, Mei is saved by the ghost of her grandmother, whom she hears calling out to her, "Aiya! Xiao Mei! Get off the floor" (wilson-yang 32). Mei feels ashamed because she chooses to lie when the ghost confronts her, saying that she has been too busy to clean herself of the vomit she is covered in. The ghost replies, "Xiao Mei! You not busy! You depressed" ... "Xiao Mei, you watch too much TV" ... You are not healthy, Mei. You need to change the scene" (wilson-yang 33). Mei cannot adjust herself to the emptiness and loneliness that suddenly came into her life after Sandy's death, along with haunting memories of sexual assault and abandonment issues from the past.

Hyper-arousal is another prevalent theme from the novel that falls under Herman's lens. According to her, the hyper-arousal state occurs when the person's self-protection system becomes vigilant as if the threat would reoccur at any instant. In this state, the traumatized victim "startles easily, reacts irritably to small provocations, and sleeps poorly" (Herman 35). Mei, as a trans woman of color, was a

victim of sexual assault, an attack that she was even prepared for, yet she was not able to escape from the violence. Annette, Mei's only close friend and a fellow trans-Asian woman, says, "I got a brick and mace in my purse" (wilson-yang 63); despite Mei taking a brick in her purse, she was not able to save herself from physical and sexual assault. Haunani-Kay Trask comments that the "color of violence" that Asian women face is not binary, but it is "white over yellow" domination (Trask 82). There is overt and covert violence against people of Color; however, both lead to trauma and even death for those who are marginalized and suppressed (Trask 83-84). After the assault, a woman on the bus showed her pity that immediately turned into disgust and commented, "Well, you certainly had that coming" (wilson-yang 68). Even in the surroundings of women, she was not safe. Mei rushes to the apartment of her older Chinese trans friend, Connie, who creates a safe place for her. Connie insists that Mei sleep in her apartment and helps clean her physical wounds. Moreover, she provides Mei with chrysanthemum tea along with congee to help her heal. Connie comments, "I used to do this for my son" (wilson-yang 70), which indicates how natural it is for them to encounter violence. The assault not only caused physical pain but also led to anxiety and sleeplessness, "The first night... she cannot sleep. Mei Sets with hazels head on her lap, running her hands through the dog's fur. She is awake... it is the time of the night that feels endless. The time between" (wilson-yang 77). Sandy, on the other side, took matters into his own hands by beating the people who assaulted Mei and providing justice to her in his way; also, it was expected from him because he was the only male in the family (Veerland 156). Connie and Sandy were a "pair of unlikely guardian angels" because of their help after the attack (wilson-yang 72). In addition, their help lasts beyond their deaths because their ghosts continue to guide, support, and encourage Mei to heal and protect herself.

In the early chapters, it is clearly mentioned that Mei's mother, Jun, rejects her and says, "This to be the last transgression she could handle, and threatens to move back to China and leave Mei alone in the city." Later, Mei tells her mother, "She was transsexual, something Jun long expected" (wilson-yang 10). Herman mentions another way trauma destroys a person is by taking away the "victim's sense of autonomy" (Herman 77). The same symptom is reflected in Mei's behavior numerous times; for instance, she does not stop her mother from leaving her, she does not seek justice for her assault, and she numbs her emotions after Sandy's death. However, there is only one incident when she takes control over herself; Mei discovers the truth about her aunt, Sandy's mother, Bernadette, who is gay. Mei feels a sense of encouragement and relief to discover family secrets and feels a sense of belonging; a weight from her shoulders was lifted after realizing that she was not the only one in the family who was *different*; perhaps this profound strength may be one of the reasons why she takes a stand for herself. Also, Mei's mother's constant rejection makes more sense because she does not attend Bernadette or Sandy's funeral. Diane, despite belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, does not accept Mei's gender

identity in the first place, “I like you, kid...Sandy must have too. I’m just hoping you’re just confused” (wilson-yang 54), “You have no idea what you’re talking about. You can’t just go ahead and make a woman” (wilson-yang 55). In Diane’s view, identities are created for individuals who cannot pass as white, straight, or cis, instead of by them (Hurdis 280). Furthermore, she asks whether Mei is taking any hormone pills or undergoing any surgery, which also means that she is not only interrogating her but also trying to put a label on Mei’s gender. The policing of Mei’s body marginalizes her more into oppression, especially in the community where she thought she would be accepted. Finally, Mei shuts down Diane’s speculation and judgments towards her and says, “You are a gay nephew,” Mei revolts back and comments, “No, I’m the trans niece. I’m a lady. As in not a man. Not the gay nephew. The gay niece” (wilson-yang 52).

Herman argues, “A supportive response from other people may mitigate the impact of the event, while a hostile or negative response may compound the damage and aggravate the traumatic syndrome” (Herman 44). A traumatized person requires emotional support from family, partners, or close friends. Even rebuilding a small amount of trust is a big challenge for them, and sometimes, all they seek is to be in the presence of a sympathetic person. Mei, since her journey as a transgender woman started, had been constantly in search of a community to belong and be accepted. Previously, she did mention that her personal life has been critically looked into by the “community workers, doctors, counselors, curious strangers, and police” (wilson-yang 13), whereas, with other transgender women, she found her safe place to talk about other things that actually mattered to her, like an average human having a conversation about the “favorite food sex or art” (wilson-yang 13). Mei assumed that Diana, being her aunt’s ex-girlfriend and a member of the LGBTQ+ community, would be accepting and empathetic towards her. However, when Diana expressed her skepticism and called her “confused,” Mei suddenly realized the need to assert her identity and perspective. Meanwhile, the lady on the cashier counter in the grocery store warmly accepts Mei as she is and comments, “I got a niece- I mean a nephew-like you... I just think it’s great people like him. And you. Brave enough to do what you’re doing” (wilson-yang 41). She points towards the little rainbow button on her vest, welcoming her to the new surroundings.

John Read states that hallucinations and delusions are often related to childhood trauma, either directly or metaphorically. (Read 2020). After Sandy’s death, Mei stays in his apartment. She could barely sleep, and one night, she felt a weight on the mattress; for the first time, she saw the ghost of her grandmother sitting near the foot of the bed. Nai Nai tells Mei, “This is a good place to remember who you are” (wilson-yang 20). Soon after that incident, Mei started performing Chinese rituals, which she had not done since childhood. Herman comments that by ignoring “severe pain, to hide their memories in complex amnesias, to alter their sense of time, place, or person, and to induce hallucinations or possession states,” Mei

started hallucinating because she had been storing her grief and pain inside her for a long time. Talking to a ghost or something invisible could be a hallucination or mental disorder. In the modern world, but given the context of the novel, the appearance of a ghost or ancestral spirit has an immense significance in Chinese culture. The stories of ghosts and spirits are a central part of Chinese culture (Tan 203). Chinese people believe that:

The spirits of ancestors who have passed away are still very present in the lives of the living family. Proper homage, prayer, and offerings to deceased ancestors would bring blessings. On the other hand, failure to attend properly to deceased ancestors could incur their wrath, resulting in illness among family members, or misfortune. (Tan 203)

She places the urn in front of the pictures of her grandmother and her aunt and lights a stick of incense, “she raises the incense to her face and holding it in front of her with arms outstretched, she bows from the waist three times” (wilson-yang 27). According to Nai Nai, one bow is for heaven, the other for the earth, and the last for the ancestors. Nai always said, “Canadians treated their dead like they treated their elderly; they sent them to a graveyard or a nursing home and forgot about them” (wilson-yang 79). Mei, a Chinese Canadian woman, has always felt disconnected from her Chinese heritage, culture, and customs. She states, “China is a myth to them... Something they only see evidence of in their skin, their eyes. Their family. Each other. They have never been” (wilson-yang 81). The ghosts come to protect Mei and show her the path to her healing journey because she cannot process her emotions without them.

Herman notes, “Only the repeated reliving of the moment of horror temporarily breaks through the sense of numbing and disconnection (Herman 35). When Mei learns about Connie’s passing from Annette, she immediately blames herself for not being there for her friend, saying, “She was sick. I was here, and she was dying.” (wilson-yang 128).” Mei continues to feel guilty about her neglect. “I tried calling her, Annette. I tried and her number wasn’t working. I could have called you. I could have called the center” (wilson-yang 129). Mei thinks, “She needs to get out of here. She should have been in the city for Connie. For a death. For a funeral. Where was she buried? She should have found her. All the regrets of absence” (wilson-yang 129). She blames herself for not being there for her and for the way she supported her. She thinks of various resources she could have used to be there, whether using Sandy’s truck to drive through the city or calling in the winters before Connie’s line disconnected. However, instead, she hid herself in the emptiness and sorrows in Sandy’s apartment. Mei relives the horror of her past memories; she is already struggling to keep her emotions suppressed after the sudden passing away of Sandy, and the news of Connie’s death adds even more pressure on her. Mei feels like she is reaching her breaking point, but this is the moment when her breakthrough starts amplifying.

Mei thought Connie would be angry for not being with her during her last days, but Connie passed away in silence and left “a statue of a jade horse and a trunk. A huge trunk full of books” (wilson-yang 129). It shows that Connie was aware of what was coming for her and knew that Mei would blame herself for everything, so she visited her as a ghost. Mei sees the ghost of her family, but in the end, she also sees the ghost of Connie, and Mei fails to understand why that happened. She comments, “Ghost of blood family somehow made sense, but Connie wasn’t blood, and besides, she had abandoned her.” Connie’s ghost replies, “People are connected through more than blood, you know this” (wilson-yang 142). Although Mei’s mother was completely absent from her life and her aunt never revealed her secrets, which could have saved Mei from a massive emotional turmoil, nonetheless, it was her chosen family, like Annette and Connie, who filled those gaps and made her life easier by just being with her. Mei says:

It is a huge deal that I wasn’t there for Connie! She took care of me. You wouldn’t get it. How amazing it is to meet someone like you who’s older, when you’ve been living with the idea that no one like you ever gets to be older. How incredible and terrifying that is. All at once. (wilson-yang 158)

Connie provided a safe place for Mei after she was assaulted last summer. Mei and Connie had established a strong bond that did not revolve around “gender or hair removal” (wilson-yang 137). As a ghost, Connie reminds Mei that she has too much anger inside her, but Mei denies the truth as usual and questions back Connie about what there is to be angry about. Connie replies:

Your family. Not looking like you think you should. Too white... All around you are reasons to be angry. The people you meet. Someone looks at you at the wrong way, someone says something at the wrong time, your paperwork gets turned down, the doctor treats you like a science experiment and won't give you hormones. Those are all great reason to be angry. But it builds up, Sai Mui. It is all over for you. I see you, holding anger like your child. Taking care of it. Quietly rising it”. (wilson-yang 136)

Connie’s ghost helps her navigate her anger and frustration caused by physical, sexual, and emotional frustrations. Meanwhile, Annette stays connected to her and consistently reminds her that she is far better than hiding at Sandy’s home and needs to escape the web of isolation and loneliness she has created for herself. Both Connie and Annette play a significant role in her healing journey. Herman argued that dissociation, constriction, and numbing are altered states that keep the experience “walled off from ordinary consciousness” (Herman 45), and the main characteristics are avoidance of emotions and failure to plan for the future. Although Mei’s grandmother had passed away when she was much younger. However, Mei frequently received visits from her ghost. Ultimately, her grandmother advises Mei to

get a new job and buy a cottage near the beach. This was symbolic of her grandmother's desire for Mei to get over her mourning period and get back to the life that she had been neglecting for a long time. While conversing with Sandy's ghost, she breaks down in tears for the first time and admits how miserable she has been; she reveals that she disappeared for a year, went through all his old stuff, and lived in his empty house because she was helpless and vulnerable. Sandy has always acted like a parental figure and protected her, even as a ghost. He did precisely the same. She expresses her anger through tears and authentically expresses herself because she is emotionally connected to Sandy. Both Connie and Sandy also remind Mei that she needs to forgive herself and let go of the burden she is not supposed to have in the first place.

In the end, Mei steals a canoe and paddles it onto a lake. As she looks out at the water surrounding her, she realizes that the lake's water and her tears symbolize cleansing and releasing all the bottled-up emotions she has held inside for years. Water is considered sacred in many cultures and religions, and among Chinese people, too, it is associated with purifying oneself, getting rid of spiritual and physical impurities, and starting anew. Similarly, Mei's story ends with Wilson-Yang surrounding her with water and each ghost, encouraging her to let go of the traumatic past by expressing her feelings truly and starting fresh. Mei reaches out to her friend Annette and tells her she is coming back and will stay with her. The novel both begins and ends with the conversation between Mei and Annette.

To conclude, Jia Qing Wilson-Yang's *Small Beauty* follows the journey of its protagonist, Mei, as she unveils the struggles experienced by transgender women of color while navigating through the system of oppression and dwells further into the complexities of trauma and resilience within the marginalized communities and how it also intersects with the theme of race and identity. Throughout the story, Mei also discovers intergenerational trauma and hidden parallels in her family to understand her identity better. Using Judith Herman's theory of Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD), the novel explores the significant impact of trauma on an individual's psyche and self-realization. Mei touches upon the central aspect of Herman's theory, including re-experiencing, avoidance, emotional numbing, and alterations in self-perception and relationship. The frequent encounters with the ghosts of her grandmother and Sandy can be considered hallucination in the medical world, but it is symbolic in Chinese culture; it serves as a representation of Mei's inner conflicts, unresolved trauma, and suppression of emotions; through their visit, she understands the fragmented aspects of her identity which help her to knit herself as whole after letting her years of stored emotions out. *Small Beauty* also talks about the importance of interpersonal relationships and community support in humbling the effects of trauma and enforcing resilience. The presence of Ghosts, as well as her friends from the transgender community, Connie and Annette, provide a source of validation, affirmation, and healing. These relationships navigate her to feel a sense of belonging and empowerment, pushing back the isolating effects of complex trauma and oppression.

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