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Beyond Victimhood: Denial as Narrative Agency in *My Dark Vanessa*

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Abstract

This paper examines the refusal of victimhood in My Dark Vanessa by Kate Elizabeth Russell, focusing on the protagonist Vanessa Wye's resistance to identifying as a victim of abuse. While dominant trauma theories emphasize recognition and acknowledgment as essential for recovery, this study addresses a critical gap by exploring whether denial can function as an adaptive response rather than a pathological one. Drawing on trauma theory and literary analysis, the paper analyzes Vanessa's narrative voice, her interpretation of consent, and her rejection of externally imposed survivor identities. Through close textual reading, it argues that Vanessa's refusal of victimhood is not merely repression but a strategy to preserve agency and maintain control over her self-definition. This challenges conventional models that equate healing with acceptance of victimhood. The findings suggest that trauma responses are more complex and varied than traditionally assumed, and that denial, in certain contexts, may serve as a mechanism of survival rather than failure. By rethinking denial within trauma discourse, the paper calls for more flexible frameworks that account for diverse survivor experiences.

I. INTRODUCTION

Trauma narratives within literary and psychological discourse have long been shaped by the assumption that acknowledgment of suffering is essential for recovery. Foundational theorists such as Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman argue that trauma acquires meaning only when it is recognized, articulated, and validated within interpersonal or therapeutic frameworks. In this model, the acceptance of victimhood becomes central to the process of healing, enabling survivors to reconstruct disrupted identities and integrate traumatic experiences into coherent narratives. However, this dominant paradigm has been increasingly questioned for its limited capacity to account for the diversity of trauma responses. Critics such as Dominick LaCapra, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub have drawn attention to the complexities of trauma representation, emphasizing that memory, testimony, and recovery do not always follow linear or universally shared patterns. Their work suggests that trauma may resist articulation, remain fragmented, or be mediated through forms of silence, deferral, or narrative instability. These perspectives open space for reconsidering whether acknowledgment is always necessary or even possible in the aftermath of trauma.

This paper builds on these critical interventions by focusing on a relatively underexplored dimension of trauma studies: the refusal of victimhood. While

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denial is often interpreted as repression or psychological avoidance, such readings risk oversimplifying the ways individuals negotiate identity in the wake of traumatic experience. The persistent framing of denial as pathological limits the possibility of understanding it as a strategy of self-preservation, especially in situations where embracing a victim identity may undermine an individual's sense of agency or disrupt the coherence of the self. The present study examines this tension through *My Dark Vanessa* by Kate Elizabeth Russell, a novel that offers a complex portrayal of trauma, memory, and self-narration. The protagonist, Vanessa Wye, resists identifying herself as a victim despite clear indications of grooming and abuse. Her narrative is marked by a deliberate reinterpretation of her relationship with her abuser, framed in terms of consent, desire, and emotional significance. This refusal creates a conflict between personal narrative and dominant social and theoretical frameworks that seek to define her experience as abuse.

This paper asks: Can refusal of victimhood function as an adaptive psychological and narrative strategy rather than a pathological denial?

To address this question, the study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that combines trauma theory with close literary analysis. It examines how Vanessa's narrative voice, her understanding of agency, and her resistance to externally imposed labels complicate conventional assumptions about trauma and recovery. Rather than treating denial as a failure to process trauma, this paper argues that it may operate as a form of narrative control that enables the subject to negotiate meaning on their own terms.

By situating Vanessa's narrative within broader debates in trauma studies, this paper seeks to expand existing frameworks that privilege recognition and testimony as the primary routes to healing. It proposes that trauma must be understood not only through what is spoken and acknowledged, but also through what is resisted, reframed, or refused. In doing so, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of survivor subjectivity, one that recognizes the multiplicity of ways individuals engage with, reinterpret, and survive traumatic experiences.

II. RETHINKING RECOGNITION: TRAUMA BEYOND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Dominant trauma theory has historically privileged recognition as the central mechanism through which trauma acquires meaning. For Cathy Caruth, trauma is defined by its belatedness—an event not fully experienced in the moment but understood retrospectively through its return in memory. As Caruth argues, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature… returns to haunt the survivor later on" (11). This formulation underscores that trauma demands a delayed recognition; its meaning emerges only through belated comprehension. The model thus assumes that the trajectory of trauma inevitably moves toward eventual recognition, where the subject comes to comprehend and articulate the experience. Similarly, Judith Herman frames recovery as a structured process in which acknowledgment, narration, and validation are essential stages. Herman emphasizes that "the first task of consciousness-raising is simply calling rape by its true name" (41). This insistence on naming reveals how, within her framework, the articulation of victimhood becomes both a psychological necessity and an ethical imperative.

While these models have been foundational, they also impose a teleological structure on trauma—one that presumes recognition as the endpoint of recovery. Such an assumption risks excluding forms of subjectivity that do not conform to this trajectory. In particular, it leaves little room for individuals who resist, defer, or refuse the recognition of their own victimization. By treating acknowledgment as both inevitable and desirable, traditional trauma theory tends to interpret non-recognition as failure: a symptom of repression, denial, or incomplete processing. Vanessa's refusal to recognize herself as a victim directly disrupts this model. In My Dark Vanessa, she asserts, "I don't consider myself to have been abused... I'm not a victim because I've never wanted to be" (Russell 272). This declaration challenges the assumption that recognition is an inevitable endpoint of trauma. Rather than moving toward acknowledgment, Vanessa actively rejects it, positioning non-recognition as a deliberate assertion of narrative control rather than a failure of

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comprehension. This paper challenges that assumption by arguing that trauma does not always culminate in recognition. Instead, it proposes that non-recognition can be intentional, strategic, and even necessary for the preservation of selfhood. In this sense, refusal is not simply the absence of awareness but a mode of engagement with trauma that operates outside dominant therapeutic and narrative expectations. Vanessa's resistance is not merely passive but linguistically self-aware. She observes that "Even if I sometimes use the word abuse… in someone else's mouth the word turns ugly and absolute. It swallows up everything that happened" (52).

This metalinguistic awareness reveals that her refusal is directed not at the experience itself but at the interpretive framework imposed upon it. By resisting the term 'abuse', Vanessa preserves the complexity of her experience and asserts control over its meaning.

III. CRITIQUING THE LINEAR MODEL OF RECOVERY

Herman's influential model of recovery—structured around safety, remembrance, and reconnection—implicitly relies on a linear progression toward narrative coherence. However, as Dominick LaCapra argues, trauma does not always resolve through such structured processes. LaCapra notes that "acting out and working through are not mutually exclusive but exist in a tension that is constitutive of responses to trauma" (143). This distinction between 'acting out' and 'working through' highlights the repetitive and unresolved nature of traumatic experience, suggesting that subjects may remain caught in cycles that resist closure rather than progressing neatly toward resolution. Vanessa's narrative exemplifies this resistance to coherence through its internal contradictions. She insists, "He and I were two dark people who craved the same things; our relationship was terrible but never abusive" (272). This paradox—simultaneously acknowledging harm while rejecting the label of abuse—demonstrates how trauma can persist in unresolved and contradictory forms. Rather than progressing toward clarity, her narrative sustains ambiguity, aligning with LaCapra's notion of trauma as an ongoing negotiation rather than a completed process.

Similarly, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub emphasize that trauma is not always fully accessible to consciousness or language. As they explain, "massive trauma precludes its registration; the observing and recording mechanisms of the human mind are temporarily knocked out" (36). This insight foregrounds the limits of cognition and representation, demonstrating that testimony is marked as much by silence and fragmentation as by articulation. The act of narrating trauma, therefore, does not guarantee mastery over it; rather, it often reveals the limits of understanding itself.

These interventions complicate the assumption that recovery must involve coherent narration and explicit acknowledgment. They open the possibility that trauma may persist in forms that are partial, contradictory, or resistant to integration. Building on this, the present study extends the critique further by suggesting that, in some cases, the subject may actively refuse integration—not because it is impossible, but because it is undesirable or destabilizing. The stakes of such refusal are not merely interpretive but existential. Vanessa admits, "I just really need it to be a love story… Because if it isn't a love story, then what is it?... It's my life" (277). This insistence reveals that denial is not simply defensive but constitutive: recognizing victimhood would dismantle the very narrative through which she understands her identity.

IV. DENIAL RECONSIDERED: FROM PATHOLOGY TO STRATEGY

Within classical psychoanalytic frameworks, denial has typically been understood as a defense mechanism that obstructs the processing of trauma. Associated with repression and avoidance, it is often interpreted as evidence of psychological dysfunction. As Sigmund Freud explains, "such ideas cannot become conscious because a certain force is opposed to them" (5). This formulation positions denial as a form of resistance that prevents traumatic knowledge from entering consciousness, reinforcing the view that it is fundamentally pathological. However, such a perspective risks collapsing complex modes of self-narration into mere symptoms of dysfunction.

Contemporary approaches to trauma encourage a more nuanced understanding. Rather than viewing

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denial solely as an impediment, it can be reconsidered as a regulatory strategy that enables the subject to manage overwhelming affect. As Cathy Caruth suggests, "this truth… cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (11). This insight complicates the assumption that full conscious recognition is either possible or necessary, suggesting instead that the unknown and unarticulated are constitutive of traumatic experience itself. In this context, denial does not simply erase or suppress trauma; it reorganizes its meaning in ways that make continued existence possible.

This shift is crucial for understanding forms of subjectivity that do not align with dominant models of victimhood. If recognition entails a reconfiguration of identity around injury and vulnerability, then refusal may function as a means of resisting that redefinition. Vanessa's narrative in My Dark Vanessa illustrates this dynamic with particular clarity. She insists, "I don't consider myself to have been abused... I'm not a victim because I've never wanted to be" (272). This statement reframes denial not as ignorance but as an assertion of agency: by rejecting the label of victimhood, she maintains authority over how her experience is defined. Denial, in such cases, becomes less about ignorance and more about control over narrative, identity, and interpretation.

V. INTENTIONAL NON-RECOGNITION AS NARRATIVE AGENCY

The central intervention of this paper lies in reframing non-recognition as intentional rather than merely symptomatic. While Cathy Caruth's model suggests that trauma returns to demand recognition, she also acknowledges that "the story of trauma… as the narrative of a belated experience… attests to its endless impact on a life" (14). This formulation implies that trauma does not resolve neatly into comprehension but continues to exert pressure on subjectivity over time. Building on this, the present study argues that such recognition can be actively resisted rather than inevitably achieved. The subject may choose not to reinterpret past experiences as trauma, even when alternative frameworks—social, legal, or therapeutic—insist upon it.

Vanessa's narrative in My Dark Vanessa exemplifies this refusal with striking clarity. She states, "The difference between rape and sex is state of mind. You can't rape the willing, right?" (236). This rationalization demonstrates how she actively reframes the meaning of her experience, resisting externally imposed definitions of violation. Her refusal is not simply a failure to recognize trauma but a deliberate reinterpretation that allows her to retain a sense of agency and coherence.

This refusal is not without consequence; it often generates tension between personal narrative and external discourse. As Judith Herman observes, "after every atrocity one can expect to hear… the victim lies; the victim exaggerates" (18). While Herman identifies such denial as a mechanism that undermines victims, Vanessa's case complicates this framework: she internalizes and redeploys these strategies herself, not to erase the event, but to maintain control over its interpretation. This tension reveals the friction between dominant trauma discourse and individual self-narration.

However, this resistance also allows the subject to maintain continuity of self in the face of experiences that might otherwise necessitate radical redefinition. As Dominick LaCapra argues, "trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence" (41). If trauma threatens to fragment identity in this way, then non-recognition can be understood as an attempt to repair or stabilize that disruption. In this sense, non-recognition operates as a form of narrative agency, enabling individuals to assert authority over the meaning of their own experiences.

Such a perspective challenges the normative assumption that healing requires the acceptance of victimhood. Instead, it suggests that survival may depend on the ability to resist imposed identities, even when those identities are framed as emancipatory or therapeutic. Vanessa articulates the existential stakes of this resistance when she insists, "I just really need it to be a love story… Because if it isn't a love story, then what is it?... It's my life" (277). This declaration reveals that the rejection of victimhood is not merely interpretive but foundational to her sense of self. By foregrounding this possibility, the paper expands trauma theory to include modes of engagement that

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are resistant, ambivalent, and strategically non-compliant.

VI. TOWARD A NON-TELEOLOGICAL MODEL OF TRAUMA

Taken together, these critiques point toward the need for a more flexible, non-teleological model of trauma — one that does not prescribe recognition as its inevitable endpoint. Trauma, in this framework, is not a problem to be resolved through narrative closure but an experience that may be continuously negotiated, deferred, or reinterpreted. As Dominick LaCapra argues, "trauma raises the question of how the past may be represented without being reduced to a simple narrative of recovery" (78). This insight challenges teleological assumptions by emphasizing that trauma resists reduction to linear models of resolution and instead demands more complex forms of representation.

This approach allows for a broader understanding of survivor subjectivity, recognizing that individuals may engage with trauma in ways that do not conform to established theoretical or therapeutic expectations. It also foregrounds the ethical importance of respecting these differences, rather than subsuming them under universalizing models of recovery. As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub emphasize, "testimony is… a discursive practice… a speech act… rather than to simply formulate a statement" (10). This understanding underscores that meaning is not fixed but produced within specific contexts of narration and reception, allowing for multiple, even conflicting, engagements with trauma.

By repositioning denial as a potential site of agency rather than failure, this paper lays the groundwork for analyzing Vanessa's narrative in My Dark Vanessa not as a deviation from trauma theory, but as a critical lens through which its limitations can be exposed. Vanessa's insistence that "girls in those stories are always victims, and I am not" (236) exemplifies this refusal of dominant narrative frameworks. Her rejection of victimhood is not merely oppositional but generative, opening up alternative modes of self-definition that challenge the universality of recognition-based models.

VII. VANESSA'S NARRATIVE AND THE REFUSAL OF VICTIMHOOD

Vanessa's narration in My Dark Vanessa operates as a sustained reinterpretation of her past, in which the language of abuse is systematically replaced by the language of desire, intimacy, and consent. This reframing can be understood through Cathy Caruth's notion of belated trauma, where experience is not immediately recognized but emerges through delayed understanding. As Caruth argues, "trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event… but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature… returns to haunt the survivor later on" (11). This model presumes that trauma eventually presses toward recognition through its belated return. However, Vanessa's case complicates this trajectory: rather than moving toward eventual recognition, her narrative actively resists such movement.

For instance, her insistence, "I don't think of myself as a victim… I knew what I was getting into. I wanted it" (272) — is not merely a moment of confusion but a consistent narrative position. The repetition of this stance across temporal moments suggests not a failure to recognize trauma, but a refusal to reinterpret the past within the framework of victimhood. In contrast to Caruth's assumption that trauma returns to demand acknowledgment, Vanessa's narrative demonstrates that recognition can be consciously deferred or resisted.

This resistance aligns more closely with Dominick LaCapra's concept of 'acting out,' where the subject remains within a repetitive structure that does not resolve into critical distance. As LaCapra explains, "in acting out, the past is not recognized as past but is relived as if it were fully present" (70). Vanessa's narrative reflects this temporal collapse, as her past continues to structure her present identity without being critically re-evaluated. Yet even LaCapra's formulation presumes a lack of control, whereas Vanessa's narrative suggests a degree of agency in sustaining this interpretive frame. Her storytelling thus challenges the assumption that trauma inevitably seeks articulation, instead presenting non-recognition as a stabilized narrative position.

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VIII. INTERNALIZED DISCOURSE AND THE PRODUCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY

Vanessa's understanding of her relationship is deeply shaped by the internalization of Strane's discourse, which reframes abuse as mutual desire and constructs victimhood as weakness. This process can be examined through a psychoanalytic lens, particularly in relation to Sigmund Freud's concept of defense mechanisms. Denial, in Freud's formulation, allows the subject to reject a reality that is too threatening to integrate into consciousness. As Freud explains, "the ego… defends itself from the painful perception… by an act of repression" (34). This suggests that denial operates not merely as ignorance but as an active restructuring of psychic reality, enabling the subject to preserve a coherent sense of self in the face of destabilizing knowledge. However, in Vanessa's case, denial exceeds simple repression and becomes a form of narrative production.

She describes her own manipulation of events by stating that "it didn't even really feel like lying, more like shaping the truth… an act of contortion I learned from Strane" (191). This admission reveals that denial is not a passive failure to recognize reality but a learned discursive practice—one that actively reorganizes experience into a more tolerable form. Her claim that she is 'shaping the truth' underscores a shift from repression to narration, where meaning is not erased but strategically reconfigured.

This reconfiguration reflects what Jacques Lacan describes as the subject's formation within language and desire. Lacan contends that "the unconscious is the discourse of the Other" (10), emphasizing that subjectivity is constituted through external symbolic structures. Vanessa's narrative demonstrates this precisely: her understanding of the relationship is mediated through Strane's language, which she internalizes and reproduces as her own. Her 'truth' is thus not autonomous but shaped within a discursive system that precedes and exceeds her. By adopting this framework, she sustains an identity that avoids the passivity associated with victimhood, even as it remains dependent on the very discourse that produced it.

At the same time, this internalization complicates the notion of agency itself. Vanessa's insistence on her own complicity does not necessarily indicate empowerment; rather, it reveals how deeply the perpetrator's discourse has structured her self-perception. Her narrative does not simply deny abuse but reframes it through a logic she has inherited, demonstrating how agency can emerge within constraint rather than outside it. As Lacan further suggests, "man's desire is the desire of the Other" (689), indicating that what appears as individual will is often shaped by external desires and symbolic authority.

In this sense, her refusal of victimhood emerges not only as a personal choice but as the effect of an already structured narrative imposed upon her. This duality—agency as both assertion and internalization—demonstrates the need to move beyond simplistic binaries of empowerment and victimization. Vanessa's denial thus operates simultaneously as a strategy of self-preservation and as evidence of the discursive forces that continue to shape her subjectivity.

IX. NARRATIVE AGENCY AND THE REFUSAL OF IMPOSED IDENTITIES

Vanessa's resistance extends beyond personal memory to a broader rejection of social and therapeutic frameworks that seek to define her as a victim or survivor. When confronted with such labels, she responds with hostility and discomfort, indicating that these categories threaten her sense of self. This resistance is explicit when she insists, "I don't think of myself as a victim… I knew what I was getting into. I wanted it" (272). This declaration demonstrates that her refusal is not passive but actively articulated, positioning identity as something she claims authority over rather than accepts from external frameworks.

This tension reflects Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's argument that testimony is not merely the articulation of truth but a site of struggle over meaning. As they argue, "testimony is… a discursive practice… a speech act… rather than to simply formulate a statement" (10). This understanding reframes testimony as performative and contested, rather than transparent or stable. Vanessa's narrative can thus be read as a refusal of testimony in its conventional sense. Rather than bearing witness to trauma in a way that aligns with collective

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expectations, she constructs an alternative account that resists assimilation into dominant discourse.

Her rejection of imposed categories further reveals the violence embedded in normative frameworks of recognition. She notes that "even if I sometimes use the word abuse… in someone else's mouth the word turns ugly and absolute. It swallows up everything that happened" (52). This metalinguistic awareness underscores the extent to which externally imposed identities can be experienced as reductive, collapsing complex experiences into fixed categories that erase ambiguity and agency.

This resistance also engages with Judith Herman's emphasis on recognition as a prerequisite for recovery. Herman asserts that "to hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim" (24), positioning recognition as both relational and necessary. Vanessa's narrative disrupts this model by demonstrating that such recognition may be experienced not as liberating, but as destabilizing. Accepting the label of victimhood would require a fundamental reorganization of her identity, one that she is unwilling or unable to undertake.

In this context, refusal becomes a form of narrative agency. By asserting control over how her experience is interpreted, Vanessa maintains authority over her own story, even when that story contradicts widely accepted definitions of abuse. This assertion of agency is further evident when she declares, "girls in those stories are always victims, and I am not" (236), positioning herself outside dominant narrative templates. This does not resolve the tensions within her narrative, but it allows her to inhabit a position that resists external categorization.

X. COUNTER-ARGUMENT: THE LIMITS AND RISKS OF DENIAL

While this paper emphasizes the adaptive dimensions of denial, it is necessary to acknowledge its potential limitations. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Sigmund Freud associates denial with the repression of traumatic material that may later return in symptomatic forms. As Freud explains, "we have come upon something in the ego itself which is also unconscious… which produces powerful effects without itself being conscious" (7). This suggests that what is denied does not disappear but continues to exert influence from the unconscious, often in indirect and destabilizing ways.

Similarly, trauma theorists such as Judith Herman argue that the failure to acknowledge trauma can impede recovery by preventing the integration of experience into conscious narrative. Herman emphasizes that "traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (44), implying that recovery requires the restoration of these systems through acknowledgment and articulation. Without such integration, trauma risks remaining unprocessed and disruptive.

Vanessa's narrative in My Dark Vanessa provides evidence for this critique. Despite her insistence on control, her narrative reveals moments of instability and contradiction. She admits, "all of this is impossible to talk about… one minute calling it rape and the next clarifying… it wasn't rape" (300). This oscillation demonstrates the difficulty of sustaining a coherent narrative in the absence of acknowledgment, suggesting that denial does not fully resolve the tensions of traumatic experience but instead displaces them into ambiguity and fragmentation.

Her continued attachment to Strane further complicates her claim to agency. Even in retrospect, she reflects that "maybe Strane… meant it, too" (205), reinterpreting his abusive behavior as genuine care. This persistence of attachment indicates that denial may carry significant psychological costs, binding her to a past that she cannot fully re-evaluate. Rather than resolving trauma, her refusal of victimhood may perpetuate its effects by preventing critical distance from the past.

Moreover, from a Lacanian perspective, Vanessa's narrative can be understood as structured by a misrecognition of desire. As Jacques Lacan argues, "this jubilant assumption of his specular image… illustrates the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated" (76). This concept of misrecognition suggests that identity is formed through an idealized but distorted image of the self. Vanessa's belief in the authenticity of her relationship can thus be read as a similar misrecognition, one that obscures the power dynamics that shaped it and binds her to a sustaining

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yet limiting fantasy. In this sense, denial functions not only as protection but also as entrapment.

This counter-argument complicates any straightforward valorization of denial. It suggests that while refusal of victimhood may provide short-term stability or a sense of agency, it may also limit the possibility of transformation or healing. As Dominick LaCapra cautions, "the problem of representing trauma involves the risk either of denying its specificity or of becoming fixated on it" (42). Denial, therefore, occupies an ambivalent position: it can both shield the subject and constrain them within unresolved structures of experience. The challenge, therefore, is not to categorize denial as either wholly adaptive or wholly pathological, but to recognize its complex and contradictory role within the broader dynamics of trauma.

XI. TOWARD A NUANCED UNDERSTANDING OF REFUSAL

Vanessa's narrative ultimately reveals that refusal of victimhood cannot be reduced to a single function or meaning. It operates simultaneously as a strategy of self-preservation, a product of internalized discourse, and a potential barrier to transformation. By maintaining her interpretive framework, Vanessa preserves a sense of continuity and control; yet this same framework constrains her ability to re-imagine her past. As she reflects, "I just really need it to be a love story… Because if it isn't a love story, then what is it?... It's my life" (277). This admission reveals that her refusal is not merely defensive but constitutive: the narrative she sustains is inseparable from her sense of identity, making its revision profoundly destabilizing.

This complexity reinforces the need for a more flexible approach to trauma theory—one that does not impose recognition as a universal goal, but instead attends to the varied ways in which individuals negotiate meaning. As Dominick LaCapra argues, "working through does not mean the elimination of trauma but involves coming to terms with it in a manner that allows one to distinguish between past and present" (66). This perspective opens space for alternative modes of engagement that do not necessarily culminate in full recognition or resolution. Vanessa's narrative, however, complicates even this model by suggesting that such differentiation may be resisted in order to preserve continuity of self.

At the same time, her narrative reflects the limits of articulation emphasized by Cathy Caruth, who observes that "this truth… cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (11). This insight underscores that trauma exceeds complete representation, existing partially outside conscious knowledge and linguistic capture. Vanessa's refusal can thus be understood not simply as denial but as an engagement with this limit—an insistence on retaining forms of meaning that resist stabilization within dominant frameworks.

Vanessa's narrative demonstrates that trauma is not only something that is remembered or articulated, but also something that may be actively resisted, reinterpreted, or refused. In this sense, refusal emerges as a complex and ambivalent mode of engagement—one that both sustains and constrains the subject, preserving identity while simultaneously limiting the possibility of transformation.

XII. CONCLUSION

This study has examined Vanessa Wye's refusal of victimhood in *My Dark Vanessa* by Kate Elizabeth Russell as a critical challenge to dominant trauma paradigms that privilege recognition, narration, and validation as necessary conditions for recovery. By situating Vanessa's narrative within the frameworks of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and their critics, the paper has demonstrated that trauma does not always culminate in acknowledgment. Instead, it may be actively resisted, deferred, or reinterpreted in ways that preserve a sense of identity and agency.

Rather than reducing denial to a purely pathological defense, this analysis has shown that it can function as a complex strategy of self-preservation and narrative control. At the same time, the paper has acknowledged the limitations of such refusal, particularly its potential to sustain psychological entrapment and inhibit transformation. This ambivalence underscores the need to move beyond binary frameworks that either valorize acknowledgment or pathologize denial, and instead to recognize the fluid and contested nature of trauma responses.

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By foregrounding intentional non-recognition as a meaningful mode of engagement with trauma, this study contributes to an expanded understanding of survivor subjectivity, one that accommodates resistance, contradiction, and narrative autonomy. Such a perspective has important implications not only for literary trauma studies but also for interdisciplinary approaches to trauma that seek to respect the diversity of survivor experiences.

Future research may build on this work by examining refusal of victimhood across different literary texts, cultural contexts, and gendered experiences of trauma. Comparative studies could further explore how narrative resistance operates in relation to social power structures, while interdisciplinary approaches integrating psychology, sociology, and literary studies may deepen our understanding of denial as both a protective and limiting mechanism. By extending the inquiry beyond individual case studies, future scholarship can continue to refine more flexible and inclusive models of trauma and recovery.

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