

## **Wounds Without Geography: A Comparative Trauma Study of T. S. Eliot's Modernist Ruins and Jaun Elia's Shayad**

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### **Abstract**

Trauma, as a persistent psychological and cultural wound, has become a defining force in modern literary expression. The collapse of moral certainty, erosion of faith, devastation of war, exile, and ideological failure have profoundly shaped twentieth-century poetry. This paper presents a comparative trauma-based study of T. S. Eliot, a central figure of Anglo-American modernism, and Jaun Elia, a seminal and rebellious voice of modern Urdu poetry. Despite differences of language, history, and geography, both poets articulate a shared vision of a fragmented world inhabited by spiritually exhausted and emotionally damaged individuals. Drawing on trauma theory as developed by Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth, and Dominick LaCapra, the study examines representations of trauma in Eliot's *The Waste Land*, *The Hollow Men*, and selected early poems, alongside Jaun Elia's *Shayad* (1971), with references to *Yani* and *Guman*. The analysis focuses on fragmentation, alienation, repetition, irony, and symbolism as poetic responses to individual, cultural, and existential trauma. The paper argues that Eliot and Elia construct a shared poetics of trauma in which broken language bears witness to unhealed wounds, revealing trauma as a universal, transnational condition of modern existence.

**Keywords:** Trauma, Modernism, Fragmentation, Alienation, Shayad, Existentialism

## Introduction

The history of modern literature is inseparable from the history of trauma. The twentieth century witnessed events that permanently altered the human psyche: two world wars, mass displacement, genocide, colonial collapse, Partition, and the rise and fall of political ideologies. As a result, literature became not merely a source of imagination or aesthetic pleasure but a space of mourning, memory, resistance, and existential questioning. Among literary genres, poetry has been particularly powerful in articulating traumatic experience, for it allows broken images, silences, fragmented voices, and emotional intensity to coexist within a limited space.

Two poets from different cultural and linguistic traditions, Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888–1965) and Syed Hussain Jaun Asghar Naqvi, known as Jaun Elia (1931–2002), stand out as witnesses to the spiritual and psychological crises of the modern world. Eliot, an American-born British poet and critic, emerged as one of the leading figures of literary modernism. His work reflects a Europe shattered by war, cultural decay, and the loss of spiritual authority. Elia, an Urdu poet originally from Amroha, India, later migrated to Pakistan after the Partition of 1947. He became a voice of extraordinary intensity, marked by loneliness, skepticism, ideological disappointment, and emotional collapse.

Although Eliot and Elia were formed by different historical events—World War I in Eliot's case, and Partition, political chaos, and personal alienation in Elia's—the outcome is strikingly similar: a deeply traumatized poetic consciousness struggling to survive in a world emptied of meaning. Their poetry becomes a record of brokenness, an archive of wounds that resist healing.

This paper seeks to explore how trauma functions as a central force in the poetry of both writers. By placing Eliot's modernist ruins in conversation with Elia's *Shayad*, this study demonstrates that trauma is not confined to a single culture or geography. Instead, it travels across languages and histories, shaping a shared modern sensibility of despair, loss, and fragmentation. The title, *Wounds Without Geography*, suggests precisely this: trauma has no borders; its language is universal.

By reading *The Waste Land*, *The Hollow Men*, and *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* alongside the verses of *Shayad*, this research reveals how both poets articulate:

- The fragmentation of the self
- The collapse of belief systems
- The crisis of love and communication
- The paralysis of modern existence
- A continuous dialogue with death and nothingness

Thus, this paper argues that Eliot and Elia, despite their differences, share a remarkable poetic vision — one shaped by existential trauma and irreparable loss.

### **Literature Review**

Both T. S. Eliot and Jaun Elia have attracted significant critical attention, yet comparative studies between them—especially through the lens of trauma studies—remain extremely rare.

Scholars such as Cleanth Brooks and Helen Gardner analyze Eliot's work in terms of modernist technique, myth, and theology, emphasizing the fragmentation and spiritual barrenness of *The Waste Land*. Brooks famously interprets Eliot's poetry as an "examination of a broken civilization," where symbols such as the barren land, broken cities, and hollow men reflect the moral decay of Western society (Brooks 68). Eliot's use of myth in *The Waste*

Land has also been seen as an attempt to impose order on chaos, though this order remains fragile and incomplete.

In recent years, Eliot's poetry has increasingly been read through trauma studies. Critics argue that his disjointed style reflects the psychological impact of war and cultural collapse. The repetition of images of death, ruin, and silence are not merely artistic strategies but symptoms of a traumatized consciousness. Gregory Jay suggests that Eliot's fragmented structure mirrors the inability of modern society to produce a coherent narrative after immense destruction (Jay 112).

In contrast, Jaun Elia's poetry has primarily been studied within the framework of existence, philosophy, and rebellion. Urdu critics often describe him as a "nihilist poet" or a "philosopher of despair." His verses from *Shayad* are marked by self-destruction, bitterness toward society, and an almost romantic attachment to suffering. Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi once commented that Jaun Elia "wrote as if he was talking to death itself."

However, when re-read through a trauma lens, Elia appears not simply as a pessimist but as a figure deeply wounded by displacement, ideological collapse, and emotional fragmentation. His poetry becomes a record of "internal exile," a condition in which the subject no longer feels at home in either the world or the self.

Despite the richness of critical material on both writers, there exists a striking absence of comparative studies between Eliot and Elia. This paper fills that gap by applying trauma theory to examine their work side by side and demonstrate that their poetic landscapes, though geographically distant, are in fact shaped by the same psychological and philosophical wounds.

### **Theoretical Framework: Trauma Studies**

Trauma theory, as developed by thinkers such as Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth, and Dominick LaCapra, provides a powerful tool for analyzing literature that emerges from crisis. Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, describes trauma as an overwhelming experience that the mind cannot fully process at the moment of occurrence. It returns later in the form of nightmares, repetition, and unconscious acts.

Cathy Caruth extends this idea by arguing that trauma is not simply a painful memory but an unclaimed experience that haunts the subject. According to Caruth, trauma is “the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge” (Unclaimed Experience 4). It is therefore not fully understood when it occurs but returns repeatedly, demanding expression.

Dominick LaCapra differentiates between “acting out” and “working through” trauma in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. “Acting out” involves repetition, compulsive memory, and emotional paralysis, while “working through” attempts to process the trauma and gain distance from it. Literature often oscillates between these two processes. In the case of Eliot and Elia, their poetry is primarily a form of acting out—repeating the trauma rather than resolving it.

Fragmentation, silence, repetition, paradox, and ambiguity become literary symptoms of trauma. Both poets employ these techniques consciously and unconsciously, revealing inner fractures through form as well as content.

Thus, trauma theory enables us to understand:

- Why Eliot’s poems are shattered and discontinuous
- Why Elia’s verses return obsessively to themes of death and annihilation
- Why both reject closure, harmony, and conventional resolution

Their poetry is not meant to heal the reader, but to bear witness to a wound that refuses to disappear.

### **Eliot's Modernist Trauma: The Broken Landscape**

T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) is widely regarded as one of the greatest modernist poems ever written. It is also one of the most traumatised literary texts in English literature. Written in the aftermath of World War I, the poem presents a Europe spiritually dead and culturally exhausted. The poem begins with its now famous and disturbing line:

April is the cruellest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land ...

(Eliot, *The Waste Land* 1–2)

Traditionally, April symbolizes rebirth and renewal. Eliot reverses this symbol, suggesting that in a traumatized world, even rebirth is painful. Life itself becomes a form of cruelty. This inversion signals the collapse of natural and spiritual order.

The structure of the poem is fragmented into five sections, each filled with broken voices, sudden shifts in time, multilingual references, and disjointed images. This structural fragmentation mirrors the shattered psyche of post-war Europe. The poem lacks a single stable narrator, just as modern humanity lacks a stable identity.

One of the most striking lines in the poem expresses absolute fear:

I will show you fear in a handful of dust

(Eliot, *The Waste Land* 30)

This image suggests that death and meaninglessness are reduced to mere dust — an ultimate symbol of destruction and impermanence. The modern individual is left contemplating annihilation, surrounded by spiritual emptiness.

In *The Hollow Men*, Eliot continues this vision of trauma:

We are the hollow men

We are the stuffed men

(Eliot, *The Hollow Men* 1–2)

These “hollow men” are emotionally and spiritually empty, incapable of action or belief. They exist in a liminal space between life and death, between meaning and nothingness. Their world is a “dead land,” a “cactus land,” echoing the imagery of *The Waste Land*. They are survivors of trauma, yet they are not fully alive.

This condition strongly parallels Jaun Elia’s self-description in *Shayad*, where he repeatedly refers to himself as empty, ruined, and disconnected from the world. Eliot’s hollow men and Elia’s broken self are two sides of the same traumatized consciousness.

### **Collective Trauma and Modernist Fragmentation in *The Waste Land***

T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* is not only a modernist experiment in poetic form, but also one of the earliest literary representations of collective trauma. The poem does not narrate trauma in a straightforward way; rather, trauma is embedded in its structure and recurring imagery. The poem continually returns to ideas of death, infertility, paresthesia, and emotional paralysis, all of which are symptoms associated with traumatic consciousness.

The poem’s urban setting, often identified as London, is represented as a city of ghosts:

Unreal City,

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,

I had not thought death had undone so many

(Eliot, *The Waste Land* 60–63)

With an explicit allusion to Dante's *Inferno*, these lines show city-dwellers as walking dead. This metaphor strongly symbolizes the post-war generation — physically alive, yet psychologically destroyed. The city becomes a haunted landscape, full of people who have lost purpose, identity, and spiritual direction. Such a vision aligns with Caruth's theory that trauma returns as a repetitive haunting, an unrelenting ghost of the past that invades the present.

The presence of broken identities appears throughout the poem. Characters like Marie, the typist, Tiresias, and the clerk are unable to connect meaningfully. Their lives are marked by mechanical routines and sexual emptiness. This emotional numbness is not simply moral decadence but rather a condition of psychological shock. The trauma of war has reduced human interaction into meaningless gestures.

The desolate imagery throughout *The Waste Land* — “dry bones,” “dead trees,” “cracked earth,” and “empty cisterns” — represents unconscious memories of destruction. According to Freud, such images are not coincidental symbols; they are expressions of repressed trauma. Eliot's unhealthy landscapes mirror the condition of the modern mind, which has lost connection with meaning and continuity.

Eliot's technique of using multiple voices and languages further enacts trauma. The mind jumps from German to French to Sanskrit with no logical sequence, just as traumatized thought processes abandon linear time. The fragmentation of language mirrors the fragmentation of memory.

This poetic strategy allows the reader to experience confusion and emotional imbalance, placing them inside the traumatised consciousness of modern man.

### **Psychological Paralysis in The Hollow Men**

Eliot's poem *The Hollow Men* (1925) further develops the theme of psychological paralysis. If *The Waste Land* deals with the external ruins of civilization, *The Hollow Men* deals with internal collapse.

The speaker claims:

Shape without form, shade without colour,

Paralysed force, gesture without motion

(Eliot, *The Hollow Men* 11–12)

This is not a normal human condition. It is the description of a traumatized subject: one who is stripped of essence, coherence, and agency. The repeated use of contradictions — “shape without form,” “gesture without motion” — suggests that language itself has been damaged.

*The hollow men* exist in a suspended space, “between the idea and the reality,” unable to act, love, or even pray. Trauma here is presented not as a memory but as a permanent condition.

The poem's most famous line:

This is the way the world ends

Not with a bang but a whimper

(Eliot, *The Hollow Men* 97–98)

reflects the exhaustion of both history and hope. There is no heroic end — only silence, weakness, and disappearance. This is an ultimate vision of trauma: no climax, no redemption, only slow extinction.

The same idea can be found in Jaun Elia's poetry, where existence itself feels like waiting for an end that never arrives. Elia, like Eliot, presents life as a continuation of decay, not a journey toward resolution.

### **Introduction to Jaun Elia: Life, Exile, and Psychological Wounds**

To fully understand Jaun Elia's poetry, especially *Shayad* (1971), one must examine his personal history and psychological background, which is deeply tied to trauma.

Jaun Elia was born in 1931 in Amroha, India. He came from an intellectual family, fluent in Arabic, Persian, and classical literature. However, the Partition of India in 1947 forced millions to migrate under violent circumstances. Elia left behind his homeland, his cultural roots, and his childhood memories. This separation became one of the deepest unhealed wounds of his life.

Unlike many who celebrated independence, Elia never emotionally accepted Pakistan as "home." He often spoke bitterly about this displacement. His exile was not just geographical, but spiritual and emotional. This internal homelessness is central to trauma.

In addition to political displacement, Elia experienced ideological disillusionment. A committed Marxist in his youth, he later grew disappointed with the failures of politics and revolution. Even love failed him; his separation from his wife deeply marked his poetry.

Thus, Elia's trauma is layered:

- Loss of homeland
- Loss of ideology
- Loss of love
- Loss of faith in history

These multiple losses merge into a profound existential emptiness — the core theme of *Shayad*.

### ***Shayad* (1971): A Text of Private and Collective Trauma**

Jaun Elia published *Shayad* relatively late in life, even though he had been writing for many years. This delay itself is symbolic — Elia feared exposure, vulnerability, and confrontation with his pain. When *Shayad* finally appeared, it was immediately recognized as a revolutionary text in Urdu poetry.

The very title *Shayad* (Perhaps) reflects uncertainty, doubt, and indecision — classic features of a traumatized mind. Elia was not a poet of certainty. He was a poet of suspension, contradiction, and despair.

In *Shayad*, Elia repeatedly describes himself as broken, incomplete, and lost:

Main bhi bohat ajeeb hoon, itna ajeeb hoon ke bas

Khud ko tabah kar liya aur malaal bhi nahi

(Elia, *Shayad*)

(Translation: I am very strange, so strange that I have destroyed myself and feel no regret.)

This line reveals the ultimate symptom of trauma: self-destruction without emotional response.

The poet is no longer shocked by his ruin; he has normalized it.

Another famous verse by Jaun Elia captures the transformation of intimate pain into a broader condition of alienation:

Shayed mujhe kisi se mohabbat nahin huī

Lekin yaqin sabhi ko dilata raha hoon main

(Elia, *Shayad*)

(Translation: Perhaps I never loved anyone, yet I kept assuring everyone that I did.)

Here, personal loss becomes a universal alienation. Love is no longer private; it is shaped, performed, and ultimately hollowed out by social expectations. Emotional experience is

subordinated to public validation, creating a fractured self that oscillates between inner absence and outward conformity. Interpersonal disillusionment thus exceeds the individual and assumes a collective dimension, where private trauma reflects a broader cultural and social crisis.

Elia's poetry constantly moves between personal heartbreak and cosmic loneliness, making it a perfect companion to Eliot's themes of isolation and fragmentation.

### **Alienation and the Crisis of Identity**

One of the strongest parallels between Eliot and Elia is their treatment of identity. Both poets portray the self as unstable, divided, multiplied, or erased.

Eliot's characters speak in broken voices that shift identity—sometimes male, sometimes female, sometimes mythical, sometimes modern. There is no fixed "I." This reflects the modernist realization: identity has collapsed.

Similarly, Elia repeatedly questions who he is and whether existence itself makes sense:

Main jo hoon 'Main' hoon—magar kya hoon, mujhe kya maloom?

(Elia, *Shayad*)

(Translation: I am "I"—but what am I? I do not know.)

This crisis of identity is one of the clearest manifestations of trauma. Trauma disrupts the narrative that a person tells about themselves. As a result, identity fragments. The self becomes inaccessible to itself.

In both Eliot's and Elia's poetry, the subject is lost in time, memory, and alienation. Nothing is stable. Nothing is certain. Everything has either passed or been destroyed. Thus, the poems become sites of haunting, not of healing.

## Memory, Silence, and the Unspeakable

Trauma is often associated with silence — things too painful to be named. Eliot uses silence in the form of broken lines, pauses, and incomplete narratives. Elia uses silence through contradictions and circular thought.

In trauma theory, this is known as the “unspeakable” — a memory or experience that language cannot fully contain. What both poets do is write around the pain rather than naming it directly.

This indirectness makes their poetry even more powerful. The reader feels the wound without it being explained.

Thus, both Eliot and Elia create a poetics where meaning lies not in what is said, but in what cannot be said.

## Comparative Analysis: Eliot and Elia—Two Voices of a Shared Wound

A comparative reading of T. S. Eliot and Jaun Elia reveals a striking convergence of poetic vision despite differences of culture, language, and historical context. Both poets articulate a world fractured by trauma and position the poetic subject as fundamentally alienated. Their poetry does not emerge from confidence or coherence, but from profound rupture—the disintegration of faith, love, political belief, identity, and meaning itself.

Eliot depicts a civilization in ruins. In *The Waste Land*, the dominant image is that of a barren and infertile landscape, symbolizing the spiritual exhaustion of postwar Western society. The land has lost its myths, rituals, and sacred authority, while human figures move through this wasteland as shadows, repeating mechanical and meaningless gestures. Existence is marked by emotional sterility, spiritual paralysis, and the absence of genuine connection.

Jaun Elia, by contrast, does not primarily represent the collapse of a civilization but the fragmentation of the self. *Shayad* functions as a record of a wounded consciousness

shaped by displacement, ideological failure, and emotional loss. Instead of ruined cities, Elia presents ruined intimacy; instead of broken institutions, broken relationships. Yet the psychological outcome mirrors Eliot's vision: radical alienation and despair.

Both poets are shaped by historical trauma—Eliot by the devastation of World War I and the collapse of Western moral certainties, and Elia by the Partition of India, exile, political disillusionment, and personal abandonment. Crucially, neither poet merely describes trauma; both formally embody it through fragmented structure, disrupted voice, and destabilized language. Eliot's external barrenness and Elia's internal desolation thus represent two manifestations of the same traumatized modern condition.

Moreover, both poets exhibit a compulsive return to time and memory. In *The Waste Land*, time is fractured, repetitive, and circular; in *Shayad*, the past persists as an unhealed wound. As Cathy Caruth argues, trauma is an experience that resists assimilation into the past and continually returns in language and memory. This insight aptly describes both poets, whose work does not move toward resolution but instead circles endlessly around loss. Their poetry is defined not by progress, but by return.

### **Love, Loss, and the Trauma of the Intimate**

Another vital comparative point is the treatment of love and intimacy. In Eliot's world, human connection is hollow and mechanical. In the section "A Game of Chess" from *The Waste Land*, marital interaction is reduced to boredom, irritation, and emptiness. Sex no longer represents union; it symbolizes alienation.

When lovely woman stoops to folly ...

She smooths her hair with automatic hand

(Eliot, *The Waste Land* 252–254)

The word “automatic” is important — it reduces a human being to a machine. This reflects deep emotional trauma.

In Jaun Elia’s poetry, love is not mechanical but impossible. He desires it desperately, yet he is unable to believe in it. Many poems in *Shayad* address an absent beloved, a figure who does not answer. This unfulfilled desire becomes another source of trauma.

Tera gham hai to gham-e-dauran bhi to kya hai

Gham-e-dauran se hi gham-e-jaan hai juda

(Elia, *Shayad*)

(Translation: If your sorrow exists, then what is the sorrow of the world? It is distinct even from the sorrow of life.)

For Elia, the pain of love exceeds all social and political pain. The private wound is more devastating than historical trauma. This personalizes trauma in a way that makes his poetry deeply intimate and psychologically rich.

Thus, while Eliot portrays a society that cannot love, Elia portrays a lover who cannot survive love. Both situations reflect emotional trauma and collapse.

### **Silence, Death and the Attraction of Nothingness**

A characteristic common to both T. S. Eliot and Jaun Elia is a constant fascination with death, quietness and nothingness. Eliot's poetic world is on a steady path towards its obliteration and vanishing. In *The Hollow Men*, existence is dissolving less due to catastrophe, than by exhaustion:

This is the way the world ends

Not with a bang but a whimper

(Eliot, *The Hollow Men* 97–98)

The last "whimper" serves as a metaphor for trauma itself - a weak, diminishing sound that signals the conclusion not of historic meaning but of a dramatic ending. Trauma here does not explode; it is draining life of vitality till all is silence.

Similarly, Jaun Elia expresses on several occasions a desire for disappearance and withdrawal from existence:

Ab main zinda hoon magar jeene ki khwahish nahi hai

(Elia, *Shayad*)

(Translation: I am alive, but I no longer have the desire to live.)

This articulation is not only greater than personal sadness or depression. It is a philosophical and psychological tiredness that is expressed by trauma theorists, after Freud, in terms of the death drive, an impulse towards not-being and the release from memory, desire, and the burden of history. Both poets thus live in a world where living is painful, remembering is inevitable, forgetting is impossible, and even hope itself is suspect. As such, their poetry takes the form of a slow disappearance - of writing-toward-death. Yet paradoxically, it is this continued confrontation with nothingness that ensures their permanent literary presence.

### **Culture Difference and Trauma Universality**

While T. S. Eliot comes out of Western modernity and Jaun Elia out of the South Asian Urdu poetic tradition, their work shows that trauma is essentially transnational. Psychological and existential wounds are not bound by language, culture or geography. Both poets articulate suffering in ways that transcend national boundaries and highlight a modern condition of loss, fragmentation and disillusionment that is shared by them both.

Eliot's poetry is a portrait of the ruins of modern western civilization - of its moral exhaustion, spiritual decay, and cultural paralysis in the aftermath of war. Elia's poetry, by

contrast, documents the ruins of the modern self in exile, ideological ruins, emotional estrangement. Yet taken as a whole, these external and internal ruins combine to produce a composite image of twentieth-century trauma. The coincidence of their poetic visions leads to the affirmation that modern suffering cannot be localized; that it is human rather than cultural. The title *Wounds Without Geography*, therefore, is not metaphorical but an important and precise one, an articulation of trauma as a shared experience across the globe and through different literary traditions.

### **Major Findings of the Study**

This study illustrates that trauma is the dominant force in the shaping of the poetry of both T. S. Eliot and Jaun Elia albeit in different but complementary ways. In Eliot's work, trauma appears mostly in a historical, cultural and moral context brought on by the collapse of Western civilization after the First World War, while, in Elia's poetry, it takes on a personal and existential dimension, with displacement, ideological disillusionment, and emotional loss as its main features. Fragmentation serves as the primary aesthetic mode by which both poets express traumatic experience in which broken structures, fragmented imagery and destabilised language reflect psychological disintegration. Alienation emerges as a common modern condition - for both poets, the individual is isolated, rootless and unmoored spiritually. The failure of love, faith, and meaning further ties together their poetic visions, while poetry itself is not a form of healing but a sort of testimony which bears witness to the persistence of wounds. Ultimately, this study argues that Jaun Elia's *Shayad* could be read as a Urdu counterpart to Eliot's *The Waste Land*, and that these two texts are both which are foundational in terms of trauma-narratives in modern poetry.

### **Conclusion**

This study has proven that T. S. Eliot and Jaun Elia, although coming out of two different cultural, linguistic and historical contexts, are part of a common worldwide tradition of trauma poetry. By placing their work in comparative dialogue, the paper has demonstrated that trauma operates as a transnational condition - one that is articulated through fragmentation, silence, repetition, despair, and longing. Rather than serving as a localized response to specific historical events, trauma in both poets works to become a durable structure of modern consciousness.

And Eliot's ruined cities and Elia's broken self are not separated realities but parallel expressions of the same wound. Whether expressed in the broken landscapes of the postwar world in Europe or the existential estrangement of the post-exile/post-ideological-collapse world, both poets face a world in which meaning has depleted and coherence is impossible. Their poetry is not a search for consolation and resolution; it is witness to loss and disintegration.

The concept of Wounds Without Geography therefore transcends the metaphor and moves into critical insight. Pain as we see it in modern poetry is not bound by borders, languages and traditions. In Eliot and Elia, poetry is the last space left where trauma can be voiced, preserved and passed on. Ultimately, this research validates the position of the modern poet as not just an artist, but rather a witness of collective rupture, and trauma as the contemporary deepest language of modern poetic communication.

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