



HEALING BEYOND TRAUMA: THE FRACTURED REALITY OF RECOVERY IN DOROTHY ALLISON'S BASTARD OUT OF CAROLINA

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Abstract

This article explores the complexities of trauma recovery in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* by applying a critical, intersectional lens grounded in contemporary trauma theory. While Judith Herman's triphasic model of recovery serves as a foundational framework, the analysis also engages with theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Stef Craps, and Bessel van der Kolk to account for the fragmented, recursive, and socially embedded nature of healing. The study examines how Allison's narrative portrays recovery not as a linear or universally applicable process, but as a politically charged, context-dependent struggle shaped by poverty, familial betrayal, and institutional neglect. Through a structured thematic analysis grounded in Braun and Clarke's framework, and informed by interdisciplinary trauma theory, the article demonstrates how the novel destabilizes conventional paradigms of recovery and reconfigures survival as a form of resistance. This study contributes to trauma and literary studies by foregrounding the limitations of universal recovery models and highlighting the role of literature in articulating the lived complexities of post-traumatic experience.

Keywords: *Bastard out of Carolina*, familial betrayal, Judith Herman, recovery, trauma theory

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Introduction

Trauma is not merely an event; it is an enduring force that reorganizes a survivor's internal world and reshapes their engagement with social, cultural, and relational structures (Ehlers & Clark, 2000). While extensive scholarship has examined the causes and immediate consequences of trauma, the complexities of recovery remain comparatively underexplored—particularly within literary studies. Fictional narratives often concentrate on the traumatic rupture itself, relegating the long-term process of healing to a peripheral or unresolved space. Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* offers a compelling counterpoint by focusing on the enduring aftermath of abuse. Through the character of Ruth Anne "Bone" Boatwright, the novel explores how recovery is not a linear journey toward wholeness, but a contested process entangled in poverty, familial betrayal, and institutional neglect.

Contemporary trauma theory increasingly acknowledges the plural, culturally mediated, and non-linear nature of traumatic experience. While Judith Herman's triphasic model—establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection—remains foundational (Herman, 1997), it has faced substantial critical revision. Cathy Caruth (1996), for instance, challenges the possibility of narrative closure, arguing that trauma returns belatedly and disruptively, resisting integration into a coherent recovery arc. Similarly, Dori Laub (2013) highlights the instability of testimony itself, noting how trauma can fracture memory and language, rendering the act of narrating both necessary and deeply fraught. Stef Craps (2013) further critiques the universalization of Western trauma paradigms, calling for more context-sensitive, intersectional frameworks that attend to postcolonial and marginalized perspectives. Meanwhile, Bessel van der Kolk (2014) emphasizes trauma's somatic imprint, arguing that embodied and neurobiological dimensions often evade strictly cognitive or narrative-based approaches to healing.

This article foregrounds Herman's model for its attention to the relational and social dimensions of healing, particularly relevant to *Bastard Out of Carolina's* thematic concerns. However, it does not treat the model as exhaustive or universally applicable. Instead, the article critically engages and expands Herman's framework by juxtaposing it with alternative

theoretical perspectives that better account for fragmented memory, systemic injustice, and the recursive nature of post-traumatic survival.

The study is guided by three research questions:

1. How does the novel depict the possibility of recovery for survivors of familial trauma?
2. In what ways does Bone's experience challenge or extend trauma theory?
3. How do familial and institutional forces shape or obstruct the survivor's capacity for healing?

To address these questions, the article combines trauma theory with close literary analysis. Particular attention is given to narrative strategies—such as fragmentation, silence, and shifts in focalization—that reflect the complex dynamics of trauma and resistance. The structure of the article corresponds directly to the research questions, ensuring systematic alignment between theoretical objectives and interpretive outcomes:

1. **Theoretical Framework** – A critical overview of trauma theory, with an emphasis on Herman and her interlocutors.
2. **Textual Analysis** – A close reading of Bone's trauma and recovery in *Bastard Out of Carolina*.
3. **Critical Discussion** – A reflection on how the novel contests linear recovery models and reconfigures healing as a politically and socially contingent process.

Although Herman's model offers a valuable framework for understanding trauma recovery, *Bastard Out of Carolina* ultimately resists any prescriptive or linear model of healing. Dorothy Allison's narrative reveals how recovery is continually shaped—and often obstructed—by intersecting forces of systemic violence, poverty, and gendered marginalization. Rather than affirming normative trajectories of trauma resolution, the novel reconfigures survival as a form of ongoing resistance: not a story of triumph or closure, but of endurance and the fragile, recursive process of making meaning in the aftermath of betrayal.

Literature Review

The Paradox of Trauma and Recovery

Trauma exists at the intersection of individual suffering and broader systemic failure. Though it is often experienced privately, trauma is fundamentally shaped by cultural, familial, and institutional structures (Summerfield, 2001). Cathy Caruth (1996) describes trauma not merely as an effect of destruction but as “an enigma of survival” (p. 33), highlighting its paradoxical nature: it fractures identity and disrupts meaning, yet compels the survivor to bear witness and reconstruct narrative coherence. This paradox reflects the dual reality of trauma—both a deeply internal rupture and a socially mediated phenomenon.

The recovery process mirrors this tension. It is often non-linear, recursive, and obstructed by the same structures that enabled the trauma. Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* offers a rare literary exploration of recovery as a prolonged negotiation with systems that fail to protect or repair. Through the character of Ruth Anne “Bone” Boatwright, the novel poses a critical question: What does recovery look like in a world that normalizes harm and marginalizes survivors?

Despite a growing body of trauma scholarship, literary studies have largely emphasized the moment of rupture rather than the aftermath. While Judith Herman's (1997) triphasic model of trauma recovery—establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection—remains influential, it has been critiqued for its psychological individualism and linearity. Summerfield (2001) and Stef Craps (2013) argue that such frameworks risk universalizing Western therapeutic paradigms, often neglecting how class, race, and systemic injustice condition trauma responses. Caruth and Felman emphasize the limits of language and memory in processing trauma, while Bessel van der Kolk (2014) focuses on its somatic imprint, arguing that trauma is lodged not only in the psyche but in the body itself. Bonanno et al. (2011) further complicate recovery by foregrounding resilience, social support, and meaning-making as central to post-traumatic adaptation.

This article engages with these perspectives not as discrete alternatives, but as interlocking frameworks that together illuminate the limitations of purely psychological or linear models. Where Herman offers a structured approach emphasizing relational safety, theorists like Caruth, Felman, and

van der Kolk challenge the possibility of resolution, suggesting that recovery is often partial, fragmented, and embodied. By synthesizing these perspectives, this study offers a multidimensional account of recovery—one that is attuned to both inner psychic experience and outer structural forces.

Trauma and its Extended Dimensions

Herman (1997) defines trauma as an event that “overwhelms the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning” (p. 33). This framing has informed much of trauma studies, but it has also drawn criticism for insufficiently accounting for sociopolitical context. In contrast, van der Kolk (2014) emphasizes the neurobiological residue of trauma, demonstrating how traumatic memories are stored somatically and elude verbal expression. Felman (1992) and Laub (2013) shift focus toward the linguistic and testimonial dimensions, arguing that trauma fragments the narrative self and problematizes the very act of witnessing.

Bastard Out of Carolina illustrates how trauma extends beyond physical abuse to include emotional betrayal and institutional neglect. Bone’s trauma is not limited to private violation—it is reinforced by public systems that ignore or deny her pain. The novel’s depiction of trauma as both intimate and structural aligns with Felman’s emphasis on testimony, van der Kolk’s somatic theory, and Craps’s critique of the cultural specificity of Western trauma models. These dimensions—psychic, somatic, linguistic, and systemic—interact throughout the narrative to shape Bone’s post-traumatic experience.

The Complexities of Recovery

Recovery, often imagined as a trajectory toward wholeness, is more accurately conceptualized as a long-term negotiation between loss, memory, and identity. Herman’s model provides a useful outline of recovery stages but is increasingly critiqued for assuming access to safe spaces, stable relationships, and therapeutic resources. Summerfield (2001) and Craps (2013) point out that recovery cannot be universalized; it must be understood within the frameworks of social inequality, cultural context, and lived precarity.

Resilience theory (Bonanno et al., 2011) and narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) offer complementary models that prioritize adaptability, social support, and the restorative power of storytelling. These frameworks view healing not as a return to a prior self but as the construction of a new narrative self, one capable of integrating pain into identity. In literary contexts, recovery is thus often a metaphorical process—less about closure and more about asserting agency in the face of silencing structures.

In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, recovery is portrayed not as a fixed endpoint but as a series of ruptures, resistances, and redefinitions. The novel's form—marked by narrative fragmentation, symbolic repetition, and silence—mirrors the disjointed processes of coping and meaning-making. Allison's work insists that recovery be understood not just as internal repair but as survival within systems that offer no guarantees of safety or justice.

The Intersections of Identity, Marginalization, and Resilience

Identity

Identity is not static; it is relational, performative, and continuously negotiated (Vignoles et al., 2011). In Allison's novel, Bone's identity is shaped by external labels—"bastard," "white trash," "trouble"—that reflect classist and patriarchal hierarchies. Her internal conflict between self-perception and social categorization echoes Herman's (1997) claim that trauma fractures identity and demands its reconstruction. However, Bone's identity is not merely fractured—it is contested terrain. The family, expected to be a site of stability, becomes a source of betrayal and alienation. In this way, Bone's self-formation is hindered not only by trauma but also by the institutionalized forces that define and confine her.

Social Marginalization

Bone's trauma is exacerbated by her positionality as a poor, illegitimate, Southern girl—socially marked and systemically invisible. Her abuse is enabled and normalized by institutions that fail to intervene. This systemic neglect supports Craps's (2013) argument that trauma cannot be divorced from historical and social injustice. Bone's suffering is not merely personal but emblematic of broader patterns of structural violence. Her marginalization is reinforced through the instability of housing, family structures, and kinship roles, leaving her excluded even within her own community.

Resilience

Resilience in this context is not triumphant but tactical. The American Psychological Association (2024) defines resilience as the capacity to adapt flexibly to adversity. In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, resilience is an act of endurance rather than resolution. Bone does not heal in a traditional sense; instead, she develops survival strategies that allow her to reclaim her voice and agency in the face of silence and abandonment. Her resilience challenges the assumption that recovery must be visible, linear, or complete. Rather, it emerges through persistence, memory, and refusal to disappear.

This literature review highlights how trauma, recovery, identity, and marginalization intersect in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. By synthesizing insights from Herman, Caruth, van der Kolk, Craps, Bonanno, and others, this study builds a multidimensional framework for analyzing recovery not as a psychological resolution, but as a politically embedded and narratively constructed process. In doing so, it addresses a critical gap in literary trauma studies: the need to explore recovery as resistance—contingent, context-dependent, and structurally constrained.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative literary-critical methodology to examine Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* through the lens of trauma theory, with particular attention to Judith Herman's (1997) triphasic model of recovery. Herman's framework—comprising the stages of establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection—served as a foundational guide in identifying trauma-related themes. At the same time, the analysis critically engages with contemporary theorists such as Cathy Caruth (1996), Stef Craps (2013), Bessel van der Kolk (2014), and George Bonanno (2020) to expand and problematize Herman's linear model, particularly in relation to the fragmented, recursive, and socially embedded nature of trauma recovery.

To ensure methodological rigor, an iterative thematic analysis was conducted by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. This process included (1) familiarization with the text through repeated close readings of the novel; (2) generation of initial codes informed by trauma theory concepts such as safety, agency, marginalization, and resilience; (3)

identification of overarching themes from patterns in narrative structure and symbolism; (4) refinement of themes through ongoing analysis of their consistency and relevance across the text; (5) thematic definition and consolidation; and (6) final integration of themes into the theoretical framework.

Themes were deductively informed by trauma scholarship and inductively refined through sustained textual engagement. To enhance reflexivity and transparency, analytical memos were maintained throughout the process, documenting interpretive decisions and theoretical tensions. These themes were then systematically mapped onto the study's three research questions to ensure structural alignment between theoretical aims and interpretive outcomes.

Theoretical triangulation with Herman's framework and complementary trauma models ensured that the analysis remained both critically engaged and contextually sensitive. This methodology moves beyond impressionistic reading by combining close textual analysis with systematic coding and interdisciplinary theory, enabling a robust interpretation of how *Bastard Out of Carolina* reflects, resists, and redefines dominant narratives of trauma and recovery.

Thematic and Theoretical Framework

This analysis adopts a thematic approach, identifying and examining recurring motifs such as victimization, agency, memory, resilience, and the reconstruction of self. Through close textual reading, the study highlights how recovery is both a deeply personal endeavor and a process influenced by the broader social and cultural contexts that shape Bone's experiences. This method provides a comprehensive understanding of how trauma, identity, and resilience interact throughout the novel. To frame the analysis, Judith Herman's trauma theory serves as the foundational lens.

Herman's model outlines three critical stages of recovery:

1. Establishing safety
2. Remembrance and mourning
3. Reconnection with ordinary life

This framework provides a structured analysis of Bone's psychological and emotional development. Applying Herman's model, the study traces Bone's

journey from establishing physical and emotional safety to grappling with painful memories, ultimately leading to her reclamation of agency. This approach offers insight into the non-linear nature of recovery and the systemic obstacles complicating it.

While Herman's triadic model offers a valuable structure for understanding trauma recovery, recent trauma scholarship has critiqued the linear and stage-based nature of this framework, suggesting that recovery is often non-linear, recursive, and shaped by intersecting social, cultural, and economic forces (Bonanno, 2020; van der Kolk, 2014; Wang et al., 2025). In particular, Herman's emphasis on individual psychological healing overlooks how systemic oppression, poverty, and institutional neglect can disrupt or even preclude progress through the recovery stages (Sinko et al., 2022).

Bone's journey in *Bastard Out of Carolina* exemplifies these complexities. Her path toward healing is repeatedly interrupted and reshaped by ongoing familial violence, social marginalization, and the consistent failure of protective institutions. Rather than following a predictable sequence, Bone's recovery is fragmented and cyclical, marked by setbacks and moments of resilience that do not align neatly with Herman's stages. This fragmentation underscores the limitations of applying a universal recovery model in contexts where trauma is compounded by structural barriers and layered vulnerabilities.

Thus, this study uses Herman's framework not as a prescriptive or exhaustive model, but as a critical lens through which to interpret Bone's journey. By examining how Bone's recovery intersects with and resists Herman's stages, the analysis highlights the necessity of trauma theories that account for the influence of social context, intersectionality, and systemic injustice. This approach aligns with recent calls in trauma studies for more flexible, context-sensitive models of recovery (Bonanno, 2020; Wang et al., 2025).

Each stage of Herman's model is examined critically, in light of Bone's lived experience. The analysis engages directly with the research questions by showing how Allison's narrative aligns with and challenges conventional trauma recovery models. In doing so, it underscores the complex interplay between individual agency and systemic constraints, offering a nuanced

understanding of recovery as a fractured, ongoing process, rather than a linear progression.

Interdisciplinary Perspectives

To enrich the literary and trauma-theoretical analysis, this study incorporates interdisciplinary insights from psychology, social work, and narrative therapy, focusing particularly on social support networks, identity reconstruction, and the sociocultural dimensions of healing. Psychological studies emphasize the crucial role of social connectedness in trauma recovery, highlighting that resilience is often contingent upon relational resources and community support (Bonanno, 2020; Herman, 1997). In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Bone's journey toward healing is deeply influenced by her relationships with characters like Aunt Raylene, who provides both emotional safety and a sense of belonging, counteracting the isolation imposed by her abusive family. These moments of relational support are pivotal in her emotional recovery, illustrating the importance of interpersonal connections in resilience.

Social work literature further underscores how systemic inequities—such as poverty, institutional neglect, and gendered violence—shape survivors' access to healing and complicate recovery trajectories (Sinko et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2025). In the novel, Bone's marginalized social position—particularly as a poor, abused girl in the rural South—impedes her ability to access institutional resources that could facilitate her recovery. The failure of the state and family to protect Bone from abuse exemplifies how structural inequities complicate her journey, forcing her to navigate a hostile world with limited support and no guaranteed pathway to healing. These systemic barriers are integral to understanding why Bone's recovery is marked by fragmentation and setbacks, rather than a linear process.

Narrative therapy, with its focus on storytelling as a means of reclaiming agency and reconstructing identity, provides a crucial framework for interpreting Allison's novel (White & Epston, 1990). Bone's gradual assertion of voice—especially in her interactions with Aunt Raylene—can be read as a therapeutic narrative act, where she not only reclaims control over her personal story but also resists the silencing imposed by her family and society. For example, Bone's recounting of her traumatic experiences to Aunt Raylene becomes an act of both remembrance and reclamation. This aligns with trauma scholars who argue that narrative reconstruction is not

merely cathartic but a politically charged process that challenges dominant discourses and institutionalized forms of oppression (Craps, 2013). By reclaiming her narrative, Bone challenges the silence and invisibility imposed upon her by her abusers, thus engaging in a form of resistance against the societal structures that sustain her trauma.

By integrating these interdisciplinary perspectives, the study situates Bone's recovery within a broader matrix of psychological resilience, social context, and narrative resistance. This approach moves beyond individualistic models of healing, emphasizing recovery as a socially embedded, dynamic process shaped by both internal and external forces. In this sense, literature functions not only as a reflection of trauma but as an active participant in the struggle for recognition, justice, and empowerment.

Addressing Gaps in Existing Research

A review of existing literature on trauma and recovery reveals that many studies primarily focus on victimization and the immediate psychological effects of trauma, often overlooking the broader sociocultural and systemic barriers to recovery. For example:

- Wang et al. (2025) conducted a systematic review of trauma systems, emphasizing structural and operational barriers that hinder effective recovery. Their analysis highlights how disparities in access to care and resource allocation significantly impact recovery outcomes.
- Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1997) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding PTSD and its complexities, yet it does not fully explore how marginalized individuals face unique systemic challenges in navigating the stages of recovery.
- Sinko et al. (2022) explored trauma recovery pathways across four countries, emphasizing the importance of social support but noting that systemic issues like institutional discrimination remain underexamined.

Despite these valuable contributions, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the intersection of trauma with other critical themes such as identity, memory, gender, and class. Trauma is often analyzed in isolation, without considering how it is shaped by or entangled with

broader structural forces. Additionally, much of the existing research centers on the traumatic event itself, offering little sustained attention to what happens afterward—how survivors navigate the long, uneven path of coping and recovery. Few studies fully consider how layered vulnerabilities, including poverty, familial betrayal, and social marginalization, complicate the process of healing.

This study addresses these gaps by foregrounding the interplay between psychological and structural trauma and exploring how these intersect in *Bastard Out of Carolina*. While much of the existing research isolates trauma within individual psychological frameworks, this study integrates structural and sociocultural dimensions, emphasizing the systemic barriers that hinder recovery and the unique struggles faced by marginalized individuals. By applying Judith Herman's trauma model in conjunction with an interdisciplinary approach, this research moves beyond linear recovery models and offers a more nuanced understanding of healing that accounts for layered vulnerabilities, such as poverty, familial betrayal, and social marginalization.

Furthermore, this study interrogates how *Bastard Out of Carolina* resists closure and easy narratives of healing, a feature that is often absent in trauma literature, which tends to simplify or resolve the complexities of recovery. By closely analyzing how Bone's journey toward healing is fragmented, cyclical, and fraught with setbacks, this research challenges the notion of a linear or definitive recovery process, offering a fresh perspective that integrates psychological, social, and narrative dimensions of trauma.

In doing so, this study contributes original insights to the field by emphasizing the importance of contextualizing trauma within its broader sociocultural, economic, and political frameworks and by highlighting the need for trauma theories that can account for the complexities of real-life recovery. It moves beyond existing research by expanding the focus from trauma events to the ongoing, complex process of healing.

Contributions of This Study

This study advances trauma theory by reconceptualizing recovery not as a universal or psychological endpoint, but as a fragmented, ongoing, and politically charged process embedded within intersecting structures of

oppression. While existing scholarship on *Bastard Out of Carolina* has examined trauma and victimization, few have rigorously analyzed the process of recovery as an act shaped by class, gender, familial betrayal, and institutional neglect. This study fills that gap by foregrounding recovery itself as the central site of struggle—not as a resolution, but as a radical, contested terrain where social and personal forces collide.

This research challenges the neutrality of traditional trauma models by expanding Judith Herman's framework to account for the sociopolitical dimensions of trauma recovery. Rather than accepting the conventional victim-to-survivor trajectory, it demonstrates how Allison's novel deliberately resists closure. Bone's narrative is not one of triumph but of survival marked by silence, complexity, and ambivalence. In doing so, the novel becomes a powerful critique of dominant recovery discourses that overlook the cumulative weight of poverty, abuse, and social marginalization.

By applying an intersectional trauma lens to literary analysis, this study extends the boundaries of both trauma theory and Southern Gothic literary criticism. It asserts that recovery must be read through the lens of identity, power, and systemic inequality—not as a private experience, but as a socio-narrative act. This approach differs from existing research by insisting that literature does not merely represent trauma—it theorizes it. *Bastard Out of Carolina* becomes a site of epistemic resistance, revealing insights into trauma and coping that are inaccessible to clinical or sociological paradigms alone.

The study also contributes methodologically by integrating Judith Herman's trauma model with thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and interdisciplinary research from psychology, social work, and narrative therapy. This triangulated framework grounds the analysis in both textual close reading and contemporary trauma discourse, ensuring a rigorous and original contribution.

Ultimately, this research asserts that trauma recovery is not a clean arc toward resolution but an uneven, unfinished negotiation between personal pain and collective oppression. It pushes trauma theory to recognize recovery as a dynamic, intersectional, and narrative process—one that literature not only reflects but actively shapes. In doing so, this study offers

a bold, politically engaged intervention in the field of trauma and literary studies.

Textual Analysis and Interpretation

The setting of 1950s Greenville, South Carolina, grounds *Bastard Out of Carolina* in a sociohistorical context marked by poverty and social marginalization, which critically shapes Bone's traumatic experience and recovery. Bone's nickname, "no bigger than a knucklebone" (p. 2), metaphorically encapsulates her vulnerability and resilience, reflecting how trauma survivors negotiate identity within constraining social structures (Vignoles et al., 2011). This introduction situates Bone's narrative within intersectional frameworks of class, gender, and familial betrayal, foregrounding the complexity of trauma as both personal and systemic.

Despite the challenging circumstances, Bone exudes a vibrant joy, intelligence, and an indomitable will to live, embodying a resilience that persists even amid the darkest aspects of their lives. This dynamic aligns with Adams et al. (2023), who explore how trauma and resilience are intertwined within impoverished settings, creating a complex relationship between the two in shaping individuals' lives.

Anney's complex role in *Bastard Out of Carolina* reveals the contradictions at the heart of maternal love under systemic oppression. Her fierce devotion to Bone coexists with an internalized desperation to conform to societal expectations of respectability, particularly through marriage and economic security. Her decision to marry Glen—despite early indications of his volatility—can be read as an act of survival shaped by class-based precarity and the pursuit of legitimacy for her children. This reflects what trauma theorists describe as **compromised agency**, wherein caregivers themselves operate under coercive structures that limit their capacity for protective action (Sinko et al., 2022).

The subsequent assault on Bone during Anney's labor is emblematic of how familial spaces, traditionally idealized as sites of safety, can become arenas of profound betrayal. The simultaneous occurrence of birth and abuse underscores the collapse of generational continuity and maternal protection. Rather than confronting Glen's escalating violence, Anney retreats into denial, her silence functioning as a survival strategy but also as a mechanism of complicity. This dynamic exemplifies Judith Herman's

(1997) concept of **betrayal trauma**, where the victim is harmed not only by the abuser but also by the failure of a trusted caregiver to intervene.

Bone's secrecy and internalized guilt reveal how survivors often adopt self-silencing behaviors to maintain familial bonds, even at the expense of their own psychological well-being. Anney's ultimate choice to flee with Glen, rather than with Bone, starkly illustrates the tragic calculus faced by women navigating patriarchal and classist systems—where loyalty to a male provider overrides maternal protection. Rather than offering closure or redemption, Anney's decision compounds the trauma, reinforcing Herman's assertion that recovery is impossible in the absence of relational safety.

The broader cultural response to *Bastard Out of Carolina*—including its censorship and contested presence in educational spaces—further highlights society's discomfort with confronting sexual violence, especially when it implicates familial and maternal figures. Dorothy Allison's narrative challenges sanitized portrayals of trauma by centering emotional truth over graphic detail. As she notes, "All there is in *Bastard* is the emotional impact," foregrounding the psychic reverberations of abuse rather than its spectacle. This aligns with Caruth's (1996) theory of trauma's unspeakability, where the power of literature lies in its ability to convey what cannot be directly articulated.

Betrayal Trauma and Maternal Abandonment

Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* offers one of the most unsettling portrayals of betrayal trauma in contemporary fiction, rendered through the fractured bond between Bone and her mother, Anney. In Judith Herman's (1997) framework, betrayal by a caregiver—especially when paired with trauma—is one of the most destructive violations of trust, complicating the survivor's capacity for emotional regulation, attachment, and identity development. Bone's abuse at the hands of Glen, and Anney's repeated failure to intervene, exemplify this rupture. Herman defines betrayal trauma as a wound that originates not just from violence, but from the abandonment by those responsible for protection, a condition that erodes the survivor's foundational sense of safety (p. 61).

Bone's trauma is compounded by what Herman terms the "double wound": first, the physical and sexual abuse inflicted by Glen, and second, the

psychological injury caused by Anney's complicity—her refusal to act, her silence, and ultimately, her decision to leave Bone behind. The scene in which Bone recalls her mother's inaction—"Mama didn't move. She looked at me, at Glen, back at me. Her eyes were empty. She did not come to me" (Allison, 1992, p. 289)—functions as the novel's emotional core, capturing the catastrophic collapse of maternal trust and safety. The inability of Bone's primary attachment figure to protect her transforms trauma into something fundamentally unspeakable, aligning with Cathy Caruth's (1996) notion that trauma is not simply a memory, but an experience that breaks the very mechanisms of representation.

Anney's failure cannot be attributed solely to maternal weakness; rather, it reflects the sociocultural and economic constraints that define her subjectivity. Trapped within a patriarchal framework that equates male protection with familial legitimacy, Anney remains emotionally and materially dependent on Glen. Her actions illustrate Herman's claim that in situations of prolonged abuse, "survivors often adopt strategies of appeasement, denial, or emotional detachment to preserve a sense of connection" (p. 104). These same mechanisms, when mirrored by the caregiver, not only fail the survivor but intensify the trauma by reinforcing the message that their pain is neither visible nor valid.

This profound betrayal initiates a relational and psychological schism that Bone carries throughout the novel. Her inability to fully condemn Anney reflects Herman's insight that the child survivor is often caught between **attachment and survival**, loving the person who harmed or failed them even as that love becomes a source of enduring pain. Bone's internalization of this betrayal fragments her ability to trust, narrate her trauma, and form stable attachments—critical processes necessary for the first stage of trauma recovery, which Herman identifies as **establishing safety** (p. 159).

Yet Bone's situation complicates Herman's triphasic model. While the theory outlines a linear progression—safety, remembrance, reconnection—Bone's reality is one of recursive fragmentation. Her trauma recurs in memory, silence, and emotional paralysis, suggesting that the infrastructure for healing simply does not exist in her social world. Without acknowledgment from her primary caregiver or society at large, Bone cannot locate herself within a narrative of recovery; she exists in what Laub

(2013) might call a **state of narrative dislocation**, unable to fully testify or be heard.

In sum, Anney's abandonment is not only a pivotal betrayal of Bone's trust but also a structural failure of care that exposes the limitations of traditional trauma recovery models in contexts of familial and societal complicity. Allison's portrayal resists redemption arcs or cathartic closure; instead, it insists on a reality in which betrayal itself becomes the trauma, and where healing cannot begin without the recognition of this betrayal by both individual and collective structures of support.

Establishing Safety: Raylene's Care and the Boatwright Sanctuary

In Judith Herman's (1997) triphasic model of trauma recovery, the establishment of safety is not merely the removal of danger, but the creation of a stable, predictable environment that restores the survivor's sense of bodily and psychological integrity. In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Raylene's home represents a significant intervention in Bone's life, shifting her from a volatile, abusive space to one of relative calm. The absence of physical violence and Raylene's nonjudgmental presence offer Bone a reprieve from the daily terror she experienced in her mother's home. This aligns with Herman's emphasis that "recovery begins with the restoration of a sense of safety" (p. 159), as Bone finally gains some control over her environment.

However, Allison complicates the ideal of safety by exposing its emotional limitations. While Raylene's home offers a sanctuary from external threats, it does not facilitate the deeper emotional work required for healing. Bone's trauma remains **unspoken**, buried beneath the surface of daily survival. Herman stresses that "the core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others" (p. 133), and although Raylene's care prevents further harm, it does not create the conditions for narrative reintegration. There is no encouragement for Bone to tell her story, no direct acknowledgment of the abuse she endured, and no invitation to process her pain. This silence, though protective, mirrors what Herman identifies as a societal defense mechanism: a collective reluctance to confront trauma when it disrupts familial or communal coherence.

The protective but emotionally avoidant nature of Raylene's care reflects a broader pattern in trauma recovery, where survivors are often met with partial support—shelter without validation. Herman warns that such

support results in what she terms a “suspended state of recovery” (p. 160), in which the survivor remains physically safe but emotionally stuck, unable to move forward in the healing process. Bone’s emotional isolation in Raylene’s home underscores this: she is no longer under threat, yet her suffering continues to manifest internally, unarticulated and unshared.

Furthermore, Raylene’s refusal to openly address the abuse reinforces the idea that safety, to be transformative, must be relational and dialogic. As Herman argues, “Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (p. 133). Raylene provides Bone with care, but no connection. Her sanctuary is thus both a critical act of protection and a symbol of the limits of incomplete recovery—a space where trauma is contained but never confronted. The absence of witnessing or emotional engagement stifles Bone’s progression toward Herman’s second stage of recovery, remembrance and mourning, which requires not only memory but also the presence of an empathic listener.

By portraying Raylene’s home as both refuge and silence, Allison critiques romanticized notions of safety and healing. She suggests that care, while necessary, is not sufficient unless it includes the willingness to bear witness to pain. The sanctuary that Raylene offers is real—but it remains suspended, stalled by the collective refusal to name what happened to Bone.

Familial Loyalty, Rage, and the Limits of Protection

In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, familial loyalty emerges as both a site of potential safety and a profound obstacle to healing. The Boatwright family embodies a fierce kin-based solidarity, characterized by emotional intensity and a readiness to physically confront threats like Glen. However, this loyalty functions within a cultural framework that prioritizes external protection over emotional transparency. While they reject Glen’s abuse and attempt to shield Bone from further harm, they ultimately fail to engage with **the emotional truth** of her trauma. This silence mirrors a pattern Judith Herman (1997) identifies as a central impediment to recovery: the substitution of action for acknowledgment. Protection without validation, Herman argues, may offer safety from danger but not from shame, loneliness, or psychological fragmentation.

The Boatwrights’ refusal to speak openly about the abuse creates a collective silence that is emotionally paralyzing. Though their actions

suggest love, their inability to witness Bone's inner world leaves her isolated, reinforcing Herman's notion that trauma recovery is deeply relational. Healing requires not only the presence of allies but also their willingness to listen, believe, and remember (p. 181). The family's silence acts as a form of collective dissociation—a psychological and cultural defense that allows them to maintain familial bonds without confronting the unbearable realities of incest and betrayal. This silence, however, reinforces Bone's invisibility within the very space meant to protect her.

This dynamic reveals a dangerous conflation between loyalty and denial, a pattern particularly prevalent in marginalized communities where trauma is often normalized or hidden to preserve collective identity. As trauma theorists Dori Laub (1992) and Shoshana Felman have observed, bearing witness to trauma is not a passive act; it demands emotional labor and ethical risk, particularly when the trauma implicates the family itself. The Boatwrights, though fiercely protective in action, avoid this labor. They do not allow Bone to speak or to reconstruct her narrative, denying her the relational context necessary for integration and transformation (Herman 1997, p. 133).

The result is a dangerous paradox: Bone is surrounded by people who would fight for her but not speak with her. She becomes what Herman describes as a "half-healed survivor"—physically safer, yet emotionally suspended in a context that prioritizes loyalty over truth (p. 160). This half-healing reinforces the internalized shame and confusion that often follows betrayal trauma, especially when survivors are left to make sense of their suffering alone.

Allison's depiction of the Boatwrights critiques a broader cultural impulse to perform protection while avoiding emotional engagement. By emphasizing physical defense without emotional accountability, the novel demonstrates how partial support can ultimately reinforce the very conditions it seeks to remedy. Loyalty, in this case, becomes a mask for denial; it ensures the continuity of the family unit but stifles the possibility of full recovery.

Thus, Bone's healing is thwarted not only by the presence of violence but also by the family's refusal to bear witness to her pain. Allison challenges the assumption that protection equates to care, illustrating instead that

without truth-telling, listening, and mutual recognition, loyalty alone cannot disrupt the silence trauma depends upon to endure.

Remembrance and Mourning

In Judith Herman's (1997) trauma recovery model, the second phase—**remembrance and mourning**—requires the survivor to confront and narrate the traumatic past within a safe, supportive relationship. For Bone, however, this stage proves elusive. While moments of fragmented recollection surface throughout *Bastard Out of Carolina*, they remain unshared, unresolved, and often retraumatizing. Bone's trauma is not simply remembered—it returns in chaotic, disjointed fragments that reflect the disrupted narrative logic of traumatic memory, as theorized by Cathy Caruth (1996). Caruth argues that trauma resists full integration into the psyche, manifesting instead in delayed, repetitive returns that destabilize the survivor's sense of time, identity, and coherence.

This is precisely the condition in which Bone finds herself. Her attempts to make sense of her suffering are continuously thwarted by the absence of empathetic listeners and the emotional repression of those around her. In a community where abuse is sensed but not spoken, Bone's ability to process what has happened is arrested. As Herman writes, "The reconstruction of the trauma story can proceed only in a supportive environment" (p. 181). Without such support, Bone is trapped in a state of unresolved mourning, unable to transition from survival to meaning-making.

The fragmented nature of her reflections—often revealed through interior monologue, elliptical memory, and symbolic language—aligns with Laub's (2013) observation that testimony is not merely recounting the past, but a process of reliving and negotiating its meaning in real-time. Bone's realization that "things come apart so easily when they have been held together with lies" (Allison, 1992, p. 98) reflects a nascent confrontation with the constructed silences around her. Yet this moment, while powerful, is not part of a broader dialogue; it remains internal, solitary, and unresolved.

Moreover, Bone's mourning is complicated by her unresolved attachment to her mother. Anney's abandonment is not just an emotional loss—it is a rupture of identity and meaning. According to Herman, mourning in trauma involves not only grieving what was lost but also rebuilding a coherent life narrative (p. 203). Bone's attachment to Anney, however, resists closure; her longing for maternal love exists alongside the

unbearable knowledge of betrayal. This ambivalence makes mourning impossible: Bone cannot fully grieve someone she still yearns for, nor can she hate someone she continues to love. This emotional stalemate reinforces the recursive nature of her trauma: without external validation or narrative containment, Bone remains caught in what Stef Craps (2013) calls “**a structure of belatedness**,” where the trauma’s meaning cannot be settled. The novel refuses the arc of resolution or catharsis. Instead, it presents recovery as an ongoing struggle with memory, marked by repeated ruptures rather than linear healing.

By emphasizing the absence of shared mourning and testimonial space, *Bastard Out of Carolina* critiques the cultural and familial silences that make trauma inexpressible. Allison shows that remembrance is not only about memory, but also about the conditions that allow memory to be spoken aloud, heard, and witnessed. Without those conditions, Bone’s trauma remains suspended in time—half-recalled, half-buried, and wholly unresolved.

Loss of Innocence and Identity Fragmentation

Bone’s experience of trauma in *Bastard Out of Carolina* is not confined to isolated acts of abuse—it permeates her very formation of selfhood. The early rupture of her innocence through sexual violence, familial betrayal, and social exclusion produces what Judith Herman (1997) identifies as a core injury of trauma: the fragmentation of identity. This damage, Herman argues, results when a survivor’s fundamental beliefs about safety, trust, and self-worth are destabilized by prolonged interpersonal violence, especially within the context of caregiving relationships (p. 51). In Bone’s case, her trauma is both interpersonal and systemic, making the task of reconstructing a coherent identity nearly impossible.

This identity disintegration is not merely internal or emotional—it is profoundly social. As Vignoles et al. (2011) assert, identity is a “relational achievement,” shaped through language, labels, and one’s role in social structures. From birth, Bone is marked by the label “bastard,” a term that signifies more than illegitimacy—it encapsulates poverty, shame, deviance, and disposability. These social inscriptions constrain Bone’s ability to imagine herself outside of the categories imposed upon her. The abuse she suffers, and the systemic failures that follow, reinforce what Herman calls

the collapse of meaning and connection, leaving Bone to inhabit a fractured and socially dislocated self (p. 52).

Much of Bone's identity conflict centers on her relationship with Anney, whose dual role as both nurturer and betrayer deeply complicates Bone's sense of self-worth. Herman refers to this as a "conflicted attachment system" (p. 103), where survivors remain emotionally tethered to those who harmed them, unable to reconcile love with violation. Bone longs for Anney's approval and is devastated by her abandonment. This emotional paradox undermines Bone's capacity to trust not only others but herself. The lack of stable caregiving relationships erodes the internal foundation upon which a resilient self might otherwise be built.

Bone's response to this betrayal reflects what trauma theorists identify as introjected blame—the tendency for child survivors to internalize responsibility for the abuse to preserve some sense of control or attachment. Her narrative is filled with guilt, self-questioning, and silence, indicating that she has absorbed the cultural and familial message that her pain is either inconsequential or deserved. As Herman notes, "the survivor's sense of inner worth is frequently destroyed" in these contexts (p. 105). Bone's silence is thus not merely protective but also symptomatic of a shattered self-concept, a belief that her voice does not matter—or worse, that it is dangerous.

This internalized harm is reinforced by the absence of institutional intervention. As Sinko et al. (2022) emphasize, trauma experienced in marginalized communities is often magnified by systemic failures: the lack of responsive schools, social services, or legal protections compounds the survivor's sense of invisibility and helplessness. Bone's social world is one in which harm is not just inflicted, but **ignored**, and this silence reinforces her fragmented identity. She is not just a survivor of interpersonal violence—she is the product of a system that names her, blames her, and abandons her.

Importantly, Allison resists a simplistic arc of redemption or healing. Instead, Bone's identity reconstruction is portrayed as ongoing, incomplete, and contingent. Her resilience lies not in a return to wholeness, but in her refusal to disappear. She continues to narrate, to survive, to exist against the cultural forces that seek to erase or define her. Herman contends that survivors must "rebuild a system of meaning and belief that incorporates

the trauma into their life story” (p. 203). In Bone’s case, that life story is still in process—partial, wounded, but undeniably her own.

Through this portrayal, *Bastard Out of Carolina* challenges readers to understand identity not as something shattered and then neatly repaired, but as a site of continual negotiation—a space where trauma, memory, and survival coexist in tension.

Silence and Mistrust in Relationships

In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, silence becomes both a consequence and a mechanism of survival. Bone’s reluctance to speak about her abuse reflects what Judith Herman (1997) identifies as a common psychological response to trauma: emotional withdrawal, secrecy, and mistrust—particularly when the trauma is interpersonal and betrayal-based.

These defense mechanisms serve to protect the survivor from further harm but ultimately reinforce isolation, obstructing the relational trust that is essential to healing. Bone’s silence is not simply imposed by external forces; it is internalized as a form of self-regulation. Her haunting assertion—“You can’t never tell nobody. You can’t never let them know what’s going on. They’ll just make it worse” (Allison, 1992, p. 296)—reveals the depth of her mistrust, forged in the crucible of maternal abandonment and social indifference.

This refusal to disclose is rooted in Bone’s experience of betrayal by Anney, whose inaction sends a message that speaking the truth will lead not to protection but to loss. Herman emphasizes that trauma inflicted by a caregiver does not just sever the bond of attachment—it distorts the survivor’s perception of what relationships are capable of offering. For Bone, the expectation that relationships bring betrayal—not safety—becomes a psychological norm. Her silence becomes a way of preserving what little connection she has, even as it stifles her need for acknowledgment. As Herman writes, “When the victim is not believed, not supported, and not listened to, she suffers a second injury” (p. 61).

This second injury—the injury of not being witnessed—is particularly evident in Bone’s attempts to navigate relationships in the aftermath of her trauma. The emotional cost of betrayal is not confined to her bond with Anney; it bleeds into her ability to connect with others, including Raylene and her extended family. While Raylene provides consistency and physical

safety, Bone remains guarded, unwilling or unable to trust even those who mean well. The persistent mistrust that shadows Bone's relational world reflects Herman's insight that trauma recovery depends on rebuilding relational capacity—something that requires more than just proximity or goodwill; it demands honesty, vulnerability, and reciprocal recognition (p. 133).

Importantly, Allison does not portray Bone's silence as a mere absence. Rather, silence functions in the novel as a language of trauma, one that speaks volumes about Bone's emotional landscape. It conveys her fear, her shame, and her acute awareness of what is at stake when survivors tell the truth in a world unprepared to hear it. Her silence is thus not only a coping mechanism—it is a form of protest, a rejection of the inadequate responses she has received. In this way, Bone's muteness becomes a site of both loss and resistance, echoing Herman's view that survivors are not passive participants in their recovery; they are active agents negotiating impossible conditions.

Ultimately, *Bastard Out of Carolina* portrays silence and mistrust not as signs of weakness or repression, but as complex strategies forged under duress. These strategies, while protective, come at a profound emotional cost. They block the very relationships that could facilitate healing, leaving Bone suspended between the desire to connect and the fear of being betrayed again. The novel does not resolve this tension but rather exposes it, compelling readers to consider the emotional labor required to transform silence into speech, and mistrust into connection.

The Final Stage: Reconnection and Empowerment

The final phase of Judith Herman's (1997) trauma recovery model—**reconnection**—emphasizes the survivor's reintegration into a meaningful life, one that includes agency, purpose, and restored relationships. In *Bastard Out of Carolina*, this stage is approached cautiously, unevenly, and incompletely. Bone does not undergo a redemptive transformation or emerge fully healed; instead, Dorothy Allison portrays reconnection as a tentative act of resistance—a refusal to be fully defined by suffering. Bone's slow steps toward reclaiming her voice, her body, and her identity represent an act of empowerment in a world that has consistently silenced and objectified her.

While Bone's earlier relationships are marred by betrayal, her bond with Raylene, though emotionally restrained, provides a foundation for cautious reconnection. Raylene's care—nonintrusive, consistent, and nonjudgmental—offers Bone a model of relational safety that contrasts sharply with Anney's inconsistent and ultimately devastating love. Although Raylene does not initiate open conversations about Bone's trauma, her presence provides what Herman describes as the relational scaffolding necessary for healing—a space where the survivor can begin to rebuild autonomy without fear of violence or emotional abandonment (p. 205).

Still, Bone's process of reconnection is not solely relational; it is deeply personal and political. Her survival becomes a form of resistance to the structural forces that shaped her trauma: poverty, misogyny, illegitimacy, and familial silence. In this regard, Allison aligns with feminist and intersectional trauma theorists who argue that recovery cannot be separated from the social conditions in which trauma occurs. As Wang et al. (2025) assert, trauma recovery is "not just an individual process of healing but a political reckoning with systems that enable harm." Bone's reassertion of agency must be understood in the context of the structural forces that continue to marginalize her.

The novel offers no illusion that Bone will be fully restored. The scars of her trauma—emotional, psychological, and social—remain. Yet her ability to continue, to name what happened, and to exist without disappearing constitutes a form of empowerment. Herman emphasizes that the goal of recovery is not to erase trauma but to integrate it into a coherent sense of self—a process that allows survivors to reclaim control over their own narratives (p. 204). Bone begins to do this, even if haltingly, as she moves from muteness to memory, from invisibility to narration.

This progression, though subtle, marks a crucial shift. Bone's survival is not framed as triumphant but as deliberate and defiant. She refuses the roles imposed upon her—victim, bastard, burden—and instead becomes the author of her own experience, even if that experience remains painful and incomplete. In doing so, she embodies what Herman describes as the final movement of recovery: the restoration of power and connection, grounded not in denial of the past but in the ability to live with it.

Allison ultimately resists neat closure, offering instead a vision of healing that is nonlinear, partial, and deeply human. Bone's journey reflects the reality that trauma does not always end with clarity or resolution. Sometimes, survival itself is the revolution.

Conclusion

Bone's journey in *Bastard Out of Carolina* offers a profound exploration of trauma that challenges conventional recovery models, particularly those that treat trauma as a singular event to be processed and resolved. Through the lens of Judith Herman's trauma recovery model, this study examines how Bone's healing is not a linear, singular process but a fragmented, relational journey shaped by familial and societal forces. This research addresses how recovery is not simply a matter of regaining safety and control but involves navigating complex interpersonal dynamics, including the betrayal of her mother and the absence of familial acknowledgment.

In answering the first research question, *How does the novel depict the possibility of recovery for survivors of familial trauma?*, this study illustrates that Bone's recovery is not about erasing her trauma but about learning to live with its ongoing presence. Her journey of healing involves not just surviving but reasserting control over her narrative, confronting both her personal pain and the societal forces that attempt to define her. Bone's ability to reclaim her agency—despite the absence of full familial recognition—demonstrates that healing is possible even in the face of fragmented support systems.

Regarding the second research question, *In what ways does Bone's experience challenge or extend trauma theory?* This analysis reveals how Bone's recovery transcends traditional trauma models, particularly Herman's three-stage recovery process. Her healing is deeply nonlinear, disrupted by societal silences and institutionalized neglect. Rather than following a structured path toward closure, Bone's process of healing is about reconciling with a past that can never be fully processed. This complexity highlights the limitations of traditional trauma models and underscores the need for theories that embrace the ongoing, evolving nature of trauma.

Finally, in addressing the third research question, *How do familial and institutional forces shape or obstruct the survivor's capacity for healing?* The study demonstrates how the silence and complicity of Bone's family—particularly her mother—serve as significant barriers to recovery. Bone's

trauma is compounded by the societal and gendered expectations placed upon her, which prevent her from seeking validation or expressing her pain. This analysis calls for a more intersectional approach to trauma studies, acknowledging that healing is not simply a private, individual act but one that is deeply influenced by the relational and systemic forces at play.

This study contributes to trauma studies and literary criticism by offering a nuanced understanding of trauma recovery that integrates relational, cultural, and institutional dimensions. It highlights the importance of considering the broader socio-political context in which trauma occurs and the need for an intersectional, systemic approach to studying trauma. By focusing on the relational aspects of trauma and recovery, *Bastard Out of Carolina* offers an essential critique of traditional trauma models, calling for a more inclusive and context-sensitive framework that recognizes the complexities of healing.

Ultimately, Bone's story challenges us to rethink how we conceptualize recovery. It teaches us that healing is not a straightforward, individual achievement but an ongoing, collective negotiation between past and present, silence and voice, suffering and survival. As such, *Bastard Out of Carolina* serves as a pivotal text in trauma studies, urging scholars to consider not only the personal aspects of trauma but also the structural and relational forces that shape the survivor's path to healing.

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