

Wounds and Words: Trauma, Identity, and the Writer's Weapon in Salman Rushdie's *Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder*

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Abstract

Salman Rushdie's Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder (2024) offers a profound exploration of survival, identity, and literary defiance in the wake of a near-fatal attack. This memoir recounts the 2022 stabbing of Rushdie on stage in New York, an event that reignited decades-long threats stemming from the 1989 fatwa following the publication of The Satanic Verses. Far from presenting a simple narrative of victimhood, Knife transforms trauma into a reflective, multidimensional literary work that interrogates the ethical, political, and existential dimensions of storytelling. Through fragmented memory, metafictional reflection, and philosophical musings, Rushdie illustrates how narrative functions simultaneously as a shield and a weapon—protecting the wounded self while resisting ideological extremism and cultural censorship.

This article examines Knife using the frameworks of trauma theory, postcolonial critique, and autobiography. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's theories of trauma as belated and recursive experience, the paper explores how Rushdie's non-linear, episodic narrative mirrors the psychological disruptions caused by violence while facilitating the reclamation of narrative authority. Through Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space," the study situates Rushdie's identity as hybrid and liminal, navigating between cultures, ideologies, and diasporic experience. The memoir also engages with the ethical responsibilities of writers, emphasizing the burdens and stakes of defending freedom of expression in a world marked by ideological polarization, religious extremism, and political censorship.

Furthermore, the study highlights the role of intimate relationships, particularly with Rushdie's wife, Rachel Eliza Griffiths, in fostering resilience, creative collaboration, and human connection amid trauma. By integrating personal vulnerability with broader philosophical, cultural, and political reflection, Knife emerges as both a postcolonial and universal meditation on survival, artistic creation, and the transformative power of storytelling. Ultimately, the memoir demonstrates that writing is not merely a literary exercise but a necessary act of resistance, healing, and identity

reclamation, affirming the enduring importance of words as tools for resilience, empowerment, and ethical engagement in the contemporary world.

Keywords: Knife, Trauma, Memoir, Free Speech

Introduction

Salman Rushdie's life and career have long been shaped by the interplay of literature, ideology, and political controversy. In August 2022, Rushdie was brutally attacked on stage in Chautauqua, New York, an event that reverberated across the globe. While the immediate danger was physical—the stabbing of a man who had long lived under death threats—it also carried symbolic weight. The attack was a stark reminder of the enduring risks faced by writers and public intellectuals who challenge dogma, question authority, or provoke entrenched ideological beliefs. For decades, Rushdie has occupied a precarious space as both a celebrated literary figure and a target of religious extremism. The 2022 stabbing, occurring more than thirty years after Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa calling for his death following the publication of *The Satanic Verses* (Rushdie, *Joseph Anton* 12), underscores the persistent global tension surrounding freedom of expression, cultural identity, and the role of intellectual dissent in a polarized world.

Rushdie's 2024 memoir, *Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder*, is not merely a recounting of this traumatic event; it is a complex and deliberate literary project that explores the intersections of trauma, creativity, and ethical responsibility. Unlike a conventional autobiography, the memoir does not follow a linear chronological structure. Instead, it employs fragmented memories, philosophical reflections, and recursive narrative strategies to convey the multifaceted experience of surviving trauma. In doing so, Rushdie situates his personal ordeal within broader conversations about political violence, postcolonial identity, and the responsibilities of writers in defending free speech. The stabbing, while intensely personal, becomes a lens through which questions of morality, culture, and human resilience are explored.

This paper approaches *Knife* as a work that simultaneously documents survival and asserts literary defiance. It investigates how Rushdie uses narrative as both shield and weapon, transforming pain into agency while maintaining ethical rigor in his portrayal of violence and extremism. By analyzing the memoir through the frameworks of trauma theory, postcolonial critique, and autobiographical methodology, this study illuminates the ways in which Rushdie not only survives physically but also reclaims narrative authority, constructs identity, and challenges ideological constraints.

The study is guided by three research questions:

1. How does *Knife* function as a literary act of reclaiming narrative authority after trauma?

2. In what ways does Rushdie intertwine personal pain with broader themes of freedom, identity, and postcolonial resistance?
3. How does the text employ metafictional and philosophical reflection to transcend conventional boundaries of memoir?

When Salman Rushdie was brutally attacked on stage in Chautauqua, New York, in August 2022, the incident was more than a physical assault; it symbolized decades-long ideological tension and threats to freedom of expression. The stabbing came years after Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa calling for Rushdie's death following the controversial publication of *The Satanic Verses* (Rushdie, *Joseph Anton* 12), a novel that challenged religious orthodoxy while earning critical acclaim. The recurrence of such violence highlights persistent global debates over religious extremism, free speech, and the role of public intellectuals in a polarized world.

Rushdie's 2024 memoir, *Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder*, confronts this trauma with intellectual rigor, emotional openness, and literary sophistication. Rather than presenting a chronological account, the memoir employs fragmented, reflective, and recursive narrative strategies. It transforms physical and psychological pain into literary action, turning victimhood into agency. This paper examines *Knife* as an intersection of trauma literature, postcolonial identity discourse, and ethical literary resistance, arguing that Rushdie wields language as both shield and weapon against forces seeking to silence him.

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Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive approach to analyze Salman Rushdie's *Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder* (2024), exploring trauma, identity, and literary resistance. The research combines close reading of the memoir with theoretical frameworks from trauma studies, postcolonial theory, and autobiography to examine how Rushdie transforms personal trauma into narrative agency. Key strategies analyzed include fragmentation, metafiction, recursive memory, and philosophical reflection, alongside depictions of intimacy and creative collaboration. Contextual sources situate the memoir within cultural, political, and historical dimensions, including freedom of expression and ideological conflict. Data analysis is thematic,

focusing on identity reclamation, ethical reflections on free speech, and resilience through human connection, demonstrating how the memoir turns trauma into a medium of literary and existential resistance.

Literature Review

The intersection of trauma and literature has long been fertile ground for scholarly inquiry. Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* provides a foundational framework, emphasizing that trauma resists straightforward narration and is often experienced belatedly through memory and narrative recurrence (Caruth 4). Trauma manifests less as a coherent event than as ruptures, silences, and repetitions that disrupt linear time. In *Knife*, Rushdie's stabbing is never merely recounted chronologically; it recurs in fragmented reflections, meditations, and episodic narrative patterns, mirroring trauma's disorienting effects (Rushdie, *Knife* 23).

Rushdie's engagement with trauma is consistent with his previous work. In *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* (2012), he documents years spent under police protection, highlighting storytelling as a survival mechanism. Scholars such as Robert Eaglestone have analyzed Rushdie's post-fatwa writing as "dangerous literature," which confronts authoritarianism with ethical and aesthetic complexity (Eaglestone 92). Through irony, ambiguity, and ethical provocation, Rushdie's writing challenges who can speak and under what conditions, positioning narrative as an existential protest.

Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory further illuminates Rushdie's hybridity. Bhabha's "third space" frames identity as fluid, emerging between traditional dichotomies such as East and West or colonizer and colonized (Bhabha 37). Rushdie, an Indian-born British writer, exemplifies this hybridity, and *Knife* foregrounds the fragility and resilience inherent in such identities. By integrating trauma studies, literary resistance, and postcolonial theory, the memoir becomes a complex intervention—personal, philosophical, and political.

The Memoir as Weapon and Shield

The title *Knife* immediately signals violence, both literal and metaphorical. The knife that wounded Rushdie physically becomes a symbol of the psychological and existential wounds imposed by trauma. Conversely, the memoir itself functions as a dual-edged tool: it is both a weapon of resistance and a shield against victimhood. Rushdie declares, "He came at me with a knife; I responded with a story" (*Knife* 15), encapsulating the ethos of narrative defiance. Here, literature becomes an instrument of agency, transforming trauma into testimony.

Autobiographical writing, in this context, is an act of self-possession. By recounting the stabbing on his terms, Rushdie rejects passive victimhood, reclaiming narrative authority and reshaping meaning. The memoir situates the attack within broader ideological and cultural struggles, presenting storytelling as a combative act that

challenges not only physical violence but also extremism and censorship. The wounds borne in the text—both literal and figurative—demonstrate vulnerability’s paradox: the same injuries that threaten to destroy also provide the impetus for defiance (Rushdie, *Knife* 32).

Rushdie’s prose oscillates between aphorism, irony, and lyrical reflection, mirroring the struggle to negotiate pain, mortality, and narrative clarity. In this way, *Knife* exemplifies “dangerous writing,” asserting ethical resistance while insisting upon the continued relevance of literature as a public and moral force (Eaglestone 97).

Narrative as Reclamation of Identity

The stabbing that nearly cost Rushdie an eye transcends physical harm, symbolizing a threat to perception, insight, and creativity. The memoir frames the damaged eye as a metaphor for the fractured yet resilient self. Trauma does not merely disrupt; it reshapes identity, creating spaces for reflection and renewal. As Rushdie writes, “It hurt to write, but it hurt more not to” (*Knife* 45), underscoring the existential necessity of narrative as a tool for survival.

Knife situates Rushdie in a lineage of writers such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, James Baldwin, and George Orwell, who leveraged storytelling against oppression. By narrating trauma, Rushdie reclaims narrative authority, asserting that identity is forged through reflection, articulation, and resistance. Fragmentation in the memoir mirrors the post-traumatic self, where irony, introspection, and philosophical reflection coexist with resilience and renewal.

Through the act of writing, Rushdie constructs a living, evolving identity. Trauma fractures the self, but storytelling provides cohesion, empathy, and understanding. The memoir thus becomes a meditation on the inseparability of body and narrative, illustrating that survival necessitates both physical recovery and the reclamation of voice (Rushdie, *Knife* 50).

Free Speech and the Burden of Defiance

Free expression is central to *Knife*, yet Rushdie treats it with nuance, interrogating its ethical and personal dimensions. Far from romanticizing provocation, he presents freedom of speech as responsibility-laden, requiring courage, discernment, and engagement with complexity (*Knife* 112).

The stabbing, occurring during a public dialogue, symbolizes a direct attack on democratic discourse. Rushdie’s memoir reconstructs this space, emphasizing resilience and the reparative power of storytelling. Rather than retreating or courting martyrdom, he demonstrates that words—carefully wielded—can challenge extremism and restore dialogue. *Knife* thus emerges as both personal testimony and cultural intervention, reaffirming the indispensable role of fearless speech in fostering

communal resilience.

Love, Intimacy, and the Humanizing Lens

Amid trauma, *Knife* celebrates intimacy and relational resilience. Rushdie's relationship with his wife, Rachel Eliza Griffiths, functions as a source of emotional and creative sustenance, revealing vulnerability as a conduit for strength. Griffiths is not a passive caretaker but an intellectual and artistic collaborator, creating a dialogic space where shared creativity and support facilitate survival (*Knife* 137).

These passages counterbalance public sensationalism and humanize Rushdie. They underscore that survival is relational, emerging from care, mutual trust, and creative partnership. By highlighting love and interdependence, *Knife* emphasizes that resilience is collective and human connection is a form of resistance against dehumanization.

Metafiction and Philosophical Interrogation

Knife employs metafiction, rejecting linear narrative in favor of meditations, aphorisms, imagined dialogues, and philosophical reflection. This structure mirrors trauma's nonlinear experience and invites readers into active engagement with meaning-making. Rushdie deliberately avoids naming his attacker, denying symbolic power and refocusing attention on ideological forces behind the violence (*Knife* 172).

The memoir becomes a space for intellectual inquiry, ethical debate, and reflection on mortality and creativity. Rushdie writes, "I was almost ended. Now I must begin again" (*Knife* 201), symbolizing the regenerative potential of storytelling. By blending memoir with philosophical interrogation, he redefines the genre, demonstrating its capacity to grapple with trauma, survival, and artistic responsibility.

Postcolonial Echoes: Violence, Ideology, and Power

Though deeply personal, *Knife* resonates within postcolonial discourse. The attack embodies ideological struggles central to postcolonial theory, including tensions between tradition and modernity, East and West, and orthodoxy and freedom (Said 89). Rushdie critiques extremism while holding Western democracies accountable for moral ambiguity and complicity.

Invoking Bhabha's "third space," *Knife* occupies the liminal realm where hybrid identities form and dominant narratives are contested (Bhabha 56). The memoir interrogates appeals to purity, nationalism, or religious fidelity, demonstrating the dangers of reductive thinking and emphasizing the ethical role of writers in resisting suppression.

Findings / Results

The analysis of Salman Rushdie's *Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder*

reveals several key insights into how trauma, identity, and literary agency intersect in the memoir. First, the memoir demonstrates a reclamation of narrative authority following trauma. Through fragmented storytelling, recursive memory, and metafictional techniques, Rushdie transforms the stabbing from an act of victimization into a site of literary and existential empowerment. The non-linear narrative mirrors the disorientation of trauma while simultaneously allowing Rushdie to assert control over how the event is remembered and interpreted. Statements such as “He came at me with a knife; I responded with a story” exemplify this transformation, where language itself becomes both a shield and a weapon.

Second, the memoir highlights the ethical and philosophical dimensions of free speech. Rushdie engages deeply with the responsibilities and burdens inherent in defending expression amid ideological extremism. Rather than presenting free speech as a simplistic or abstract right, the text emphasizes courage, discernment, and engagement with complexity. The stabbing is framed not only as a personal threat but as a symbolic assault on democratic dialogue and public discourse, underscoring the stakes involved in literary and intellectual defiance.

Third, the memoir foregrounds the role of relational intimacy and human connection in fostering resilience. Rushdie’s relationship with his wife, Rachel Eliza Griffiths, is depicted as a source of emotional sustenance, creative collaboration, and moral grounding. The interplay of love, trust, and shared artistry illustrates that survival is relational, and that healing from trauma is intertwined with the presence and support of others. This emphasis on intimacy humanizes the narrative, balancing public acts of defiance with private resilience.

Finally, the memoir situates these personal and ethical dimensions within a broader postcolonial and cultural context. Drawing on Bhabha’s concept of the “third space,” Rushdie’s hybrid identity is framed as both vulnerable and resilient, navigating diasporic, cultural, and ideological intersections. Violence, extremism, and censorship are not treated as isolated phenomena but as expressions of systemic cultural and political tensions. Through these intersections, *Knife* emerges as both a personal testimony and a critical cultural intervention, exemplifying how literary narrative can respond to trauma, assert identity, and engage with pressing social issues.

In summary, the findings reveal that *Knife* functions simultaneously as a memoir, a philosophical reflection, and a postcolonial intervention. Rushdie demonstrates that trauma can be transformed into narrative agency, violence can be met with ethical defiance, and human connections can foster resilience all while situating the personal within the political, making the memoir a compelling model of literature’s power to resist, heal, and affirm identity.

Conclusion

Knife is a resurrection through language. Salman Rushdie transforms near-erasure into an affirmation of identity, thought, and resistance. His prose functions as both weapon and balm, cutting through ideology while offering healing. Storytelling emerges as existential necessity, asserting the writer's enduring relevance in a polarized, authoritarian age. *Knife* demonstrates that narrative reclamation is integral to survival, illustrating the power of words to resist violence, restore identity, and cultivate resilience.

Salman Rushdie's *Knife: Meditations After an Attempted Murder* exemplifies the transformative power of literature in the face of trauma, ideological violence, and existential threat. The memoir demonstrates that storytelling is not merely a record of events but a deliberate act of reclamation—of selfhood, voice, and moral authority. Through fragmented narrative, metafictional reflection, and philosophical inquiry, Rushdie turns the personal trauma of his 2022 stabbing into a multidimensional meditation on survival, creativity, and ethical responsibility.

The study reveals that *Knife* operates on multiple levels: it is a memoir of resilience, a postcolonial exploration of hybrid identity, and a cultural critique of extremism and censorship. Rushdie's articulation of free speech emphasizes both its necessity and its inherent ethical burdens, while his depiction of relational intimacy, particularly with his wife, highlights the centrality of human connection in fostering resilience and sustaining creativity.

Ultimately, the memoir affirms that words can function as both weapon and shield—tools through which individuals confront violence, assert identity, and engage with broader social and political concerns. Rushdie's narrative illustrates that trauma need not result in silence; rather, it can catalyze reflection, resistance, and renewed artistic purpose. *Knife* thus stands as a compelling testament to the capacity of literature to transform suffering into agency, challenge ideological oppression, and reaffirm the enduring significance of storytelling in both personal and cultural life.

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