



Bearing The Unspoken: Psychological Trauma And Emotional Suppression In Erin Doom's The Tearsmith

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Abstract

This article explores Erin Doom's *The Tearsmith* through the lens of contemporary trauma theory, focusing specifically on how emotional suppression and psychological trauma shape the identity and behaviour of its protagonist. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, Bessel van der Kolk, and Laurie Vickroy, and emerging pluralistic trauma models. The study examines the hidden pain that shapes the characters' lives and demonstrates how their words, silences, and relationships reveal the lasting effects of trauma. The book is studied as both a story about trauma and a healing text that encourages readers, especially young adults, to feel empathy, think deeply and find possible healing through fiction. This analysis uses ideas from attachment theory, body-focused trauma studies, and current research on emotional suppression to show how Doom's work adds to the growing literature on intergenerational trauma and its impact on adolescent growth, by exploring the novel's sophisticated portrayal of complex trauma response, therapeutic relationships, and the gradual process of healing. This study reveals how contemporary young adult literature can serve as both a mirror and medicine for readers navigating their own psychological wounds.

Keywords: The Tearsmith, Psychological Trauma, Emotional Suppression, Empathy

1. Introduction:

Psychological trauma fundamentally represents an emotional and mental reaction to events that exceed an individual's capacity to cope and integrate the experience into their existing understanding. The DSM-5 defines trauma as exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence, while newer frameworks include experiences that cause lasting negative effects on a person's functioning and overall well-being—physical, social, emotional, or spiritual (Pai et al, 2017). Complex developmental trauma occurs when a child undergoes multiple painful or harmful experiences over time, often within close relationships during their formative years. This can significantly weaken the child's ability to trust others, feel safe in relationships, and govern emotions.

Emotional suppression often follows trauma and involves holding back or hiding feelings to avoid being overwhelmed, but this strategy can only help in the short term. Over time, constantly bottling up emotions can lead to increased blood pressure, a weakened immune system, and a reduced ability to attach with others. According to the theorist James J. Gross (2002), suppression is the conscious inhibition of emotional

behaviour after an emotion has been generated, contrasting it with antecedent-focused strategies such as cognitive reappraisal.

Erin Doom's *The Tearsmith* is a masterfully woven story about two emotionally wounded teenagers, Nica and Rigel, who meet in a world filled with silence, shame, and unhealed trauma. While it seems to be a love story on the surface, the novel actually explores the complex ways people conceal their emotions to protect themselves, and how this concealment can both aid and hinder their healing process. The central symbol of *The Tearsmith* signifies not just crying, but the hidden emotional work of recognizing pain and transforming it into something meaningful.

The writer doesn't use dramatic scenes or graphic violence. Instead, she takes readers into the quiet spaces where emotional wounds are hidden and healing occurs slowly through human connection and the process of learning to express feelings again. As trauma expert Cathy Caruth (1994) explains, "is not located in the simple violent or original event...but rather in the way that is a very unassimilated nature, the way it was precisely not known in the first instance, returns to haunt the survivor." This haunting return is vividly present in the characters Nica and Rigel, who carry their past like invisible weights that shape their present relationships and future possibilities.

The novel emerges within a cultural moment when young adult literature increasingly grapples with complex psychological themes, moving beyond traditional coming-of-age narratives to address the reality of childhood trauma and its lasting effects. Contemporary research suggests that emotional suppression, while initially serving protective functions, can create significant physiological and psychological costs over time, including cardiovascular stress, a weakened immune system, and impaired social connections (Gross & John, 2003; Srivastava et al., 2009). *The Tearsmith* provides a nuanced exploration of these dynamics, demonstrating how two teenagers navigate the aftermath of institutional abuse while learning to trust in relationships that offer genuine safety and acceptance.

2. Main Body:

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Understanding Trauma and Emotional Suppression

Classical Trauma Theory Foundations:

Early understanding of trauma can be traced back to Sigmund Freud (1920), who argued that overwhelming experiences often become repressed in the unconscious mind when they cannot be processed. These unassimilated memories, however, return indirectly through dreams, anxiety, or what Freud called "repetition compulsion" — the tendency to relive the trauma in disguised forms. The framework is particularly relevant to *The Tearsmith*, where Nica and Rigel's emotional detachment can be seen as a form of repression. This survival strategy protects them from unbearable memories of institutional abuse. Furthermore, building on these foundations, Judith Herman (1992) argues that psychological trauma involves "a fundamental loss of control, connection, and meaning," often leading to dissociation, hypervigilance, and emotional numbness. Children are especially vulnerable because, as Herman notes, they always lack "the language and supportive relationships" to process their experiences. Another American psychiatrist elaborates on this by showing that trauma is stored not only in memory but also in the body and nervous system. He emphasizes, "Being able to feel safe with other people is probably the single most important aspect of mental health; safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives. Numerous studies of disaster response around the globe have shown that social support is the most powerful protection against becoming overwhelmed by stress and trauma (Van Der Kolk, 2014)." This insight is central to *The Tearsmith*, where the emotional safety provided by adoptive families creates the foundation for healing and growth.

Pluralistic Trauma Theory and Contemporary Views

Some new approaches question the belief that trauma is always "unspeakable." Michelle Balaev (2014) suggests that trauma can actually reveal new links between experience, language, and knowledge, demonstrating its broader social significance. This pluralistic perspective emphasises that trauma is not the same for everyone; it depends on personal history, cultural, and social contexts. *The Tearsmith*, Nica, and

Rigel's reactions to trauma show both common patterns and their own unique struggles. Their habit of suppressing emotions is not only a sign of damage but also, as Balaev (2014) says, an "adaptive response to impossible situations." At the same time, this approach highlights how vital supportive relationships and proper care are for healing.

2.2 Emotional Suppression: Mechanisms and Consequences

Emotional suppression involves making a conscious effort to hide feelings or push away painful thoughts. In trauma studies, it is seen as a key way people try to cope. Research explains that suppression works by using attention and self-control to keep unwanted emotions out of focus. People are usually aware of their feelings but choose not to show them. In Doom's *The Tearsmith*, emotional suppression is not a natural part of Nica and Rigel's personality but a result of deep trauma. They are not cold or distant by choice. Instead, they have learned to hide their emotions because, in the past, showing feelings often led to punishment, rejection, or loneliness. As Rigel says, "feelings are dangerous here. If you show them, you lose" (Doom, 2021). This shows how emotional restraint became their survival tool. Understanding this helps us see not only their experiences but also how love and trust slowly give them a chance to heal.

Some modern research also warns that constant suppression comes with heavy costs; it does not remove negative emotions but reduces the experience of positive ones. It can also put stress on the body and harm relationships. People who depend too much on suppression often deal with stress by pretending to be fine, while inside they feel cut off and less authentic. As the novel reminds us through Nica's quiet pain, "sometimes silence hurts more than words."

2.3 Narrative Structure and Language: Silence as Symbol

In *The Tearsmith*, the narrative voice reflects the fragmentation of trauma. Nica's first-person perspective is characterised by contradictions, self-doubt, and suspicion of kindness, illustrating symptoms of insecure attachment and post-traumatic stress through recurring patterns (Herman, 1992). In contrast, Rigel represents stoic trauma through emotional restraint and verbal silence. His quietness is not an absence but a "language of the unspeakable" (Felman, 1992), revealing the pain concealed behind control and aggression. The line, "you don't need to cry to prove you're hurting," encapsulates this philosophy of suppression, affirming the struggles of trauma survivors—especially men—who express pain through silence rather than tears.

2.4 The Tearsmith: Symbolism and the Metaphor of Healing

In Doom's novel, the central metaphor of *The Tearsmith* serves as both a myth and a coping mechanism. The Tearsmith is imagined as the creator of tears, suggesting that pain is not a random misfortune but something shaped and crafted. This symbolism emphasises the transformation potential of grief once it is acknowledged, expressed, and shared. The idea resonates with Laurie Vickroy's observation that trauma narratives create spaces of "empathetic engagement," where both authors and readers collaboratively interpret and process experiences of suffering. By embedding this mythic figure within a narrative, Doom provides young readers with a symbol framework that validates their hidden wounds and encourages reflection. Ultimately, the Tearsmith becomes a powerful emblem of repressed grief, taking form, turning silent pain into a story that can be carried and understood.

2.5 Character Psychology: Nica and Rigel's Trauma Responses

In the novel, characters Nica and Rigel show distinct but overlapping trauma responses. Nica exhibits emotional withdrawal, low self-worth, and people-pleasing behaviour, which are typical of those who have experienced neglect and emotional abandonment. She is afraid of being seen as a burden and often internalises guilt that is not hers. Rigel displays hyperarousal, rage responses, and detachment, defensive mechanisms often found in those who have ever experienced physical abuse or betrayal. He pushes people away to protect himself, believing that intimacy always leads to pain (Herman, 1992). Their relationships are both healing and harmful, a classical trauma bond. Initially, they mirror each other's fears, but eventually, they become each other's mirrors of hope. Healing begins not through a magical transformation

but through slow moments of mutual recognition, where each sees the other not as a threat, but as someone who understands the language of pain.

2.6 Cultural Relevance and Reader Impact

The *Tearsmith* connects with today's youth by portraying feelings of isolation, emotional struggle, and the pressure to appear strong in a digital world. Instead of endorsing toxic positivity, it reminds the reader that suffering is real and that expressing or not expressing pain is not a sign of weakness. The story serves as a mirror for young readers who may be silently carrying trauma, offering a safe space for empathy and reflection.

3. Conclusion:

This article has examined how Erin Doom's *The Tearsmith* depicts psychological trauma and emotional suppression, and how they profoundly influence human identity and relationships. By exploring Nica and Rigel's struggles, the novel demonstrates that silence and restraint are not signs of weakness but survival mechanisms in response to pain. It also shows that healing is achievable through trust, empathy, and supportive connections. Based on trauma theory, it becomes apparent that emotional safety is just as crucial as physical safety for recovery. The *Tearsmith*'s symbolism teaches that hidden grief can be transformed into strength when acknowledged and shared. For young adults, the novel serves both as a reflection of their challenges and a guide toward resilience. It affirms the unspoken experiences of trauma survivors and paves a way to compassion. Therefore, Doom's work enriches trauma literature while providing readers with recognition and hope.

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