

LIVING IN THE PAUSE: TRAUMA, MEMORY, AND DIGITAL IDENTITY IN JENNIFER EGAN'S *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD*

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Abstract

Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* explores the complex interplay between trauma, memory and identity in a world increasingly shaped by digital technology. This article examines how the novel's fragmented narrative structure, shifting timelines and experimental storytelling particularly the PowerPoint chapter mirror the psychological disruptions caused by trauma and the influence of digital media on how individuals remember, understand themselves and connect with others. Drawing on trauma theory and digital humanities frameworks, the study argues that Egan doesn't just write about trauma instead she builds it into the form of the novel itself. In doing so, she reflects broader cultural anxieties about how technology reshapes human experience. Ultimately, this interdisciplinary approach sheds light on how contemporary fiction is evolving to capture the emotional and structural dissonance of the digital age.

Keywords: Cultural trauma, digital humanities, fragmented narrative, memory, postmodern fiction

Introduction

In an era defined by rapid technological change, fragmented digital communication, and shifting notions of identity, Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer Prize-

winning novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) offers a striking literary response to the psychological and cultural transformations of the 21st century. Egan, a prominent figure in contemporary American fiction, is known for her innovative narrative techniques and her engagement with themes of time, memory and technology. Her work often blurs the boundaries between literary fiction and digital culture, experimenting with form and structure to reflect the disjointed realities of modern life. *A Visit from the Goon Squad* exemplifies these qualities through its nonlinear storytelling, shifting narrative perspectives and inclusion of multimedia forms such as the Power Point chapter.

In a world increasingly dominated by screens, algorithms and disjointed timelines, how do an individual hold onto who he/she is? Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) offers a compelling response to this question. Known for her stylistic experimentation and engagement with contemporary issues, Egan constructs a novel that mirrors the fragmented, digitally-mediated reality an individual live in. With shifting perspectives, nonlinear chronology and chapters that break from conventional prose including one told entirely through PowerPoint, Egan challenges traditional storytelling while asking how trauma and memory survive in a world constantly in flux.

This article examines how Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* not only represents trauma but also enacts it through its fragmented narrative structure. Drawing on trauma theory particularly the work of Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra and incorporating insights from digital humanities scholars like Lev Manovich, the analysis argues that the novel reflects how digital culture reshapes not just how individuals live, but also how they remember, relate to others and tell their stories. In doing so, Egan reveals a deeper emotional truth about life in the 21st century.

Literature Review

Since its release, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* has received wide scholarly attention for its innovative form and thematic exploration of time, memory and cultural change. Critics like Sarah Brouillette and Paul Crosthwaite have focused on its critique of capitalism and the symbolic decline of the music industry (Brouillette, Crosthwaite). Others, like ElifSendur, emphasize the novel's fragmented form as a reflection of fractured postmodern identity. The PowerPoint chapter in particular has intrigued scholars for its digital aesthetic, blending literary fiction with digital media tools (Beedham).

Despite this, there has been limited attention to the novel's psychological dimensions especially through the lens of trauma theory. Although Caruth and LaCapra's work has influenced trauma studies in literature, their frameworks are

rarely applied to Egan's novel. Similarly, while digital humanities scholars have explored Egan's engagement with media forms, few have considered how these formal experiments are tied to emotional and cultural trauma. This study bridges that gap, offering a trauma-informed, digitally literate reading of Egan's novel.

Theoretical Framework

Trauma theory provides the foundation for understanding how Egan structures emotional dissonance in the novel. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an experience "not fully assimilated as it occurs," often returning in delayed, fragmented ways (4). For Dominick LaCapra, trauma is not just a personal wound but a cultural phenomenon that plays out through repetition, silence, and gaps in narrative (37). These ideas help frame the novel's nonlinearity and fractured storytelling as formal expressions of trauma.

From the digital humanities perspective, Lev Manovich's concept of "database aesthetics" is especially relevant. Manovich argues that digital culture favours modular, nonlinear, retrievable data more like a database than a traditional story (218–220). Egan's novel, composed of loosely connected stories and non-traditional forms, aligns closely with this structure, suggesting that identity and memory are increasingly shaped by the aesthetics of digital media.

Linda Hutcheon's theory of postmodern narrative adds an important layer, especially in understanding how Egan reflects the breakdown of historical continuity and stable identity in a technologized culture (3). Taken together, these theories help explain how Egan's form and content converge to critique and reflect the emotional challenges of the digital age.

Analysis

At its core, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is about the passage of time and the marks it leaves often invisible, often delayed on people's lives. Rather than follow a single protagonist or linear plot, the novel offers thirteen interlinked chapters, each focused on different characters, time periods, and formats. This fragmented structure doesn't just tell stories it simulates the way trauma and memory work, especially in a digital environment. Take, for example, the chapter "Safari," which places a young Sasha on vacation in Africa with her family. The emotional depth of the chapter only comes into full view when read alongside later episodes that reveal her adult struggles with kleptomania, addiction, and therapy. As Caruth notes, trauma is not felt fully in the moment but echoes later in distorted forms (4). Egan captures this through the novel's structure, where events ripple forward and backward across time without clear cause and effect.

Similarly, in "Goodbye, My Love," Sasha is absent, but her presence is felt through the fragmented memories of those around her. She becomes a character

constructed entirely through the digital-era phenomenon of indirect storytelling where memory is decentralized and subject to personal (and often unreliable) perspectives.

Perhaps the novel's most innovative chapter is "Great Rock and Roll Pauses," composed entirely in PowerPoint slides by Sasha's daughter, Alison. Here, emotional experiences are distilled into bullet points, flow charts, and diagrams. What might seem like a gimmick actually reflects what Manovich calls the logic of the database where information is stored, retrieved, and recombined rather than narrated linearly. One slide reads, "Mom tends to arrange her pause lengths in descending order." What appears to be a clinical observation subtly conveys Sasha's psychological need for control and predictability, an emotional scar rendered in a data format. This is digital trauma in its purest literary form: trauma that is not spoken or narrated but shown through modular, depersonalized fragments. LaCapra's concept of trauma resurfacing through repetition and deferred meaning (78) is evident in these recurring structural motifs.

Bennie Salazar, a former music executive, further embodies the novel's central themes. His longing for the rawness of punk music and disillusionment with sterile digital sound reflects a deeper cultural trauma that one tied to aging, loss, and obsolescence. His line, "I want to know what it feels like to care about something passionately again" (112), captures the alienation of a generation displaced by digital commodification and emotional flattening.

In the novel's final chapter, set in a near-future, marketers use "pointers" to track emotional states and manipulate behaviour. Identity becomes algorithmic; memory is mined and monetized. And yet, Egan leaves the reader with a note of quiet resistance. The final PowerPoint slide reads, "The pauses are the most important part." Amid the noise and data, Egan insists, there is still space for silence, reflection, and authenticity.

Conclusion

Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is more than an innovative novel it's a cultural artefact that captures the emotional and structural dislocations of the digital age. Through its nonlinear narrative, shifting perspectives and multimedia storytelling, the novel both represents and enacts trauma. Drawing on trauma theory and digital humanities, this article has shown how Egan critiques the digitization of memory, the fragmentation of identity and the cultural effects of living in a hyper-mediated world.

Egan's work reminds that while technology changes how an individual tell stories, it also reshapes how one process pain, form identities, and relate to one another. In a time when data threatens to replace meaning, her novel insists on the

importance of gaps, silences, and emotional presence. As digital culture continues to evolve, future studies might explore how narrative forms across literature, film, and digital platforms continue to adapt in representing the emotional weight of trauma in algorithmic life.

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