



**EMBODIED TRAUMA AND THE LIMITS OF STRUCTURAL
NARRATOLOGY: RECONFIGURING NARRATIVE VOICE,
TEMPORALITY, AND IDENTITY IN KALKI SUBRAMANIAM'S "A
MUTILATED VAGINA CALLED EEZHAM"**

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Abstract

This article examines embodied trauma in Kalki Subramaniam's poem "A Mutilated Vagina Called Eezham" through a critical reassessment of Gérard Genette's structural narratology. It analyses order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice in relation to transgender subjectivity, corporeal violence, traumatic memory, and collective identity. Using qualitative textual analysis and close reading, the study places Genette's categories in dialogue with trauma theory, transgender studies, and affect theory. The analysis considers how retrospective memory, textual recurrence, first-person articulation, and corporeal imagery shape the poem's representation of suffering and political belonging. It argues that Genette's framework remains useful for describing formal organization, while its interpretation is enriched by approaches attentive to embodiment, affect, and historical context. The article proposes "embodied narrativity" as a working concept for examining how bodily experience, memory, and identity participate in poetic meaning-making. The concept is offered as a text-specific analytical extension, not a universal model.

The study contributes to interdisciplinary readings of trauma-inflected transgender poetry while recognizing that one poem cannot represent the full diversity of transgender or Tamil experience.

Keywords: Embodied narrativity; structural narratology; transgender poetry; traumatic memory; narrative temporality; gender performativity; collective identity.



1. Introduction

Narratology examines how discourse organizes and communicates events, experiences, and perspectives. Gérard Genette's account of narrative discourse offers a systematic vocabulary for analysing order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice (Genette, 1980). These categories clarify how textual presentation relates to event sequence, pacing, recurrence, perspective, and the position from which discourse is articulated. Their application to lyric poetry, however, requires attention to the ways poems may evoke events and experience without following the conventions of prose narrative.

Postclassical approaches have widened narrative inquiry by considering experientiality, cognition, identity, and cultural context alongside formal structure. Fludernik (2009) foregrounds experientiality in the recognition of narrativity, while Ricoeur (1984) explores how narrative configures temporal experience. These perspectives are useful for reading texts in which memory and affect complicate linear progression. Trauma theory similarly examines the persistence and return of painful memory. Caruth (1996) associates trauma with belated experience, while LaCapra (2001) distinguishes between "acting out" and "working through" as ways of conceptualizing relations to traumatic pasts. Such concepts can illuminate literary representation but should not be used as clinical diagnoses of a poetic speaker or author.

Transgender studies further emphasizes that gendered identity is negotiated within social, cultural, and institutional frameworks. Butler's (1990) theory of performativity questions the idea of gender as a fixed essence, while Prosser (1998) foregrounds corporeality in transgender life writing. Stryker (2017) situates transgender experience within histories of regulation and political struggle. These perspectives invite analysis of embodiment not merely as a theme but as a dimension through which identity and experience are articulated.

Subramaniam's "A Mutilated Vagina Called Eezham" brings bodily imagery, gendered subjectivity, remembered violence, and the political associations of Eelam into a shared poetic field. The speaker's recollection of her sister's suffering connects personal expression with a wider history of violence, while the poem's first-person voice moves between individual experience and collective reference. The body becomes a site through which memory and identity are represented; the association between body and territory is a poetic construction rather than a literal equivalence between distinct forms of suffering.

This article uses Genette's categories as its primary analytical framework and places them in dialogue with trauma theory, transgender studies, and affect theory. It asks how temporal reference and recurrence shape traumatic memory; how voice negotiates individual and collective subjectivity; and how corporeal language gives form to suffering and political expression. It does not argue that structural narratology is inherently incapable of analysing poetry or trauma. Instead,



it proposes “embodied narrativity” as a working term for examining the interaction of narrative form, corporeality, affect, and memory in this poem. The research gap is correspondingly limited to the specific intersection of these frameworks in the close reading undertaken here, rather than claiming that transgender poetry or trauma literature has been neglected as a whole.

The central concern is not whether a lyric poem can be classified as a narrative in the narrowest formal sense, but whether narratological concepts can clarify the ways in which a poem arranges experience. Lyric discourse may not offer a continuous sequence of externally observable events; nevertheless, it can establish relations among remembered incidents, present utterance, implied addressees, and acts of interpretation. Such relations are narratively consequential even when they remain fragmentary or associative. The poem is therefore approached as a mode of poetic narration in which the speaking position, the temporal location of memory, and the selection of images contribute to the production of meaning.

The analysis also distinguishes between the poem’s represented experience and the biographical experience of its author. A first-person speaker is a textual construction, even when the poem draws on historical, social, or autobiographical contexts. This distinction does not diminish the political force of the work; rather, it makes interpretation more precise by preventing the speaker from being treated as a transparent substitute for the author or as an exhaustive representative of transgender people, Tamil communities, or survivors of violence. The reading consequently remains attentive to the poem’s language and formal choices while recognizing the ethical limits of speaking for others.

2. Literature Review

Structural narratology supplies concepts for describing the organization of narrative discourse. Genette (1980) distinguishes order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice, while Bal (2009) and Rimmon-Kenan (2002) extend formal analysis to the relations among text, perspective, and meaning. Work on transgeneric narratology indicates that narrative concepts can also inform lyric analysis, provided that lyric expression is not simply treated as prose narrative (Hühn, 2004). Fludernik (2009) and Herman (2002) bring experiential and cognitive dimensions into narratological inquiry, while Richardson (2006) examines forms that unsettle conventional expectations about narration and perspective.

Scholarship on gender and queer representation questions stable or universal accounts of identity. Sedgwick (1990) and Jagose (1996) examine the cultural intelligibility of sexuality and identity categories. Within transgender studies, Prosser (1998) explores body narratives and Stryker (2017) addresses transgender history and representation. This work is pertinent where literary texts represent embodiment as a site shaped by personal experience and social norms, without reducing transgender identity to bodily injury or a single narrative of suffering.



Trauma criticism offers concepts for examining the relationship between memory, repetition, and time. Caruth (1996) considers belatedness and the return of experiences that resist assimilation; LaCapra (2001) differentiates forms of repetition from critical engagement with the past. Herman (1992) addresses trauma and the challenges of restoring narrative continuity. Ricoeur (1984) and Bruner (1986) consider narrative as a mode of configuring and interpreting experience. Felman and Laub (1992) foreground the complexities of testimony and witnessing. These approaches help contextualize the poem's remembered violence while requiring careful distinction between textual patterns and psychological claims.

Embodiment and affect provide further interpretive resources. Butler (1990) examines gender performativity; Prosser (1998) emphasizes corporeality in transgender narratives; and Stryker (2017) situates transgender subjectivity within broader structures of recognition. Scarry (1985) considers the difficulty of representing physical pain, while Kristeva (1982) examines bodily boundaries and abjection. Ahmed (2004) analyses the social circulation of emotion, and Cvetkovich (2003) explores affective cultural forms as records of marginalized experience. Rancière (2004) considers the political dimensions of aesthetics. In the Indian context, Nair (2021) discusses transgender self-writing and its literary and reformatory potential.

The scholarship considered here establishes substantial work on narratological form, trauma, embodiment, and marginalized writing. The present study addresses a narrower question: how Genette's categories can be applied to Subramaniam's poem while remaining attentive to the intersections of transgender embodiment, traumatic memory, and collective reference. Its contribution lies in this focused synthesis and in the text-specific use of embodied narrativity as an interpretive concept.

A further issue concerns the transfer of narrative terminology from prose fiction to lyric poetry. Hühn's work on transgeneric narratology is relevant because it treats narrative features as functions that can appear across literary genres rather than as properties restricted to the novel. In lyric, narrative elements may be condensed into a remembered scene, a shift in pronouns, a temporal contrast, or a recurring image. The analyst must therefore avoid imposing a plot structure that the poem itself does not establish. Genette's terms are most productive when used as diagnostic questions—what is recalled, from which position, and with what degree of emphasis—rather than as a rigid checklist.

Trauma scholarship also calls for careful distinctions. Repetition in a poem can suggest the persistence of memory, but it does not by itself prove a clinical symptom or establish the speaker's psychological condition. Caruth (1996) and LaCapra (2001) offer ways to discuss the difficulty of representing traumatic experience, while their concepts should be applied as interpretive frameworks rather than diagnostic instruments. Similarly, theories of embodiment can clarify how



the body becomes a site of social inscription and self-understanding without reducing transgender identity to bodily injury. These distinctions inform the present study's close reading and delimit the claims it makes.

3. Theoretical Framework and Method

The study employs qualitative textual analysis and close reading of "A Mutilated Vagina Called Eezham." Genette's categories organize the analysis: order concerns the sequence of events and their presentation; duration concerns the relation between event-time and textual space; frequency concerns recurrence; mood concerns narrative distance and focalization; and voice concerns the narrating or speaking position (Genette, 1980). Because the primary text is a poem, these terms are applied cautiously to its narrative elements rather than assuming that it follows a conventional story structure.

Trauma theory informs readings of remembered violence and recurrence (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001), but the analysis makes claims about representation rather than diagnosing the speaker or author. Transgender studies provides a context for interpreting the relation between gendered identity, embodiment, and social recognition (Butler, 1990; Prosser, 1998; Stryker, 2017). Affect theory helps distinguish emotional expression from Genette's technical category of mood (Ahmed, 2004). Experiential narratology further supports attention to how poetic discourse configures experience (Fludernik, 2009; Ricoeur, 1984). These theories perform complementary, not interchangeable, functions.

The term "embodied narrativity" is used here as a working concept to describe the interaction of corporeal signs, memory, affect, and narrative organization. It is not presented as an established universal category. The analysis focuses on selected lines as reproduced in the manuscript; quotations and page references should be checked against the exact edition of the poem before submission.

Methodologically, the analysis proceeds through repeated close readings of the selected lines, attending to diction, imagery, pronoun use, temporal markers, and relations between personal and collective reference. Each section begins with a narratological category and then considers what that category reveals about the representation of embodied experience. The interpretive movement is therefore twofold: formal description identifies how the poem organizes its material, while contextual theories help explain why those formal choices matter. This approach does not assume that every line performs a single stable function; ambiguity and symbolic excess are treated as features to be examined rather than problems to be eliminated.

The scope of the study is deliberately limited to the poem and the passages cited from the edition listed in the references. The analysis does not claim to provide a comprehensive account



of the historical conflict associated with Eelam, nor does it substitute for historical research into the experiences of affected communities. The political dimension is discussed insofar as it is represented in the poem's language. This boundary is important because literary symbolism, historical fact, and lived testimony are related but not interchangeable forms of knowledge.

4. Analysis

4.1. Order and Traumatic Temporality

Genette's category of order identifies the relation between chronological sequence and textual presentation. In the line "I am scalded by the memories of my sister in Eelam who died" (Subramaniam, 2021, p. 56), the sister's death is a past event brought into the speaker's present articulation. The verb "scalded" gives recollection a sensory force, suggesting that memory is represented as an active experience rather than detached information. This may be described as retrospective reference, although the poem does not necessarily construct a fully sequenced analepsis in the conventional prose-narrative sense.

The image "with her stomach torn and her vagina wailing agape" (Subramaniam, 2021, p. 56) makes the body central to the communication of remembered violence. Read with Caruth's (1996) account of belated memory, the recollection brings past suffering into the present without proving a particular psychological condition. The title's association of a wounded body with Eelam also links corporeal vulnerability to political history. This is a symbolic analogy, not an equation of an individual body with a territory. Genette helps describe the temporal relation; trauma theory and contextual reading help interpret its significance.

The movement between present-tense self-description and recollection of the sister produces a temporal layering rather than a simple chronological account. The remembered event is not narrated as a fully developed scene with a complete sequence of actions; it enters the poem through an emotionally charged fragment. Such compression makes the past present within the act of speaking, while leaving much of the event outside the poem's immediate representation. The reader encounters not a documentary reconstruction but a shaped act of remembrance in which selection and omission are both significant.

This structure complicates the distinction between analepsis and the present of enunciation. The past is formally prior, yet its meaning is mediated by the speaker's present consciousness. The memory is thus not simply inserted to provide background information. It changes how the speaker's body and identity are understood in the present of the poem. The effect is relational: the sister's remembered suffering becomes part of the speaker's account of self, without making the two bodies or experiences identical.



4.2. Duration and the Persistence of Suffering

Duration, in Genette's model, concerns the relation between the time of events and the textual space used to represent them. The line "I, on my quest for self, and she, on her exodus for Eezham, we both bore the pain" (Subramaniam, 2021, p. 57) juxtaposes the speaker's search for selfhood with her sister's displacement. The parallel phrasing connects distinct trajectories through shared pain without making their circumstances identical.

The poem's compression of events and emphasis on selected bodily and emotional images shape its pace. At the experiential level, remembered suffering remains significant in the speaker's present self-articulation. Ricoeur's (1984) account of narrative time helps explain how recollection configures relations between past and present, while LaCapra's (2001) distinction between acting out and working through offers a cautious interpretive vocabulary for persistence and engagement. Neither framework warrants describing the poem's duration as literally endless or diagnosing its speaker. The poem instead represents suffering as having consequences beyond the moment recalled.

The poem's duration is consequently shaped less by measurable clock time than by the textual weight assigned to particular experiences. A brief reference to an act of violence can carry more interpretive force than a longer descriptive passage because the language concentrates attention on the consequences of the event. Scarry's (1985) discussion of pain and the difficulty of its verbal representation is useful here: pain can resist ordinary description, while literary language may render it perceptible through images, metaphors, and bodily signs. This does not mean that poetic representation fully communicates another person's pain; rather, it demonstrates how the poem attempts to make suffering legible without claiming to exhaust it.

The contrast between compressed reference and sustained emotional resonance also invites attention to silence. What the poem does not narrate in detail may indicate the limits of representation, the ethical restraint of the speaker, or simply the formal economy of lyric. These possibilities cannot be collapsed into one explanation. The close reading therefore treats omission as an effect of poetic organization, not as direct evidence of a particular mental process. Duration, in this sense, helps describe the balance between what is stated briefly and what continues to resonate beyond the line.

4.3. Frequency, Repetition, and Testimony

Genette's frequency examines how often an event is represented in discourse. References to "my sister in Eelam who died" (Subramaniam, 2021, p. 56) and "those beasts who mauled my sister to death" (Subramaniam, 2021, p. 59) return the sister's suffering to the poem's foreground. These references are related but not identical retellings; their recurrence sustains the significance of loss and develops the representation from remembrance toward more explicit violence.



Felman and Laub's (1992) work on testimony provides a lens for understanding recurrence as an effort to articulate and communicate suffering. Repetition need not mean that the speaker simply relives an event or that the experience cannot be represented. Ahmed's (2004) account of affect also helps explain how grief and anger may connect personal loss to social and political contexts. In this poem, recurrence can be read as testimonial insistence: it resists allowing the sister's suffering to recede into an unexamined past. Its political significance arises from the poem's specific language and context, not from repetition as an inherently resistant device.

Repetition can also organize the reader's attention. When related references to injury, injustice, and loss recur, they establish a pattern through which separate experiences become legible in relation to one another. The pattern does not necessarily erase differences among those experiences; instead, it invites the reader to recognize a shared field of vulnerability while remaining alert to the particularity of each reference. The poem's recurrence is therefore both formal and ethical: it asks that the represented suffering not be treated as an isolated or disposable image.

At the same time, recurrence should not be mistaken for a transparent record of an event. Poetic repetition selects, frames, and transforms the material it repeats. Its testimonial force lies in the act of making a claim and soliciting attention, not in an assumption that lyric speech is identical to sworn testimony or historical documentation. This distinction allows the poem to be read as an intervention in public memory while respecting the different standards by which literary representation and factual testimony are assessed.

4.4. Voice and Collective Subjectivity

Voice concerns who speaks and the position from which discourse is articulated (Genette, 1980). The line "When injustice is inflicted upon my race" (Subramaniam, 2021, p. 59) places the speaker's account within a collective frame. The possessive "my" signals affiliation and locates personal expression in relation to a community and its history. Yet the lyric "I" should not be assumed to represent every member of that community. The poem's voice is better understood as situated: individual experience enters into relation with collective memory while retaining its particularity.

Butler's (1990) account of performativity and Stryker's (2017) transgender scholarship contextualize identity as negotiated within social and discursive relations. The speaker's voice articulates selfhood through embodied experience and historical belonging. Its testimonial dimension emerges as personal grief is placed alongside collective injustice, but personal and collective experiences remain distinct. Bakhtin's (1981) dialogism may offer a limited analogy for the encounter between individual expression and broader social discourse; this does not by itself establish the poem as polyphonic in a strict sense.



The shift between singular and collective reference is central to this negotiation. The first-person pronoun establishes a situated speaker, while references to a race or community connect that position to wider structures of injustice. The resulting voice is neither exclusively private nor wholly collective. It articulates a particular perspective that is shaped by social relations and historical conditions. This movement makes the poem's subjectivity relational: identity is expressed through memory of others, awareness of collective vulnerability, and the speaker's effort to name the conditions under which a self becomes intelligible.

A collective voice, however, should not be interpreted as an assertion that all members of a community share one experience or one political position. The poem's first-person stance retains its specificity even when it invokes a broader group. This is especially important in readings of marginalized literature, where a single speaker can too easily be made to stand for a heterogeneous population. The analysis therefore understands collective subjectivity as a textual effect created by the relation between personal testimony and collective reference, not as a sociological claim about universal experience.

4.5. Mood, Affect, and Emotional Intensity

Genette's mood concerns the regulation of narrative information through distance and focalization, not the emotional atmosphere of a text. The line "My eyes grow fiercely red and my veins throb with anger" (Subramaniam, 2021, p. 59) presents anger through bodily signs. The first-person perspective situates the expression within the speaker's represented experience, while the corporeal imagery gives affect a visible and material form.

Ahmed (2004) helps interpret emotion as socially situated rather than exclusively private. The speaker's anger can be read in relation to the injustice represented in the poem, without assuming that it produces a universal movement from grief to resistance. Sontag (2003) reminds readers that representations of suffering do not guarantee a uniform response. The distinction between mood and affect therefore remains important: focalization describes how the experience is presented, while affect theory helps interpret its emotional and social resonance.

The poem's affective intensity also shapes the relation between speaker and reader. Images of bodily injury and expressions of anger can disrupt a detached mode of reading by making the costs of violence difficult to ignore. Yet the text does not prescribe a single emotional response. Readers may experience grief, anger, discomfort, or uncertainty, and those responses are influenced by their own interpretive positions. Ahmed's (2004) account of the cultural circulation of emotion helps describe how affect can attach to bodies and signs within a social field, rather than residing only inside an individual subject.

It is useful here to distinguish Genette's category of mood from emotion in the ordinary sense. Focalization concerns the regulation of information—what is made available, and from



whose perspective—whereas affect concerns the emotional and evaluative force generated by the representation. The poem's limited, situated perspective controls what the reader can know, while its imagery shapes how that knowledge may be felt. Keeping these dimensions distinct avoids a terminological confusion and allows formal analysis to remain connected to the poem's emotional force.

4.6. The Wounded Body as a Site of Meaning

The poem's corporeal imagery connects memory, identity, and violence. The line "the scars carved on my vagina still remain as my identity" (Subramaniam, 2021, p. 56) presents the scar as both a bodily trace and a sign through which experience is articulated. Scarry's (1985) discussion of the difficulty of expressing physical pain helps illuminate the representational force of such imagery: the poem gives pain a textual form without implying that language fully contains it.

Prosser (1998) provides a relevant context for considering the relationship between corporeality and transgender narrative identity. The line should not be taken to reduce transgender identity to injury or victimhood; rather, it represents one particular relation among body, memory, and selfhood. The poem's metaphorical association between the body and Eelam places individual embodiment beside collective political history, but does not erase the material differences between them. The body thus contributes to the poem's narrativity as a medium through which experience becomes perceptible. "Embodied narrativity" names this interaction of bodily signs and narrative meaning in the present reading.

The body in the poem is not simply a biological object described from outside. It functions as a surface on which violence, memory, social judgment, and self-identification become entangled. Scars are especially significant because they refer simultaneously to an injury and to its persistence after the immediate event. The image can therefore be read as a temporal sign: the past remains materially and symbolically present in the body. This reading does not require the claim that bodily marks fully define identity; it shows instead how the poem stages the pressure exerted by remembered violence on the speaker's self-understanding.

The gendered specificity of the imagery requires interpretive care. A reference to the vagina within a transgender poem should not be used to impose a universal account of transgender embodiment, nor should it be treated as proof that gender identity is reducible to anatomy. Prosser's (1998) attention to body narratives provides a way to consider the body as meaningful within personal and cultural accounts of gender, while Butler (1990) helps question the assumption that identity follows automatically from anatomy. The poem's corporeal language is thus read as a situated poetic choice whose meaning emerges from the relation among body, language, and social power.



5. Discussion

The analysis indicates that Genette's categories remain useful for describing the poem's formal operations, but their interpretation gains depth when placed alongside theories of trauma, embodiment, and affect. Order identifies the movement between remembered events and present articulation; duration draws attention to poetic pacing and emphasis; and frequency clarifies how recurring references sustain the significance of loss. These categories describe textual organization without, by themselves, explaining the experiential or political meanings attached to it.

The poem's first-person voice connects personal memory with collective references, yet it does not become an uncomplicated spokesperson for an entire community. Its affective language makes grief and anger central to the representation of violence, while leaving reader response open rather than predetermined. Similarly, the wounded body is neither merely a symbol nor a universal account of transgender experience. It is a specific site through which the poem articulates identity, memory, and historical association.

The title's body-Eelam relation is particularly important to the poem's political imagination. It creates a symbolic correspondence between bodily vulnerability and territorial violence while preserving their distinct contexts. This reading avoids treating the body as a transparent substitute for land or reducing the poem to a single political function. Instead, the poem's significance emerges through the interaction of lyric voice, corporeal imagery, temporal reference, and historical memory.

The study's proposed term "embodied narrativity" describes this interaction as it appears in the selected poem. It does not replace Genette or claim universal applicability. Rather, it names an interpretive emphasis: narrative meaning is shaped not only by the arrangement of discourse but also by the bodily and affective forms through which experience is represented. Because the analysis concerns one poem and selected textual passages, broader claims about transgender poetry, Tamil experience, or trauma representation would require comparative research.

The concept also helps clarify the study's contribution and its limits. It names an analytical intersection rather than a new universal law: bodily signs become narratively meaningful when they are arranged in relation to memory, voice, temporal movement, and affect. In the poem, the body does not merely provide subject matter; it helps organize the reader's access to the past and to the speaker's present position. The term is therefore useful only insofar as it remains tied to textual evidence and can be tested against other works in future comparative research.

This approach may be extended through comparative studies of transgender poetry, testimonial writing, and literary representations of political violence. Such work could ask whether similar relations among corporeality, temporality, and voice recur across different languages,



genres, and historical contexts. It would also need to attend to differences in cultural location, publication history, and the political conditions under which particular texts circulate. The present article offers a focused interpretive model, not a claim that one poem can stand for all such writing.

6. Conclusion

This study has examined “A Mutilated Vagina Called Eezham” through Genette’s categories of order, duration, frequency, mood, and voice, in dialogue with trauma theory, transgender studies, and affect theory. The analysis shows how retrospective memory, recurrence, first-person articulation, and corporeal imagery contribute to the poem’s representation of embodied suffering and collective reference. Genette’s framework remains productive for describing these formal features, while complementary approaches clarify their experiential and socio-political significance.

The poem brings past violence into present expression, sustains remembrance through recurrence, and negotiates the relation between individual testimony and collective identity. Its wounded-body imagery makes corporeality central to the articulation of memory, but should not be generalized into a definition of transgender identity. Likewise, the association between body and Eelam is best understood as a poetic analogy rather than an equivalence. “Embodied narrativity” is proposed as a text-specific working concept for examining how body, affect, memory, and narrative form interact.

The study is limited to one poem and to the passages examined here; it does not claim to represent all transgender writing or all accounts of political violence. Comparative work across transgender poetry and other trauma-inflected literary forms may test the concept’s wider usefulness. The article’s central conclusion is therefore not that structural narratology must be rejected, but that its formal insights can be enriched through sustained attention to embodiment, affect, and historical context.

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