

## **Quest for Identity after a Trauma in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak***

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### **Abstract**

*The novel **Speak** by Laurie Halse Anderson deals with the self-oppression of a teenager Melinda Sordino due to the sexual assault she was forced to undergo. The story is read through the lens of the narrator's evolution from victim to survivor and offers a realistic view of the same. This paper aims to provide a perspective of healing where the protagonist discovers her identity post-trauma. In addition to understanding the survivors' ordeal, the paper also tries to notice the process of outgrowing a trauma beyond what meets the eye.*

**Keywords:** self-oppression, speak, trauma, narrative

### **Introduction - The Plot**

Laurie Halse Anderson was known for writing children's books before she wrote the novel *Speak*. She is a feminist writer who has never failed to speak against social evils prevalent among young adults. She has written many books addressing adolescent issues; the most famous is 'Winter Girls'. *Speak* is an intriguing novel by Laurie Halse Anderson that traces an inspiring journey of a fourteen-year-old. The teen protagonist of the novel, Melinda Sordino, is raped by a senior at school. The protagonist narrates the trauma she goes through by placing the incidents that trigger her to face the biggest fear of her life (Speaking up about abuse) in four marking periods.

The first marking period introduces the readers to the identity of Melinda at school as the girl who called up the police at their party. Her ex-best friend Rachel avoids her. Melinda gets a new friend Heather, a newbie keen on becoming famous. The only class Melinda manages to be involved in is Mr. Freeman's art class. She has now stopped speaking to her parents. They

exchange notes. The school informs the parents about her poor academics, and they are worried.

The second marking period is where David Petrakis, her lab partner, protests Mr. Neck's rude and racist comments on immigrants and walks out of the class. Melinda's parents once again receive calls from her counsellor, and they humiliate her. The overwhelmed Melinda chooses to self-harm using a paper clip.

The third marking period reveals the nightmare she had been running away from since the night at the party- Andy Evans. The readers now come to know that Andy Evans was her molester. He now tries to assault her again in the cafeteria. Melinda immediately runs to the bathroom and vomits. One thing leads to the other, and she gets suspended. She is now back to having her lunch alone as Heather avoids her and returns her gifts. This is when Melinda chooses to disclose the details of her rape to the readers.

The fourth marking period allows the readers to see Melinda. Rachel thinks that Melinda is jealous and refuses to believe her. She tries to instruct Rachel to avoid Andy Evans by confessing that it was he who raped her on the night of the party. Melinda later rights on a bathroom wall that Andy Evans should be avoided. A few days later, she finds that many girls have added terrible adjectives to Andy's name, and Melinda feels she has done the right thing for a long time. When Andy tries to bully and rape her again in Melinda's Closet, she says 'no' loud and clear.

### **The Journey of Self-discovery**

Melinda's adolescence makes her story and its practicality a widely relatable one. Her inability to open up to her parents despite not being at fault is a story of every teenager. It emphasizes how parents should provide safe spaces for children to open up and heal. The 14-year-old was scared of getting blamed for an assault that she had to tolerate for no mistake of hers. The fear links her past to the future, allowing her to decide that it's best to shut herself away from the world.

Isolation at school, especially how she punished herself by keeping her truth to herself and staying alone, reflects a typical state of victimhood where the one who survives an abuse always chooses to stay quiet. "I am an outcast." The fact that Melinda isolates herself from her own body is often the consequence of trauma.

"I can't stop biting my lips. It looks like my mouth belongs to someone else, someone I don't know". The depression that Mel goes through adds more meaning to other characters as she

is empathetic despite all the darkness life has thrown at her. The impact of trauma and the memory associated with it never seems to fade away and resists her from living her life as a typical teenager. It makes her adult faster in mind and matures forcefully irrespective of her young age. She notices IT everywhere. It is as if life had never happened before the incident. Her entire life suddenly revolved around the trauma. There was no way she could unlive that day.

Since the readers understand the story through the lens of a survivor of abuse, there is no way that the reader can escape the trauma too. Just like how difficult it is for Melinda to confide in and trust someone, the reader also struggles to move past the trauma. Melinda feels the memory of the trauma in different parts of her body.

"It is getting harder to talk. my throat is always, so my lips are. When I wake up in the morning, my jobs are clenched so tight I have a headache". One of Anderson's most intelligent themes in the novel is the irony in the title *Speak* when the protagonist struggles to communicate her pain throughout the book.

"Why can't I scream, say something, or do anything? Why am I so afraid?" Victim shaming is a prevalent way of silencing the survivors. Though the silence that Melinda adopts about her tragedy is ironic, it is also understandable. Speaking up is also the only way that Melinda redeems herself from the traumatic past.

"It wasn't my fault. He hurt me. It wasn't my fault. And I'm not going to let it kill me. I can grow." Melinda uses sarcasm as a coping mechanism against her tragedies. The consequent lack of faith in humanity as a trauma survivor leads her to be left in a situation where she finds herself detached from her identity. She was perfectly aware of who she was and what she was capable of becoming and yet chose to take up a whole new life because she did not want to revisit the past. Because the past was where IT lived.

The entire story is a journey that Melinda takes the readers along to transformation through tragedy. She also does not leave the readers hanging there in ambiguity. Instead, she grows along with the readers and sends a message that every adolescent, even adult, abuse survivor needs to remember. For instance, there is a scene when Melinda revisits the place where she got assaulted and makes peace with it.

"I did my fingers into the dirt and squeezed. A small clean part of me waits to warm and burst through the surface. Some quiet Melindagirl I haven't seen in months. That is the seed I will care for."

She decides to outgrow the victim that she has been all her life and stands firm in her decision to turn out into a new and powerful woman who is much more than the trauma that happened to her. At a certain point in the novel, Melinda decides to be in charge of a transformation and realizes that talking about the abuse is the only way she can move on.

"Jeans that fit, that's a good start. I must stay away from the closet and attend all my classes. I will make myself normal. Forget the rest of it." It, of course, does not happen overnight, and the journey through which she takes the readers through her transformation is slow yet so powerful. She identifies her life with the fresh seeds of flowers. It was as if nature told her how to become the person she was meant to be. The journey of Melinda's addressing of the antagonist from IT to Andy Evans indicates the identity she patiently strives to discover from within. The characterization of Melinda proves resilience is a steady and mandatory milestone in the healing process.

### **Conclusion**

Laurie Halse Anderson helps the readers understand the process of healing and finding one's ground after a trauma in the most realistic way possible. No specific incident kindles Melinda to wake up and take charge of her life. A series of incidents involving self-shaming, hatred, guilt, fear, indifference, and courage lead her to grow into the survivor she is in the end. Throughout the novel, she has a love-hate relationship with her own identity. It is like she is walking away from what she was and struggling to embrace the woman she is becoming. Anderson has presented trauma survivors worldwide with a message that we are not the trauma that happened to us. We are whom we choose to become after the trauma, no matter how slow the journey is.

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