

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Trauma, archetype, and growth: A comparative psychological analysis of the ‘Killing of the wise old man’ motif in speculative fiction

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ABSTRACT

This study utilizes a psychological research framework to investigate the extent to which the traumatic rupture in the mentor-protagonist relationship enables posttraumatic development in speculative fiction. We examine the “killing of the wise old man” motif in Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem* and Ntsika Kota’s *and the Earth Drank Deep* using Jungian theory and Calhoun & Tedeschi’s Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) model. The protagonists’ voyages from separation, which is characterized by a psychospiritual crisis, to initiation, where cognitive dissonance and emotional turmoil induce a change in beliefs, are traced through qualitative narrative coding. Disillusionment and subsequent identity reconstruction are the outcomes of the symbolic ‘filial violence’ against the mentor figure, which induces a psychic rupture that challenges fundamental values. PTG is facilitated by coping strategies, including self-disclosure, creative expression, and the revision of cultural schemas. This results in a redefined life purpose, increased resilience, and enhanced meaning-making. Our results emphasize the Antihero’s Journey as a paradigm that is effective in elucidating the manner in which literature depicts adaptive transformation in the aftermath of tragedy. This research contributes to the disciplines of trauma studies and narrative psychology by emphasizing the relationship between personal growth and archetypal disruption. It illustrates that speculative fiction is a valuable instrument for investigating psychological resilience and the processes of meaning-making in the presence of adversity.

Keywords: Antihero’s Journey; killing of the wise old man; posttraumatic growth (PTG); speculative fiction; cultural contexts

1. Introduction

In recent years, the genre of speculative fiction has become increasingly popular, as it delves into intricate themes of human nature, society, and the universe, in addition to pushing the boundaries of scientific imagination. Liu Cixin’s *The Three-Body Problem* (2014) and Ntsika Kota’s *and the Earth Drank Deep* (2023) are notable for their cultural resonance and profound thematic explorations, among these works. Despite the fact that Liu Cixin and Kota come from different cultural backgrounds—China and Eswatini, respectively—they both create narratives that transcend geographical boundaries, providing a deeper understanding of the intricacies of human existence and the interplay of science, ethics, and identity in

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speculative contexts. Liu Cixin, a prominent figure in Chinese science fiction, is recognized for his investigation of grand existential questions. Ntsika Kota, an emerging voice in African speculative fiction, has received international recognition, including the 2022 Commonwealth Short Story Prize, for his cultural commentary and narrative depth.

The engagement with the archetype of the “wise old man,” a motif that is fundamental to the Hero's Journey, is a significant aspect of these narratives. The hero's transformation, which is typically viewed as a positive evolution toward wisdom, maturation, or self-realization, has been the primary focus of discussions of the Hero's Journey, a concept that was first articulated by Joseph Campbell (1949). Nevertheless, this voyage is not always characterized by a solely positive transformation. Campbell's monomyth is rooted in psychological and cultural structures that mirror the phases of human development; however, it seldom investigates the potential negative consequences or obstacles that are inherent in this transformation. The “killing of the sage old man” is one such challenge, a motif that signifies the rejection of traditional knowledge, authority, and wisdom.

The act of “killing the wise old man” is a potent symbolic gesture that reflects the protagonist's endeavor to transcend inherited wisdom, interrogating the foundations of established knowledge and social norms. Whether it is through literal violence or more subtle forms of defiance, this symbolic rupture is a critical turning point in the hero's journey, as it is frequently accompanied by a profound existential crisis and the emergence of a new, often darker worldview. By analyzing this motif in the contexts of *The Three-Body Problem* and *And the Earth Drank Deep*, our objective is to reveal the intricate layers of significance that are ingrained in the protagonists' interactions with their mentors and to investigate the ways in which these relationships influence their journeys. This analysis will emphasize the universal human inclination to defy conventional wisdom, particularly during times of crisis, and its implications for personal and societal transformation.

2. Literature review

The aesthetics of violence in literature have been a prominent feature, particularly in modernist works, where violence is frequently perceived as both a catalyst for art and a reflection of its darker impulses (Sheehan, 2013). This is especially apparent in works that address traumatic historical events, such as the Holocaust, where violence serves as a symbol of trauma, creating a connection between visibility and invisibility and presence and absence (Silverman, 2021). Furthermore, the aesthetic impact of violence on audiences has been investigated in order to comprehend its reception in media, such as video games (Yayla, 2021). The representation of violence against women, particularly in poetry, has been examined in the context of feminist literary theory to challenge gender-based violence and enhance our comprehension of these portrayals (Wardana & Ulya, 2021). Themes of feminine and natural liberation from violence are also explored in Nigerian ecofeminist literature, underscoring the significance of addressing violence in the pursuit of liberation (Ajibola & Okoli, 2023). Furthermore, the subversive potential of violence in the act of writing has been emphasized as a significant aspect of contemporary literature, reflecting ethical and aesthetic transgressions (Jean-François, 2011).

Liu Cixin employs violence within a science fiction narrative in *The Three-Body Problem* to investigate the repercussions of our actions and the nature of human nature (Markov, 2023). The novel integrates scientific advancements with reflections on human civilization, providing readers with a distinctive perspective on the ethical implications of violence (Wang & Li, 2018). Liu's examination of violence establishes a connection between fictional events and real-world social and political themes, encouraging readers to contemplate the broader societal structures that perpetuate violence (Potapchuk, 2019).

In *And the Earth Drank Deep*, the anonymous hunter's character is fundamentally defined by his portrayal of violence. His lack of empathy compels him to engage in violent acts in order to win respect (Villiers, 2022). This narrative is significantly influenced by the "wise old man" archetype, which symbolizes wisdom and guidance. The loss of historical knowledge and the destruction of wisdom are signified by his mortality, which is indicative of the broader societal tensions surrounding power and control (Allison & Green, 2020; Jamalinesari, 2015). The act of murdering the wise old man in both *The Three-Body Problem* and *And the Earth Drank Deep* challenges societal values and moral boundaries, and the moral dimensions of violence intersect with psychological and philosophical themes. These narratives ultimately contribute to the understanding of the antihero's journey, a model characterized by the rejection of traditional wisdom and the embrace of violence as a means of self-empowerment. Despite the existence of existing research on the aesthetics of violence in literature, there is a dearth of a cohesive framework that connects violence, trauma, and the psychological transformation of the antihero, particularly the role of the "killing of the wise old man" archetype in shaping post-traumatic growth and identity reconstruction.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design, coding and data selection of the research

This study employs a qualitative, interpretative textual analysis approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018), with an emphasis on two primary texts: Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* and Ntsika Kota's *And the Earth Drank Deep*. The selection of both works was based on their cross-cultural exploration of archetypal violence and moral transformation. The analysis integrates Jungian archetypal criticism with the Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) framework to monitor the development of characters during trauma, crisis, and recovery.

In order to identify narrative segments that explicitly depict mentor–protagonist interactions, moments of rupture, and subsequent reflections indicative of development, a purposive sampling strategy was implemented. Three primary thematic categories were identified: (1) Separation (disillusionment and trauma), (2) Initiation (cognitive dissonance and self-revision), and (3) Return/Integration (emergence of posttraumatic meaning). Consequently, fifty-six passages (28 from each novel) were coded using NVivo qualitative analysis software. Miles and Huberman (1994) established that independent cross-checking guaranteed intercoder reliability, resulting in a Cohen's kappa of 0.86, which demonstrated robust agreement.

3.2. Framework for analysis

The Antihero's Journey Model is based on Joseph Campbell's Hero Model and Bray's' expanded model that anticipates the incorporation of psychospiritual processes of transformation in PTG (Posttraumatic Growth).

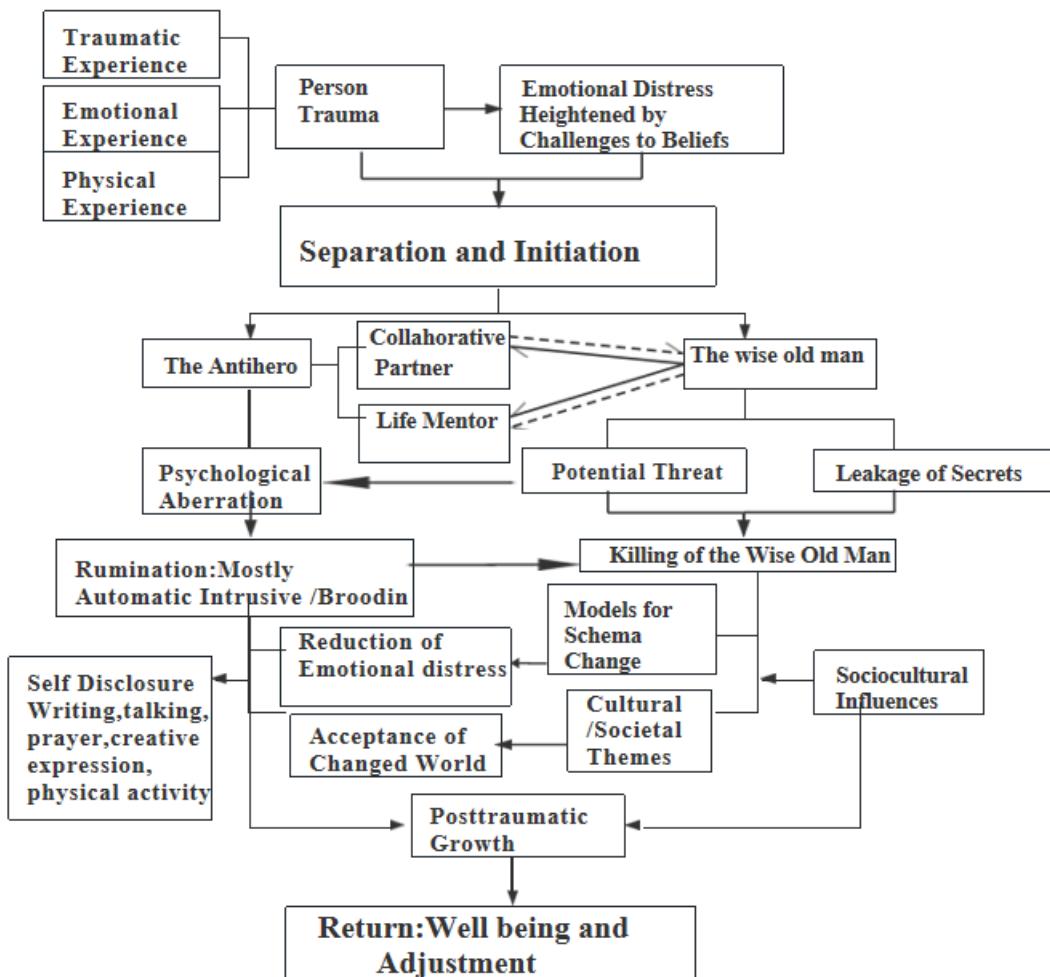


Figure 1. The antihero's journey incorporating Calhoun and Tedeschi's (2006) model of posttraumatic growth and bray's (2010) mode of psychospiritual transformation.

The model commences with trauma, which induces emotional distress and challenges the individual's beliefs, thereby exacerbating internal turmoil. This distress is influenced by psychological and sociocultural factors, such as cultural influences and societal acceptance. Individuals adjust their schemas to cope with distress by engaging in physical activity, creative expression, and self-disclosure. Key archetypal figures, including the "wise old man," the "antihero," and the "partner," direct this voyage. The "wise old man" represents mentorship and development. In conclusion, the model illustrates the resilience of the human spirit by describing posttraumatic growth, which is the process by which individuals embrace the altered world and incorporate new perspectives. The "killing of the wise old man" is a transformative moment in which cognitive dissonance challenges preexisting beliefs, causing individuals to reevaluate their worldview and identify with a new post-trauma identity.

4. Antihero's journey in two novels

4.1. Person trauma: Reasons for separation and initiation

Psychological trauma has the potential to significantly alter an individual's identity by profoundly affecting their emotional and behavioral responses. Ye Wenjie's trauma is a critical factor in her

psychological development in *The Three-Body Problem*. Her experiences, which include the brutal death of her father during the Cultural Revolution, physical abuse, and betrayals, exacerbate her sense of impotence and hopelessness, resulting in her adoption of an antiheroic persona. Ye's transformation is indicative of the way in which trauma challenges her fundamental beliefs, transforming her worldview into one that is characterized by moral ambiguity and cynicism. As she contemplates the erosion of her faith in humanity, she asserts:

"I have seen too many cruel and selfish people. My belief in the goodness of humanity has been shattered beyond repair. I no longer believe that humanity is capable of redemption or even capable of kindness. The world is full of selfishness and betrayal. And I have become a part of it." (Liu, 2014, p. 274)

In the same vein, the Hunter undergoes a variety of traumatic experiences in *And the Earth Drank Deep*, including witnessing animal fatalities and hunting. He is compelled to confront the inevitable nature of suffering and the fragility of life as a result of these encounters. His distress is further exacerbated by the emotional turmoil within his community and the physical hazards he encounters. His once-held beliefs and values are challenged by his internal conflict and feelings of inferiority toward senior members of the community. As he observes a predator slay Mvubu, he contemplates:

"In that moment, I felt everything I knew about life unravel. The natural world was no longer a place of harmony but one filled with cruelty and chaos. I saw death in its most raw form, and I felt powerless. It shattered the world I thought I understood." (Kota, 2023, p. 57)

The traumatic events that both characters encounter compel them to reevaluate their previous identities, thereby signifying a transition from a naivete to a more intricate, antiheroic understanding of the world. According to Grof (1989), these psychological crises are the consequence of trauma-induced anomalies, which result in either "spiritual emergence" or "spiritual emergency.". These emotional ruptures induce an internal state of disequilibrium, which may promote psychological development, albeit in potentially detrimental manners.

Neumann (1954) contends that these psychological crises are indispensable for the process of individuation, which involves the development of one's authentic self. The Hunter and Ye's transformation into antiheroes is not solely the consequence of personal suffering; it is also the result of a necessary psychological upheaval that compels them to transcend their previous paradigms of thought and behavior. Their departures from their previous identities are reminiscent of Campbell's (1949) Hero's Journey, particularly the "separation" phase, during which the protagonist is thrust into a new, frequently morally equivocal, reality by traumatic experiences.

Although trauma frequently induces profound personal transformation, the results can be highly variable. According to Bray (2018), the process by which individuals process their pain can result in either growth or regression as a consequence of trauma-induced separation from previous identities. The sinister side of this process is exemplified by Ye's transformation into an antihero, which is driven by a desire for vengeance. Trauma exacerbates her moral and emotional disintegration. In the same vein, the Hunter's alienation from his community underscores the potential for unresolved trauma to cultivate a profound sense of isolation and distrust in societal structures.

Post-traumatic growth (PTG) is characterized by a profound reevaluation of oneself and society, which is evident in the psychological landscapes of both Ye Wenjie and the Hunter. PTG is a process that entails the reconstruction of one's beliefs in the aftermath of trauma, allowing individuals to discover new fortitude

or a renewed sense of purpose (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2004). This process is characterized by a desire for retribution for Ye, as her trauma has caused her to perceive humanity as irredeemable. The Hunter's reevaluation of his role within the community and the natural world is triggered by trauma, which prompts him to question the values he once upheld.

Jung (1968) conceptualized the “killing of the wise old man” motif as a symbol of the psychological rupture that is necessary for transformation to occur, in addition to the literal annihilation of an authority figure. The dismantling of old belief systems by traumatic events necessitates the protagonists to reconstruct their identities in a new, frequently painful, context, as exemplified by Ye's rejection of her ideological mentors and the Hunter's detachment from ancestral wisdom.

In summary, the Hunter and Ye Wenjie both serve as examples of how trauma, when left unresolved, can result in the development of antiheroes whose moral and existential transformations mirror the intricacy of the human response to suffering. Their narratives emphasize the importance of confronting trauma and its influence on personal identity, as well as the broader implications of unresolved trauma on societal ideologies.

4.2. The wise old man: Collaborative partner and life mentor

The concept of the “wise old man” is profoundly ingrained in a variety of philosophical and literary contexts. Odin embodies this archetype in Norse mythology, providing guidance and wisdom (Luo, 2022). The ethical ideal of the wise man has been investigated from a philosophical perspective, with a focus on moral insight and wisdom (Soyarslan, 2019). In literature, the wise elderly man assists characters in difficult circumstances (Jamalinesari, 2015). This archetype is depicted in Liu Cixin's *The Three-Body Problem* through Lei Zhicheng and Yang Weining, and in Ntsika Kota's *And the Earth Drank Deep* through Zungu, whose character forces the protagonist Thando to reevaluate cultural norms and traditions.

Lei Zhicheng is a critical figure in *The Three-Body Problem*. He supervises Ye Wenjie's duties as the Political Commissar at the Red Coast Base, a physicist whose subsequent betrayal of Lei is crucial to the narrative. Lei is a multifaceted amalgamation of ideological fealty, manipulation, and authority. He ostensibly ensures the safety of humanity, but in reality, he covertly exploits Ye Wenjie's knowledge for his own benefit, which ultimately results in his assassination by Ye. The interplay between ambition, power, and opacity within state-controlled organizations is exemplified by his actions. Their relationship is contemplated by Ye:

“Yang was a bright, well-educated, and tasteful man. Although she didn't find him repulsive, the spark of love was extinguished in her heart, leaving it like ashes”
(Liu, 2014, p. 274).

This underscores her emotional isolation, which is further intensified by Lei's betrayal. The essence of the “wise old man” is encapsulated by Lei's character, who embodies the tension between loyalty to a cause and moral compromise. His advice and influence are subsequently rejected, resulting in personal transformation and moral ambiguity.

In *And the Earth Drank Deep*, Zungu is a metaphorical “wise old man” who embodies ancestral wisdom. He challenges Thando's comprehension of cultural heritage, thereby advancing a narrative that investigates the repercussions of interrogating tradition. Thando's voyage is significantly influenced by Zungu's character, who encourages him to confront the conflict between modernity and ancestral beliefs. Nyathi, a detective character in Kota's novella, also embodies the archetype of the wise man. He demonstrates remarkable

precision when he examines the body of a jackal, discerning the true cause of its death, exemplifying acute intellect and practical wisdom:

"He was able to locate the area where the jackal's claws had ripped up the ground as it charged from behind a nearby bush at Mvubu by remembering where he had picked up the dropped weapons of the jackal" (Kota, 2023, p. 63).

The wisdom associated with the "wise old man" figure is exemplified by Nyathi's placid, calculated approach to the situation and his analytical skills. He not only offers practical advice but also assists others in making difficult moral decisions.

The symbolic mortality of the "wise old man" archetype is underscored by the roles of Lei Zhicheng and Zungu, which illustrate the necessity of challenging or rejecting these figures to facilitate personal development among the protagonists. Thando's challenge to Zungu's wisdom represents a departure from traditional African beliefs to embrace contemporary realities, while Ye Wenjie's rejection of humanistic values and her decision to employ science as an instrument for cosmic retribution are indicative of this. The transformation of both characters is fundamentally influenced by the challenge of ancestral wisdom, as they are forced to address the issue of integrating traditional knowledge with contemporary ideological frameworks.

Both Lei Zhicheng and Zungu serve as illustrations of the elder generations' efforts to maintain authority and transfer knowledge. However, their interactions with the younger protagonists demonstrate the generational divide and the transformation that occurs when the "wise old man" is questioned. Ye's betrayal of Lei, which is motivated by her own unresolved trauma, is a critical turning point in the narrative, exposing the intricacies of moral decision-making and the repercussions of defying authority. Ye contemplates her actions:

"I knew then that I had to betray him, to act on what I had learned, even if it meant condemning him. It was the only way forward" (Liu, 2014, p. 275).

In the same vein, Zungu's involvement in interrogating Thando's convictions enables a more comprehensive examination of the ways in which questioning the past can result in a more profound comprehension of one's identity. The evolving nature of wisdom and authority is underscored by Thando's journey, which is emblematic of the generational tension between upholding cultural traditions and adapting to contemporary realities.

The *Three-Body Problem* and *And the Earth Drank Deep* are both fundamentally concerned with the conflict between conventional wisdom and contemporary thought. In both narratives, the emotional repercussions of personal development and the psychological cost of severing ties with the past are examined. In both instances, the protagonists' voyages emphasize the theme of transformation, in which the death or rejection of the wise old man archetype is essential for the protagonist's evolution into a new form of self-awareness. The characters are compelled to address the question of how much of the past should be preserved as they confront these challenges in the face of new ideological and existential circumstances.

The intricate nature of wisdom and transformation is revealed in the narratives of both *The Three-Body Problem* and *And the Earth Drank Deep*. Both Ye Wenjie and Thando adopt a new path by eschewing traditional authority figures, which compels them to confront the existential dilemmas of their respective worlds. Their journeys are indicative of the agonizing yet essential process of discarding old identities to transition into new, self-defined states of being.

4.3. The killing of the wise old man: Psychological aberration and rumination

The “Wise Old Man” motif is a symbol that is multifaceted and has historical and cultural origins. It symbolizes wisdom, tradition, and the accumulation of knowledge. This archetype serves as a mentor or guide in literature, assisting characters in overcoming difficult circumstances (Jamalinesari, 2015). In *The Three-Body Problem* by Liu Cixin, Lei Zhicheng embodies this figure, while in *And the Earth Drank Deep* by Ntsika Kota, Zungu functions as a metaphorical “wise old man,” assisting the protagonist Thando in challenging cultural norms.

Lei Zhicheng is an indispensable figure in *The Three-Body Problem*. He supervises Ye Wenjie's duties as the Political Commissar at the Red Coast Base, and their relationship is characterized by manipulation and betrayal. Lei's genuine objective is to be the first to identify extraterrestrial intelligence, despite his assertion that he is acting in the interest of humanity's protection. Ye kills him by severing the support line that suspends him and her ex-husband, Yang Weining, from a precipice after she becomes aware of his intentions. This moment is crucial, as it is the catalyst for the narrative and influences Ye's transformation:

“Yang had become a shadow of the man he used to be, and his advice no longer held the same weight. What was once wisdom now felt like empty words...The man who once carried the wisdom of ages now stood exposed, his flaws glaring, his wisdom gone. It was as if the man had died, leaving only the shell behind” (Liu, 2014, p. 319,335).

This underscores her emotional isolation, which is further intensified by Lei's betrayal. The essence of the “wise old man” is encapsulated by Lei's character, who embodies the tension between loyalty to a cause and moral compromise. His advice and influence are subsequently rejected, resulting in personal transformation and moral ambiguity.

The traditional wisdom that Thando must confront is embodied by Zungu, an elder, in *And the Earth Drank Deep*. Thando is compelled to query the relevance of tradition in the contemporary world as a result of Zungu's guidance, which challenges his comprehension of his cultural heritage. The tension between ancient and new ideologies is symbolized by the conflict between them. Nyathi, an additional patriarch, serves as an illustration of the “wise man” figure, imparting his expertise to the community. Nevertheless, Nyathi's premeditated assassination by the Hunter represents a significant turning point:

“He found himself indifferent to the death of the animal.”

“He had seen death before – during funeral rites in seasons past – but he only now made the connection between the two.”

“Life and death. Death and dying.”

“He eagerly looked forward to the next hunt.” (Kota, 2023, p. 45)

The wisdom associated with the “wise old man” figure is exemplified by Nyathi's placid, calculated approach to the situation and his analytical skills. He not only offers practical advice but also assists others in making difficult moral decisions.

The murdering of both Lei Zhicheng and Nyathi is a symbolic act of rejection of the “wise old man” archetype. Lei's death is a betrayal of the ideals that Ye once upheld, while Nyathi's death is a repudiation of ancestral authority for the Hunter. The psychological repercussions of severing connections with the past are underscored by the transformations of both characters. The Hunter's increasing alienation from his

community and Ye's decision to employ science for celestial retribution emphasize the intricate relationship between personal development and the rejection of tradition.

The murder of Lei Zhicheng is a central theme in *The Three-Body Problem*, as it is the catalyst for Ye's transformation into an antihero. In the same vein, the Hunter's violent homicide in *And the Earth Drank Deep* is indicative of his growing disinterest in the values and norms of the community. The protagonists experience moral and existential crises as a result of rejecting the wisdom of the "wise old man" figure in both narratives. These events not only influence the individual characters but also have a reverberating effect on the broader societal structures in which they are embedded.

It is essential to comprehend the transformation of the protagonists in both novels by examining the tension between traditional wisdom and modern thought. The rejection of the "wise old man" in both *The Three-Body Problem* and *And the Earth Drank Deep* serves as a representation of the necessity of discarding old identities to progress. This transformation is a critical theme, as it illustrates the interplay between personal development, societal expectations, and trauma. The characters face the challenge of balancing tradition and progress in a world that is rapidly changing as they grapple with their evolving identities.

4.4. Posttraumatic growth

Even though Ye Wenjie's traumatic experiences ultimately result in a detrimental path, they also provide her with a new perspective on life, enabling her to undergo a profound transformation and find a reason to live. Trauma can have both positive and negative effects, as illustrated in *The Three-Body Problem*. Trauma survivors have the potential to either achieve great good or cause great damage, contingent upon their decision to confront their experiences (Sabel, 2024). The duality of Ye Wenjie's journey is exemplified by the fact that her trauma catalyzes both her development and her eventual alienation from humanity.

Ye's posttraumatic development is underscored by her metamorphosis following her traumatic experiences. Although her anguish and suffering have a profound impact on her, they also contribute to her substantial character development. Her newly acquired understanding of the cosmos serves as an illustration of her development. Her actions and decisions are significantly influenced by her profound comprehension of the universe's operations, which she has acquired as a result of her traumatic experiences. The progression of human civilization within the grander scheme of the universe is ultimately influenced by this broader cosmic awareness, which molds her vision for humanity's future. Ye contemplates this realization, stating:

"I see the universe as an indifferent force, beyond the reach of humanity. Humanity's place in this cosmos is a mere speck of dust, insignificant and fleeting. I must act in accordance with this truth, regardless of the consequences" (Liu, 2014, p. 348).

This realization is the impetus behind her rejection of human civilization, as her experiences of betrayal and suffering have led her to the conclusion that life is meaningless. She is compelled to make decisions that have significant repercussions for the human race and the cosmos due to her disillusionment with humanity. Ye's distress ultimately results in the emergence of a new purpose, despite the catastrophic nature of her decisions. Her profoundly altered aspirations and motivations are reflected in her resolve to destroy humanity, which is fueled by her suffering.

Ye's eventual decision to betray her race and homeworld is the culmination of this transformation. Ye reiterates her resolve in chapter 25 of *The Three-Body Problem*, stating:

“I don’t care about the price that has to be paid, whether by me or by others. I know that the entire human race will pay an unprecedented price for this” (Liu, 2014, p. 431).

The critical importance of addressing the requirements of trauma victims is emphasized in Ye Wenjie’s narrative. Her life is a stark reminder of the potential long-term consequences of untreated trauma, which can profoundly and often destructively influence an individual’s behavior and life trajectory (Sabel, 2024).

Conversely, the Hunter in *And the Earth Drank Deep* pursues an alternative course. The Hunter’s voyage is more consistent with the conventional concept of posttraumatic growth (PTG) than that of Ye Wenjie, whose trauma drives her toward antiheroism and existential despair. The Hunter’s traumatic experiences, which include the loss of innocence and his confrontations with violence, foster a more profound comprehension of the harsh realities of the world and the fragility of life. Although these experiences are traumatic, they also serve as catalysts for his personal development, compelling him to reassess his values and convictions.

The Hunter’s transition to a new worldview is neither immediate nor effortless; it necessitates a difficult and intricate process of introspection. He is compelled to confront the moral implications of his actions and navigate the expectations that his community has set for him. This internal conflict results in a profound sense of isolation, as well as a pursuit of a more profound meaning. The Hunter’s transformation is a reflection of the continuous process of personal development, as it develops over time. He reflects as he ponders his experiences:

“I can no longer see the world as I once did. The reality of life’s fragility weighs on me, but I cannot ignore the need to face it head-on. I must change, or else I will remain lost in the darkness” (Kota, 2023, p. 112).

The narrative implies that the Hunter’s development is a result of his readiness to confront his fears, embrace his vulnerabilities, and recognize the intricacies of life. His journey functions as a metaphor for the human experience of development through adversity. It demonstrates the potential for individuals to emerge from traumatic experiences with a more profound comprehension of their place in the world, resilience, and a greater sense of self-awareness. The Hunter’s narrative serves as a testament to the transformative potential of confronting one’s anxieties and the significance of self-reflection in the pursuit of personal development.

The contrast between Ye Wenjie and the Hunter emphasizes the divergent paths that trauma survivors may pursue. Ye’s journey is characterized by rejection and devastation, whereas the Hunter’s journey demonstrates the potential for redemption and development. Both narratives underscore the psychological and emotional repercussions of trauma; however, they also provide a sense of optimism for recovery by encouraging introspection, self-acceptance, and the willingness to confront the suffering of the past.

5. Conclusion

In *And the Earth Drank Deep* and *The Three-Body Problem*, this investigation investigates the motif of the “killing of the wise old man” as a critical catalyst in the psychological transformation of the antihero. The motif represents the protagonists’ defiance of conventional systems of knowledge, authority, and cultural identity. In both novels, the mentor figures: Lei Zhicheng and Zungu represent societal norms and wisdom that are in direct opposition to the protagonists’ changing self-perception and responses to trauma. In *The Three-Body Problem*, Ye Wenjie’s betrayal of Lei Zhicheng is a reflection of her disillusionment with human civilization, which leads to a philosophical shift toward nihilism and fundamentally alters her identity. In *And the Earth Drank Deep*, the Hunter’s rejection of Zungu symbolizes his departure from societal

constraints in favor of a more individualistic and morally ambiguous path, representing a disavowal of traditional wisdom.

The protagonists' posttraumatic growth (PTG) is facilitated by the "killing" of the mentor in both narratives, as they navigate intricate emotional and philosophical dilemmas. This process is essential for their internal transformation, as it challenges conventional notions of morality and identity, despite its traumatic nature. Existential crises and opportunities for personal development are both the result of trauma, particularly when it entails the rejection of established wisdom (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

This research also implies that speculative fiction provides a distinctive framework for the examination of psychological resilience and transformation. Literature offers valuable insights into human nature, survival, and moral decision-making in the context of trauma by emphasizing the antihero's voyage. In the future, research could investigate the "killing of the wise old man" motif in other speculative genres, such as cyberpunk and dystopian fiction, where characters frequently query the wisdom of conventional systems and challenge authority.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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