

RESEARCH ARTICLE



**MAPPING TRAUMA AND DISPLACEMENT: SYSTEMIC VIOLENCE IN
JEANINE CUMMINS'S *AMERICAN DIRT***

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of this paper is to present a productive report on forced migration caused by systemic violence in contemporary Mexico in *American Dirt* (2020) by Jeanine Cummins. The novel talks about Lydia and her son Luca, escape to Acapulco after a brutal cartel massacre destroys their family. This paper exposes how trauma and displacement operate not merely a personal experience but also consequences of entrenched systems of violence involving drug cartels, corrupt state institutions, border regimes, and social inequality. The narrative also examines how migrants are pushed into constant motion, living in a state of fear, loss, and survival.

Keywords: *Trauma, Displacement, Systemic Violence, Migration, American Dirt*

INTRODUCTION

21st century American literature excessively talks about forced displacement rather than voluntary movement. Jeanine Cummin's novel *American Dirt* deals with the theme of systemic violence, migration, displacement, and trauma. *American Dirt* sets against the background of cartel drug dealers' violence in Mexico. The novel opens with a disastrous genocide of sixteen family members of Lydia Quixano Pérez during her family party. Lydia and her eight-year old son escape after their entire family is murdered by the drug lord Javier Crespo Fuentes. The main reason of attack on her family is her husband Sebastián's journalism. He exposes Javier. No sooner had they escaped from their home than they took a bus to Mexico City, because they knew that they could neither use their car nor go to the police. From this point, their migration begins.

From the opening pages, violence is presented as systemic rather than accidental. Lydia reflects on how ordinary life coexists with terror: "*In Acapulco, you learn quickly which stories to repeat and which ones to bury*" (Cummins, p. 8). This line signals how fear has become normalized within society. Migration, therefore, emerges not as a choice but as an act of survival.

This paper not only examines trauma, displacement but also shows how systemic violence fractures both physical space and psychological balance. Mother and son's journey to north expose the layered suffering of migrants – loss of identity, safety, dignity, and home. They face every nook and corner traumatic situation in order to save their lives.

Cummins reveals the long-lasting effects of violence on displaced bodies and minds.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This paper primarily argues three critical areas: trauma, migration, systemic violence, and ethical representation. Trauma theorists are Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman. Sigmund Freud says in his book *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) "trauma as suppressed memory that restores through dreams and repetition". Cathy Caruth argues in his book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996) that trauma was hardly fully known at the present of violence when it appeared through memory, fear, and repetition. This is evident in Lydia's constant reliving of the massacre: "*The scream still lives inside her, waiting*" (Cummins, p. 75).

Few scholars believe that the forced migrants can transmit trauma theory across borders rather than leaving it behind. According to Homi Bhabha, and Gloria Anzaldúa, the frontiers are dangerous places where identity is destabilized. Some critics opine that *American Dirt* portrays the borderline of hope no less than it is an extension of danger. As one reviewer observes, the novel presents migration as "a continuum of violence rather than an escape from it."

Moreover, systemic violence scholars John Gultung, Paul Farmer and Michel Foulcault argue that cartels function through the manipulation of the state. Cummins reflects this reality when Lydia observes: "*The police are only another arm of the cartel*" (Cummins, p. 142). Literature on Latin American narco-violence highlights how such systems

leave civilians with no legal protection, forcing displacement. This paper builds on existing scholarship by linking trauma theory directly with spatial displacement and systemic violence.

METHODOLOGY

To be examined, I have chosen a qualitative textual analysis method in order to study trauma and migration theories in *American Dirt*. Both these theories function not only as a physical process but also as a psychological process. The method involves: Close reading of key scenes depicting violence and migration; Identification of trauma symptoms such as fear, memory intrusion, silence, and emotional numbness; Analysis of displacement as a recurring condition shaped by systemic violence rather than individual choice.

DISCUSSION: TRAUMA, DISPLACEMENT, AND SYSTEMIC VIOLENCE

1. TRAUMA AS AN ONGOING CONDITION

As the novel opens with lamentable massacre at the family party, this incident marks the beginning of Lydia's trauma ; its effects persist throughout the narrative in the form of fear, guilt, and constant vigilance. This trauma is not only interpreted as a single episode but as continuing psychological episodes, which shapes both mother and son's lives. Lydia senses that survival does not mean healing when she reflects, "*Grief is what you feel when something is already gone. Terror is what you feel when something might still be taken*" (Cummins, p. 61). This distinction reveals how trauma continues through anticipation and dread.

Though Lydia tries to alleviate the violence in her memory, she fails to remove its psychological fastening. She notes that the past is never truly past: "*The scream still lives inside her, waiting*" (Cummins, p. 75). Trauma resurfaces unpredictably, intruding into moments of temporary safety. This aligns with trauma theory, which suggests that trauma resists closure and remains embedded in the survivor's consciousness.

Luca's trauma is as equal as his mother's, though, as a child, it is expressed differently. Lydia observes that Luca has learned "*how to be quiet in the way children should never have to learn*" (Cummins, p. 97). His silence becomes a coping mechanism, indicating how trauma reshapes childhood itself. Luca's fear of being noticed reflects the internalization of violence and danger.

Thus, trauma in *American Dirt* is not confined to memory but becomes a lived, daily experience. Cummins emphasizes that trauma migrates with the body, refusing to be left behind, making survival itself an exhausting psychological burden.

2. DISPLACEMENT AND LOSS OF HOME

Displacement means destruction of one's home and it is not possible of restoration. It is clear in the novels *American Dirt*. Having taken the bus to Mexico City, they have transformed into migrates. Lydia's home in Acapulco, once a space of safety and family life, becomes a site of death. She realizes that home no longer exists in any meaningful sense: "*That these people would leave their homes, their cultures, their families, even their languages, and venture into tremendous peril, risking their very lives, all for the*

chance to get to the dream of some faraway country that doesn't even want them." (Cummins, p. 96). This moment captures the emotional core of displacement—the loss of physical shelter as well as emotional belonging.

American Dirt presents displacement as a condition of around-the clock insecurity. Both Lydia and Luca continue their journey, as they feel unsecure settling in one place and fear being caught by their enemies. Migration is neither a hopeful travel nor a desperate escape. Lydia opines that they are moving not toward something better but away from death: "They are running from something, not toward anything" (Cummins, p. 156). This reverses traditional narratives of migration as aspiration. The journey aboard *La Bestia* further symbolizes displacement. Migrants cling to the train despite its dangers because movement itself becomes synonymous with survival. Lydia observes that people ride the train "as if motion itself were the only proof they were still alive" (Cummins, p. 189). Displacement here is both physical and existential, stripping migrants of stability and identity.

Moreover, displacement fractures Lydia's sense of self. She must abandon her former identity as a bookseller, wife, and mother in a stable home. In doing so, she becomes invisible, a survival strategy that deepens her alienation. Cummins thus portrays displacement as a profound emotional rupture, where losing home means losing one's past, identity, and sense of continuity.

3. SYSTEMIC VIOLENCE AND DEHUMANIZATION

American Dirt exposes violence as systemic, sustained by cartels, corrupt institutions, and social

indifference. The novel makes clear that individuals are trapped within structures that normalize brutality. Lydia understands early that protection does not exist: "The police are only another arm of the cartel" (Cummins, p. 142). This collapse of trust in authority forces civilians into silence, fear, or flight.

Systemic violence extends beyond physical harm to include dehumanization. Migrants are treated not as people but as burdens or threats. Lydia bitterly reflects, "To the world, they are not people. They are a problem" (Cummins, p. 224). This line exposes how political and social systems erase migrant humanity, reducing lives to statistics or security concerns.

Women migrants experience vulnerability. Sexual violence is normalized as a "price" of migration, revealing how systemic brutality is gendered. When Lydia hears this reality, she is horrified by its acceptance: "This is the price of getting to el norte" (Cummins, p. 201). Violence becomes transactional, expected, and unchallenged.

Dehumanization is reinforced through language, borders, and institutions that deny migrants dignity. Lydia recognizes that survival often depends on invisibility, reinforcing the system's power. Cummins shows that systemic violence does not require constant spectacle; it operates through routine fear, corruption, and silence. In this way, *American Dirt* critiques the structures that force migration while simultaneously punishing those who attempt to escape.

CONCLUSION

American Dirt powerfully maps trauma and displacement as interconnected consequences of

systemic violence. Through Lydia and Luca's journey, Jeanine Cummins reveals how violence infiltrates every aspect of migrant life—home, memory, body, and identity. Trauma in the novel is not a singular wound but a continuous state shaped by fear, loss, and uncertainty.

The narrative exposes the failure of social and political systems that force individuals into migration while denying them dignity. By humanizing migrants and foregrounding their psychological suffering, *American Dirt* challenges readers to confront the ethical realities behind migration debates. Finally, the novel insists that displacement is not merely a movement across borders but a deep emotional rupture caused by systemic injustice. Recognizing this trauma is essential to understanding migration not as a crisis of numbers, but as a crisis of humanity.

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