

Original Article

An Indexicality Analysis of Post-Traumatic Growth in Cinematic Discourse: Kya Clark in *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2022)

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Abstract

This study examines how indexical meanings embedded in discourse linguistically construct trauma, post-traumatic growth, and identity transformation in Kya Clark's character in *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2022). While previous studies have explored trauma and resilience in literary narratives, limited research has investigated how these experiences are encoded through indexical features of discourse. Grounded in Silverstein's Indexicality Theory and supported by Narrative Identity Theory and Post-Traumatic Growth Theory, the study analyzes how linguistic choices reflect emotional, psychological, and social meanings throughout the narrative. Using a qualitative discourse-analytic design, the study examined selected discourse excerpts from Kya Clark's dialogues and interactional exchanges in the film. Data were subjected to close reading, open coding, thematic categorization, and indexicality analysis. Linguistic features such as silence, avoidance, hesitation, emotional distancing, self-positioning, metaphorical expressions, and declarative statements were analyzed to determine how they index trauma, resilience, and identity reconstruction. Findings reveal that trauma is linguistically manifested through silence, emotional withdrawal, generalized relational statements, and self-exclusion, reflecting abandonment, social isolation, and psychological distress. In contrast, post-traumatic growth is indexed through emotional agency, self-affirmation, ecological attachment, assertive self-positioning, and symbolic identity ownership, signaling

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resilience, self-worth, and emotional recovery. The progression of these indexical meanings demonstrates a gradual movement from a trauma-centered identity toward an integrated and empowered sense of self. Based on these findings, the study proposes a discourse-based analytical framework consisting of trauma-indexed discourse, transitional resilience discourse, and post-traumatic growth discourse. The study contributes to cinematic discourse analysis by demonstrating how language, silence, prosodic delivery, and interactional patterns function as sites where trauma, recovery, and identity reconstruction become linguistically observable. It further expands the application of indexicality to the examination of psychological experiences and character development in cinematic narratives.

Keywords: cinematic discourse analysis, narrative identity, post-traumatic growth, trauma discourse

1. Introduction

Language is more than a means of communication; it is a medium through which individuals express emotions, experiences, identities, and personal struggles (Sawicka, 2025). The ways people speak, respond, remain silent, or select particular words often reveal aspects of their inner lives, even when feelings are not explicitly stated (Hale, 2024). Meaning is therefore conveyed not only through words but also through tone, pauses, hesitation, and patterns of interaction (Ali & Ansari, 2025). Because of this, language serves as an important resource for understanding human experience, particularly among individuals who have experienced trauma, loss, and social isolation (Cook & Dewaele, 2022).

From a sociolinguistic perspective, language is closely tied to identity because individuals continually construct and negotiate their identities through discourse. Yelenevskaya and Protassova (2024) emphasize that language and culture are deeply interconnected, while Zabrodaskaja (2025) argues that identity emerges and develops through everyday linguistic interaction. Thus, discourse not only reflects social realities but also shapes how individuals understand themselves and their relationships with others.

The relationship between language and identity becomes especially significant in the context of trauma and emotional experiences. Individuals who have undergone trauma often struggle to articulate their pain directly. Instead, emotional distress may be expressed through silence, fragmented statements, brief responses, or emotionally

charged language (Rinker, 2024). Kross et al. (2023) explain that people sometimes distance themselves from painful memories by altering their linguistic choices, whereas Yao (2025) suggests that emotions and inner conflicts can be identified through recurring language patterns. These observations indicate that discourse functions not merely as communication but also as a reflection of psychological and emotional states.

Within sociolinguistics, the theory of indexicality provides a framework for understanding how language conveys meanings beyond its literal content. Indexicality explains how linguistic forms point to social meanings related to emotions, relationships, identities, and lived experiences. According to Eckert (2019), language carries social meanings that reveal who people are and what they have experienced. Similarly, Silverstein's Indexicality Theory posits that linguistic choices index social identities, stances, and experiences within particular contexts. Through this lens, discourse can reveal manifestations of trauma, resilience, emotional struggle, and personal transformation.

The film *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2022) offers a compelling context for examining the relationship between discourse, trauma, and identity formation. Its protagonist, Kya Clark, experiences abandonment, poverty, neglect, and social exclusion from an early age. These experiences profoundly shape both her sense of self and her ways of communicating with others. In the early stages of the narrative, Kya's discourse is characterized by silence, caution, fear, and emotional distance. As she matures and encounters various life challenges, however, her language gradually reflects resilience, confidence, self-awareness, and agency. This transformation resonates with the concept of post-traumatic growth, which refers to positive psychological changes that emerge following adversity. Tedeschi et al. (2025) argue that trauma can foster resilience and stronger self-concepts, while McLean et al. (2020) maintain that individuals construct identity by organizing life experiences into coherent narratives. From a linguistic perspective, such changes may be observed through shifts in discourse patterns, lexical choices, and interactional behaviors.

Despite the growing body of research on trauma, identity, and post-traumatic growth, limited studies have examined how these processes are linguistically indexed within cinematic discourse, particularly through the integration of sociolinguistic and psychological perspectives. Recent linguistic scholarship has increasingly examined films as sites of discourse construction, identity negotiation, and social meaning-making. Delius (2023) demonstrated how audiovisual texts facilitate the interpretation of discourse by integrating verbal and nonverbal semiotic resources. Boughton and Connors (2025) examined pragmatic functions in film and television corpora, highlighting how conversational structures construct character relationships and social positioning. Similarly, Knoff et al. (2024) and Sebastian (2025) analyzed linguistic features of trauma narratives, emphasizing how discourse patterns reveal psychological experiences beyond the explicit content. Despite these developments, limited research has integrated Silverstein's Indexicality Theory with the Post-Traumatic Growth and Narrative Identity frameworks to investigate how trauma and

recovery are linguistically indexed in cinematic discourse. This gap motivates the present study.

By analyzing the linguistic features embedded in Kya Clark's discourse, this study contributes to sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, and literary studies by demonstrating how language reflects and constructs human experience. It further highlights the value of discourse analysis in understanding the complex relationship between trauma, identity, and personal growth. Through this interdisciplinary approach, the study expands current scholarship on the social meanings embedded in language and the ways discourse reveals psychological transformation.

1.1 Research Questions

This study aimed to examine the discourse of Kya Clark in *Where the Crawdads Sing* through the lens of indexicality in order to explore how language reflects trauma, resilience, and identity transformation. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do the indexical features embedded in Kya Clark's discourse linguistically construct and reflect her traumatic experiences in *Where the Crawdads Sing*?
2. What forms of indexicality in Kya Clark's discourse signify post-traumatic growth in emotional resilience, self-perception, and social positioning?
3. How does the progression of indexical meanings across Kya Clark's discourse reveal the transformation of her identity from trauma toward post-traumatic growth?
4. What discourse patterns and indexical markers may be synthesized into an exploratory analytical model for understanding trauma and post-traumatic growth in cinematic discourse?

1.2 Theoretical Lens

The present study was primarily grounded in Silverstein's (1976) Theory of Indexicality, which posits that language does more than convey propositional or literal meaning; it also points to socially and culturally situated meanings. Linguistic forms function as indexical signs that indirectly signal aspects of speakers' identities, relationships, emotions, social positions, and lived experiences within particular contexts. From this perspective, meaning extends beyond what words explicitly denote to what linguistic choices implicitly evoke or presuppose. Features such as deixis, pronoun use, lexical selection, metaphor, hedging, repetition, silence, and discourse omissions may index underlying psychological states and social realities that are not directly articulated.

In cinematic discourse, indexicality is especially valuable because emotional experiences are communicated through both verbal language and multimodal performance resources such as silence, prosody, facial expression, and interactional context. Within the context of this study, Indexicality Theory provides the principal

analytical lens for examining the discourse of Kya Clark in *Where the Crawdads Sing*. Kya's language is analyzed not as a transparent reflection of emotion, but as a site where trauma and recovery become linguistically indexed. For instance, her limited interpersonal references, recurrent orientation toward nature, emotional restraint, and moments of silence or withdrawal may index social isolation, abandonment, and disrupted attachment. Likewise, shifts in discourse patterns, such as increased relational language, greater self-reference, or more agentive expressions, may index changing self-perceptions and evolving social identities. By foregrounding the relationship between linguistic form and social meaning, Indexicality Theory enables a nuanced interpretation of how trauma and resilience are encoded in discourse.

Supporting this primary lens is Post-Traumatic Growth Theory, developed by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995). This theory argues that individuals may experience positive psychological transformation following highly challenging life events. Rather than viewing trauma solely as a source of impairment, the theory emphasizes the potential for growth in domains such as personal strength, appreciation of life, interpersonal relationships, and self-understanding. Post-traumatic growth does not imply the absence of suffering; rather, it refers to the reconstruction of meaning and identity in the aftermath of adversity.

Applied to the present study, Post-Traumatic Growth Theory offers a psychological framework for interpreting the developmental trajectory reflected in Kya's discourse. The linguistic shifts observed across the narrative are examined as possible indicators of evolving emotional resilience and identity reconstruction. Changes in how Kya positions herself relative to others, narrates her experiences, and exercises agency may signal broader processes of adaptation and growth following prolonged trauma. Accordingly, the theory provides an interpretive basis for understanding how discourse may reflect psychological transformation over time.

Another supporting framework is Narrative Identity Theory, proposed by McAdams (1993). This theory posits that individuals construct identity through internalized and evolving life narratives that integrate past experiences with present understanding and future aspirations. Identity is therefore not fixed but continuously negotiated through storytelling and meaning-making practices. Personal narratives allow individuals to organize experiences into coherent frameworks that provide continuity and purpose.

In this study, Narrative Identity Theory helps explain how Kya's evolving discourse contributes to the construction and reconstruction of selfhood. Across the novel, her language reflects an ongoing process of identity formation in which traumatic experiences are gradually integrated into a more coherent self-narrative. The progression from fragmented expressions of isolation toward discourse that conveys agency, belonging, and self-definition suggests not only changes in emotional states but also transformations in narrative identity. Thus, discourse functions as a medium through which identity is negotiated, revised, and affirmed.

Taken together, these theories constitute an integrated analytical framework for the study. Indexicality Theory serves as the primary lens for examining how linguistic

forms index social and psychological meanings beyond literal semantics. Post-Traumatic Growth Theory provides the psychological foundation for understanding transformation following adversity, while Narrative Identity Theory explains how such transformations are constructed and expressed through evolving self-narratives. Collectively, these frameworks enable a multidimensional analysis of how Kya Clark's discourse in *Where the Crawdads Sing* indexes trauma, reflects identity reconstruction, and reveals pathways toward resilience and post-traumatic growth.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed an indexicality analysis within discourse analysis to examine how language reflects trauma, resilience, and identity transformation in the discourse of Kya Clark in *Where the Crawdads Sing*. This research focuses on understanding meanings, experiences, and human expression through language, interaction, and interpretation rather than numerical data. This design was appropriate for the study because the researchers aimed to explore how Kya Clark's discourse conveys emotional and social meanings connected to her traumatic experiences and post-traumatic growth.

Specifically, the study centered on the concept of indexicality, which explains how language points to meanings beyond the literal words being spoken (Silverstein, 2003). Through indexicality, certain linguistic features such as word choice, pauses, silence, emotional expressions, tone, and interaction patterns may indicate fear, isolation, resilience, confidence, and identity transformation (Moore & Podesva, 2009). Using discourse analysis, the researchers closely examined Kya Clark's dialogues and verbal interactions to identify how these indexical features reflect her emotional condition, social positioning, and personal development throughout the film. This research design was employed because it enabled the study to provide a deeper, context-based interpretation of how language reflects trauma and post-traumatic growth within literary and cinematic narratives.

2.2 Analytical Framework

This study is grounded in the sociolinguistic concept of indexicality to examine how linguistic forms construct and reflect trauma, resilience, and identity transformation in the discourse of Kya Clark in *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2022). Indexicality refers to the capacity of language to point to social meanings beyond the literal meaning of words. Through discourse, speakers may index emotional states, social positioning, interpersonal relationships, lived experiences, and identity construction (Bamberg, 1997). In this study, indexicality served as the central analytical lens in identifying how Kya Clark's language choices, silence, pauses,

hesitation, emotional expressions, and interactional responses signify experiences of abandonment, fear, isolation, survival, and post-traumatic growth.

The framework examined the relationship between discourse and identity development throughout the film's narrative progression. Early discourse patterns associated with silence, guarded responses, fragmented expressions, and emotional withdrawal were analyzed as indexical representations of trauma and social alienation (Miño-Reyes et al., 2024). In contrast, later discourse patterns reflecting confidence, emotional openness, self-positioning, and agency were examined as linguistic manifestations of resilience and post-traumatic growth (Ncube, 2020). Through this framework, the study analyzed how indexical meanings embedded in the discourse reveal the gradual reconstruction of Kya Clark's identity within the narrative's social and emotional context.

2.3 Coding and Analytical Process

This study exclusively analyzed the 2022 film adaptation of *Where the Crawdads Sing*. Although the film is based on Delia Owens' novel of the same title, the novel was not included in the analytical corpus. All discourse data were derived solely from the film transcript and corresponding audiovisual scenes. Because indexical meaning in cinematic discourse extends beyond lexical content, the analysis incorporated selected multimodal features accompanying the dialogue. During repeated film viewings, researchers documented prosodic and interactional markers, including intonation shifts, prolonged pauses, silence, crying, hesitations, gaze direction, facial expressions, and embodied responses whenever these features contributed to the interpretation of indexical meaning. These multimodal elements were not analyzed independently but were used as contextual resources for interpreting how specific utterances indexed trauma, resilience, and identity transformation.

Relevant discourse excerpts involving Kya Clark were extracted based on their alignment with the study's focus on trauma, resilience, identity construction, and post-traumatic growth. The extracted data were then subjected to open coding to identify recurring linguistic and interactional features. During open coding, each discourse excerpt was examined line by line to identify linguistic indicators associated with trauma, resilience, identity negotiation, and post-traumatic growth. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data and subsequently refined through constant comparison. Examples of preliminary codes included abandonment anxiety, emotional withdrawal, self-erasure, ecological attachment, assertive agency, and identity affirmation. These codes were later grouped into broader thematic categories based on conceptual similarity and theoretical relevance.

To establish coding consistency, the researchers independently coded a subset of the corpus prior to full dataset analysis. The coded outputs were compared through investigator triangulation and were done manually. Disagreements regarding code assignment, thematic categorization, and indexical interpretation were discussed during a series of consensus meetings involving the research team. Coding decisions

were refined until full agreement was reached. Rather than calculating a statistical inter-coder reliability coefficient, the study adopted a negotiated-consensus approach, commonly used in qualitative discourse analysis, to ensure interpretive rigor and theoretical consistency.

After the initial coding stage, similar linguistic patterns were further organized into broader thematic categories. The themes were structured according to discourse representations of trauma, social isolation, emotional suppression, resilience, identity negotiation, and post-traumatic growth. The coded data were then interpreted through indexicality analysis to examine how linguistic forms pointed to implicit emotional, psychological, and social meanings within the narrative context. The analytical process focused not only on what was explicitly stated in the discourse but also on how meanings were socially and emotionally indexed through language use.

2.4 Corpus Validation

The corpus of this study consisted of the official transcript and selected discourse segments from the 2022 film adaptation of *Where the Crawdads Sing*, directed by Olivia Newman and written by Lucy Alibar. To ensure textual accuracy and corpus reliability, the researchers cross-validated the transcript with the film's audiovisual content through repeated viewing and scene verification. This process ensured the accurate representation of both verbal and nonverbal communicative elements, including dialogue, pauses, silence, emotional delivery, gestures, and interactional context, all of which are essential in discourse analysis.

This study exclusively analyzed the 2022 film adaptation of *Where the Crawdads Sing*. Although the film is based on Delia Owens' novel of the same title, the novel itself was not included in the analytical corpus. All discourse data examined in this study were derived solely from the film transcript and corresponding audiovisual scenes. Consequently, the interpretations and findings are limited to the film adaptation and should not be generalized to or assumed to represent the novel in its entirety.

A total of 42 discourse excerpts involving the protagonist, Kya Clark, were purposively selected from the film transcript. The selection was guided by three inclusion criteria: (1) the utterance explicitly reflected experiences of abandonment, social isolation, resilience, or identity negotiation; (2) the discourse contained linguistic markers relevant to indexicality analysis; and (3) the excerpt occurred within narratively significant events that contributed to character development. Discourse segments that did not directly address the study's objectives were excluded to maintain analytical focus and coherence.

The selected excerpts collectively represented the major stages of Kya Clark's narrative development, including childhood abandonment, social exclusion, emotional attachment, relational loss, resilience formation, identity reconstruction, and post-traumatic growth. This purposive sampling strategy ensured that the corpus captured

both trauma-related and growth-oriented discourse patterns across the protagonist's full narrative trajectory.

The final corpus captured Kya Clark's experiences of trauma, emotional struggle, resilience, and identity transformation across different stages of the narrative. Each discourse segment was examined for its indexical meanings and its capacity to provide linguistic evidence of trauma discourse and post-traumatic growth within the film.

To ensure methodological rigor and trustworthiness, the study employed investigator triangulation, expert validation, and reflexive practices. Independent coding was initially conducted by two researchers to establish coding consistency. The coded data were subsequently reviewed by expert validators, and any coding discrepancies were resolved through discussion until consensus was reached. This iterative process enhanced the reliability and consistency of the analytical procedures. Furthermore, reflexive memoing was maintained throughout the analysis to document emerging insights, monitor researcher assumptions, and minimize interpretive bias.

The coding framework, selected discourse excerpts, and thematic classifications were likewise subjected to expert validation by three validators with doctoral degrees (PhD) in Linguistics and specialize in discourse analysis and language studies. Their evaluation focused on the appropriateness of the corpus selection, the consistency and accuracy of the coding procedures, and the alignment of the data with the theoretical framework of indexicality. Feedback from the validators was incorporated into the refinement of codes and thematic categories to ensure analytical precision and theoretical coherence. These procedures strengthened the study's credibility, dependability, confirmability, and overall analytical integrity, thereby enhancing the trustworthiness of the research findings.

2.5 Analytical Procedure

The study followed a systematic qualitative discourse-analytic procedure guided by the principles of indexicality analysis. First, the researchers obtained the official transcript of *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2022) and conducted repeated viewings of the film to establish contextual familiarity with the narrative structure, discourse environment, and character interactions. During this stage, discourse excerpts involving Kya Clark were identified and extracted based on their relevance to trauma, resilience, identity negotiation, and post-traumatic growth.

Second, the extracted discourse data were organized and subjected to qualitative coding. Linguistic and interactional features such as pauses, silence, hesitation, repetition, lexical choices, emotional expressions, relational positioning, and self-referential statements were identified as potential indexical markers. These features were coded and categorized according to recurring discourse patterns associated with trauma discourse, emotional suppression, resilience, agency, and identity transformation.

Third, the coded discourse data were analyzed using indexicality analysis to examine how specific linguistic forms indexed implicit emotional, psychological, and

social meanings. The analysis focused on how discourse reflected Kya Clark’s evolving identity across different stages of the narrative. Particular attention was given to shifts in discourse patterns that signaled movement from emotional isolation and trauma toward resilience, self-awareness, and post-traumatic growth.

Finally, the interpreted findings were synthesized to establish dominant indexical patterns within the discourse and to formulate a discourse-based analytical framework for examining trauma and post-traumatic growth in literary and cinematic narratives.

3. Results and Discussion

Table 1. Indexical features reflecting trauma in Kya Clark’s discourse.

Extract from the Discourse	Indexical Feature	Linguistic Interpretation	Indexed Trauma Experience
<i>“Sometimes I feel so invisible... I wonder if I’m here at all.”</i>	Self-erasure and existential distancing	The discourse reflects emotional invisibility and weakened self-recognition.	Social abandonment and emotional isolation
<i>“People don’t stay.”</i>	Generalized declarative statement	The statement universalizes abandonment as a permanent reality.	Fear of attachment and relational trauma
<i>“I had to do life alone.”</i>	Self-positioning through isolation	The discourse constructs survival through forced independence.	Childhood neglect and emotional deprivation
<i>“You’re never gonna come back.”</i>	Anticipatory rejection	The utterance indexes distrust rooted in repeated abandonment.	Trauma from broken attachment
<i>“I don’t have it in me. I won’t.”</i>	Resistance through emotional closure	The discourse reflects emotional exhaustion and defensive withdrawal.	Psychological fatigue and trauma defense
<i>“I can’t say it.”</i>	Silence and linguistic avoidance	Avoidance functions as an index of unresolved pain and fear of judgment.	Trauma associated with abuse and social stigma
<i>“They hated me.”</i>	Collective social positioning	The pronoun “they” constructs communal exclusion and marginalization.	Social rejection and stigmatization
<i>“Being completely alone was a feeling so vast, it echoed.”</i>	Metaphorical emotional amplification	The figurative language intensifies emotional abandonment.	Deep loneliness and psychological displacement

Kya Clark's earliest discourse patterns reveal a character whose sense of self is shaped by abandonment, invisibility, and chronic social exclusion. This strongly supports the assumptions of Indexicality Theory (Silverstein, 1976), which posits that language does more than convey literal meanings; it also signals social realities, emotional conditions, and identity positions. In Kya Clark’s discourse, trauma is not expressed solely through explicit descriptions of suffering. Instead, it emerges through highly indexical linguistic patterns, including silence, emotional distancing, generalized statements, avoidance strategies, and oppositional social positioning.

These discourse features demonstrate that language functions as a symbolic representation of lived experience, allowing deeper psychological realities to be inferred from linguistic choices.

Kya's expressions, such as "*Sometimes I feel so invisible*," index prolonged emotional neglect, social exclusion, and diminished self-worth, illustrating how trauma becomes encoded in language (Bar-Halpern & Wolfman, 2025; Lukasik, 2026). Similarly, statements such as "*You're never gonna come back*" and "*People don't stay*" function as indexical markers of abandonment and loss. The utterance "*People don't stay*" emerges after repeated experiences of familial abandonment and relational instability. Its generalized declarative structure transforms a personal lived experience into a perceived universal truth, demonstrating how trauma becomes cognitively internalized. Rather than referring to a specific individual, the statement indexes an enduring expectation of relational loss, reflecting attachment insecurity and anticipatory abandonment (Grey, 2023). Collectively, these findings support Silverstein's (1976) argument that linguistic forms do not merely convey communicative intent but also index broader social and psychological realities.

The excerpt "*I can't say it*" further illustrates the indexical nature of traumatic discourse. The utterance is characterized by linguistic avoidance and ellipsis. The omission of the traumatic event itself suggests an inability or unwillingness to verbalize distress directly. From an indexical perspective, the silence indexes unresolved emotional pain and social vulnerability. Similar patterns have been identified in trauma discourse where speakers employ omission strategies to manage emotionally overwhelming experiences (Caruth, 2016). This finding reinforces the view that silence and absence in language can be as meaningful as explicit expression, particularly in representing experiences that exceed verbal articulation.

The findings likewise align with Narrative Identity Theory (McAdams, 1993), which proposes that individuals construct and understand themselves through evolving personal narratives. Kya's discourse reveals a self-narrative shaped by abandonment, marginalization, and emotional isolation. Her repeated references to being unseen, unwanted, and excluded demonstrate how traumatic experiences become integrated into identity formation. The discourse patterns identified in the study suggest that traumatic experiences may be narratively organized through language. The utterance "*They hated me*" reveals a significant indexical contrast between the collective pronoun "*they*" and the singular pronoun "*me*." The pronoun "*they*" constructs an undifferentiated social collective, representing the community as a unified source of judgment and exclusion. In contrast, "*me*" positions Kya as an isolated individual confronting a perceived majority. This pronoun opposition indexes a strong self-versus-community orientation, reinforcing her internalized experience of stigmatization and social marginalization. The linguistic construction transforms interpersonal conflict into a broader narrative of collective rejection, revealing how trauma becomes embedded in the formation of social identity.

Although the findings primarily highlight traumatic discourse, they also provide a foundation for understanding the psychological processes described in Post-

Traumatic Growth Theory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). This theory suggests that adversity may serve as a catalyst for psychological transformation, increased self-awareness, and personal development. However, post-traumatic growth is often preceded by profound emotional disruption, isolation, and cognitive struggle. The indexical markers identified in Kya’s discourse—particularly silence, emotional withdrawal, defensive self-positioning, and anticipatory rejection—reflect these initial psychological consequences of trauma (Muntigl, 2020; Ellis & Cromby, 2012). The inability to verbalize painful experiences, as reflected in *‘I can’t say it,’* may indicate an emotional burden that precedes cognitive processing and recovery. From the perspective of Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995), such discourse patterns signify the psychological struggles that may eventually give rise to resilience and transformation. Thus, the findings illuminate the linguistic manifestations of trauma that precede the possibility of post-traumatic growth.

Table 2. Indexical features reflecting post-traumatic growth.

Extract from the Discourse	Indexical Feature	Linguistic Interpretation	Manifestation of Post-Traumatic Growth
<i>“Whenever I stumbled, the marsh caught me.”</i>	Ecological self-identification	The discourse reflects emotional grounding and adaptive coping.	Emotional resilience
<i>“At last, the heart pain seeped away.”</i>	Gradual emotional processing	The metaphor indexes healing rather than emotional suppression.	Psychological recovery
<i>“I know feathers.”</i>	Self-affirmation through knowledge	The statement reflects confidence in personal expertise and identity.	Positive self-perception
<i>“I’m feeling brave enough.”</i>	Explicit emotional agency	The discourse reflects increased confidence and willingness to engage socially.	Emotional growth
<i>“They’re judging themselves.”</i>	Reversal of social positioning	The statement demonstrates self-awareness and emotional detachment from stigma.	Reconstructed social identity
<i>“I will never live like that.”</i>	Assertive self-protection	The discourse indexes agency and refusal to normalize abuse.	Empowerment and autonomy
<i>“Nature my guide.”</i>	Identity integration	The discourse reflects inner stability and self-definition through nature.	Identity reconstruction
<i>“I am the marsh now.”</i>	Symbolic identity ownership	The utterance reflects complete integration of self, survival, and belonging.	Self-actualization

Collectively, these findings provide evidence consistent with Silverstein's (1976) argument that linguistic forms do not merely convey communicative intent but may also index broader social and psychological realities. Through the lens of indexicality, Kya’s language reveals the emotional and social consequences of trauma. Through narrative identity, these linguistic patterns illustrate how traumatic experiences become integrated into her evolving sense of self. Through post-traumatic growth, the

identified discourse features represent the psychological conditions from which resilience and personal transformation may later emerge. Taken together, the findings suggest that Kya Clark's discourse is not merely a reflection of traumatic experience but may also function as a linguistic indicator of identity formation and psychological adaptation. This integrated perspective provides a comprehensive understanding of how trauma is constructed, experienced, and expressed through language, demonstrating the close relationship between discourse, identity, and psychological development (Velte, 2025; Farsi & Hallaji, 2022; Bar-Halpern & Wolfman, 2025; Lukasik, 2026; Grey, 2023; Muntigl, 2020; Ellis & Cromby, 2012).

A noticeable transformation emerges in the later stages of Kya's discourse, where linguistic choices increasingly signal agency, emotional regulation, and self-recognition. This strongly supports the explanatory power of Indexicality Theory (Silverstein, 1976), demonstrating that Kya Clark's linguistic choices serve as social and psychological indicators of her evolving emotional condition. Throughout the novel, her discourse does not merely communicate experiences; it indexes deeper meanings associated with trauma, resilience, identity formation, and personal transformation. The shift from trauma-centered expressions toward language characterized by agency, self-recognition, and emotional stability confirms Silverstein's assertion that language serves as a medium through which speakers reveal their social positioning, internal states, and lived realities. Kya's changing linguistic patterns, particularly her movement from silence, isolation, and vulnerability toward self-affirmation and empowerment, illustrate how discourse can index psychological development over time.

The findings are further reinforced by Post-Traumatic Growth Theory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), which posits that individuals may experience positive psychological transformation following adversity. The emergence of ecological identity in Kya's discourse, exemplified by statements such as "*Whenever I stumbled, the marsh caught me,*" reflects the development of alternative sources of attachment, meaning, and emotional security. Rather than remaining defined by abandonment and rejection, Kya reconstructs her relationship with the world through her connection with nature. This linguistic representation aligns with the theory's proposition that trauma can facilitate new perspectives, increased personal strength, and adaptive coping mechanisms. As observed by Maspul (2025) and Krystal (2015), post-traumatic growth is not characterized by the disappearance of suffering but by the individual's ability to develop new forms of resilience and self-understanding despite enduring pain.

Similarly, the findings on emotional agency align directly with the central assumptions of Post-Traumatic Growth Theory. The declarative statement "*I will never live like that*" indexes a transition from passivity to self-determination. Such discourse reflects Kya's growing capacity to establish boundaries, exercise personal

choice, and reject circumstances that once contributed to her vulnerability. This transformation demonstrates the development of personal strength, a core dimension of post-traumatic growth identified by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995). Through language, Kya reveals an emerging sense of control over her life, indicating that psychological recovery manifests not only in behavior but also in discourse.

Kya's evolving discourse illustrates the dynamic process described in Narrative Identity Theory. Rather than merely reflecting personal experiences, her linguistic choices actively construct a more coherent sense of self. Statements such as "*I know feathers*" function as identity claims that position her as knowledgeable, competent, and self-assured. This shift suggests that language operates not only as a medium of expression but also as a mechanism for reconstructing self-understanding following adversity. Furthermore, the statement "*They're judging themselves*" provides compelling evidence for both Indexicality Theory and Narrative Identity Theory. From an indexical perspective, the utterance linguistically signals a shift in social positioning, indicating that Kya no longer internalizes the stigma imposed by her community. Instead, she reinterprets judgment as a reflection of others' limitations rather than her own inadequacies. From a narrative identity perspective, this discourse illustrates a reconstructed life story in which she no longer occupies the role of a marginalized victim but emerges as an individual capable of critically interpreting her social environment. This shift reflects emotional maturity, self-awareness, and the reauthoring of personal identity.

The culmination of these theoretical processes is most evident in the statement "*I am the marsh now.*" Through the lens of Indexicality Theory (Silverstein, 1976), this expression indexes belonging, acceptance, and the integration of self with a meaningful environment. Post-Traumatic Growth Theory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995) reflects the attainment of psychological adaptation and existential growth following prolonged adversity. Through Narrative Identity Theory (McAdams, 1993), it represents the completion of an evolving self-narrative in which trauma is no longer the defining feature of identity but becomes part of a broader story of survival and self-realization. As noted by Edler et al. (2026), integrated identity often emerges when individuals successfully reconcile painful experiences with a stable sense of self and purpose.

Overall, the findings validate the interconnected contributions of Indexicality Theory (Silverstein, 1976), Post-Traumatic Growth Theory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), and Narrative Identity Theory (McAdams, 1993). The identified forms of indexicality, ecological attachment, emotional agency, reconstructed self-worth, social detachment from stigma, and integrated identity formation demonstrate that Kya Clark's discourse functions as both a linguistic reflection of trauma and a narrative record of growth. Collectively, the findings reveal that language serves as a powerful

site where psychological transformation, identity reconstruction, and post-traumatic growth become visible and measurable through discourse (Maspul, 2025; Krystal, 2015; Edler et al., 2026).

Table 3. Progression of indexical meanings in Kya Clark's identity transformation.

Narrative Stage	Dominant Indexical Meaning	Linguistic Characteristics	Identity Construction
<i>Childhood abandonment</i>	Fear and invisibility	Silence, fragmented statements, emotional dependency	Traumatized and abandoned self
<i>Social isolation</i>	Defensive withdrawal	Minimal responses, avoidance, distrust	Socially excluded identity
<i>Emotional attachment</i>	Fear of loss	Hesitation, emotional caution, anticipatory rejection	Vulnerable relational identity
<i>Emotional rupture</i>	Pain and self-preservation	Emotional distancing and generalized statements	Emotionally guarded self
<i>Recovery and resilience</i>	Adaptive self-awareness	Reflective statements and emotional regulation	Emerging resilient identity
<i>Social and emotional empowerment</i>	Agency and confidence	Assertive language and self-positioning	Empowered selfhood
<i>Identity integration</i>	Belonging and acceptance	Symbolic and metaphorical discourse	Fully reconstructed identity

Examining the discourse chronologically reveals that Kya's identity transformation is not sudden but develops through a series of linguistically observable shifts. The three theoretical lenses underpinning the study are Indexicality Theory (Silverstein, 1976), Post-Traumatic Growth Theory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), and Narrative Identity Theory (McAdams, 1993). Together, these theories provide a comprehensive explanation of how Kya Clark's discourse reflects the gradual transition from trauma-centered identity to post-traumatic growth and self-integration.

Primarily, the findings validate the assumptions of Indexicality Theory (Silverstein, 1976), which posits that linguistic forms function as indexes of social, emotional, and psychological realities. The progression of Kya's discourse demonstrates that language serves as more than a medium of communication; it operates as a marker of her evolving internal state. During the early stages of the narrative, her silence, fragmented emotional expressions, and dependence on absent relationships index abandonment, social exclusion, and emotional insecurity. These linguistic features point to a selfhood shaped by fear, neglect, and marginalization. As her experiences develop, the emergence of defensive and emotionally guarded language indexes the internalization of trauma and anticipatory rejection. The findings affirm Silverstein's (1976) argument that linguistic choices carry embedded meanings that reveal the speaker's social positioning and lived experiences. In the later stages, the shift toward reflective, assertive, and metaphorical expressions indexes resilience,

self-awareness, and emotional maturity, demonstrating how evolving linguistic patterns signal changes in identity and psychological orientation.

The progression of Kya's discourse reflects several dimensions of post-traumatic growth. Early expressions marked by hesitation and emotional withdrawal gradually give way to statements characterized by confidence and agency. This linguistic transformation suggests that growth is not represented solely by dramatic narrative events but is also embedded in subtle shifts in self-positioning, emotional expression, and interpersonal engagement. The discourse, therefore, provides evidence of how psychological recovery becomes observable through language. Moreover, Kya's growing ability to interpret her experiences through reflective, emotionally balanced language demonstrates the reconstruction of her self-perception and the emergence of adaptive coping mechanisms. The findings suggest that trauma remains part of her life story; however, it no longer functions as the dominant framework through which she understands herself. Instead, her discourse reveals a transformed identity characterized by agency, acceptance, and emotional growth, which are central indicators of post-traumatic growth.

The findings also substantiate Narrative Identity Theory (McAdams, 1993), which views identity as an evolving life story constructed through discourse and personal meaning-making. The gradual linguistic shifts observed throughout the narrative reflect the reconstruction of Kya's self-narrative. Initially, her discourse portrays a fragmented identity defined by abandonment and isolation. As the story progresses, her language becomes increasingly coherent and self-reflective, suggesting an active process of integrating painful experiences into a meaningful personal narrative. McAdams (1993) contends that individuals construct identity by organizing life experiences into stories that provide continuity and purpose. This process is evident in Kya's discourse, particularly in the final stage, where symbolic expressions such as "I am the marsh now" signify the integration of memory, survival, belonging, and self-understanding. Through these narrative constructions, Kya transforms from a passive recipient of trauma into an active author of her own identity.

Collectively, the findings demonstrate the interconnectedness of Indexicality Theory (Silverstein, 1976), Post-Traumatic Growth Theory (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), and Narrative Identity Theory (McAdams, 1993). The evolving indexical meanings embedded in Kya Clark's discourse reveal how language functions as a site where trauma, resilience, and identity reconstruction are negotiated. Indexicality Theory explains how linguistic features encode psychological and social meanings; Post-Traumatic Growth Theory explains the positive transformation underlying these linguistic shifts; and Narrative Identity Theory clarifies how such transformations are organized into a coherent and meaningful sense of self. Consequently, the findings affirm that Kya's discourse is not merely a reflection of traumatic experience but a

linguistic representation of resilience, identity development, and post-traumatic growth.

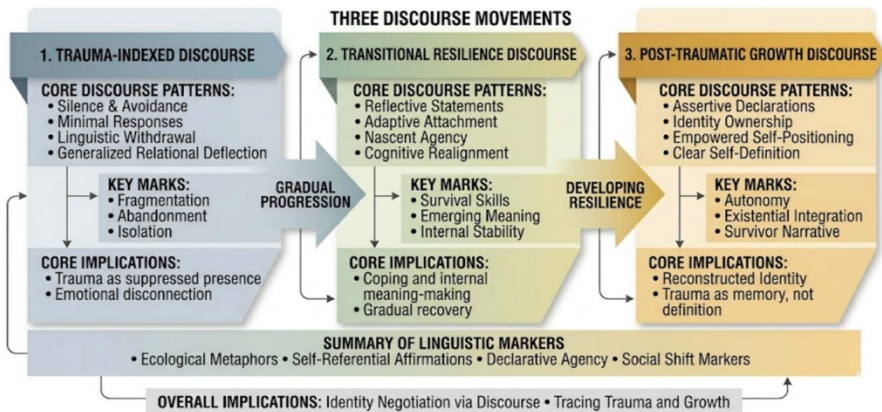


Figure 1. An exploratory indexicality model of trauma and post-traumatic growth in Kya Clark's cinematic discourse.

The findings of the present study suggest that trauma and post-traumatic growth in Kya Clark's cinematic discourse may be interpreted through recurring discourse patterns and indexical markers. Based on a single-character analysis of *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2022), the model presented here should be viewed as an exploratory analytical proposal rather than a definitive framework applicable to all narratives. The framework synthesizes three interconnected discourse movements: trauma-indexed discourse, transitional resilience discourse, and post-traumatic growth discourse. These stages do not operate as isolated categories; rather, they reflect a gradual linguistic progression in which identity evolves through changing discourse patterns and social meanings.

The first stage, *trauma-indexed discourse*, is characterized by linguistic restraint, emotional fragmentation, and defensive positioning. The study found that silence, avoidance, minimal responses, generalized statements, and emotionally distant expressions consistently indexed abandonment, fear, and social exclusion. Statements such as “People don’t stay” and “I can’t say it” demonstrate how trauma often resists direct articulation. Instead of explicit disclosure, emotional pain emerges indirectly through hesitation, incomplete expression, and linguistic withdrawal. These discourse patterns suggest that trauma in literary narratives is frequently encoded through absence, suppression, and emotional distancing rather than direct confession alone.

The second stage involves *transitional resilience discourse*, where language begins to reflect emotional adaptation and cognitive reorganization. In this stage, reflective statements, ecological attachment, cautious self-expression, and emerging

agency become dominant markers. Kya's discourse gradually shifts from passive emotional survival toward self-awareness and internal stability. Expressions such as "Whenever I stumbled, the marsh caught me" indicate that resilience develops through alternative forms of belonging and emotional grounding. The discourse no longer centers entirely on loss; instead, it begins to construct meaning, continuity, and adaptive coping. This transitional stage is important because it reveals that recovery is not immediate. Linguistically, resilience first appears as subtle shifts in emotional positioning before becoming fully articulated through confident self-expression.

The final stage, *post-traumatic growth discourse*, is marked by assertiveness, symbolic self-definition, emotional clarity, and reconstructed social positioning. The study found that declarative statements, metaphorical identity ownership, and empowered self-positioning index the emergence of a reconstructed identity no longer controlled by trauma. Expressions such as "I will never live like that" and "I am the marsh now" demonstrate emotional agency, self-recognition, and existential integration. At this stage, discourse reflects acceptance rather than fragmentation. Trauma remains part of memory, but it no longer defines the speaker's entire identity. Instead, the character reconstructs meaning through language that affirms survival, autonomy, and belonging.

Across these three discourse movements, several recurring indexical markers emerged as central components of the proposed framework. These include silence and avoidance, emotional distancing, generalized relational statements, ecological metaphors, self-referential affirmations, declarative agency, symbolic identity claims, and shifts in social positioning. Each marker functions as an index of psychological and emotional states that extend beyond literal meaning. Their significance lies not only in what the character says, but also in how discourse constructs emotional reality, social identity, and personal transformation.

The proposed model offers an interpretive lens for examining how trauma, resilience, and post-traumatic growth may be represented through discourse in the specific context of Kya Clark's narrative. Given the limited scope of the corpus, the model should be regarded as a preliminary conceptual contribution that requires testing, refinement, and validation across additional films, literary works, autobiographical narratives, and other discourse contexts. It is important to emphasize that the model emerged from the discourse trajectory of a single fictional character within a single cinematic text. Consequently, the framework should not be interpreted as universally representative of trauma narratives. Future research examining different genres, protagonists, cultural contexts, and narrative forms may reveal alternative indexical pathways toward resilience and post-traumatic growth. The present model, therefore, functions as a heuristic starting point for subsequent comparative investigations rather than a finalized theoretical framework.

Ultimately, the synthesized framework contributes to literary discourse analysis by offering a structured yet interpretive model for examining trauma and recovery through language. It allows researchers to move beyond thematic interpretation alone and instead analyze how specific linguistic forms index psychological struggle, resilience, and identity reconstruction within narrative discourse.

4. Conclusion

The study examined how Kya Clark's discourse reflects trauma, post-traumatic growth, and identity transformation through an indexicality analysis. The findings revealed that Kya's traumatic experiences are linguistically expressed through patterns of silence, avoidance, emotional distancing, generalized statements, and self-exclusion. These discourse features reflect the enduring psychological effects of abandonment, neglect, and social rejection on her self-perception and relationships with others. The study demonstrates that trauma in cinematic narratives is communicated not only through the events the character experiences but also through subtle linguistic choices that reveal her emotional and psychological state.

As the narrative progresses, the findings show a gradual transformation in Kya's discourse, which becomes increasingly confident, self-aware, and assertive. Her evolving language reflects emotional healing, strengthened self-worth, greater independence, and an increased capacity to challenge social stigma and redefine her identity. These linguistic changes indicate that resilience and post-traumatic growth are manifested in the ways she reconstructs meaning about herself, her relationships, and her lived experiences. Rather than merely describing recovery through the storyline, the discourse itself reveals the process of personal growth and identity reconstruction.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that discourse serves as a dynamic site where psychological transformation becomes observable through language. The findings suggest that post-traumatic growth is embedded not only in narrative outcomes but also in subtle shifts in self-positioning, relational orientation, metaphorical expression, and communicative agency. By integrating Indexicality Theory, Narrative Identity Theory, and Post-Traumatic Growth Theory, the study provides an interdisciplinary perspective on how language mediates the reconstruction of identity following adversity. This theoretical integration extends existing scholarship on cinematic discourse by illustrating that identity transformation can be systematically traced through evolving patterns of meaning-making and linguistic expression rather than through plot development alone.

5. Implications of the Study

The findings of this study have important implications for discourse analysis, education, literary studies, psychology, and future research by demonstrating how language functions as a powerful medium for expressing trauma, resilience, and identity transformation in narrative discourse. The proposed discourse-analytic framework contributes to the growing body of discourse studies by providing a systematic approach to examining how linguistic features and indexical markers reveal characters' emotional and psychological experiences. The framework may be applied to various forms of cinematic texts, multimodal narratives, films, and other discourse-based materials, thereby expanding opportunities for researchers to investigate human experiences through language across diverse communicative contexts.

The study also offers valuable educational implications for literature and language instruction by illustrating how discourse analysis can examine cinematic and multimodal texts beyond their surface meanings. By analyzing language choices as indicators of emotion, identity, and character development, educators can encourage learners to engage in more critical, reflective, and meaningful textual analysis. Likewise, students of linguistics, literature, and related disciplines may benefit from the study as it provides concrete examples of how discourse analysis can be applied to understand identity construction, interpersonal relationships, and the lived experiences of fictional characters. The findings may therefore serve as a useful reference for those undertaking research in discourse analysis, literary criticism, sociolinguistics, and related fields.

Furthermore, the study highlights the interdisciplinary value of discourse analysis for psychology and the humanities by demonstrating that language offers meaningful insights into representations of trauma, recovery, resilience, and personal growth. Examining discourse patterns enables scholars to better understand how emotional and psychological development is constructed within narratives, thereby offering an additional analytical perspective on cinematic, literary, multimodal, and cultural texts. The proposed framework likewise provides a foundation for future investigations, as researchers may validate, refine, and extend its application across different genres, cultures, languages, and narrative contexts, thereby strengthening its theoretical and methodological contribution to discourse studies.

Finally, the study encourages readers and viewers of literary and cinematic works to be more attentive to how language reflects emotional struggles, resilience, and identity transformation. By recognizing the discourse patterns that shape characters' experiences and personal journeys, audiences can develop richer, more nuanced interpretations of narratives, fostering a deeper appreciation of the intricate relationship among language, identity, and human experience.

6. Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, the analysis was restricted to the discourse of a single fictional character within the 2022 film adaptation of *Where the Crawdads Sing*. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as context-specific rather than broadly generalizable. Second, although the study incorporated investigator triangulation and expert validation, the interpretation of discourse remains inherently subjective. Third, the analysis focused primarily on verbal discourse and selected interactional features, potentially overlooking additional multimodal elements that may contribute to the representation of trauma and post-traumatic growth. Furthermore, because the analysis focused on a single fictional character from a single film adaptation, the resulting analytical model should be interpreted as exploratory and illustrative rather than as universally representative of trauma discourse across narrative contexts.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this study. The authors have no financial, professional, or personal relationships that could have influenced the research process, findings, or interpretation of results.

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