

Intersection of Trauma and Narrative in Nayomi Munaweera's Fictional Works

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Abstract

Nayomi Munaweera's fiction explores the deep interconnections between trauma and narrative. Her works are set against the backdrop of Sri Lanka's civil war which fostered individual and collective trauma delineated in her narratives. This study investigates how Munaweera's fiction offers a unique narrative lens through which trauma, memory, and repetition are intertwined with cultural, gender, and sexual identities. Drawing on trauma theory, particularly the works of Jakob Lothe and Joshua Pederson on trauma and narrative, this paper analyses the role of narrative in representing traumatic experiences that resist easy articulation. Munaweera's use of fragmented memories and repetitive events reflects the disorienting nature of trauma. Moreover, her focus on gendered, cultural, and sexual dimensions of violence and suffering contributes to highlighting various shades of trauma. Therefore, this paper argues that Munaweera's fiction does not simply depict trauma but also functions as a narrative act of witnessing, inviting readers to bear witness to the unspeakable. By examining the intersection of trauma and narrative in Munaweera's works, this study highlights how fiction becomes a space for healing, remembering, and giving voice to silenced sufferings. Thus, this paper mainly addresses how expressing trauma in narratives represents and reconciles a victim's traumatized self.

Keywords: Identity; Memory; Narrative; Self; Suffering; Trauma.

A major social shift has occurred by the end of the previous century with the emergence of a new category of personal and collective trauma. This shift involves acknowledging how a painful past can resurface in the present often through indirect symptoms, silences, and in a repetitive thought pattern. Owing to this very shift, literary trauma studies developed as an independent branch addressing how literature deals with, represents, and

reconciles a victim's traumatised self. In this context, Robert Eaglestone remarks, "Our human engagement with trauma and its aftermath means that these questions are not just an examination of language function but are part of our more demanding ethical involvement with the world and with others" (288). Therefore, the victims, survivors, and witnesses of traumatic experiences usually want to talk about trauma or express it through different cultural forms of remembrance and testimony. One vital forum to communicate such disturbing issues is literature. Joshua Pederson remarks, "Thus, it is no surprise that when trauma theory burst onto the stage in the middle of the 1990s, some of its biggest proponents begin arguing that literature – literary narrative in particular – might possess a privileged (if not unique) value for communicating our deepest psychic pains" (95). In this way, along with other forms of literature, storytelling, testimonies, and fictional narratives are pivotal means to achieve a kind of reconciliation through expressing and recounting traumatic experiences. Thus, it poses several crucial challenges to the writer of fiction whosoever attempts to write about trauma.

The initial challenge is finding out how far fiction is appropriate enough to represent trauma. Fiction is fundamentally a living tradition of writing where truth is told through lies. To make literary fiction more grounded in its nature, it usually deals with existential truths – "things about our shared world beyond merely factual matters" (Eaglestone 287). Thus, fiction is a potent source of delivering bitter truths about human existence in the form of tolerable fictional narratives. Therefore, according to Robert Eaglestone, trauma fiction means less "fiction about trauma" and more "reading with trauma in mind" (287). One of the foundational theorists of trauma theory, Cathy Caruth, highlights that it is not easy to capture real trauma in any possible form:

... it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language. (*Unclaimed* 4)

Another challenge is to find grounds for the argument that fiction can be treated as testimony. There has been an ongoing debate regarding the authenticity and appropriateness of fiction being the apt medium for expressing existential crises and the human condition. However, in this way, fiction is not a "testimony in the legal or historiographic sense" (Webb 52).

Still, it also shares “a commitment to making representations from point of view, from a position on an event,” by creating “a sense of event, a feeling of what might have happened” (Webb 52). Thus, fiction, more particularly, does not only represent the truth but also reshapes or constructs it in the very act of narrating. Hence, every attempt to bring together fiction (word) with trauma (wound) opens up various significant dimensions of understanding human nature and health. Therefore, the ultimate question is the way fiction might appropriate trauma. In this regard, Robert Eaglestone remarks, “This appropriation has two parts: appropriation by the writer and, perhaps more subtly, appropriation by the reader. Since trauma fiction draws on the very deepest parts of what it is to be human – good and evil, suffering, justice, community, self-understanding – this question is especially fraught” (291). Hence, it can be proposed that fiction can represent and construct trauma.

It should be further argued why a fictional narrative is invariably considered a more viable source than a piece of essay, poetry, memoir, or diary in dealing with the intricacies involved in the representation of trauma. In Jo Winning’s words, “The fractured language, non-linear narrative structures and multiple modes of representation that best convey the trauma of pain and illness are more legible when read, and at times translated, through humanities frameworks” (274). Furthermore, the most significant trauma theorists of the 1990s like Hartman, Felman, Caruth, and LaCapra also try to find answers to questions like how literature expresses trauma or how trauma shapes those narratives. In such a confusing state, literary trauma fiction is a far better attempt to represent the consciousness of traumatic events and their effects on the victim’s psyche more precisely for the large canvas fiction offers with a variety of moods and situations. In this context, Laurie Vickroy, in her work, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (2002), defines trauma narratives as “fictional narratives that help readers to access traumatic experiences” (1).

Stories when narrated delineate individual or collective experiences with a latent dimension of reconciliation inherent in the act of narration itself. Psychologists like Sigmund Freud talk about “talking cure” (Bacopoulos-Viau 41) as narratives help the healing process for their victims. Joshua Pederson mentions, “Indeed, it is a widely accepted therapeutic truth that the stories we tell about the catastrophes that beset us – both individual and collective – can be crucial tools for recovery” (97). Thus, in the 1990s, a unique bond was established between trauma and narrative because trauma can be reconciled through expression. In this context, Geoffrey Hartman is of the view:

Trauma theory introduces a psychoanalytic scepticism as well, which does not give up on knowledge but suggests the existence of a traumatic kind, one that cannot be made entirely conscious, in the sense of being fully retrieved or communicated without distortion. (537)

Hartman also argues that literature can help us read the wounds of trauma and ask whether trauma can further be reclaimed by literary knowledge or not? On the other hand, Joshua Pederson's words have two dimensions of trauma and narrative: "First, what is it about literary narrative that makes it so appropriate for communicating trauma? And second, how exactly does trauma shape the narratives in which it appears?" (97). In this connection, it can be argued that the imaginative quality of literary narrative allows it to access traumatic experiences. Thus, literature can be used to claim trauma with this ability to imagine. The present paper deals with the third dimension of how various shades of trauma and narrative emerge in reading fiction and how pairing trauma with culture, gender, and sexuality can stimulate the understanding of traumatic experiences narrated in the text. In this study, literary trauma studies have been applied to Nayomi Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* (2012) and *What Lies Between Us* (2016) because in her stories trauma is made available as a gripping truth about human conditions and sufferings. Her approach is distinct on the pretext of making human survival possible even in the face of an invisible adversity like trauma.

Most of the scholarship about Nayomi Munaweera's works is limited to studying different themes upon which her literary corpus is constructed. Even if some scholars touch on the issue of trauma, they have merely deliberated upon its thematic significance or linked it with war. There are many more dimensions to be probed to see on what level Munaweera speaks when trauma intersects with her narrative style. The present study tends to make an in-depth analysis of trauma in connection with Munaweera's narrative strategies to express the challenges and opportunities involved while interacting with gendered, cultural, and sexual dimensions of trauma in her fiction.

The present study involves a discursive approach to foreground several latent elements in Munaweera's writings. The path-breaking observations of Roger Luckhurst, Cathy Caruth, and Judith Herman in trauma's context are used to contextualize this paper in studying the intersection of trauma and narrative. Jakob Lothe's critical views on the narrative trope of memory prove handy; whereas, Joshua Pederson's analysis of repeti-

tion as a narrative strategy is an amazing tool to adopt for the present research. Similarly, while examining the linkage between culture and trauma, Jeffrey Alexander's ideas inspire in understanding of the Sri Lankan cultural bondage propelling traumatic reverberations in the narratives. Moreover, Sharon Marquart and Jennifer Griffiths help in unraveling the relation between gender and trauma and how the intimate and personal sides of women hurt the most. In comprehending trauma and sexuality, Alec M. Smidt and Melissa G. Platt have given wonderful insights in exposing silences and shame. Overall, Munaweera's narratives are analyzed by capturing the intricacies of memory and repetition used in them with reference to how her characters respond to the fissures of gender, culture, and sexuality found in her stories.

The effort to study fictional narratives in comprehending traumatic experiences is based on the observation that memory plays a crucial role. Roger Luckhurst in his foundational book, *The Trauma Question*, opines, "Aside from myriad physical symptoms, trauma disrupts memory, and therefore identity, in peculiar ways" (1). Therefore, the relationship between trauma and narrative is essential for being grounded in memory itself. Jakob Lothe observes:

While our memory of the traumatic event may prompt narration, it may also thwart narration. Moreover, a person who tries to tell about a traumatic event may find the narrative activity helpful; narration inevitably takes him or her back to the event, thus perhaps making the person remember what he or she wants to forget. (152)

Looking at the narrative from this perspective, trauma, and memory share a closer bond that necessitates, problematises, and characterises the narrative in the text. In *What Lies Between Us*, when Ganga is traumatised after the birth of her daughter, her husband, Daniel, highlights the role of memory: "Those nightmares of yours, they're so fierce. I think you need to talk them out. Maybe something happened when you were little. When you were Bodhi's age. Sometimes having a kid can bring up buried memories, you know" (253) Here, the narrative imparts hints at how decisive the role of memory is in shaping the narrative of trauma. It suggests that a kind of salvation is possible only by revisiting the memories that haunt the victim. Similarly, in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, Yasodhara's adolescent memories of the suicide bombing create a deeper context in the narrative for the role of memory in triggering the trauma: "I remember the moment when I knew that we were all involved, that the island was not some vague and

distant memory, but vivid and alive” (119).

Ruminating over the role of memory, Jakob Lothe concludes about the relation of narrative, memory, and identity that “memory, including traumatic memory, is closely linked to both. It appears impossible to come to terms with the concepts of narrative and identity without activating, implicitly or explicitly, aspects of memory” (153). For example, in *What Lies Between Us*, Ganga suffers from this identity crisis linked to her memory and substantiates the claim of narrative identity. Becoming highly insecure about her place in her daughter’s life, Ganga encapsulates:

She will fit in in a way I never had. She will go to school with girls who look like her. There will be no memory of me. I will be erased. Our marriage would mean nothing. My motherhood would mean nothing. The way I loved them both would mean nothing. (253)

Ganga is at such a vantage point in her life where she has failed both as a mother and a wife, and it forces her to revisit and reconstruct her past memories to understand better her failed relationships. She tries to relive her past with the help of memories so that she can make sense of it in the present:

All my pieces fell in the wrong order. I was separated from myself, and empty, echoing spaces were opened in me for a darker inhabitant. No one knew, no one suspected. And yet even this smaller war is not my excuse. My sin is only and ever my own. (61)

Whereas *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* deals less with this inner battle and more with the war between Tamil and Sinhala communities in Sri Lanka. As a victim of forced migration due to civil war, Yasodhara’s memories are haunted by the idea that someone may leave her alone. Her attempt to look for someone safe is loaded with her past memories. She mentions, “How could I not be seduced by my own lost memories” (159). Consequently, considering the role of memory in the understanding of the narrative, it would be wise enough to assert that the narrative certainly helps the survivor “to come to terms with aspects of his or her traumatic experience, other aspects of that experience, including the way it is remembered, resist narrativization” (Lothe 153)

Pederson asserts about the trope of repetition that “The importance of

repetition to our understanding of trauma goes back at least to Freud – who observes victims reexperiencing trauma in dreams and flashbacks and reliving it through the repetition compulsion” (104). This trope of repetition has skillfully been used in Munaweera’s texts. The narrative of *What Lies Between Us* is structured in a way that when Ganga becomes a mother of a daughter, her personal fears begin to haunt her repeatedly: “I nod into my hands. Yes, it is a disease. Yes, I am infected. Yes, I need to keep it away from her. She is too fragile to hold the weight” (237). Nightmares are also a form of repetition of the same traumatic experience haunting Ganga time and again: “The nightmares come. Sharp objects. Skin tearing slowly. A child crying in a hidden place. Water crashing over my head. I gasp awake, gulp air. Daniel’s hands are trying to soothe me” (159). Ganga is convinced that whatever adverse happened in her life was the consequence of her molestation by Samson, and this conviction makes any slight remembrance of the incident traumatic for her. Thinking about Samson turns out to be nightmarish. When Daniel asks her what troubles Ganga, she is scared that any mention of Samson may expose her own faulty and ashamed self to him: “I nod, but I know that there are some things you cannot tell. If I tell, he will know what I am, he will see through to the corrupt core of me” (160).

Trauma also comes repeatedly in the form of nightmares in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, which influences the narrative effect of mental agony and existential anxiety. The Tamil Girl, Saraswathi, is constantly haunted by the incident of her rape by Sinhala soldiers: “But some nights, I fall asleep only to awaken in a bright concrete room where the sky opens to a perfect square of blue. Fear wraps its fingers around my throat, bile rises into my mouth” (178). This traumatic self-consciousness hampers the narrativisation exemplified in literary trauma theory of how trauma shapes literary narratives by unspeakability of the total experience as Cathy Caruth asserts that trauma is “an event whose force is marked by its lack of registration” (*Trauma* 6).

The relationship between culture and trauma also emerges as a crucial question in Munaweera’s writings. Instead of focusing on the psychic traces left on the individual by a traumatic event, there is an attempt to unravel trauma’s social and cultural dimensions. It means to examine how culture mediates in different processes of representation. Culture is a potent agency that mediates not only on the level of individual traumatic experience but also in affecting how racial or gender struggle turns out to be traumatic for a group. Jeffrey Alexander asserts:

Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways. (1)

Through this cultural trauma model, an individual's traumatic experiences can be interpreted in different cultural contexts. A significant focus of literary trauma theory is primarily seen on historical upheavals and their impact on individual and community life. It is an imperative medium to study the interplay between the personal and cultural ramifications of traumatic experiences. Ganga also goes through a form of cultural trauma, which is quite subtle and emphatic in her conversation with Daniel on the issue of virginity. Comparing Sri Lankan cultural mores with the American mindset, she asserts:

It's a matter of life and death. It's what mothers look for when they choose a bride for their sons. When the couple comes back from their honeymoon they have to bring the sheet with them to prove she was a virgin. Otherwise the family can decide she's spoiled goods and discard her and then no one will marry her. (158)

But this answer to Daniel is not the sum total of her traumatised self that has remained undulant and freaky. The actual horror of the situation comes later in her rationalising state when exactly she loses her virginity, "Was it at twenty-two when that boy entered me? Or was it much, much earlier? Was it when I was a little girl with a spot of blood upon the curve of my foot? Was it in the months and years after that, when every footfall felt like a threat?" (159). Whereas, in *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, Munaweera tries to represent the cultural trauma through the migration of Yasodhara and her family to American soil. The children feel out of place for being marked by others as belonging to a different race:

There are lessons about shame learned by watching eyes; by noticing the way the other kids wrinkle their noses or pretend not to see us when we sit next to them at the lunch table or on the school bus. (111)

Their sense of self gets complicated by comparing themselves with American cultural mores, "In school we learn quickly that the smell of our bodies is shameful, and must be dissipated by perfume, deodorant" (110).

To widen the canvas of Munaweera's fiction, it would be interesting to explore trauma's relation to gender. As Sharon Marquart remarks, "Feminist scholarship on trauma and sexual assault offers further development of gender's use as a mode of theoretical and methodological inquiry" (165). Gender plays a crucial role in Nayomi Munaweera's *What Lies Between Us* in that the narrative gives minimal space to the suffering and victimhood of male characters. Instead of fighting the battle for their survival, Samson dies unnoticed, and Ganga's father commits suicide. According to Relational Cultural Theory:

the type of traumatic experiences may differ between males and females, with females more often exposed to high-impact interpersonal, sexual or gender-based trauma, and they are frequently subjected to these kinds of traumas early in their life, which is associated with a higher risk for PTSD. (Taha and Sijbrandij 2)

The theory further propagates that females, compared to males usually display stronger perceptions of threat and consider themselves as having less self-control in the severe phase following traumatic incidents. Jennifer Griffiths observes, "women's trauma is linked to intimate life and is interpersonal in nature" (182). Furthermore, female characters are undoubtedly the worst-hit victims of trauma in the novel, but they are strong survivors as well. For example, Ganga being guilty of her father and Samson's death, for her mother's loneliness, and for being a murderer of her daughter, is still alive and surviving by narrating the tale of her traumatic life journey. One more critical dimension of gender and trauma described by Taha and Sijbrandij is that:

In addition, it has been proposed that males and females have different cognitive schemas with female trauma victims more often blaming themselves for the trauma, holding more negative views of themselves and the world as being more dangerous than male trauma victims do. (2)

But, as far as the narrative of *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* is concerned, it also shows male characters as victims of trauma and affected in the same way as women. Shiva is traumatised after the death of Lanka, the younger sister of Yasodhara, propagated by the suicide bomber, Saraswathi. His nightmares are equally torturous, haunting him and making him shudder. As far as Saraswathi is concerned, her rape by opponent soldiers is the direct outcome of her gender identity. Had she been a male, no one would have raped her. Being a female soldier entitles her to the trauma,

and the physical torture meted out in the encounter with male soldiers. In this context, Jennifer Griffiths's statement stands true, "This controversial reversal demonstrates the way in which women's bodies serve as the site of political struggle" (192).

Thus, the narrative poses specific important questions when looked at from the perspective of gender and trauma. First, women as trauma victims are the worst hit target since they have to undergo several forms of trauma to survive and reconcile to their lost sense of self. Second, men are too weak to struggle against their traumatised selves in that instead of fighting against their fears and guilt, they have been portrayed to quit their lives. Thus, under the backdrop of trauma, the narrative deconstructs the popular gender stereotype that men are strong and women are weak. As the narrative unfolds, the readers are exposed to the masculine side of female characters and the feminine side of male characters. In other words, when the trauma narrative is read from the gender consciousness, it reveals that trauma is such strong an influence that it can turn weak into strong and robust into weak. Moreover, it would be wise enough to conclude that traumatised beings are exposed both to their strengths and weaknesses and finally, whatever they land up with are their natural selves. Thus, trauma fiction provides ample space to figure out and refigure traumatic experiences to make them acceptable and reconcilable.

Furthermore, if Munaweera's narratives are looked at from the perspective of trauma and sexuality, they open up new vistas for understanding one's sexuality. As Alec M. Smidt and Melissa G. Platt opine, "The topics of sexuality and sexual trauma are often fraught with silencing and shame" (401). Munaweera has made a bold attempt to deal with this aspect as well. For example, trauma can be so strong a factor that it may force someone to change one's sexual orientation. A woman wronged by a man may begin to lean more on women as a consequence. Sexual assault meted out by Ganga in childhood traumatises her so intensely that once she compromises her heterosexual being for homosexual desire. In this context, Estelle Clayton et al. observe that "In many cases, child sexual abuse has devastating consequences for the lives of those who suffer it, as it involves the destructuring of the child's behaviour and emotions and, sometimes, serious interference in his or her development" (181). The episode between Ganga and her cousin, Dharshi, vividly picturises the damage caused to Ganga's sexual being. Only after Daniel creates a special niche for himself in Ganga's life, does she regain her lost confidence in a heterosexual relationship. Trauma can even hamper an individual's identity to such an extent that it renders the person devoid of any meaningful

identity. This stands true in Saraswathi's case from *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, who, as a consequence of rape trauma, turns into a suicide bomber uncategorized by any gender or sexual identity: "I am fearless. I am free. Now, I am the predator" (176). Her sense of identity, womanhood, and sexual orientation – everything just vanishes as an aftermath of what she has to go through due to rape.

Thus, a detailed analysis of Munaweera's narratives presents how culture, gender, and sexuality act as secret agents of trauma and are expressed through fractured memories and constant repetition in her stories. However, the narrative of *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* projects avoiding and escaping from the scene as the only available survival strategy left to the survivors, "The island dropped away from me the moment I left it framed in the airplane porthole. This is the only way we may survive" (215). Though trauma related to the past does not subside, the place which triggers it somehow gets blurred by moving away from it ". . . a dimly remembered hallucination, some nightmare with no relevance in the waking world" (220). Therefore, the atrocities caused by twenty-three year of civil war have changed much for the Sri Lankan populace.

People from both Tamil and Sinhala communities have suffered enough but gained nothing except disappointment with their ideals. Moreover, what they have gone through in the past has adversely affected not only their psychological health but also their gender relations, cultural bonding and sexual experiences. Characters like Yasodhara, Saraswathi, Mala, Lanka and Shiva bear the indelible scars of the exploitation, rape and death of their loved ones. Thus, much has still been left to probe as far as Nayomi Munaweera's craftsmanship is concerned. Trauma in itself is very tricky since the scholar has to swindle the ashes in search of evidence to a moment in the past that has caused trauma to a culture, country or community. Munaweera has done her best in voicing the agony of Sri Lankan populace through her narrative vigour. It is on the part of scholars to add value to her efforts and make her literary representation worthwhile in changing the mindset of the world towards third-world countries and their sufferings caused by trauma.

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