

The Manifestation of Trauma in Nayomi Munaweera's *What Lies Between Us*: A Thematic Analysis

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ABSTRACT: *Trauma literature has garnered a lot of interest and has gained a significant position in today's literary studies as it offers an outlook on the different reactions of individuals in face of disruptive experiences. Since the language of literature has a fascinating power to display the inner world of man, there has been a rising interest in trying to depict the struggles of unearthing deeply buried emotional turmoil. This gave birth to the merger of literature and psychoanalysis resulting in the emergence of literary trauma theory. The objective of the present paper is to examine how authors explore the theme of trauma in their writings to expose the struggles imposed by different kinds of traumatic experiences as their stories have been revolving around characters whose identities are lost in-between worlds and whose voices are unheard or muted. The analysis is conducted through a thematic analysis of Nayomi Munaweera's *What Lies Between Us* to explore how the author employs literary devices to represent the protagonist's experience of psychological trauma and displacement. The findings reveal the main features of Munaweera's trauma narrative and how they are consistent with the broader framework of literary trauma theory. By analysing Munaweera's novel, this paper provides insights into the ways literature can offer a pathway towards reconciliation and self-healing to those who have experienced trauma.*

KEYWORDS: Trauma, Literary Trauma Theory, Trauma Narrative, Literature, Diaspora

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Introduction

In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association diagnosed the phenomenon of 'trauma' as a pathological manifestation, giving it the acronym PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder)". Since the 1990s, trauma studies have evolved as a complex paradigm which, crossing the boundaries of disciplines such as history, literary criticism, psychology and cultural studies, have brought to light the anxieties of the contemporary Western world or, to put it mildly in the words of Roger Luckhurst, the trauma theory "has been turned into a repertoire of compelling stories about the enigmas of identities, memory and selfhood that have saturated Western cultural life" (2008).

Since the language of literature has a fascinating power to display the inner world of man, there has been a rising interest in trying to depict identity struggles during resettlement. This gave birth to the merger of literature and psychoanalysis resulting in the emergence of literary trauma theory lead by famous trauma theory pioneers namely, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Laurie Vickroy. Different types of traumas have been dealt with in literature ranging from collective national trauma to psychological experiences among of which is the trauma of displacement, the focus of the study at hand.

Nayomi Munaweera's *What Lies Between Us* is an example of a trauma novel that brings together trauma and diaspora as the story revolves around the life of a protagonist who was abused as a child, suffered the loss of a dear one and had to uproot her life in Sri Lanka and move to the United States. Throughout the novel, the narrative follows the Sri Lankan immigrant in the United States and her journey to self-discovery where she must grapple with the idea of "fitting in" within American culture, and the complicated relationship between her Sri Lankan heritage and her new American identity.

The novel also brings to light the interconnectedness of psychological and physical trauma, and how both can have an immense impact on a person's life. Trauma is often seen as an emotional wound that affects a person's psyche, but it can also have physical effects, such as fatigue and insomnia. *What Lies Between Us* brings this concept to life, as the protagonist's emotional trauma manifests itself physically, causing her immense pain and suffering. The protagonist is subject to different kinds of trauma. First, she is sexually abused as a child then, she witnesses the death of her father and blames herself for it and finally the trauma of displacement as she has to relocate her whole life to go live in the United States. In addition to its powerful depiction of trauma and its effects, Munaweera employs the novel as an exploration of identity and culture. Diaspora is a recurrent theme in modern and contemporary literature and the novel is a prime example of the presence of diasporic nuances and how they affect the protagonist's life.

Accordingly, the present work seeks to investigate trauma in literature through the Nayomi Munaweera novel, *What Lies Between Us*, which offers a nuanced exploration of the theme by offering an insight on the complex and long-lasting effects of trauma as well as its power to shape one's identity and life trajectory. Hence, the present study attempts to answer few questions that stem from the main research objective, namely:

1. What are the main distinctive features that set the trauma novel apart from other literary works?
2. How does Munaweera portray the tormenting effects of trauma in the novel?

Hypotheses

In an attempt to attain the aforementioned objective, the research has been built on the following hypotheses:

1. There are several features that mark the uniqueness of the trauma novel.
2. The narrative style and structure of the novel contribute to the representation of trauma and its impact on the main character's life and identity.

Research Method

Using a thematic analysis, the research will be conducted through the employment of literary trauma theory to examine the representation of trauma in literature and how the trauma theme is manifested throughout the selected novel. The research is conducted through three sections. The first one involves a theoretical framework about the concept of trauma and the evolution of trauma theory. The second section tackles the main features that distinguish the trauma novel and the techniques used by trauma authors to invite the reader and share the experiences with them. The last section deals with highlighting the narrative techniques used by the author to illustrate the impact of trauma on the protagonist and how it radically shifts their life trajectory.

Review of Literature: Trauma and Literary Trauma Theory

The American Psychological Association defines trauma as “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster”. Whereas, from a lexical perspective, the Meriam Webster Dictionary entry for the word “trauma” means an “an injury (such as a wound) to living tissue caused by an extrinsic agent”, at the same time it involves a “disordered psychic or behavioural state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury” Merriam Webster Dictionary. Etymologically speaking, the term ‘trauma’ originates from the Greek trauma meaning “wound”. The word can take on the meaning of either physical hurt or psychic hurt. In other words, trauma can be the result of an overwhelming occurrence that disrupts the individual's well-being. However, the causes of trauma are not always the same as it can happen in response to one single traumatic event or it can be a prolonged event that is repeated over the time. Furthermore, the event can occur in the form of domestic or sexual abuse or it can come as a result of a war or epidemic or even a civil turmoil (Khan & Khan, 2021).

Before the 1990's, the term was solely related to psychoanalysis studies. In addition, it had been criticized for its inability to cover all instances of events that would disrupt one's stream of everyday life. Drawing on the Freudian theory, many canonical theorists resorted to other disciplines including post structural, sociocultural and postcolonial frameworks to construct a criticism that encompasses all experiences that “challenge the limits of language fragments the psyche, and even ruptures meaning altogether[...].” (Richter, 2018, 360). Cathy Caruth, Soshana Felman and Geoffery Hartman were the first ones to weave a connection of trauma in literary studies (Abubakar, 2017; Richter, 2018). Michelle Balaev Explains that “[early] scholarship shaped the initial course of literary trauma theory by popularizing the idea of trauma as an unrepresentable event” (Balaev, 2014 as cited in Al Khabbas, 2020, 1).

Yet, this new form of trauma theory, as Stef Craps claims, has not being able to achieve the “cultural solidarity” that has been sought after by Caruth and many other pioneering critics (Al Khabbas, 2020). According to Craps, the theory failed on four accounts:

They marginalize or ignore traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures, they tend to take for granted universal validity of definitions of trauma and recovery that have developed out of the history of Western modernity, they often favor or even prescribe a modernist aesthetic of fragmentation and aporia as uniquely suited to the task of bearing witness to trauma, and they generally disregard the connections between metropolitan and non-Western or minority traumas (Craps, 2014, 46)

Critics started to call for the need for overthrowing the eurocentrism of the trauma theory as it created one universal mold for all traumatic experiences ignoring non-Western or minority cultures as trauma has been privy to the white able-bodied western man whereas some of the traumas encountered in the world are the doings of these white men. Hence, efforts were made to decolonize the theory of trauma to make it more encompassing and inclusive (Al Khabbas, 2020; Craps, 2014).

Al Khabbas (2020) states that the scholars who advocated for the representation of the trauma of the minorities and the marginalized communities are Stef Craps (2015), Jill Bennet and Rozane Kennedy (2003) and John Luckhurst (2008). While the focus is on representation of trauma, these scholars tackle the issue from different aspects. Luckhurst, for example, in his book *The Trauma Question* (2008) traces the origins of the of trauma all the way back to medical discourse leading to the concept's current status as a key concept in literary and cultural studies. Luckhurst delves into the challenges of representing trauma in literature and the ways in which trauma narratives can both challenge and reinforce dominant cultural norms and assumptions (Craps, 2015).

Similarly, Craps in his book *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (2015) discusses how trauma exceeds the bounds of representation. Concurring with Caruth, he suggests that postcolonial literature can provide a way to bear witness to traumas that have been historically ignored or marginalized. This is because cultural difference influences the experience of trauma and makes it difficult to represent across different cultural contexts. Furthermore, Craps argues that colonial and postcolonial histories shape experiences of trauma and provide a space for reconciliation through literature. Al Khabbaz posits that what ignited the interest in decolonizing trauma studies are the earlier contributions of the psychoanalyst Franz Fanon, namely, his canonical work *The Wretch of the Earth* (1961). The psychoanalyst presses the importance of "decolonizing" the discourse of the trauma theory which has been focused solely on the "white folks" (Al Khabbas, 2020, 4). Hence, the trauma theory evolvement was tightly linked to postcolonial theory and literature.

Trauma Novel or Trauma Fiction

Modern times have witnessed an upsurge in literary and social studies focusing on trauma. What ignited this interest is a turn to memory and the need to address the complexities that representing the past arises. According to Ronald Granofsky (1995), "In the trauma novel, the very humanness of humanity is questioned in a genre which is broadly humanistic" (9). The trauma novel challenges the normative ways and tests the formal boundaries through questioning the nature and limitations of narrative (Whitehead, 2004). Therefore, the trauma novel is a distinctive narrative that explores the experience of trauma through the use of literary symbolism which is the primary technique of the trauma novelist (Granofsky, 1995). In addition to the use of symbolism, some other features were provided by literary critics.

Laurie Vickroy, for example, posits that trauma narratives are "fictional narratives that give the reader access to traumatic experiences" (as cited in Anderson, 2012, 10). She argues that there are two approaches to trigger the empathy of the reader; an informational approach which occurs through the "transfer of traumatic

responses” or an empathic approach (Žindžiuvien, 2013). Another distinguishing characteristic is discussed by Robert F. Garratt in his monograph *Trauma and History in the Irish Novel: The Return of the Dead*. Garratt posits that the trauma novel is a “literary hybrid” that employs a technique grounded on the reconstruction of traumatic events (Mulvany, 2012) while Horvitz uses the term “narrative representations of trauma” which objective is to expose “the need for social transformation” (Anderson, 2012, p. 10). In the same regard, Whitehead concurs and claims that trauma novels give voice to the unknown and give birth to witnesses to experiences that were reduced to silence in the past (Žindžiuvien, 2013).

The trauma novel explores the traumatic events inviting the reader to a journey into the realms of the unconscious. Hence, the reader empathizes with the victim sharing with them past events, alarming insecurities of the present or haunting thought of the future. Symbolism is of paramount importance for this exploration of the individual or the collective trauma. Writers of the trauma novel adopt literary symbolism as a technique to achieve a connection with the reader to veil the unpleasant actuality of the trauma (Granofsky, 1995). Symbolism offers spatial distance for the reader to avoid that unsettling rapprochement to the victim or what the critics call identification. They advised against identification transference and even call it dangerous as the reader intrudes on the specificity of the experience and devoid the victim of her voice (Croisy, 2012). Hence, symbolism imposes a figurative shaft between the symbolized and the reader. The direct representation of a traumatic event in fiction is impossible since it is reflecting a reality that proves to be inconceivable hence, the author calls on the “empowering function” of language to provide the reader and the traumatized protagonist the path towards human recovery (Granofsky, 1995).

Considering another aspect of trauma fiction, according to Caruth, trauma constitutes a response, usually late to one or multiple problematic events that recur in the form of dreams, hallucinations, thoughts and behaviors that result from the wounds caused by the memory of the event traumatic. For Caruth (1995) the traumatic experience is a “symptom of history” or an experience that can never be captured. Accordingly, the author of trauma fiction uses flashbacks, dreams and late reappropriation of the events in order to reconstruct or recreate the traumatic experiences. Yet, there exists an ongoing argument between the possibility of narrating a traumatic event and the impossibility of it due to the fact that these memories are imprisoned in the trap of time. However, in narrating the traumatic event, the subject is carried to survival through the witnessing and sharing suffering with other. In this regard, Felman believes that literature is the privileged place for testimony of traumatic experiences: “the specific task of the literary testimony is, in other words, to open up in that belated witness, which now the reader historically becomes, the imaginative capability of perceiving history” (Felman & Laub, 2013, 108).

Unlike historiography, Felman sees in the literary testimony a channel of empathic sharing of the traumatic event. This prerogative is the basis of an aesthetic that Dori Laub and Daniel Poddell call art of trauma. The testimony is configured as an indirect dialogic strategy that favors the sharing the sense of suffering with the other through “a latent but powerful address that requires the viewer or reader to become engaged in a dialogue of his own with the trauma” (as cited in Ganteau & Onega, 2014, p. 3) enabling the dialogic aspect of traumatic literary representation which, according to Laub and Poddell, is a tool of potential redemption, characterized by a liminal value which, on the one hand, tends to reopen a wound never completely healed while, on the other hand, it gives voice to the pain of the memory it brings with it. On the level of literary representation, the theory of trauma, as Hartman states, explores the relationship between words and wounds. It would be a way to bring silences and wounds to the surface, in a model in which the literature simulates the very structure of the trauma, fueling a temporary condition of empathy. (Ganteau & Onega, 2014). Whitehead identifies three other major aspects of trauma narrative on a narrative level including intertextuality, repetitiveness and the shattering of the narrative voice. The use of repetition is purposeful in trauma fiction as it mimics the effects of trauma which

reflects the insistence of manifestation of the past and its disruption of the progress of the narration (Whitehead, 2004). Therefore, the repetition in this case acts as an intermediary between a disturbing return of past and an attempt to reconcile with the present to overcome the that sense of loss and suffering (Monaco, 2016).

Exploration of Trauma Narrative techniques in What Lies between us

As explained by Cathy Caruth, “trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive experience of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (1996). In her book Caruth mentioned the possible outcomes of the overwhelming experience which may include hallucinations and other characteristics. This section will explore trauma as it is manifested in Munaweera’s *What Lies Between Us* (2016).

The novel is an incisive and powerful novel that takes readers into a world of psychological trauma and its effects in a very human and complex way. The story follows an unnamed protagonist who is the daughter of an abusive father and a mother who is a victim of domestic violence. Using the first-person perspective, the narrator tells the story of her life and each chapter explores a new event in her life. As the novel progresses, the reader moves toward an unknown crime that is hinted at in the story’s prologue.

The girl grows up in a large home in Kandy, Sri Lanka but feels lonely. She longs for her mother’s affection however, the latter is unpredictable at best (Ziadi, 2016) One moment she is dancing and full of joy and the next she’s storming into her room in a fit of rage. Consequently, the girl’s only companion is Samson, the gardener. They enjoy many happy hours together as they clear a lake or climb trees. Sita, the old cook, is also a constant presence in the house. As a result, of her family’s struggles, the protagonist grows up feeling a sense of claustrophobia that is almost tangible. When tragedy strikes her family and her father dies, she and her mother are forced to immigrate to the United States, where she must reinvent herself as an American teenager in order to survive. Therefore, the protagonist was not only subject to the psychological trauma in the form of her sexual abuse and losing her father but it also involved the traumatic experience of diaspora when she had to uproot her life and face the challenges of acclimating to a new environment and fitting-in. The author centres the events of the novel around the recollections of the protagonist through the use of techniques of non-linear time sequencing to provide the reader with access to the narrator’s memories who believe that in order for the reader to understand what she did in the present time they would have to go back with her down memory lane which resulted in an unreliable narrator. As a response to the shattering effects of trauma, readers of the trauma novel will often find themselves hearing the story of unreliable narration (Granofsky, 1995). One crucial detail is repressed from Ganga’s memory, a defence mechanism to protect her frail mind because it was too painful to remember. Hence, Ganga’s narration is built around this one detail without revealing it rendering the narration unreliable (Vickroy, 2002).

Foreshadowing

To tell the story in a resonant and emotional way, Munaweera makes use of several stylistic devices one of which is foreshadowing. Arizti describes this literary device as a “a closed form of temporality that encourages determinism” (2018, p. 40). She elaborates on Gary Saul Morson’s representation of time in *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (1994) explaining how foreshadowing forces certain events to happen as a consequence rather than being caused by prior events. In other words, the author controls narrative events by fixing the time they occur retrospectively.

Throughout the novel, the author uses subtle hints and clues to foreshadow the devastating events that are to come. For instance, the opening pages of the novel start with a dark tale that foreshadows the brutal ending of the story. The narrator starts with an ancient story of a moon bear who strangled her cub when she believed it was in danger and then bashed her head until she died. The narrator states that she started by telling this story to explain the nature of the love between a mother and a child. Later in the story, the protagonist poisons her three-years old daughter to protect her from the monster lurking in the shadows of her mind. However, she is saved from the depths of the river where she tried to end her life. Another example of Munaweera's use of this technique is the mention of the Sri Lankan Civil War in the background of the story. The political upheaval does not directly affect the protagonist's life; however, it is employed to foreshadow the violence and unrest that will, later, play a role in her life. Likewise, the protagonist's childhood experiences with violence and trauma foreshadow the traumatic events that she will face later in life. Furthermore, in the beginning of the story, the narrator is highly fixating on everything related to the English culture namely the language, the clothes and the music. She is wrapped in this exotic world as she reads book in English:

Stories of boarding schools and midnight feasts featuring foods I've never tasted but yearn desperately for, I read about children who have to put on scarves and mittens and hats to go outside and wish I too had a pair of mittens [...] How exciting to live in a snowy place and eat crunchy red apples and chocolate digestive biscuits. How exotic, how enticing. How boring my life is in comparison (14).

This fascination with the English and their food and culture foreshadows the protagonist's eventual migration to the United States. Also, the descriptions of her mother's mental health issues and her father's abusive behaviour foreshadow the protagonist's own struggles with mental health and relationships. By using foreshadowing, Munaweera creates an atmosphere of anticipation and suspense, building to the novel's dramatic climax.

Time Sequencing

Traumatic events can disrupt the protagonist's perception of time hence, the trauma novelists explore temporality in a way that creates a complex relationship between time and narrative. In some parts of the novel, Munaweera employs a non-linear sequencing and by using this technique, Munaweera is able to slowly unravel the protagonist's complicated backstory and develop her character in a more meaningful and personal way. The novel jumps back and forth in time, giving readers a glimpse into the protagonist's past and present and at the same time paining the narrative in mysterious shades. In fact, the reader is taken down the protagonist's memory lane seeing the events as she remembers them. Throughout the story, the guardian Samson is portrayed as the villain as the narrator believed he was the one who abused her as a kid. Even after her escape to the United States, his ghost haunts her dreams and disrupt and jeopardizes her sanity. In her nightmares, Samson comes to visit her when she sleeps, he slips from behind closed doors (259). It's not until the narrator's mother tells her the whole story that she learns the truth, that Samson died protecting her (282). In her mind, as a young abused girl, the protagonist veiled the reality to protect her frail sanity.

The narrative is brimming with flashbacks where the narrator visits her childhood memories to provide the reader with details from her past. The flashbacks, which help create a multilayered narrative, are used to reveal key details that are pertinent to the progress of the story. Munaweera uses flashbacks to allow the protagonist to tell her story at her own pace, inviting the reader to experience the significant events that shaped her and helped forming her identity. Moreover, non-linear progression of time in the novel also helps the reader understand the full extent of the trauma and how it impacted her in the years that follow. Additionally, the narrative techniques show how the protagonist's experiences with trauma change and evolve over time. As the

protagonist ages and experiences new challenges, the reader is able to see how her perceptions and attitudes towards trauma change, providing insight into the long-term effects of trauma and its impact on mental health and personal relationships.

Intertextuality

In addition, Munaweera utilizes intertextuality to explore the complexities of trauma and identity. Throughout the novel, the protagonist is constantly grappling with the idea of belonging and the disconnect she feels between her Sri Lankan heritage and her new American identity. In order to explore this notion, the novel is brimming with references to other works of literature, such as the Bible and Greek mythology. By making these references, Munaweera is able to emphasize the importance of identity and explore the protagonist's complex relationship with her heritage. For instance, the name Samson refers to a biblical legendary warrior and judge while the name of the protagonist is Ganga a reference to a Hindu river goddess. The author uses these mythological references to illuminate the protagonist's experiences and the cultural context of the story. Furthermore, and to enrich the meaning of the text, Munaweera references other literary work such as *Alice in Wonderland*. The narrator explains why she reads that particular novel:

I read *Alice in Wonderland* obsessively. Not because I like it. All those panicked, devious animals, the uncontrollable growings and shrinkings that suggest one's body is never quite one's own. When the Queen of Hearts shouts and demands obedience, it feels real and close. When everyone scampers to obey her orders, when the soldiers paint each white rose red so that she is appeased and satisfied, I understand the threat of the cold blade slicing through their necks. They are waiting to hear her words "Off with their heads!" I too am waiting for the cold steel of her disapproval to drop. In these days I too live in the kingdom of the Queen of Hearts (34)

This literary reference is used to reflect the narrator's relationship with her mother which is complex and strained in nature. The mother is portrayed as being fragile and sickly with mood swings and depression episodes where she is demonstrative and affectionate and the next minute, she shuns her child and storms back to her room in a fit. This behaviour leaves the narrator hanging between joy and uncertainty whenever she comes near her or addresses her. Her mother, the narrator explains, "is delicate. We need to treat her carefully. You understand this, don't you? The need for care" (16). So, the child, reading about the Queen of Hearts and her threats of the cold blade, is well aware of the menace as she understands that her mother "must be handled with diligence, like all things precious and dangerous" (16). Later, the protagonist reads the same story to her daughter which reflects on her awareness of the cycle entangling her life with her mother's and eventually to her daughter as well.

The novel incorporates a Sri Lankan Civil War as a historical reference which serves the purpose of adding a historical dimension to the narrative. Although the war affected them, albeit indirectly, the protagonist did not feel concerned as she said that "the war was just something we lived with" (64). However, she refused to blame the war for her misfortune or accept the term Post-traumatic Disorder (PTSD) as an excuse for her heinous act by the end of the story. This adamant denial reflects the protagonist's struggles with an even bigger war than the civil war which is the one raging inside her mind; the abuse.

Munaweera had recourse to her own experiences to add a personal and biographical element to the novel. The author was born in Sri Lanka and before immigrating to the United States she grew up in Nigeria (Saranya, 2021). Therefore, she understands the struggles of having to navigate between two different cultural traditions and values.

Symbolism

In an attempt to analyse the different stylistic devices that are used in a trauma fiction, Žindžiuvienė (2013) posits that the symbols constitute a powerful tool in exposing the different dimensions of trauma. Similarly, Granofsky states that “literary symbolism allows for a “safe” confrontation with a traumatic experience” (1995, p. 7). Symbolism helps to convey, vividly, the intangible and complex effects of trauma while providing insight into the protagonist’s emotional turmoil and inner struggles rendering the whole difficult experience accessible to the reader.

In her novel, Munaweera does an incredible job of depicting the psychological trauma that the protagonist experiences in her journey for survival through the use of symbolisms and metaphors. For example, water is a recurring symbol that plays an important role in different turning points in the novel. In literature, water symbolizes rebirth and purity and at the same time it represents danger and destruction. Munaweera uses this symbol to depict the protagonist’s conflicting emotion about her traumatic past. First, the name Ganga, as aforementioned, refers to a river goddess of purification and forgiveness (Eck, 1998). Water starts as a place of safety and security. At first, water reflected happy childhood memories of her playing in the pond with Samson picking up Lotus flowers (12), the fresh water of the well hitting her body in the hot summer days and making her feel alive (30) or her father teaching her how to swim with her cousins’ boisterous laughter filling the air (48-50).

However, soon after, water starts to be associated with destruction and fear in the protagonist’s mind as she starts to be conscious of the abuse her body has been undergoing. Water shifted from being pure, energetic and alive to a choking stagnate fluid prison that was drowning her little heart. The change in the symbolism of water represents the narrator’s shame of what was happening and how her traumatic experience has marked her soul to the point that she believed that if she were cut, she would not bleed red but instead a “rotten putrid green” (68). It also represents the sense of safety deserting her as her fear of being attacked again haunted her and she even stops going down to the river with her father to swim (67). Her father’s death marks the turning point in the symbolism of water. Her release comes one night when an angry storm hits the town. The monsoon, described as elephantine clouds pouring in torrents after a long period of dryness. The river is raging like a “frothing, boiling cauldron” (76). Morning comes, and with it the discovery of her father’s body swallowed by the river. Monsoons are associated with mayhem and death like what happened with the protagonist’s uncle Sarath (131).

Henceforth, the protagonist distinguishes life before and after water became dangerous as she starts associating water with nightmares of her drowning father and the guilt she felt blaming herself for what happened (157). She considers water as the “strata” of the flesh, holding memories and sins floating around like dead bodies (187). When the protagonist chooses to end her life and her daughter’s at the bottom of the river, it reflects the mother’s attempt at redemption and rebirth. She seeks the help of the ghosts residing in the water to guide her back home because she believes that all water is connected. However, her daughter is accepted while she has to face the consequences of her actions. In other words, the protagonist has not forgiven herself and still blamed herself for all the traumatic ordeals she experienced.

Conclusion

This study aimed to analyse the portrayal of trauma in Nayomi Munaweera's novel *What Lies Between Us*, which provides a nuanced look at the long-lasting and far-reaching impacts of trauma and its ability to shape one's identity and life path. The research was conducted using a thematic analysis and the application of literary

trauma theory, revealing that the novel is characterized by several distinct qualities that allowed the author the exploration of the trauma while inviting the reader to share the experience with the protagonist. Additionally, the narrative style and structure of the novel play a role in the representation of trauma such as the employment of a non-linear time sequence like flashbacks and memories which help create a multilayered narrative that provides the reader with a front seat to the experience. Furthermore, and to provide the novel with depth, the author utilizes intertextuality through the reference of different literary works and historical figures in addition to the different symbolic elements that were incorporated throughout the novel serving the purpose of providing insight into the human mind and the emotional turmoil invoked by the traumatic ordeal faced by the protagonist.

Trauma has been a prominent theme in Munaweera's *What Lies Between us*. Different types of traumas were manifested through the folds of the story following the life of Ganga the protagonist. The novel provided a nuance exploration of the physical and psychological effects of psychological trauma through Ganga's ordeal with sexual abuse and the death of a loved one. In addition, despite the presence of the civil war in the backdrop and the fact that Ganga and her mother left to the United States mainly to escape the ramifications of death of her father, the novel still stands as a diasporic work of literature as it exposed the hardships faced by the protagonist and her attempts to carve a new identity that would blend in with the new society. In conclusion, the study emphasized the significance of examining trauma in literature as it offers a deeper understanding of the experiences of survivors and the complex and ongoing effects of trauma.

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