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Interrogating New Perspectives of Trauma Studies in Select Narratives from Sri Lanka

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Abstract
This article examines how contemporary Sri Lankan writers represent trauma in the aftermath of civil war, focusing on novels by Anuk Arudpragasam, Michael Ondaatje, and Nayomi Munaweera. The study asks a crucial question: how do colonial histories, ethnic tensions, and decades of civil conflict shape both individual psychology and collective memory in Sri Lankan fiction? Rather than relying on a single theoretical lens, the research draws on three complementary approaches: Cathy Caruth's understanding of trauma as an experience that resists representation, Laurie Vickroy's work connecting personal suffering to shared social trauma, and Anne Whitehead's insights into how narrative form itself mirrors traumatic experience. Through close reading of six novels spanning 1992 to 2021, the study traces how these writers use fragmented narratives, repetition, intertextuality, and shifting perspectives to capture the disorienting effects of trauma. The findings challenge simplistic explanations of trauma's origins. These novels show that war alone cannot account for psychological damage—colonial violence, ethnic persecution, and even everyday domestic abuse intersect to produce complex patterns of suffering. The texts reveal how external political forces and internal psychological responses work together to shatter identity and disrupt memory. Importantly, the narrative strategies these writers employ—the gaps, silences, and formal experiments—are not failures of expression but deliberate choices that reflect culturally specific ways of bearing witness to catastrophe. This research expands trauma studies beyond its traditional focus on Western experiences, demonstrating how literary analysis can deepen our understanding of post-conflict societies.
Keywords: *trauma studies, Sri Lankan literature, post-civil war fiction, narrative fragmentation, collective memory, postcolonial trauma*

Introduction

Trauma, in its most fundamental sense, represents an invisible wound—a profound injury to the psyche caused by overwhelming events that shatter an individual's capacity to respond. From a psychoanalytic perspective, trauma operates as an experience so overwhelming that it escapes the grasp of intellect and eludes conventional memory. It creates a temporal void where the coordination between self and world ruptures completely. When creative artists attempt to represent traumatic experience, they face the formidable challenge of depicting a world the self has not fully comprehended and a self alienated from that world.

The literary representation of trauma first found deep resonance in the war poetry of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, whose verses captured the harrowing experiences of First World War soldiers subjected to extreme forms of torture during trench warfare. Virginia Woolf's portrayal of Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs. Dalloway* remains one of modernist literature's most powerful depictions of psychological damage, illustrating the nightmares and hallucinations that plague those who have witnessed war's horrors. While war initially dominated discussions of trauma's literary representation, the field has expanded to encompass

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diverse catalysts: rape, sexual abuse, slavery, colonial suppression, racism, and terrorism. These experiences can manifest in depression, neurosis, and various post-traumatic stress disorders. Trauma studies, therefore, examines how these catastrophic occurrences are processed through and represented within literary texts.

This field explores trauma's impact on literature and society by analyzing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural dimensions. Scholars investigate the complex factors that influence how the self comprehends traumatic experience and how such experience both shapes and is shaped by language. The formal innovations of texts—whether print or media—that illuminate how identity, the unconscious, and memory are transformed by extreme events remain central to this scholarly endeavor. Contemporary trauma studies has evolved beyond its initial psychoanalytic foundations to incorporate poststructural, sociocultural, and postcolonial frameworks, creating richer interpretive possibilities for understanding representations of extreme experience and their effects on identity and memory.

Sri Lanka's tumultuous history—marked by colonial domination, ethnic conflict, and a brutal civil war spanning nearly three decades—provides a compelling context for examining trauma's literary manifestations. The island nation's experience of sustained violence, displacement, and social fragmentation has produced a body of literature that wrestles with questions of memory, identity, and representation. Writers such as Anuk Arudpragasam, Michael Ondaatje, and Nayomi Munaweera have emerged as significant voices in articulating the psychological and social dimensions of Sri Lankan trauma. Their works offer not merely documentation of suffering but sophisticated explorations of how traumatic experience reshapes consciousness and community.

This study interrogates how these authors employ narrative strategies to represent trauma's complex operations on individual and collective levels. By examining six novels—Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage* and *A Passage North*, Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* and *The English Patient*, and Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* and *What Lies Between Us*—this research explores how Sri Lankan fiction challenges Western-centric models of trauma while developing culturally specific modes of representation that honor both the unspeakability and the necessity of testimony.

Literature Review

The scholarly conversation surrounding trauma studies emerged prominently in the 1990s, building upon Freudian foundations to develop models that understand trauma as an experience challenging the limits of language and potentially rupturing meaning altogether. Cathy Caruth's seminal works—*Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience* (1996)—established parameters that continue to influence critical discourse. Caruth's traditional model positions trauma as an event that fragments consciousness, preventing direct linguistic representation and suggesting that traumatic experience irrevocably damages the psyche. This model draws attention to suffering's severity by proposing that trauma remains outside normal memory and narrative representation, acting like a tumor in consciousness that wounds the self even as it resists full articulation.

Following Caruth's foundational work, scholars developed more pluralistic approaches. Laurie Vickroy's *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (2002) pairs postcolonial and trauma theories to explore how individual protagonists' psyches represent collective emotional experiences of social groups. Michael Rothberg's *Traumatic Realism* (2000) situates trauma within cultural studies frameworks, developing the concept of traumatic realism as both narrative mode and social response that bridges the normal and extraordinary qualities of extreme experience. Anne Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction* (2004) identifies recurring stylistic features—intertextuality, repetition, and dispersed narrative voices—that effectively mimic traumatic pathology's symptoms in fiction.

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Scholarship on Sri Lankan literature has begun addressing trauma's representation in postcolonial contexts. Studies on Arudpragasam's work reveal diverse analytical approaches: Dr. M. Subha examines the sense of unresponsive acceptance toward civil war cruelties, while Abhisek Ghosal investigates how post-war survivors are politically reduced to "bare bodies." Isabel Alfonso focuses on ethics of care in *The Story of a Brief Marriage*, and Senath Perera explores post-truth dynamics in conflict's final stages. These studies illuminate specific thematic concerns but rarely integrate comprehensive trauma theory frameworks.

Ondaatje's novels have attracted substantial critical attention. John Bolland's analysis of *Anil's Ghost* explores alternative causality models that confound Western cause-and-effect narratives. Hilde Staels examines the poetic discourse containing traces of characters' unconscious moods and drives, while Victoria Cook addresses transnational identity construction. For *The English Patient*, Steven Totosy discusses historical backgrounds, and Darryl Whetter analyzes the novel as travel literature. These studies illuminate important dimensions but often treat trauma as backdrop rather than central analytical focus.

Munaweera's fiction has prompted examination of mirror images and doppelganger concepts (S.D. Piyasena), representations of female suicide bombers (Sandaru Diwakara), and xenophobia's manifestations (Shruti Das). Payal Chattopadhyay Mukherjee explores the precariousness of belonging in diasporic contexts. While these studies address violence, displacement, and identity crisis, they rarely engage systematically with trauma theory's full conceptual apparatus. The present research addresses this gap by applying integrated trauma studies frameworks specifically to Sri Lankan narratives, demonstrating how these texts participate in and extend theoretical conversations about trauma's representation, memory's operations, and recovery's possibilities.

Methodology

This study employs a tripartite theoretical framework that synthesizes complementary approaches to trauma analysis, combining close textual reading with contextual awareness of Sri Lanka's specific historical and cultural circumstances. The methodology is both analytical and exploratory, drawing on established trauma theory models while remaining attentive to ways Sri Lankan narratives might challenge or extend existing frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

The first model, developed by Cathy Caruth and rooted in Freudian observations, understands trauma as an unrepresentable event revealing inherent contradictions within language and experience. Caruth views trauma as fragmenting consciousness and preventing direct linguistic representation. This perspective emphasizes how traumatic experience shatters identity and remains outside normal memory, creating a paradoxical situation where survivors simultaneously wish to know the past's meaning but find themselves unable to comprehend it fully. Caruth's concept of trauma's unrepresentability provides crucial insights into the narrative challenges Sri Lankan writers face when attempting to articulate experiences of extreme violence and loss.

The second model, associated with Laurie Vickroy and Michael Rothberg, offers a more pluralistic approach. Vickroy analyzes formal innovations in trauma narratives, pairing postcolonial and trauma theories to explore how individual protagonists' psyches represent collective emotional experiences. Rothberg's concept of traumatic realism—both narrative mode and social response—brings together normal and extraordinary qualities of extreme experience. This pluralistic model suggests that traumatic experience, while altering perception and identity, also generates new knowledge about self and world. It provides greater attention to variability in traumatic representations and the cultural dimensions that shape meaning-making processes.

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The third model draws from Anne Whitehead's *Trauma Fiction*, which identifies recurring stylistic features in trauma narratives: intertextuality, repetition, and dispersed or fragmented narrative voices. These formal devices effectively mimic traumatic pathology's symptoms. Intertextual echoes draw audiences from the expressed to the repressed, allowing previously silenced voices to resurface. Repetition at levels of language, imagery, or plot invests symbolic significance in repeated elements. Dispersed narrative voices signal the collective dimension of catastrophic experience, suggesting different experiential perspectives on trauma.

Analytical Approach

The research conducts inter-textual analysis across six primary texts, examining how each novel employs narrative strategies to represent trauma's operations. Close reading attends to linguistic choices, structural patterns, temporal disruptions, and characterological developments. The analysis considers both internal factors—repressed memories, unconscious processes, emotional states—and external factors—historical events, cultural contexts, social structures—that shape traumatic experience and its representation.

This approach recognizes that trauma's effects on identity and memory result from interplay between external and internal forces, individual character traits, and cultural factors. By contextualizing trauma within Sri Lanka's specific historical circumstances—colonial domination, ethnic conflict, civil war—the methodology creates broader appreciation for links between singular and collective traumatic experience. The analysis examines not only what these narratives say about trauma but how their formal properties enact trauma's disruptions, making visible the ways extreme experience reshapes consciousness, memory, and narrative itself.

Analysis and Interpretation

Narrative Fragmentation as Traumatic Mimesis

Arudpragasam's *The Story of a Brief Marriage* exemplifies how narrative structure can mirror traumatic consciousness. The novel unfolds over a single day in a displacement camp during the Sri Lankan civil war's final stages, yet this compressed timeframe contains vast temporal disruptions. The protagonist Dinesh's consciousness fragments repeatedly, moving between present survival imperatives and intrusive memories that arrive unbidden. The narrative refuses linear progression, instead circling back obsessively to moments of loss—his mother's death, his father's disappearance, the disintegration of family and home.

This structural fragmentation reflects what Caruth describes as trauma's resistance to narrative integration. Dinesh cannot construct a coherent story of his experience because trauma has shattered the frameworks through which he once organized meaning. The novel's prose moves with deliberate slowness, each sentence weighted with the difficulty of thought under siege. Arudpragasam captures what Whitehead identifies as repetition's role in trauma fiction: Dinesh returns again and again to the same images, the same questions, unable to move beyond them yet unable to fully inhabit them. The marriage that gives the novel its title—arranged hastily in the camp—becomes simultaneously an attempt at normalcy and a reminder of all that normal life once meant and can no longer mean.

Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* employs a different form of narrative fragmentation, one that reflects the forensic anthropologist Anil's attempt to reconstruct individual identity from skeletal remains. The novel's structure mirrors archaeological excavation—layers of narrative revealing partial truths, each discovery prompting new questions rather than definitive answers. Ondaatje shifts between characters and temporalities without transition, creating a mosaic that refuses unified perspective. This formal choice enacts the epistemological crisis trauma produces: the impossibility of achieving complete knowledge, the gaps that remain despite investigation's best efforts.

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Collective Trauma and Individual Consciousness

Munaweera's *Island of a Thousand Mirrors* demonstrates how individual psyches bear collective trauma's weight. The novel alternates between two families—one Sinhalese, one Tamil—whose fates intersect amid escalating ethnic violence. This dual perspective illustrates what Vickroy describes as the relationship between individual psychology and collective experience. Neither family's story makes sense in isolation; each requires the other to reveal the full pattern of suffering that ethnic conflict produces.

The character Yasodhara embodies this intersection of personal and collective trauma. Her transformation from privileged Colombo life to displacement and loss tracks not just individual suffering but the shattering of an entire social world. Munaweera shows how political violence penetrates intimate spaces—family, home, body—making the personal inescapably political. The novel's mirror structure, with Sinhalese and Tamil narratives reflecting each other, suggests that trauma in Sri Lanka cannot be understood through singular ethnic perspectives. Instead, suffering circulates between communities, each group's trauma becoming part of the other's story.

Arudpragasam's *A Passage North* extends this exploration of collective trauma through its protagonist Krishan's journey to attend his grandmother's caretaker's funeral. The novel becomes a meditation on memory's operations in post-war Sri Lanka, examining how individuals carry histories they did not directly experience but which shape their consciousness nonetheless. Krishan, living in relative safety in Colombo, finds himself haunted by images of the war's final stages—the no-fire zone where thousands died, the testimonies of survivors, the photographs of bodies. This haunting represents what trauma theory calls secondary trauma or transgenerational transmission: how those who did not directly experience catastrophe nonetheless bear its psychological marks.

Silence, Testimony, and the Ethics of Representation

The tension between silence and testimony emerges as a central concern across these texts. Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, while not exclusively focused on Sri Lanka, illuminates this tension through its exploration of how war destroys not just bodies but the very possibility of identity. The English patient's burned body and fragmented memory represent trauma's erasure of self, while the novel's slow revelation of his story suggests both the necessity and difficulty of testimony. Ondaatje shows that some experiences resist telling not because language fails absolutely but because the telling itself can retraumatize.

Munaweera's *What Lies Between Us* confronts this issue most directly through its narrator's gradual disclosure of sexual abuse. The novel's first half presents a relatively straightforward immigrant narrative, but the second half shatters this surface, revealing the trauma that has shaped everything preceding it. This structural choice enacts trauma's belated temporality—the way traumatic knowledge arrives not at the moment of experience but later, often unexpectedly. The narrator's movement from silence to speech occurs not as cathartic release but as painful necessity, each word extracted with difficulty.

These narratives collectively suggest that neither silence nor testimony offers complete resolution. Silence may protect against retraumatization but perpetuates isolation and prevents collective acknowledgment of suffering. Testimony may provide recognition but risks reducing complex experience to consumable narrative. The novels navigate this dilemma by developing formal strategies that honor both the need to speak and the limits of speech—gaps in narrative, shifts in perspective, moments where language breaks down or becomes inadequate.

Intersecting Traumas: War, Colonialism, and Domestic Violence

The selected texts reveal that trauma in Sri Lankan literature cannot be attributed to war alone. Instead, multiple forms of violence intersect and compound each other. Colonial histories, ethnic tensions, patriarchal structures, and intimate betrayals all contribute to characters'

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psychological suffering. This multiplicity challenges trauma studies' tendency to focus on single catastrophic events, suggesting instead that trauma often results from accumulated violences operating across different scales and temporalities.

In *What Lies Between Us*, Munaweera demonstrates how domestic violence and civil war violence operate through similar logics of power and control. The narrator's father's abuse occurs within the context of ethnic riots, suggesting that private patriarchal violence and public political violence reinforce each other. The novel refuses to separate these forms of trauma, instead showing how they create compound effects that traditional trauma theory, with its focus on singular events, may not adequately address.

Ondaatje's work consistently attends to colonialism's lingering effects on identity and consciousness. *Anil's Ghost* positions Sri Lanka's contemporary violence within longer histories of colonial domination and postcolonial state formation. The novel suggests that civil war violence cannot be understood apart from the structural violences colonialism introduced—racial hierarchies, linguistic divisions, economic exploitation. This historical layering complicates simple narratives of trauma and recovery, suggesting instead that Sri Lankan trauma has deep roots that cannot be addressed through focusing on recent conflict alone.

Memory, Time, and the Possibility of Healing

These narratives grapple with questions of whether and how healing might occur after trauma. Rather than offering straightforward redemption narratives, they present more ambiguous possibilities. Arudpragasam's *A Passage North* ends not with resolution but with Krishan's continued meditation on loss and memory. The novel suggests that living with trauma means developing capacity to hold multiple temporalities simultaneously—past suffering, present survival, uncertain future.

The texts collectively resist linear narratives of recovery that move from trauma through processing toward healing. Instead, they present time as circular or spiral, with past continuously erupting into present. This temporal structure reflects trauma's phenomenology—the way traumatic memory operates outside normal chronological sequence, arriving in intrusive flashbacks or triggered by seemingly innocuous stimuli. Yet within this disrupted temporality, the novels also suggest forms of connection and meaning-making that, while not constituting cure, offer ways of continuing to live.

Munaweera's novels, particularly *Island of a Thousand Mirrors*, gesture toward reconciliation possibilities through their formal structures. By presenting Sinhalese and Tamil perspectives side by side, the novel suggests that healing requires recognizing shared humanity across ethnic divides. Yet this recognition does not erase or minimize suffering; rather, it acknowledges that trauma in Sri Lanka has created complex patterns of victimhood and perpetration that resist simple moral categories. The novel's mirror structure implies that true reconciliation requires seeing oneself in the other's story, accepting responsibility for violence while also honoring one's own wounds.

Conclusion

This study has examined how contemporary Sri Lankan fiction represents trauma through sophisticated narrative strategies that both draw upon and extend existing trauma theory frameworks. The analysis of works by Arudpragasam, Ondaatje, and Munaweera reveals several significant findings that contribute to broader conversations about trauma's literary representation and the specific contexts of postcolonial violence.

First, these texts demonstrate that narrative fragmentation, repetition, and temporal disruption are not merely stylistic choices but essential strategies for representing traumatic consciousness. The formal properties of these novels enact trauma's operations, making visible how extreme experience shatters coherent selfhood and linear temporality. By refusing

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conventional narrative structures, these works honor trauma's resistance to straightforward telling while still insisting on the necessity of testimony.

Second, the novels reveal that trauma in Sri Lanka results from intersecting violences operating across multiple scales and temporalities. Colonial histories, ethnic conflict, civil war, and intimate betrayals compound each other, creating complex patterns of suffering that cannot be attributed to single causes. This finding challenges trauma theory's tendency to focus on discrete catastrophic events, suggesting instead that many traumatic experiences, particularly in postcolonial contexts, involve accumulated violences that require more nuanced analytical approaches.

Third, these texts navigate the tension between silence and testimony by developing forms that acknowledge both the necessity of speaking about trauma and the limits of language to capture extreme experience. They suggest that neither complete silence nor exhaustive narration offers adequate response to traumatic suffering. Instead, they model approaches that honor gaps, silences, and moments of linguistic breakdown as meaningful components of testimony rather than failures of representation.

Fourth, the analysis demonstrates how individual consciousness bears collective trauma's weight while also showing that collective trauma manifests through individual experience. The relationship between personal psychology and social history emerges as dialectical rather than unidirectional, with each level of experience informing and shaping the other. This finding supports pluralistic trauma models that attend to both internal psychological processes and external social forces.

The study's theoretical significance lies in its demonstration that trauma theory developed primarily through engagement with Western experiences—particularly the Holocaust—requires substantial modification when applied to postcolonial contexts. Sri Lankan trauma narratives operate through culturally specific logics that Western frameworks may not fully capture. These texts suggest that decolonizing trauma studies means attending to diverse cultural contexts, historical specificities, and forms of violence that extend beyond the catastrophic events that have dominated the field's attention.

Methodologically, the research models how integrating multiple theoretical approaches—Caruth's emphasis on unrepresentability, Vickroy's attention to collective dimensions, Whitehead's focus on formal features—can produce richer understanding than relying on single frameworks. This synthetic approach allows for attending to both what makes trauma universal (its capacity to shatter identity and disrupt meaning) and what makes specific traumatic experiences culturally and historically particular.

The analysis also reveals that these Sri Lankan narratives resist straightforward recovery narratives, instead presenting more ambiguous possibilities for continuing to live with trauma's aftermath. Rather than moving from suffering through processing toward healing, they suggest that living with trauma means developing capacity to hold multiple temporalities simultaneously, to bear witness without claiming mastery over experience, and to recognize connection across difference without minimizing particular suffering.

Several areas merit further investigation. Comparative analysis with trauma narratives from other postcolonial contexts could illuminate whether the patterns identified here operate more broadly or reflect specifically Sri Lankan circumstances. Examination of Tamil-language literature would provide crucial perspectives currently absent from English-language focused studies. Investigation of how these literary representations relate to actual survivors' testimonies and therapeutic practices could bridge literary and clinical trauma studies. Finally, research on how younger generations of Sri Lankan writers represent trauma differently than the authors examined here could reveal evolving approaches to representing and processing collective suffering.

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This research does not claim to offer definitive conclusions about trauma's representation in Sri Lankan literature. Rather, it opens conversations about how literary analysis can deepen understanding of trauma's operations in specific contexts while also contributing to broader theoretical discussions. The novels examined here demonstrate literature's capacity not merely to document suffering but to illuminate how consciousness itself transforms under extreme pressure, how communities attempt to rebuild after catastrophe, and how the past continues to shape present experience in ways both visible and hidden.

Ultimately, these Sri Lankan trauma narratives insist that attending to suffering requires acknowledging its complexity, refusing easy consolation, and developing forms of witnessing that honor both the need to speak and the limits of speech. They model approaches to representation that might prove valuable not only for understanding Sri Lanka's specific history but for engaging with trauma's literary representation more broadly. In doing so, they expand trauma studies' horizons while also demonstrating literature's unique capacity to make visible the invisible wounds that extreme experience inflicts on individuals, communities, and nations.

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