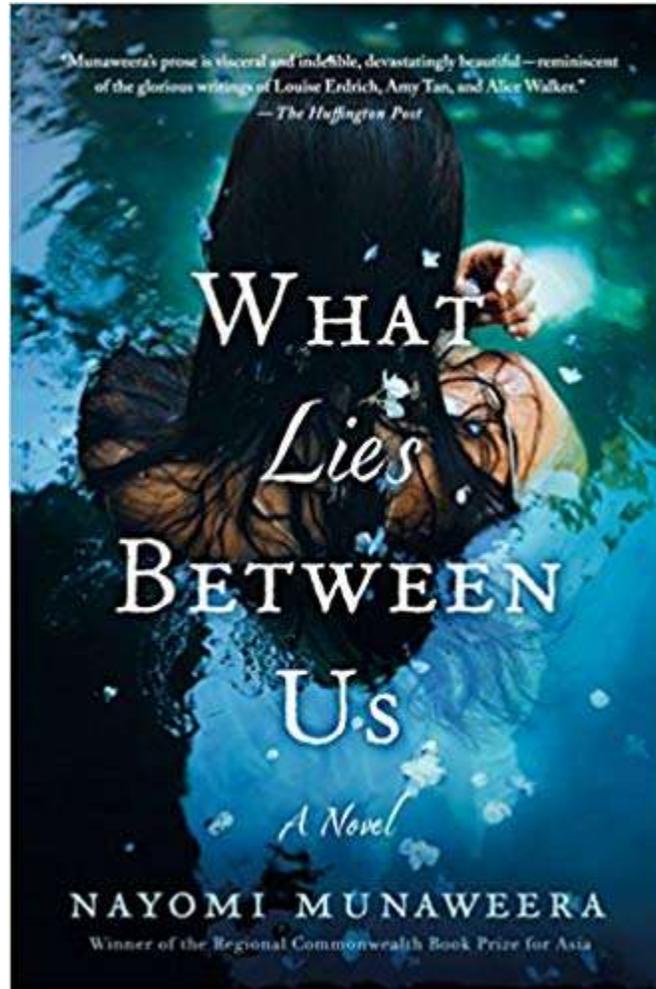


**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Diasporic Life in the Novel
What Lies Between Us by Nayomi Munaweera**

Harine G., M.Phil. Scholar



Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.com/What-Lies-Between-Us-Novel/dp/1250118174>

Abstract

Life as Diaspora is not always a blissful one, the fresh and fragile memories of home land constantly agitating the life of immigrants. In such case, if an individual with a haunting past starts her adulthood as an immigrant, then the life become worse. This article focuses and follows the life of a child in Sri Lanka to her adulthood in America who is continuously haunted

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by her past childhood memories and it also points out her Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder [PTSD] through a psychological analysis of the novel *What Lies Between Us* by a Sri Lankan American novelist Nayomi Munaweera. This article further throws light on the difficulties of a young girl with PTSD to fit into a new culture and identity to which she does not belong to. This kind of exploration about the life of Diaspora and effects of PTSD is essential to understand the sufferings and struggles of those alienated group which long for recognition.



NayomiMunaweera

Courtesy: <https://twitter.com/nayomimunaweera>

Baby Madame

Fiction performs a major role in cultivating the varied emotions of humans into the minds and hearts of the readers from different cultures and nations. Contemporary novelists explore the theme of trauma to a greater extent in their works. Trauma is a part of every human life; the stain and pain of a traumatic experience remains fresh within the deepest layer of hearts. The childhood trauma continues its infection throughout the life time of the child. The diasporic life of a young girl with a terrible childhood trauma is analysed psychologically in this article. A Sinhala family in Sri Lanka, with a typical father, a mother with mood swings and an innocent child who longs for mother's warmth spends most of her time with her keepers of childhood Samson and Sita. Our eight-year-old protagonist enjoys her childhood with the gardener Samson who accompanies her in all her childhood mischief; Samson calls her as Baby Madame. The life of Baby Madame was pleasant until she experiences a sexual assault in the room of Samson. This incident shattered her happiness; she hesitated to open this matter to her

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parents because she felt this news might make her mom move out of home. She missed the secured feeling, face of Samson haunted her. When she turns into age, she was restricted to go out of room. In such isolation her sense of fear towards Samson increased. Her life went upside down after the doubtful death of her father. Her father was drowned in the flood and Samson was missing from that day. Due to this tense situation in the family our protagonist and her mother moves to USA to Malini aunt's house where she grows into an adult and then into a mother. The effect of childhood trauma has poisoned her life and forced her to commit an unforgivable crime.

Trauma Caused by War

Majority of the people of Sri Lanka have experienced trauma in their life because they live in a war country, but the trauma of our protagonist is different. She suffers because of a sexual assault at the age of eleven. The face of Samson, her house gardener settles within her and disturbs her constantly because she believed that Samson is responsible for that assault. Her life as a diaspora in the alien land was filled with difficulties. The below lines show her intense feeling towards her motherland. She hates the idea of moving out of her country, her bond with her Sinhala language and her people makes this migration a painful one.

Dark Childhood Memories

On the other hand, her heart relaxes because she is moving far away from the ghost of his father and the threat of Samson. She tries to leave her haunting childhood experience in her motherland and move towards a foreign land. She states that, "How can I leave everything known? How can I leave language and belonging and familiar faces, faces that look like mine?" [WLBU 85] and similarly she states that, "I put my forehead on the cold window to say goodbye to both my father's ghost and the threat of Samson". [WLBU 87].

Traces of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

The dark childhood memories constantly haunt and disturb her life in the foreign land. A psychological analysis of the character of our narrator shows the traces of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which has completely ruined her life. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a mental health problem that some people develop after experiencing or witnessing a life-threatening event, like combat, a natural disaster, a car accident or sexual assault. This disorder can happen to anyone. It is not a sign of weakness.

A number of factors can increase the chance that someone will have PTSD, many of which are not under that person's control. The intensity of the traumatic event and its aftermath is very important. Stress can increase the effects of this disorder more severe. In this novel our narrator has experienced a sexual assault at the age of eleven. Childhood memories will not fade away from our mind and heart. In such a case this kind of bad memory and its effect has turned our narrator into an individual with PTSD.

Migration as Possible Cause of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

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The migration from her native land increases her symptoms towards PTSD because to survive in a foreign land she leaves her individuality and moulds herself into an American to look normal among the crowd. Her struggle to fit into the new land without the interruption of her childhood trauma increases her stress condition. PTSD symptoms usually start soon after the traumatic event, but they may not appear until months or years later. They also may come and go over many years. If the symptoms last longer than four weeks, cause you great distress or interfere with your work or home life you might have PTSD. Our narrator's behaviour clearly shows the symptoms of PTSD. The horrible incident has induced her fear; she has lost the feel of security in her home. She often hears the footsteps of Samson near her room and whenever she peeps out of her window she visualizes the threatening image of Samson. The symptoms of PTSD have started affecting her after that sexual assault which completely demolished the peace in her life. Self-harming is one of the major symptoms of PTSD.

Self-Harm

Self-harm refers to a person harming his or her own body on purpose. It tends to begin in teen or early adult years. Some people engage in self-harm a few times and then stop but someone struggles to stop this behaviour. Self-harm is related to trauma in that those who self-harm are likely to have been abused in childhood. Those who self-harm seem to have higher rates of PTSD and other mental problems. Self-harm is most often related to going through trauma in childhood rather than as an adult. Individuals who self-harm very often have a history of childhood sexual abuse. The protagonist states that, "I keep a small fruit knife under my pillow. When I feel too filled up, I press its point against the skin on my wrist. I press until a single point of red rises. It's always a relief..." [WLBU 65]

Signs of Self-Harming Behavior

This line clearly reveals out the self-harming behaviour of our narrator. The crucial abuse has turned her as a harmful individual to herself. She is constantly haunted by the cruel incident, to distract herself from that thought she started to punish her. She keeps a knife under her pillow and whenever she feels the high intensity of stress and fear she press it against her skin until it bleeds. We cannot call it as a suicide attempt, her motivation is not to kill herself. Self-harming serves as an outlet to open out all her fear and stress. It blocks her upsetting memories and flashbacks. The red blood from her skin gives her a secured feeling. This self-harming act started after the day of abuse and it continued even in her adult stage. This kind of behaviour strengthens her Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The trauma which she faced at the age of eleven has turned her into a self-harming individual.

Adulthood and Motherhood

The novel moves from the childhood of our narrator to her adulthood and to her motherhood. She has experienced a sexual abuse, turned into a self-harming child and haunted by the past-memories even after her settlement in United States. The diasporic experience and her past-memories turned her into a new adult. She enjoys her solitary pleasures and works as a nurse in the foreign land. She falls for Daniel an American and marries him. She felt comfort and

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security under his arms. The trauma which lays deeper in her heart continues to affect her. PTSD has reached its peak when she was blessed with a girl baby. Her baby is her universe, she taught her to be tough and strong and she loved her more than a mother can love her baby. The threat of Samson increased after the arrival of her baby. She states that, “Why is there a thudding panic in my blood? Why do I feel as if some childhood door is inching open? Sometimes when he’s gone, something secret happens to me. Sometimes I put her in the crib, go into our bedroom, close the door, and fall into bed.”[WLB 229] Similarly she states that,

“The sense of being watched, of being sighted by someone and held there like a pinned insect, rises. As if my body is a target and secret eyes are homing in. I lift my head to listen, my hackles rising. I push a hand against my mouth. I will not scream. I will not frighten the child. I go to the window, tug the curtain open silver. Across the street a man is waiting.”[WLB 248]

Haunting Childhood Horrors

These lines help us to explore the effect of trauma upon our narrator. When she is alone with her baby in the house her childhood horrors start to haunt her. The panic feeling rushes within her, she becomes a child again and hides herself in the bedroom to protect her. She leaves the child in the crib and locks the door. This is called re-experiencing symptom. Individuals with PTSD re-experience their traumatic event. In the case of our narrator she re-experiences the panicked life and threat of Samson. In her childhood days she often peeps out of her window and gets panic by the image of Samson. Similarly, when she is alone with her baby she felt the sight of Samson on her and when she looks out of the window she sees his image. Her peace and happiness were completely disturbed. She often leaves the child in the crib and hides herself in some other room. These are the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Her childhood trauma is threatening her. Daniel observes her abnormal condition and makes her to stay alone. Her baby was gone under the care of her in-laws. This separation of her child increased her stress and fear.

Mother’s Actions

She searches for an outlet to reveal her childhood abuse. Her mother calls her, and she shares it with her. A phone call with her mother has changed her life. She came to know about the greatest truth of her abuse that her father is responsible for the cruel sexual assault which was known by her mother. Samson was the one who tried to save her. The first thing she remembered after hearing this is her baby. Her baby is with Daniel. She wants to save her baby which her mother failed to do. People with PTSD suffer from negative thoughts; they do not have faith among people. In the case of our narrator her father is the one who abused her and hence she has lost faith among every father in this world. In order to protect her child from this cruel world, from such cruel fathers she sinks into the sea with her little baby and commits the unforgivable crime. She killed her baby. She was saved and prisoned. Her baby has lost within the huge waves. She feels satisfied that she has done her duty as a mother, she has saved her child from this world with monsters. She performed her duty which her mother failed to do to her. The name of such perfect mother is Ganga. The decision of Ganga raises a question among us, To

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protect our loved ones, do we kill them? The answer for this is YES, people with PTSD will kill. Ganga states that, “These kinds of things do not happen to girls like me. I am from a good family. I go to a good school. I have an Amma. So how can this be happening in my own home? It is unimaginable.” [WLBU 63]

To Conclude

These words of Ganga constantly linger within my head. We think family as a place of safety. But sometimes this turns into a greatest lie. For children like Ganga family is the place which gives secret wounds that cannot be healed. Those wounds by the ancestors stay fresh and suppress the happiness of the children. Mother is the supreme protector of her child; she should not slip from her duty as a mother. In order to protect the pride of the family a mother should not do injustice to her child. Childhood is the most precious period of our lifetime it absorbs everything around us like a dry land. Sexual abuse by own family members, relatives and neighbours is something dangerous and horrible. Such incidents will ruin the entire life of the child. Post- Traumatic Stress Disorder is one of the effects of such incident. If her mother saved her, Ganga might not turn into a PTSD patient and killed her own child. Ganga’s mother failed to protect her because she does not have the courage to put shame on her husband. She performed her duty as a wife, saved her husband from a bad image but as a mother she failed to protect her child. She had not punished her husband and she had not shown her supporting hand to her child. Parents should protect the child until they start to live on their own in this world. Child abuse is an unforgivable crime, whoever the culprit may be; father, brother, servant or teacher or any other. They should be punished cruelly. Nothing is more precious than the life of our children. Hiding such things from the world and protecting our family name is an offense. It is like we are supporting the culprits. They should be punished, and the victims should be saved. No more Ganga in this world should fall as a victim to such monsters. We should protect our children, our generation from such flesh-eating beasts. The feel of motherhood should always flow within us.

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Primary Source:

Munaweera, Nayomi. *What Lies Between Us: A Novel*. New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2016. Print.

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Harine G., M.Phil. Scholar
Department of English
PSG College of Arts and Science
Coimbatore
haruganesan@gmail.com

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