

Childhood Trauma: A Study of Psychological Disintegration in Nayomi Munaweera's *What Lies Between Us*

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Abstract

Motherhood is the constancy of a pair of eyes that seek, want, and need the child to be taken care of. But, this care sometimes completely changes a child into solitude. Socialization makes a child to be disciplined and this is hidden in the mind of child. Parent's anxiety and anger form psychic in the mind of child. This childhood trauma extends till they become adult and expose in their family life. Distress, frustration and fear make a psychic conflict in their life. NayomiMunaweera's *What Lies Between Us* reveals the psychological position and explains how the characters live and personalize have been affected by the psychic conflict. A detailed psychoanalytical analysis of the novel provides knowledge about psychological state of the central character. These characters and their actions are intended to analyze in relation to Freudian concept. The psychic conflict is discussed during the analysis of the characters in the novel by making references of the childhood and past memories.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, psyche, socialization, desire, personality.

Psychology is regarded as an inseparable part of literature. Each of the texts in literature exposes the psychological aspects through their characters. Psychoanalysis shows the path for the readers to analyse the characters and their faults. Most of our conflicts and personalities occur due to repressed desires, feelings or childhood trauma. Freud in his interpretation of dreams expresses the result of research which he made in his clinic. There is no clear idea about the prehistoric times of the primitive races of men that how do they consider the world and the soul in their dreams. The pre historic view of dreams was connected with the world of superhuman beings that they believed they were the revelations from gods and daemons. Aristotle's two works which deal with dreams have already become a subject for psychological study. Dreams are not sent by the gods and not of a divine character but they are 'demonic' since nature is demonic and not divine. Dreams are defined as the "mental activity of the dreamer" (37).

Burdach, an old physiologist gave expressions about the phenomena of dreams that in dreams the daily life with labours and pleasures, joys and pains will not be repeated. Even when our mind is filled with

something, torn by some deep sorrow or when all our intellectual power is absorbed by some problem, the dream will enter into the tone of our mood and represent reality in symbols. The material which makes up the content of dream is derived from experience, that is, it has been reproduced or remembered in dream. But when it has a connection between the content of the dream and reality it immediately result will be comparing them. Psychoanalytic theory was created by Sigmund Freud. He was a neurologist who pioneered the studies of hysteria, obsession illness and other obscure disorders of unknown etiology. Freud discovered the mental illness which occurred when the sufferer's personality permeated by powerful and mysterious impulses from deep within the psyche. He thought that these mysterious impulses are delayed sexual traumas that have been experienced in childhood. He discovered the reactions were not merely the events of childhood but they were the expressions that drive at the core of the psyche. He wrote that these forces are rise up from the deep like demonic forces. The Neurotic symptoms are hysterical paralyses, amnesias, obsessions and phobias. Freud devoted his life to study these invading instinctual forces which has the origin in mind and influence on mental life. The mind is an organization of mental system in which higher systems associated with mature development and regulate the lower systems. He believed, the instinctual forces are from the darkness of center of psychic life which he called unconscious or id. He modified his investigative therapeutic techniques and wrote about his discoveries and applied them not only to the problems of psychopathology and pathogenesis but also to the psychology of dreams, mythology, creativity and love and to the critical issues in anthropology, developmental psychology, religion and political science.

Burns in his work *Psychiatry* said "In his time, Freud was influenced by the field of psychiatry and the scientific tradition" (70). Strachey commented over Freud, psychoanalytic theory that "the whole part of psychic is conscious and unconscious" (16). Hoffman in his work *Freudianism and the Literary Mind* denotes that "the other causes cannot be determined by medical research" (4). Psychoanalytic research says that the mental life is characterized by the presence of psychic conflict. The child depends on his or her parents and on the extended family and social environment. This results to the disciplinary reactions of the child's significant caretakers. If these responses are respective and painful to the child's behavior, they precipitate psychic conflict in the child. Psychic conflict challenges the mind to produce new patterns of pleasure seeking. Every individual's wishes are unique and personal.

Psychic conflict occurs when wishes become associated with painful effects of pleasures in the course of development. Freud discovered childhood wishes are associated with fear. He found these fear falls into four categories. First, it is due to the loss of mother or primary caretaker. Second, it is loss of love of mother. Third, punishment and the fourth, it is due to the fear of being a bad child who deserves to be punished. The fear triggers out when a wish associates with any of these dangers. This will reach to a traumatic level. Meantime the child learns various ways to reduce anxiety. An important theoretical innovation says that the anxiety is not only a painful affect in the childhood. Brenner demonstrated that

“psychic conflict also instigates depressive affects”. Discipline often entails punishment. When a child is punished by apparent or restricts child’s pleasure, the child prone to become frustrated and angry.

In literature, the authors were influenced by the psychoanalytic concept which was reflected in the characters of their works. Novels are the imitation of life. It is the critical study of the mind of the author. The creative writing of the novel is one way the trauma of the author in the childhood. Literary genre opens way for the writers to expose their desires as writing. The authors and the writers had made use of Freud’s psychoanalytical theory in their writings. The insights of the mind of the author were exposed through their characters.

NayomiMunaweera , was born in SriLanka and grew up in Nigeria. She immigrated to United States in her early teens and now lives in Oakland, California. Her novel *What Lies Between Us* was about a young girl Ganga, who lived with her family in SriLanka. The trauma of her childhood and the loss of her father made the family move to America. She and her mother learned more about America and found a vast difference in culture and language between America and Srilanka. Years later, she falls in love with Daniel and lived happily. But the secrets and scar which happened in her childhood made her to kill her own daughter who was about two and half years old. The rest of her life she was in prison and had an illusion life with her lovable daughter.

Ganga was the only child for her mother. As a child she had desires. But the socialized community never allows a child or adult to be undisciplined. She wanted her mother to be a role model and must care her. To satisfy her desire she repressed deep in her unconscious mind. She expected her mother love and compassion, but she was scared by the attitudes of her mother. She was “ruled over by the keepers of her childhood, Samson and Sita” (9). She loved to dance. She danced with her house servants but with her mother she was “tongue tied and thick-footed”(15). Her mother was anxious towards her when she refused to dance with her. Her mother said “How is this child? So different from me,so stiff and so serious?” (15).

At the age of seven, Ganga learned how to be silent in the house. She was restricted not to make any noise in the house while playing with toys. This happened when Ganga was waiting outside the locked door of her mother’s room. She wished to see her mother. By the time the big doll slips from her fingers and hits on the wooden floor. Her mother opened the door and clutches her fingers around her upper arm and told her to be quiet. That important information hits on Ganga’s head that she should be quiet and leave her mother to take rest. By the age of seven, she “learned the lesson of silence perfectly”(16).

Munaweera in this novel applied Freud’s psychoanalytical theory. The theory Iso explained how anxiety affects the mind of children. When Ganga was at the age ten, she participated in a school play. She acted as an evil old crocodile. When the play got over she looked for her parents. Her father caught hold of her and said “you were wonderful” (31). But there was no response from her mother. Her father took some photos of Ganga and her friends. Ganga’s mother came in anger and dashed the camera on the floor. Her

face was imperial. As a child, Ganga could not able to understand the behavior of her mother. She was not matured to read the mind of her mother. The cruel attitude of her mother was imprinted in her mind. The way her mother talk, being silent inside her room, not mingling with anyone in home and the way she treats the maids in home were all sometimes seems different for her. Ganga's father used to drink for hours and "has stack of work to bury him in" (14).Ganga clearly watched each and every moment of their parents and absorbed it in her mind. She did not know this would affect her in future.

Munaweera, discusses the vivid and clear cut problematic features of temperamental incompatibility, conjugal chaotic and conflicting dilemmas between man and woman. Wollstonecraft provides the first major theoretical exploration of gender inequality. In a Vindication of the Rights of Women she established her view that women are naturally weaker or inferior to men. Wollstonecraft proposed that women must be treated as equals because they play a crucial role in society and mainly in bringing up their children.

Ganga was not allowed to go out of her house for seven days. It was traditional for a girl during that time. In order to secure Ganga's life she followed tradition. She even insists Ganga that "If you aren't properly looked after now, no man will take you for his wife. You will stay here with us until you are old and dried up. All alone without a husband or children"(51). Though Ganga was protected from outsiders she was affected by her own family member. A few weeks before her fourteenth birthday she was dreaming about whom her mother would call for birthday. While she was thinking about it someone grabs her hand and took her to Samson's room. She thought it was Samson only. By the time there was a movement in the door. It was her mother. She ran towards her room. She heard her mother's scattered cry, the sound of her palms on his skin and his begging voice. Ganga know definitely her mother will punish for the behavior and will be thrown out of the family. Next day in the morning she heard the news of her father's death. Ganga and her mother do not know what to do. Ganga could not able to concentrate on her studies. Her body was wake but her head was clouded. "There is a hum in her head, a sort of heaviness and buzz that makes it impossible to pay attention" (66).

Childhood experiences mould one's adult personality and behavior. Ganga and her mother moved to America. Though they are far away from their homeland they could not able to forget the past incidents. Ganga was physically changed to the culture of America but the inner mind still rotates around the past childhood incidents. Ganga got married and was mother to a child. The childhood trauma reflects when she became a mother. She whispers Samson name in dream. She thought Samson had found her where she is now. In the dream she thought "he leans over her and his face comes closer...She cannot tell if he will kiss her or bite her"(246).There was a conflict in her mind. She asked to herself "when did I become this other person?"(245). Everyday night she used to "lie awake, watching the night pass through the room (245). Only sleeping pills helped her. She stored it up for all those nights when "Samson threatened to come" (268).

Munaweera in her psychological novel, she focuses on the minute and subtle images of a tormented, tortured, toiled, trodden and self-frustrated character preoccupied with her inner heart, soul and mind. Her sulking depression, melancholy, pessimism, and self-storming pragmatics surrounded the atmosphere of mankind. Munaweera, discussed the vivid and clear cut problematic features of temperamental incompatibility, conjugal chaotic and conflicting dilemmas between man and woman. Ganga kept the childhood trauma as a secret to her husband. She struggled to face her life. She lead as illusion life. Wherever she turn she felt Samson “smiles like something amphibious, comes closer, stands over the bed, teeth glistening”(246).

Daniel warns her “just don’t infect her with your disease. Whatever that is”(237). She felt as a disease. It was like “sparking of electricity”(248). She was totally depressed. She sobbed in terror.

The author highlights Freud’s three states of mind. Her character Ganga’s mind was in id, ego and superego stage. Ganga rang to her mother and told about her bad behavior and the incidents which happened in the childhood. Ganga’s mother told her it was not Samson who has spoiled her it was her father. She even said she could not able to protect her since she was from village. “Her words are sinking inch by inch into the strata of her mind”(267). She was shattered and her memories flied out like bits of torn paper with the truth written on them. She now decided to save her child from Daniel because all the time Daniel hug and comfort his daughter and not her. She did not want her child also affect like her. She filled up the bottle with juice and added twenty sleeping pills into it. She took her child for a drive and gave the juice to drink.

Ganga killed her child. When she woke up she was in hospital but the child was not found. Daniel came to the hospital and he shouts and sobs “Why! Why? Why’d you do this?”(280). She never cried the crime what she has done. When she was sitting in the courtroom she left them to say what they want. When they put the picture of her daughter she thought “none of them will ever know the depth of my sorrow, the sights I see in the night”(282). Motherhood is a precious for a woman. Munaweera says that “To be a good mother is to give yourself completely”(6). Ganga was now alone in the prison but still she was living an illusion life with her daughter.”Sometimes she comes to visit me. She’s always a different age. She comes as the older child, the teenager, the young woman, as if were merely somewhere else...to visit me here inside these cement walls”(283).

Motherhood was not bounded by social contracts. Munaweera, aimed at examine the natural, social and fanciful bonds that unchain the women’s issues. The martial unhappiness and sorrowful heart caused depression and alienation in the minds of woman. Munaweera, was considered as an inner psychological writer as her prime concerns was mingled with the nocturnal and nebulous atmosphere of the women’s psyche. Sigmund Freud in his Dream Psychology he explained about the interpretations of dreams that “when they were recalled after awakening they were regarded as either the friendly or hostile manifestation of some higher powers” (1). Munaweera’s character Ganga was also affected in her childhood. The trauma

became a psychic conflict inside her mind. Even after her marriage she could not able to forget. Her inner mind expressed that Samson was still following her. This disturbed her mind and she became a daydreamer.

Munaweera through her novel provided us with a profound insight into the unconscious mind of the writer. The novel was analyzed in relation to Freudian psychoanalytical theory and with the interpretation of dreams. She presents a kaleidoscopic image of the profound minds of her characters. Women in Munaweera's writing embodied the quest for the psychologically insight, awareness and harmony. In the male dominated bourgeois society, the matriarchal community has been humiliated, afflicted, silenced and tortured socially and economically.

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