

Behind Closed Doors: A Study of Psychological Trauma in *What Lies Between Us*

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Abstract

This paper explores the psychological intricacies presented in the novel. It focus on the inner turmoil of the protagonist shaped by childhood trauma, migration and emotional isolation. The novel unfolds as a confession revealing the distributing truth behind a mother's violent act. Through a psychological lens, this study examines how suppressed memories, abuse and undecided mental illness contribute to the protagonist's disabled identity. It also highlights the themes of motherhood, silence and the long-term impact of trauma. The paper argues that the protagonist's actions are not isolated but are deeply rooted in her past experiences, making the novel a powerful exploration of the human mind under extreme distress. This paper aims to analyze the psychological depth of the protagonist, focusing on how trauma, motherhood, and mental instability intertwine to reveal the "dark truth" behind her actions.

Keywords: Trauma, Silence, Motherhood, Identity Crisis, Mental Illness

Literature is a mirror which highlights the hidden struggles of the human mind. In this novel the author brings out the inner turmoil of the protagonist. The novel begins with a confession of a mother who commits terrible crime against her own daughter. Instead of focusing on the crime, the author brings the struggles faced by the protagonist which uncovers the inner turmoil of her. The novel is set against the backdrop of migration from Sri Lanka to

the United States. It explores the challenges of cultural displacement, identity crisis, and emotional alienation. More over it delves into the effects of childhood trauma, abuse, and silence. The protagonist in this is not just about guilt but about understanding how unsolved pain can shape a person's thoughts and actions.

Psychology as a branch of knowledge serves as a strong force to study the literary texts and the authors from a different angle. By evaluating the behaviour of the character the reader can trace the childhood, family life, fixations, traumas, and conflicts. The author write what they face in the social life of human activities. Psychoanalysis, gives much importance on the significance between the unconscious and the thought processes. It is believed to be a predominant and challenging tool for literary concepts, and exchanges an intimate relationship with literature and offers a vast forum for literary aspirants. Peter Barry in his *Beginning Theory* rightly observes: "Psychoanalytical criticism is a form of literary criticism which uses some of the techniques of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of literature" (92).

The central theme of the novel is trauma and its long-lasting effects. The protagonist experiences severe emotional and psychological trauma during her childhood which remains unsolved throughout her life. These painful memories are not openly expressed but are deeply buried within her subconscious. As she grows older these oppressed emotions begin in destructive ways. The protagonist's inability to confront her past leads to a fragmented mental state influencing her decisions and behaviour.

In the novel *What Lies between Us*, Munaweera depicts the life of Ganga. She investigates the psyche of Ganga who carries unfulfilled desires and imposed familial burden in her. Her childhood monstrous life leads her to commit a crime when she becomes a mother for a child. Instead of living peacefully, her secrets and scars continue to corrode her life, past and present. In an interview, Munaweera speaks to Punch Magazine about the exploration of slippery memory. She says, "... the memories from our childhood are incredibly fragmented

and we might think that we have them down, but that might be due to something that we saw.... because my characters are trauma victims; memory gets so much more complicated. Their memory is not concrete” (Punch). Being a child Ganga longs for her mother’s love. For a child, mother resembles the world. Through the mother, the child learns how to develop human qualities like affectionate, loving, fear, anger, cry, laugh, and etc. In fact, the mother is said to be a first teacher. With the help of mother, the child adopts to love the world. But for Ganga her personal needs and desires are fulfilled only by her house keepers Samson and Sita.

In everyone’s mind childhood experiences are imprinted. Ganga’s housekeeper shows much love and affection to her. She belongs to a Sinhala family and grows up in Kandy, the hill city of Buddhists. She expects her mother to receive her while she returns from school. Instead of her mother, her house keeper Samson takes care of her, plucks guavas from garden and makes her swim in the stream. She waits “... to hear the slightest sound, the merest whisper of evidence that she is inside... anything rather than this haunted silence” (24-25). The silence makes her to feel the lack of mother’s love and compassion and leads her to be isolated and whispers to the dolls.

One of the most striking elements in the novel is silence. She expects love and care from her mother. Lack of affection leads Ganga to be silent. She is unable to speak about her suffering. This silence becomes more powerful force that shapes her inner world. The lack of communication and emotional support isolates her further, making it difficult for her to process her pain. Ganga’s eventual breakdown can be seen as a result of years of suppressed emotions and unspoken truths.

The author brings out the attitude of mother towards their children. Pressuring their desires towards their children creates fear, anxiety and silent. Ganga’s mother grabs Ganga’s hand to dance like how she dances. Ganga is not able to dance like her mother. She feels: “Anxiety and joy flood through me in equal measure. Joy at her closeness, anxiety at the

thought of what my ungraceful feet are doing under me” (14). She loves to dance with housekeepers, but with her mother, her tongue is tied and her legs fail to move. In fury, Ganga’s mother shouts at Ganga: “‘How is this my child? So different from me, so stiff and so serious?’... Her hands push [Ganga] away. Quick footsteps. The bed room door slams, reverberating through the house” (15). Ganga’s conscious mind imprints the words of her mother and makes her to think when she is alone. Horney in *New Ways in Psychoanalysis* depicts the Freud’s concept of the unconscious in which the experiences of both fear and desires are regressed in childhood. Horney concludes:

The other and more important influence is that the sum total of childhood experiences brings about a certain character structure, or rather, starts its development. With some persons this development essentially stops at the age of five with some it stops in adolescence, with others of around thirty, with a few it goes on until old age. This means that we cannot draw one isolated line from a later peculiarity. (153)

Motherhood experiences fabricate one’s adult personality and behaviour. Traditionally it is associated with love and care. In this novel it is intertwined with fear, anxiety and instability. After the death of Ganga’s father they moved to America where Ganga mother’s sister settled. Though Ganga and her mother are far away from their homeland they are not able to forget the past incidents. Physically Ganga changes herself to the culture of America but her inner mind still revolves around the past childhood incidents. Ganga hides her childhood incident to her mother. Her subconscious mind often takes her to a life illusion. During night, in her dreams, she feels someone grabs her hand and tries to fulfill his sexual desires. She is not able to see who it is but she can hear the voice like Samson. Her subconscious voice says, “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?” (63). She is restless and fears that Samson would enter into her room voluntarily. In order to secure herself she pushes the table

against the door. She even hides a small knife under her pillow, which she has taken from the kitchen. When she is conscious, she is in stress and feels guilty. She does not have the fortitude to inform her mother.

Ganga's mother wants her daughter to get married with a Sinhala boy. But, Ganga plans to marry a foreigner because whenever she hears the word of Sri Lanka she is in depressed mind. Due to the continuous force of her mother, she breaks the norms laid by her mother and marries a foreigner Daniel, a year older than her. He is "... passionate, compassionate, intuitive, romantic, and to have magnetic personalities. [He is] usually humanitarian, broadminded and generous..." (153). After three years of her marriage life, she becomes a mother to a child. Her subconscious illusionary life has changed to violence.

The novel provides a deep insight into mental illness, particularly conditions like depression and psychological instability. The author focuses the inner conflict mind of Ganga even after her marriage. She is not able to take proper decision like to whom she must show her love and affection— her child or husband or Samson. In a confused state she asks this to herself, "When did I become this other person?" (245). Daniel's lack of sympathy and hard hearted ness brings suppression in Ganga's life and leads to ultimate deprivation, alienation, marital clashing and unhappy conjunct life. In *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet rightly observes:

Because of our social circumstances male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences are utterly different and this is crucial. Implicit is all the gender identity development which takes place through childhood is the sum total of the parents, the peers, and the culture's notions of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interests, status, worth, gesture and expression....In adolescence the merciless task of conformity grows to crisis proportions, generally cooling and settling in maturity. (31)

Basically, men and women attitudes are psychologically different. Man proposes patriarchal views and women expose their feelings and emotions. Ganga after becoming a mother to a child, she does not want to treat her child like how her mother treats her. She loves her child more than her mother loves her. When she looks at Daniel's affection towards her child, she sobs and screams. The pain infects her brain and she feels being isolated. Even she feels some beast moves below the surface and unfurls in jerky movements, "... like a sparkling of electricity" (248).

Ganga accepts the displacement from Sri Lanka to America, her childhood incident still sticks into her inner mind and dwindles inside her. Changing of thought from past to the present also elevated the anxiety of her mind. In *Psychology of C.G. Jung*, Jacobi puts forwards:

In analysis of the path leads to the 'land of childhood', the time before the rational present-day consciousness separated from the historical psyche, the collective unconscious: not only to the land where the complexes of childhood have their origin, but to prehistoric country which was the cradle of all our psyches. Departure from the 'land of childhood' is inevitable, but too often the individual travels so far from the primordial twilight psyche that his natural instincts are lost.... But it also follows from the separation that the 'land of childhood' will remain definitely infantile and become a perpetual source of childish inclinations and impulses. (80)

Lack of love, affection and tenderness creates depression and isolation in the mind of Ganga. She calls to her mother and reveals the secret of her childhood to her mother. While she cries her mother consoles her and says "It's my fault. I was trying to protect you. So we never talked about it. I thought you couldn't remember.... I should have stopped it. I'm so sorry" (266-67). She revealed the truth to Ganga that it is not Samson who touched her but it is her father. Ganga's mother now realizes her mistakes and she has not thought her daughter's childhood incident will affect the future life and lead to an illusionary life. Ganga now decides

to rescue her child from Daniel because all the time he hugs and comforts his daughter. She wants to save her daughter unlike her mother who failed to do it. The only way to rescue her daughter from the distress world is that Ganga has to end up her life and her daughter's life. She fills up a bottle with juice and adds some sleeping pills into it. She takes her child and goes for a drive. The innocent child, bonded with the love of her mother, drinks the juice. When Ganga looks into the mirror the child face settles against her shoulder "... her body twitching and shaking, a milky froth spilling out of the corner of her mouth" (272). Ganga takes the child and runs to the sea to end up her life with her child. When she regains consciousness, she opens her eyes, she is now in the hospital but the child is not found. Eventually, the depressed mind of Ganga reveals that she has rescued her daughter from distress and agony.

Ganga's lack of love from her parents is also one of the reasons for her illusionary life. Even Ganga's mother's illusionary life as a village girl makes her submissive. The scar and the secret in both women's lives lead to a psychological distress even they live in the host land. The desires, emotions and the memories which are kept in the unconscious mind will expose in the future.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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