
Childhood Trauma and Displacement in Veera Hiranandani's *The Night Diary*: A Psycho-literary Analysis

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Abstract

This paper examines the psychological dimensions of childhood trauma and forced displacement as portrayed in Veera Hiranandani's award-winning middle-grade novel *The Night Diary* (2018). Set against the backdrop of the 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent, the novel follows twelve-year-old Nisha, a half-Hindu, half-Muslim girl who is compelled to flee her home in Pakistan for India following independence and the drawing of new national borders. Employing a psycho-literary analytical framework informed by Judith Herman's trauma theory, Cathy Caruth's work on narrative and trauma, and contemporary developmental psychology research on childhood adversity, this study investigates how Hiranandani renders the lived experience of traumatic displacement through narrative form, particularly the epistolary mode of Nisha's diary entries addressed to her deceased mother. The analysis identifies key manifestations of complex childhood trauma in the text, including identity fragmentation, grief and ambiguous loss, hypervigilance, survivor guilt, and disrupted attachment. The paper further explores how communal violence, religious division, and the abrupt rupture of home and belonging constitute compounding stressors that shape Nisha's psychological development. The findings suggest that *The Night Diary* functions not only as historical fiction but as a nuanced literary document of how children negotiate trauma, identity, and resilience in contexts of large-scale political violence. Implications for using the novel in therapeutic and educational contexts are briefly considered.

Keywords: childhood trauma, forced displacement, Partition of India, *The Night Diary*, psycho-literary analysis, identity, resilience, epistolary narrative, Veera Hiranandani

Introduction:

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in August 1947 stands as one of the most catastrophic episodes of forced human displacement in the twentieth century. Accompanied by widespread communal violence, the redrawing of national boundaries between India and Pakistan triggered the migration of an estimated twelve to fifteen million people and resulted in between two hundred thousand and two million deaths (Khan, 2007). Among those affected, children were uniquely vulnerable, subjected to the immediate violence of displacement while also lacking the cognitive and emotional resources to fully process traumatic loss. Literary texts that reconstruct this historical experience occupy a significant role in cultural memory and trauma transmission, offering readers — and researchers — windows into the subjective experience of catastrophe that historiography alone cannot provide.

Veera Hiranandani's *The Night Diary* (2018), recipient of the Newbery Honor, presents one of the most psychologically rich and accessible accounts of Partition-era displacement written for young readers. Through the voice of Nisha, a twelve-year-old girl of mixed religious heritage, the novel charts the journey from home to exile, from silence to narrative agency. The diary form — Nisha's secret letters to her dead mother — serves both as the novel's narrative engine and as a therapeutic device through which the protagonist begins to process grief, displacement, and identity confusion.

This research paper undertakes a psycho-literary analysis of *The Night Diary* with a specific focus on how the novel represents childhood trauma and forced displacement. The central argument is that Hiranandani constructs a psychologically sophisticated portrait of a traumatised child that resonates with clinical and theoretical understandings of complex childhood trauma, while simultaneously affirming the possibility of healing through narrative, community, and relationship. The paper proceeds through the following sections: a review of relevant scholarship on childhood trauma, displacement, and literary representations of Partition; a discussion of methodology; a close textual analysis of key passages and themes; and a concluding discussion of the novel's significance as both literary text and cultural document.

The clinical study of childhood trauma has evolved substantially since the late twentieth century. Herman (1992) introduced the concept of "complex trauma" to describe the psychological sequelae of prolonged, repeated traumatic events, particularly those involving interpersonal violence and captivity. Unlike single-incident trauma, complex trauma disrupts the developing child's fundamental sense of safety, self, and the reliability of relationships (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2005). In the context of forced displacement, children experience not a single shock but a cascading sequence of losses: loss of home, community, routine, social networks, and often beloved persons, all of which meet the threshold for complex traumatic stress.

The American Psychological Association's concept of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), developed by Felitti et al. (1998), established empirical links between early-life trauma and long-term developmental outcomes. Displacement, communal violence, and parental death — all present in *The Night Diary* — are each categorised as significant ACEs that can disrupt neurological development, emotional regulation, and attachment systems. Van der Kolk (2005) further argues that developmental trauma, when experienced during critical periods of identity formation, can fundamentally alter a child's internal working models of self and world.

Developmental psychologists including Garbarino and Kostelny (1996) have examined how political violence and forced migration affect children's psychological development. Their research underscores that children's responses to mass trauma are mediated by age, prior attachment security, community cohesion, and the availability of protective adults. Critically, they find that children who are given narrative opportunities — the chance to tell their stories — demonstrate better psychological outcomes than those who cannot access their experience through language (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1996).

Trauma theory in literary studies, associated principally with Cathy Caruth (1996), Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992), and Dominick LaCapra (2001), has foregrounded the relationship between traumatic experience and narrative form. Caruth (1996) argues that trauma resists direct representation; it manifests instead

through gaps, repetitions, and belatedness — what she terms the "latency" of traumatic memory. For the literary analyst, this means attending not only to what texts say about trauma, but how form, structure, and language embody the traumatic itself.

The epistolary form, in which a narrative is constructed through letters or diary entries, is particularly well suited to the representation of traumatic experience. As Dalsimer (1986) has noted in her psychoanalytic reading of adolescent diaries in literature, the diary creates a private space of witness, enabling the writer to narrativise experience incrementally. This connects to Laub's (1992) clinical insights about the therapeutic necessity of testimony: trauma requires a witness, and the diary — addressed to an imagined other — performs that witnessing function when external witnesses are unavailable or unsafe.

In the specific context of Partition literature, scholars have noted a tendency toward trauma aesthetics characterised by fragmented timelines, ellipsis, and silenced or unspeakable experience (Didur, 2006; Mondal, 2014). Hiranandani's choice of a child narrator and the diary form constitutes a significant formal strategy that both mirrors and manages the traumatic content; the child's voice naturalises gaps and uncertainties in understanding, replicating the cognitive and affective experience of traumatic knowing.

The literature of the Partition of India is vast and includes canonical works such as Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories, Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* (1974), and Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* (1988), as well as more recent memoirs and diaries. As Butalia (1998) documents in *The Other Side of Silence*, women and children were particularly targeted during Partition violence and bore disproportionate burdens of displacement and loss. Scholarship on children's experiences of Partition has remained comparatively sparse, making literary texts like *The Night Diary* especially significant as sites for understanding the child's perspective.

Identity fragmentation is a central theme in Partition literature. Characters are frequently caught between competing communal allegiances, national identities, and familial loyalties. Nisha's identity — half-Hindu through her father, half-Muslim

through her deceased mother — positions her as a figure of hybridity that the Partition's binary logic of Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan cannot accommodate. This connects to Homi Bhabha's (1994) theorisation of hybrid identity as inherently unsettling to nationalist discourse; Nisha embodies a liminal selfhood that the violence of Partition seeks to erase.

Research on refugee and displaced children further underlines the significance of home and belonging in child development. Eastmond (2007) argues that the loss of home for displaced children constitutes a form of ontological insecurity — a disruption to the fundamental sense that the world is a safe, stable, and knowable place. This resonates with Erikson's (1968) developmental framework in which the establishment of basic trust and identity are foundational tasks of childhood and adolescence; forced displacement disrupts both.

This study employs a psycho-literary methodology, combining close textual analysis with theoretical frameworks drawn from trauma psychology, developmental psychology, and literary trauma theory. Psycho-literary analysis, as articulated by Berman (2004), takes psychological theory as a critical lens for reading literary texts, attending to both manifest narrative content and latent structural and stylistic dimensions. The approach does not reduce literary texts to clinical case studies but treats them as complex cultural objects whose aesthetic and formal properties are inseparable from their psychological meanings.

The primary text is Veera Hiranandani's *The Night Diary* (2018). Close reading is the principal method of analysis, with attention paid to narrative voice, imagery, structure, and the epistolary form. Selected passages have been identified through repeated reading for their density of psychological significance, particularly as they relate to the themes of loss, identity, violence, displacement, and resilience. These passages are read in dialogue with relevant theoretical texts, including Herman (1992), Caruth (1996), van der Kolk (2005), Bhabha (1994), and Eastmond (2007). The study is interpretive rather than empirical; it does not make claims about actual children's psychological experiences but about the literary representation of such experiences and its theoretical implications. The paper acknowledges the limitations inherent in psycho-literary work, particularly the risk of anachronistic or reductive

readings. It seeks instead to use psychological theory as a heuristic that illuminates textual dimensions that would otherwise remain invisible, while respecting the literary text's irreducible aesthetic integrity.

The most structurally significant feature of *The Night Diary* is its epistolary form. Nisha writes each diary entry as a letter to Ammi, her dead mother, creating a sustained address to an absent, unresponsive other. This formal choice has profound psychological resonances. In trauma theory, testimony requires a witness (Laub, 1992), yet for Nisha, the circumstances of displacement — social isolation, the prohibition on discussing her mother's Muslim heritage, her father's emotional unavailability — deprive her of accessible human witnesses. The diary thus functions as a surrogate witness, a space in which the unspeakable can be spoken. The diary entries enact what Caruth (1996) describes as trauma's temporal uncanniness: events are not processed in linear time but return obliquely, through circumlocution and repetition. Nisha returns repeatedly to her uncertainty about who she is — Hindu or Muslim, Indian or Pakistani — and to her mother's absence. These returns are not simply narrative repetition for dramatic effect; they reproduce the characteristic intrusive quality of traumatic memory, in which the past is not past but continues to irrupt into present consciousness.

Importantly, writing the diary is also a form of agency. For a child who is displaced, whose identity is contested and whose voice is unheard by adults, the diary represents an autonomous space of self-constitution. This aligns with narrative therapy's insight that trauma survivors who can construct coherent narratives of their experience demonstrate greater resilience and recovery (White & Epston, 1990). By the novel's conclusion, Nisha's diary has evolved from a site of confusion and grief to a space of emergent selfhood and hope — she has, in narrative terms, authored herself through trauma.

Nisha's mixed heritage places her at the intersection of identities that the Partition renders mutually exclusive. Her father is Hindu, a doctor; her mother was Muslim, and is now dead. In the world of the novel, this hybridity is a source of shame and danger: Nisha is aware that her Muslim heritage, if disclosed, could make her a target. This forced concealment of a part of herself constitutes a form of identity

trauma. Psychologically, identity concealment — particularly when it involves core aspects of selfhood — has been associated with elevated psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and a fragmented sense of self (Goffman, 1963; Herman, 1992).

Hiranandani renders Nisha's identity fragmentation with considerable psychological nuance. Nisha does not experience her hybridity as enriching but as incomprehensible; she cannot understand why the world demands she choose one part of herself over another. Her questions to her dead mother — "What am I, Ammi?" — are not merely rhetorical. They express a genuine developmental crisis of the kind Erikson (1968) identifies as central to adolescence: the formation of a coherent, integrated identity. Displacement intensifies this crisis by destroying the environmental and relational supports — school, friends, home, extended family — that ordinarily scaffold identity development.

Bhabha's (1994) theorisation of the hybrid subject as inherently ambivalent and unsettling is useful here. Nisha cannot be incorporated into the binary logic of Partition — she is neither purely Hindu nor purely Muslim, neither fully Indian nor fully Pakistani. Her hybridity reveals the constructedness and violence of these categories, and the novel ultimately suggests that her hybrid selfhood, though source of pain, is also a form of moral and epistemological advantage: she is able to see across divisions that others cannot.

The novel is saturated with grief. Nisha mourns her mother, who died in childbirth; she mourns her home as displacement approaches; she mourns the loss of her friend Amil's childhood innocence as violence surrounds them. This multilayered grief aligns with Boss's (1999) concept of "ambiguous loss," in which losses are unresolved because the object of loss is neither wholly present nor wholly gone. Nisha's mother is dead, yet alive in the diary; her home exists but is no longer safe; her identity is both claimed and disavowed. Ambiguous loss, Boss (1999) argues, is among the most psychologically destabilising forms of grief precisely because it forecloses the normal rituals of mourning that facilitate healing.

Nisha's grief for her mother is also complicated by the prohibition on openly acknowledging her mother's Muslim identity. This connects to what Volkan (1981) terms "deposited representation," in which children absorb the unresolved grief of their parents or caregivers and carry it without being able to name it. Nisha's father cannot speak about his wife; his silence transmits grief without context, leaving Nisha to carry a sorrow she cannot fully understand. The diary, addressed to the absent mother, is in part an attempt to make sense of this deposited, unmetabolised grief.

As the Partition violence escalates, Nisha and her brother Amil witness episodes of communal violence that constitute clear traumatic stressors. The novel presents these moments with restraint appropriate to its intended readership, but the psychological effects are rendered precisely: Nisha becomes hypervigilant, hyper-alert to threat, and finds herself unable to sleep or concentrate — classic symptoms of post-traumatic stress as described by DSM-5 diagnostic criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The journey itself — the forced march toward the border, the crowded trains, the unknown destination — functions in the novel as a sustained traumatic ordeal. Van der Kolk (2005) notes that trauma is fundamentally an experience of helplessness: the organism is overwhelmed by stimuli it cannot process or escape. The displacement journey renders Nisha entirely helpless, stripped of agency, subject to forces she cannot control or comprehend. Hiranandani captures this helplessness through the sensory texture of the diary entries, which become increasingly fragmented and immediate as the violence approaches — a formal enactment of the dissociative phenomenology of acute trauma.

Despite its unflinching engagement with trauma, *The Night Diary* is ultimately a narrative of resilience. The psychological literature consistently identifies relationship as the primary protective factor against the worst outcomes of childhood trauma; children with at least one secure attachment figure demonstrate significantly better recovery from traumatic events (Masten, 2001; Werner & Smith, 1982). In the novel, Nisha's relationship with her cook, Kazi — a Muslim man who chooses to stay with the family despite his own danger — functions as a key

protective relationship. Kazi provides continuity, warmth, and cultural connection in the midst of disruption.

The relationship between Nisha and her twin brother Amil also performs a protective function. Amil is extroverted and expressive where Nisha is introverted and silent; together they constitute a complementary dyad that manages collective anxiety. Masten (2001) identifies sibling relationships as significant sources of resilience for children experiencing family disruption, providing peer support and shared meaning-making in contexts where adult caregiving is compromised. Amil and Nisha's relationship models this dynamic precisely.

By the novel's conclusion, Nisha has not overcome her trauma — the Partition's wounds are presented as permanent and generational — but she has begun to develop what Herman (1992) calls "reconnection": the third phase of trauma recovery, in which the survivor re-engages with the world, reconnects with relationships, and begins to build a life that contains but is not wholly defined by trauma. Her voice, increasingly confident in the later diary entries, is the primary evidence of this emergent recovery.

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