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## Trauma and Healing: Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Sri Lankan Tamil Identity

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### **Abstract**

War does not end when the guns fall silent. For many Sri Lankan Tamils, the end of the civil war in 2009 marked not peace but the beginning of another struggle to live with memories that refuse to fade, to search for loved ones who never returned, and to rebuild lives in lands that no longer feel like home. Behind the statistics of casualties and displacement are families like Sarva's, where a son disappears and a mother's days are spent chasing rumors of his survival. There are women like Mugil, who carry the scars of battle and abuse while trying to raise children in a city that watches her with suspicion. And countless others remain uprooted, their sense of belonging fractured. Rohini Mohan's *The Seasons of Trouble* captures these intimate struggles, showing how trauma lingers in everyday life through flashbacks, silences, and restless nights. Through the lens of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, these stories remind us that the past is never fully past; it echoes through generations, shaping not only memory but also identity.

**Keywords:** Sri Lankan Tamils, Trauma, Displacement, memory, Cultural identity, Civil war

### **Introduction**

Rohini Mohan's *The Seasons of Trouble: Life Amid the Ruins of Sri Lanka's Civil War* (2014) poignantly captures the profound trauma, displacement, and cultural identity loss experienced by Sri Lankan Tamils during and after the ethnic conflict (1983–2009). Through the lives of three individuals Sarva, a young man abducted and tortured by government forces; Indra, his mother searching tirelessly for her disappeared son; and Mugil, a former LTTE fighter rebuilding her life post-war, the book illustrates the enduring scars of war, including abductions, torture, and forced migrations. These narratives reveal how the war's end in 2009 did not resolve the suffering but perpetuated it through ongoing surveillance, land grabs, and marginalization, disrupting Tamil cultural identity rooted in their ancestral homelands, traditions, and community ties. A wealth of poignant works on the Tamil genocide, such as Shobasakthi's *Gorilla* and

V.V. Ganeshanathan's *Love Marriage*, similarly interweave personal narratives with collective trauma to illuminate resilience and identity, much like Mohan's vivid portrayal of Tamil anguish through a deeply human lens. In *The Seasons of Trouble*, Sarva's fragmented memories of torture, Mugil's nightmares from the "No Fire Zone," and Indra's relentless quest for her son reflect the psychological distress of displacement, where the loss of home, temples, and cultural heritage compounds personal grief with collective mourning. While the conflict has been studied, there is limited research on how contemporary Sri Lankan Tamil literature, like Mohan's work, employs subtle cultural elements, stories, rituals, and oral histories to preserve identity and challenge the silence of global institutions during these atrocities. This study applies Cathy Caruth's trauma theory from *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), which views trauma as an overwhelming event that resists linguistic representation and resurfaces belatedly, to analyze how Mohan's narrative, characters, and folk elements connect individual suffering to the collective grief of Tamils, highlighting their resilience using qualitative literary analysis guided by trauma theory.

Trauma takes many forms, shaping both individual lives and collective histories. In *The Seasons of Trouble*, Rohini Mohan portrays acute trauma through Sarva's abduction and detention, complex trauma in Mugil's prolonged experiences of war and displacement, and vicarious trauma in Indra's relentless search for her disappeared son. These narratives echo Cathy Caruth's view of trauma as fragmented and belated, as well as Freud's idea of repetition compulsion, where suffering returns in flashbacks, silences, and compulsive retellings. The book also reflects intergenerational and collective trauma, showing how the scars of Sri Lanka's civil war extend beyond

the battlefield, embedding themselves in memory, identity, and the everyday lives of Tamil communities.

### **Trauma in the Context of the Sri Lankan Tamils**

The Sri Lankan Tamils' experiences are marked by displacement, violence, and cultural loss during the civil war (1983–2009), leaving scars that continue to echo across generations. Intergenerational wounds remain especially prominent: grief and exile have disrupted cultural identity and social structures, with younger generations, including the diaspora, inheriting these burdens through stories, silences, and rituals. As Cathy Caruth notes in *Unclaimed Experience*, such memories resist straightforward narration, returning belatedly in fragmented cultural expressions.

This struggle with memory also extends to the collective. The destruction of temples, libraries, and ancestral homelands did not simply erase physical spaces but reshaped communal identity, creating a narrative of resilience deeply intertwined with grief. Freud's idea of repetition compulsion helps explain how these memories reappear across literature, oral histories, and rituals, keeping the wounds of war alive even in attempts to heal. Mugil's revisiting of sites of surveillance and violence illustrates how past traumas become embedded in the very landscapes survivors inhabit.

At the same time, these cycles of remembrance deeply affect the psychological lives of individuals. Detention, displacement, and fear fostered anxiety, flashbacks, and fractured memory, blurring the boundaries between survival and healing. Sarva's recurring sensations of burning pain and Indra's relentless search for her disappeared son reveal how the war continued to intrude on the ordinary, long after its official end.

Through the intertwined lives of Sarva, Indra, and Mugil, Rohini Mohan's *The Seasons of*

*Trouble: Life Amid the Ruins of Sri Lanka's Civil War* (2014) brings these layered realities together. The narrative reveals that for the Tamils, the end of the conflict did not bring closure, but rather prolonged cycles of loss and endurance, which Caruth calls an "unclaimed experience" and Freud describes as the compulsion to repeat. Trauma, in this sense, is not only an individual affliction but a continuing presence in collective memory, cultural identity, and everyday survival.

Caruth's concept of trauma as a "belated experience" emphasizes how overwhelming events are not fully grasped at the moment of occurrence but resurface later through intrusive memories, disrupting linear time and understanding. In *The Seasons of Trouble*, this idea is evident in Mugil's post-war resettlement, where her attempts to begin a new life in Colombo after escaping a refugee camp by reuniting with family, marrying, raising children, and seeking work are persistently overshadowed by delayed trauma. As a former LTTE cadre, Mugil carries unassimilated memories of battlefield losses, the deaths of comrades, and experiences of sexual violence, which return belatedly in the form of flashbacks, hypervigilance, and a sense of haunting. Mohan's portrayal of Mugil shows how the war's violence, rather than ending with the ceasefire, continues to intrude upon her present, illustrating Caruth's notion that trauma resists immediate comprehension and instead reappears later, amplifying the sense that peace itself is marked by the unfinished and ongoing presence of war.

In *The Seasons of Trouble*, Indra's relentless search for her disappeared son, Sarva, illustrates how trauma returns in cycles that refuse closure. After Sarva is abducted by government forces, Indra herself, displaced multiple times, travels between camps, petitions officials, and clings to fragments of rumor, compulsively reliving the moment of separation.

This unending loop of grief and desperate action reflects what Freud termed "repetition compulsion," later described by Caruth as the traumatic event's insistent return through intrusive thoughts and behaviors. Indra's experience shows how the absence of her son becomes a wound that continually cries out, preventing resolution and trapping her in a perpetual state of mourning. Mohan uses this case to reveal how enforced disappearances, with over 12,000 reported in Sri Lanka, not only devastate families but also exemplify trauma's cyclical nature, where the violence of war persists long after its official end.

The crisis of meaning in trauma emerges when experiences are so overwhelming that they resist integration into coherent narratives, leaving survivors with fragmented memories and incommunicable pain. Sarva's journey in *The Seasons of Trouble* reflects this rupture: after enduring illegal detention, torture, and near-death experiences, he escapes to India and later seeks asylum abroad, yet his recollections remain fractured and incomplete. Mohan portrays his memories of interrogations and escapes as disjointed, marked by physical scars and psychological dissociation, capturing what Caruth terms an "unclaimed experience" that defies full understanding. This inability to assimilate trauma is not only personal but collective, as Tamil communities grapple with the weight of disappearances, land seizures, and systemic violence, all while the Sri Lankan state reframes war crimes as triumphs. The result is a profound gap between lived suffering and official histories, a crisis where personal and collective pain cannot be reconciled with the dominant narrative of victory.

Caruth highlights that trauma narratives inherently call for an ethical listener, as they transform private pain into historical truth and make healing possible through the act of shared witnessing. This dynamic is central to *The Seasons of Trouble*, where Rohini Mo-

han's journalistic storytelling gives space to the voices of Sarva, Indra, and Mugil, challenging the silence that surrounds Sri Lanka's atrocities. Their interwoven accounts, Mugil's memories of LTTE recruitment and defection, Indra's repeated petitions in search of her disappeared son, and Sarva's struggles for asylum function as testimonies that resist erasure and insist on being heard. Reviews noting that Mohan "gives voice to the voiceless" capture how these stories embody Caruth's idea of trauma as a "symptom of history," where individual experiences speak to collective suffering. In a postwar context defined by militarized zones, economic exclusion, and systemic marginalization of Tamils, these narratives serve not only as records of pain but also as urgent appeals for recognition, justice, and ethical responsibility from global audiences.

This analysis through Caruth's lens enriches the understanding of the Sri Lankan Tamils' trauma as depicted in Mohan's work, emphasizing how displacement and cultural identity loss are not merely historical events but ongoing, unclaimed experiences that demand recognition and ethical engagement.

### ***The Lived Experiences of Sri Lankan Tamils***

The long years of civil conflict in Sri Lanka left deep emotional scars on the Tamil population, many of whom experienced forced migration, loss, and unimaginable suffering. As war engulfed the northern and eastern parts of the island, entire families were displaced from their villages and homes, caught between moments of survival and the permanent loss of a life they once knew. The trauma of this displacement continues to shape the personal histories and emotional worlds of countless individuals, many of whom still live in exile or remain internally displaced within the country. The departure was rarely planned or organized. In many cases, people fled in haste

leaving behind ancestral homes, sacred temples, schoolbooks, photographs, and even the graves of their loved ones. There was no time for mourning. The emotional chaos that accompanied such exits has lingered in the minds of survivors, many of whom still struggle to articulate what they went through. For many Tamil families, the trauma was not limited to the loss of land or belongings, it was the severance of identity, the fracturing of relationships, and the vanishing of a shared cultural world. In *The Seasons of Trouble*, Mugil's experience of fleeing the "No Fire Zone" amidst shelling and mass killings reflects Caruth's concept of trauma as an overwhelming event that fragments consciousness, leading to dissociation and an inability to fully process the horror in the moment (Caruth, 1995).

In the years that followed, displaced Tamils found themselves navigating life in unfamiliar territories, refugee camps in India, shelters in Jaffna, or distant diasporas in Europe and North America. Amid efforts to survive and adjust, many carried silent burdens: the loss of loved ones, the anxiety of uncertain futures, and the emptiness of disconnection from home. Memories of shelling, midnight escapes, and missing family members continue to haunt even decades later. The emotional pain lives on in the quiet moments triggered by smells, songs, or words in their native tongue. Indra's relentless search for her abducted son, Sarva, in *The Seasons of Trouble*, embodies Caruth's idea of trauma's delayed impact, where the full weight of loss emerges only through repeated, futile efforts to reclaim what was taken, echoing Freud's repetition compulsion (Caruth, 1996; Freud, 1920). Sri Lankan Tamils too endure a form of trauma that resists closure. Many have been unable to return to their original villages, while others have returned only to find everything altered: homes reduced to ruins, old neighbors gone,

and landscapes transformed by years of conflict. The grief is not about what was lost but also about the inability to return to the emotional space that once felt safe and whole.

Trauma theory helps us understand this complex, prolonged suffering. These experiences are not limited to one generation. Children born in exile or post-war environments often inherit the emotional weight of their parents' stories. Many grow up hearing tales of displacement, loss, and longing stories that shape their worldview, even if they never saw the conflict firsthand. This form of intergenerational trauma becomes embedded in everyday life in cautious behaviors, unspoken fears, and the persistent search for identity and belonging. In *The Seasons of Trouble*, the younger generation's engagement with their parents' narratives of war and displacement reflects Caruth's concept of trauma as a legacy that persists across generations, manifesting in fragmented cultural expressions (Caruth, 1996).

Even years after the war has officially ended, the emotional landscape of the Tamil community is filled with grief that has not found full expression. Mourning remains suspended, with many survivors still waiting for answers about missing family members or longing for recognition of their suffering. In this prolonged state of emotional exile, memories are preserved not just in words but in silent moments when the voice falters, the eyes well up, or the room falls quiet. The persistent post-war threats and surveillance in *The Seasons of Trouble*, compelling characters like Mugil to revisit sites of loss, illustrate Caruth's temporal dislocation and Freud's repetition compulsion, where trauma drives survivors to unconsciously relive their pain (Caruth, 1995; Freud, 1920).

For displaced Sri Lankan Tamils, as with Kashmiri Pandits, the pain is not always visible, but it is deeply felt. It lives in the body, in

memory, and in relationships. It shapes how people love, trust, and build new lives. Beneath the surface of ordinary routines lies a deep emotional reservoir one filled with longing, fear, and resilience. Understanding their trauma requires listening not only to what is said, but also to what remains unspoken.

The experiences of Sri Lankan Tamils, as illuminated through Rohini Mohan's *The Seasons of Trouble* and analyzed via Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, reveal the enduring interplay of displacement, cultural disruption, and psychological wounds. Trauma emerges not as a finite event but as an ongoing process of belated reckoning, repetition, and ethical demand for witnessing. By bridging personal narratives with collective history, this study underscores the resilience of Tamil communities in preserving identity amid genocide and silence. Future research should expand on literary representations to advocate for global recognition and healing, ensuring that unclaimed experiences find voice and resolution.

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