

Memory, Trauma And Identity Reconstruction In Anita Nair's *Lessons In Forgetting*: A Feminist Trauma And Disability Studies Perspective

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines Anita Nair's *Lessons In Forgetting* (2010) through the combined lenses of feminist trauma theory and feminist disability studies, arguing that memory, trauma, and embodied disability function together as the mechanisms through which the novel's protagonists reconstruct fractured identities. Drawing on Cathy Caruth's model of trauma as a delayed and repeated psychic wound and Judith Herman's stages of trauma recovery, the paper first traces how Meera and Jak's parallel losses unsettle linear selfhood and produce narratives organised around silence, repetition, and deferred disclosure. It then extends the analysis, largely absent from existing criticism of the novel, to the character of Smriti, whose comatose, non-verbal body following a sexual assault becomes a site where gendered violence and disability intersect. Using Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's feminist disability framework, the paper reads Smriti's condition not as a passive backdrop to her father's grief but as an active locus of meaning that exposes the limits of a purely psychological trauma paradigm and demands attention to embodiment, dependency, and caregiving as feminist concerns in their own right. The paper concludes that Nair's novel stages identity reconstruction as a collective, relational process rather than an individual triumph, and that reading disability alongside trauma and gender yields a fuller, more ethically responsive account of the text.

Keywords: Memory, trauma, identity reconstruction, feminist trauma theory, disability studies, Anita Nair, *Lessons In Forgetting* silence, care

1. Introduction

Anita Nair's 2010 novel *Lessons In Forgetting* occupies a distinctive place in contemporary Indian English fiction because it refuses to treat trauma as a private, individual malaise. The novel interlaces two narrative strands: Meera, a Bangalore homemaker and cookbook writer abandoned by her husband, and Jak, a cyclone-studies professor whose nineteen-year-old daughter Smriti lies in a coma after a violent sexual

assault. Structured, as several readers of the novel have noted, around the stages of a cyclone, the narrative uses natural catastrophe as a controlling metaphor for psychological rupture and, eventually, recovery.

Existing scholarship on *Lessons In Forgetting* has largely approached the text through the lens of gender and voice, reading Meera's abandonment

and Smriti's silence as instances of women's subordination within patriarchal domestic and social structures. What this body of criticism has attended to less directly is the fact that Smriti's condition is not merely a symbolic silence but a disability: a comatose, non-ambulant, non-verbal embodiment that requires round-the-clock physical care, medical management, and family reorganisation. Treating her condition only as a metaphor for trauma's unspeakability risks erasing the material, embodied dimension of her experience and of the labour it generates around her, most of it performed by women in the novel.

This paper therefore proposes a dual framework. It reads the novel first through feminist trauma theory, following Cathy Caruth's account of trauma as an event that resists direct representation and Judith Herman's model of recovery through safety, remembrance, and reconnection. It then supplements this framework with feminist disability studies, particularly Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's argument that disability and gender are mutually constituting categories of embodied difference. The aim is to show that Nair's novel reconstructs identity not through a single character's psychological journey alone, but through a network of relationships organised around memory, disclosure and care, in which Smriti's disabled body is an active participant in meaning rather than a passive occasion for other characters' grief.

2. Literature Review

Critical commentary on *Lessons In Forgetting* has tended to cluster around three concerns. A first strand reads the novel as a study of emerging womanhood, tracing how Nair's female characters move from socially conditioned passivity toward self-determination, with Meera's arc from corporate wife to independent head of household serving as the central example. A second strand foregrounds silence as both theme and narrative technique, arguing that the novel uses withheld speech, gaps, and euphemism to represent trauma that cannot be directly articulated, particularly around Smriti's assault. A third, smaller strand situates the novel's gender politics within the domestic sphere, examining how Meera and other

women in the Lilac House negotiate authority, dependency, and emotional labour in the absence of the men who once organised their lives.

What unites these readings is an almost exclusive focus on trauma as a psychological or discursive phenomenon: something borne in silence, memory, and speech. Disability, where it is acknowledged at all, is typically folded into this discussion as a synonym for muteness or voicelessness rather than examined as a distinct embodied condition with its own social and ethical demands. Feminist disability scholars such as Garland-Thomson and Susan Wendell have argued that this kind of conflation is common in literary criticism, which tends to use disabled characters chiefly as vehicles for other characters' development or as metaphors for abstract states such as trauma, guilt, or moral failure, rather than as subjects whose embodied experience matters on its own terms. This paper responds to that gap by treating Smriti's coma as both a consequence of gendered violence and an instance of disability that reorganises the novel's household, its economy of care, and its account of what recovery can mean. Recent disability scholarship has increasingly challenged this metaphorical use of disability and emphasized intersectional, embodied, and culturally situated accounts of disabled experience (Schalk, 2018; Schalk et al., 2020; Dawn, 2021).

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Feminist Trauma Theory

Cathy Caruth's influential formulation treats trauma as a wound that is not fully known at the moment it occurs and returns instead through intrusive images, repetition, and belated recognition. This account is useful for reading the fragmented, non-chronological structure of *Lessons In Forgetting*, in which the truth of Smriti's assault is withheld from the reader and reassembled gradually through Jak's investigation and the testimony of others.

Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* supplements Caruth's model with a explicitly gendered and clinically grounded account, arguing that trauma recovery proceeds through the re-establishment of safety, the reconstruction of the traumatic story, and the restoration of connection

with a community. Herman's insistence that sexual and domestic violence against women constitutes a form of trauma equivalent in severity to combat trauma, and her attention to the social conditions that silence survivors, make her framework especially apt for a novel in which a young woman's assault is met with institutional indifference from the police and evasion from her boyfriend. Feminist trauma theory in this sense reframes trauma not simply as an individual psychic event but as a social and political phenomenon shaped by gender, power, and who is permitted to speak.

3.2 Feminist Disability Studies

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's foundational essay *Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory* argues that disability, like gender, is not a fixed biological fact but a category produced through cultural narratives, institutional practices, and the social organisation of bodies. She contends that feminist theory's traditional concerns with dependency, embodiment, and the ethics of care are transformed once disability is taken seriously as an analytic category, because disabled bodies expose the fiction of the autonomous, self-sufficient subject on which much liberal feminist thought has relied.

Susan Wendell's related work on the rejected body similarly stresses that disability is experienced through, rather than despite, social relationships of care, and that literary and cultural texts often manage the discomfort of disability by converting it into metaphor. Applying this framework to *Lessons In Forgetting* allows the paper to ask not only what Smriti's coma signifies about trauma in the abstract, but what it materially requires of the women around her, and how the novel's feminist politics are reshaped once her embodied condition, rather than only her silence, is placed at the centre of analysis. More recent feminist disability scholarship similarly stresses interdependence and the need to rethink care beyond a simple one-way relation between an autonomous caregiver and a dependent recipient (Kelly, 2020; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018).

4. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, text-based

approach combining close reading with thematic analysis, informed by the theoretical frameworks outlined above. The primary text is Anita Nair's *Lessons In Forgetting* (HarperCollins India, 2010). The analysis proceeds thematically rather than chronologically, moving from memory and trauma, to identity reconstruction, to the specifically feminist and disability-inflected dimensions of the novel's treatment of gendered violence and embodiment. In keeping with standard academic practice, the paper paraphrases and summarises plot and thematic content rather than reproducing extended passages from the novel.

5. Memory and the Architecture of Trauma

Lessons In Forgetting is structured around withholding: the reader, like Jak, does not know at the outset what happened to Smriti on the beach that changed her from a confident nineteen-year-old into a comatose body requiring constant care. This narrative delay enacts, at the level of form, Caruth's claim that trauma is registered only belatedly, in fragments, and through the gaps in what can be told. Jak's parallel career as a cyclone-studies expert supplies the novel's controlling metaphor: memory and trauma, like a cyclone, build in unseen pressure before making landfall, and the aftermath must be read backward from its wreckage to be understood at all.

Meera's memory work operates differently but toward a comparable end. Her husband's disappearance forces her to reconstruct, retrospectively, a marriage she had not previously examined critically, and uncovering patterns of quiet self-erasure that she had mistaken for stability. In both plots, memory is less a simple retrieval of the past than an active, painful reconstruction that reorganises the present. The novel thereby stages trauma not as an event that is over, but as an ongoing process of meaning-making that implicates family members, caregivers, and, ultimately, the reader.

6. Identity Reconstruction: From Fragmentation to Selfhood

Both protagonists begin the novel in states of arrested or externally defined identity. Meera's early sense of self is organised entirely around her

role as wife and household manager; when that role collapses, she is left to construct an identity out of practical necessity, taking charge of Lilac House, her children, her mother, and her grandmother. Jak's identity as a successful academic is likewise destabilised by his inability to protect or explain what happened to his daughter, a failure that unsettles his professional authority over cyclones, systems he can predict but cannot, in his own family, prevent.

The novel's model of identity reconstruction is notably relational rather than individualist. Meera and Jak's converging storylines suggest that selfhood is rebuilt not in isolation but through encounter, mutual disclosure, and the willingness to witness another person's pain. This relational model resonates with Herman's insistence that trauma recovery requires reconnection with others, and it anticipates the paper's later argument that Smriti's recovery, such as it is, similarly depends on a network of care that extends beyond her own consciousness or agency, implicating the whole household in her identity's ongoing reconstruction.

7. Feminist Trauma Perspective: Gendered Violence, Silence, and Voice

Read through Herman's framework, the institutional response to Smriti's assault dramatises the social conditions that feminist trauma theory identifies as compounding, rather than merely following from, gendered violence. The indifference of the police and the evasiveness of her boyfriend echo a broader pattern in which women's testimony about sexual violence is doubted, minimised, or actively suppressed, forcing the burden of investigation onto her father rather than onto institutions charged with protecting her. Smriti's own inability to speak, then, is not only a clinical consequence of her injuries but a heightened, literalised version of the silencing that feminist trauma scholars argue survivors of sexual violence routinely encounter.

Meera's trajectory offers a quieter but structurally parallel account of gendered constraint. Her marriage required a habitual suppression of her own ambitions and opinions in favour of domestic harmony, a pattern the novel frames as a socially

rewarded form of self-silencing. Her husband's departure, though initially devastating, ultimately affords her a voice and authority she had not previously exercised. The novel's feminist trauma perspective thus operates on two registers at once: the extreme, bodily silencing of sexual violence embodied in Smriti, and the more diffuse, everyday silencing of women's autonomy embodied in Meera, with the two registers illuminating and intensifying one another.

8. Disability, the Body, and the Politics of Care: Reading Smriti

It is here that a feminist disability studies lens adds a dimension that purely psychological readings of trauma tend to miss. Smriti's coma is not simply a narrative device signifying unspeakable violence; it is a disability that reorganises the daily life, labour, and finances of her household. Her care requires physical maintenance, medical oversight, and constant vigilance, work that, consistent with Garland-Thomson's account of the gendered politics of caregiving, falls disproportionately on the women connected to her and on her father in a role coded, within the text, as unusually and notably maternal for a man of his generation and profession.

Garland-Thomson's concept of the disabled body as a site that exposes the limits of individual autonomy is directly relevant to Smriti's position in the novel. She cannot narrate her own trauma, control her own body, or participate directly in the investigation into her assault; her personhood survives instead through the interpretive and caregiving labour of others. Read only as a metaphor for trauma's silence, this dependency risks being framed as tragic diminishment. Read through feminist disability studies, however, Smriti's dependency can instead be understood as revealing a truth that applies to all the novel's characters to varying degrees: that identity and personhood are sustained relationally, through the care and recognition of others, rather than through autonomous self-sufficiency alone.

The novel's treatment of Smriti also raises, without fully resolving, the ethical questions that Susan Wendell identifies as central to feminist disability thought: how a family narrates a disabled

member's condition to itself, whether her body is treated as a puzzle to be solved on behalf of others' closure or as a person whose own, unknowable interior life deserves consideration independent of the plot's need for resolution. Jak's investigative drive, while sympathetically motivated, at times risks instrumentalising Smriti's body as evidence in a mystery he needs solved for his own sake, a tension the novel gestures toward through his gradual recognition that his daughter's needs and his own need for answers are not identical. Reading this tension as a disability studies concern, rather than only a trauma-narrative device, sharpens the novel's feminist critique: it is not only Smriti's assault that must be reckoned with, but the ongoing question of who has the authority to speak for a disabled woman's body and experience once she cannot speak for herself.

9. Intersections: Disability, Gender, and Trauma in the Novel's Feminist Vision

Bringing feminist trauma theory and feminist disability studies together allows this paper to argue that *Lessons In Forgetting* stages a triple bind rather than a single axis of oppression. Smriti is vulnerable first as a young woman subject to sexual violence, second as a survivor met with institutional silence and disbelief, and third as a disabled person whose ongoing embodied needs are easily subordinated, within both the family and the narrative economy of mystery novels generally, to the demands of other people's grief and investigation. Nair's novel does not fully escape this last risk; Smriti remains, for much of the text, an object of others' concern rather than a speaking subject. Yet the novel's slow, attentive depiction of her physical care, and its refusal to grant Jak's investigation a triumphant, fully redemptive closure, suggest an authorial awareness of the limits of using a disabled character primarily as a vehicle for other people's healing.

This intersectional reading also reframes the novel's central metaphor of the cyclone. Where earlier criticism has read the cyclone chiefly as a figure for the buildup and release of psychological trauma, a disability-attentive reading notes that a cyclone also describes what it leaves behind: a landscape permanently altered, requiring ongoing

maintenance and adaptation rather than a single moment of recovery. Smriti's condition, unlike Meera's more resolvable marital crisis, does not conclude with restored wholeness; it persists as changed terrain that the family must learn to inhabit. This distinction matters for the novel's feminist politics, because it resists a narrative in which trauma is neatly overcome, insisting instead that some forms of gendered harm, particularly those compounded by disability, demand sustained, unglamorous, collective care rather than individual triumph.

10. Narrative Structure and the Poetics of the Cyclone

The novel's organisation into named cyclonic stages, from disturbance to depression, deep depression, cyclone, and eventual dissipation, is more than decorative framing; it supplies a temporal logic that substitutes for conventional chronology. Because a cyclone's life cycle is scientifically legible even when its landfall is unpredictable, the structure allows Nair to promise the reader an eventual resolution, however partial, while withholding the specific content of what happened to Smriti for most of the narrative. This formal choice enacts, rather than merely illustrates, Caruth's claim that traumatic knowledge arrives out of sequence: the reader receives the storm's classification before receiving its cause.

Jak's alternating first-person sections and the more distanced third-person narration of Meera's chapters further complicate any single, stable narrative authority. Jak's voice is saturated with scientific vocabulary that he cannot fully redirect toward emotional understanding, producing a narrator who is simultaneously expert and helpless. Meera's sections, by contrast, accumulate through domestic detail, letters, and remembered conversation, a texture that Susan Wendell would recognise as the ordinary, unglamorous material of embodied care work. Read together, the two registers stage a productive friction between the language of systems, which Jak commands, and the language of bodies and relationships, which the novel increasingly insists is the more adequate vocabulary for understanding what has happened to his daughter.

11. Comparative Contexts: Trauma and Disability in Indian English Women's Fiction

Situating *Lessons In Forgetting* alongside other works of Indian English women's fiction sharpens what is distinctive about Nair's treatment of disability. Shashi Deshpande's novels, for instance, have long been read for their attention to women's psychological confinement within marriage and family, but Deshpande's protagonists remain largely able-bodied narrators of their own suppression; their silence is chosen or socially enforced rather than physiologically total. Manju Kapur's fiction similarly foregrounds constrained female interiority without introducing a character whose body itself becomes the site of enforced non-speech. Smriti's coma therefore occupies an unusual position in this literary landscape, converting a familiar thematic concern, women's silencing, into a literal, embodied condition that cannot be narrated away by eventual self-assertion.

This comparison matters because it clarifies what feminist disability studies adds to a body of criticism already attentive to gender. Where earlier Indian English fiction by women often resolves its heroines' constraint through an act of departure, voice, or self-authorship, such as Meera's own arc in this novel, Smriti's disability forecloses that particular resolution. Her body cannot exit the household economically or declare its own meaning. Reading her alongside, rather than as a variation on, the genre's more familiar silenced wife or daughter figure reveals a gap in existing comparative scholarship: disability, understood as a distinct embodied condition with its own social organisation of dependency and care, has rarely been treated as a category through which Indian English women's fiction can be read, even though the emotional and domestic labour surrounding disabled family members recurs across the tradition.

12. Masculinity, Fatherhood, and the Limits of Investigative Care

Jak's characterisation invites a reading attentive to masculinity as well as gender more broadly, since his response to his daughter's assault is channelled almost entirely into investigation rather than into the hands-on physical care that predominantly falls

to women in the household. This division of labour is neither commented upon by the narrative as unusual nor entirely naturalised; Jak's occasional participation in Smriti's physical care is marked as exceptional and moving precisely because it departs from an implicit norm in which men's care work takes an intellectual, problem-solving form while women's care work is bodily and continuous. Feminist theorists of care, including Garland-Thomson, have argued that this gendered division is not incidental to patriarchal structures but constitutive of them, since it allows men's labour to be recognised as agency while women's labour is naturalised as invisible background.

At the same time, the novel does not present Jak's investigative mode of care as simply inferior or false. His scientific training gives him tools, patience with uncertainty, and a tolerance for slow-building evidence, that prove genuinely useful to uncovering what happened to Smriti, and the narrative rewards this labour with partial answers. The more productive reading, consistent with an intersectional feminist approach, is not that Jak's masculine mode of care is illegitimate but that it has been allowed to substitute for, rather than supplement, the bodily care his daughter requires day to day. The novel's quiet insistence that both forms of care are necessary, and that neither is sufficient alone, models a more integrated feminist ethics of care that resists assigning investigative authority to men and embodied labour to women as separate, non-overlapping domains.

13. The Political Economy of Care: Domestic Labour and Class in the Lilac House

A feminist disability studies reading also draws attention to the economic infrastructure that makes Smriti's care possible, an infrastructure the novel represents but does not always foreground as a subject of analysis in its own right. Round-the-clock care for a comatose patient requires nursing labour, household reorganisation, and financial resources that are unevenly distributed across the novel's female characters. Meera's own economic precarity after her husband's departure exists in implicit tension with the resources evidently available to sustain Smriti's care within the Lilac House, a tension that raises questions about class

and access that a purely psychological trauma framework tends to leave unexamined. Indian disability-studies scholarship has likewise shown that family care, gender, class, and personhood are socially organised rather than merely private matters (Addlakha, 2013; Ghai, 2018).

Attending to this economic dimension extends Garland-Thomson's and Wendell's insistence that disability is not simply an individual medical fact but a socially organised condition whose burdens are distributed according to existing hierarchies of gender, class, and kinship obligation. The household's female members, across generations, absorb the invisible labour of Smriti's care alongside their own domestic and emotional responsibilities, a form of doubled labour that mirrors, in intensified form, the everyday domestic burden the novel elsewhere associates with Meera. A fuller feminist economic reading of the novel would ask not only what Smriti's condition means, but what it costs, and to whom, questions that remain implicit in Nair's narrative but that a disability-attentive criticism is well positioned to make explicit.

14. Cultural and Religious Frames of Disability and Care in the Novel's Indian Setting

The novel's Bangalore setting situates its treatment of disability and trauma within culturally specific frameworks of family obligation, medical authority, and stigma that a purely Western theoretical apparatus can risk flattening if applied without adaptation. In many Indian households, caregiving for a dependent family member is understood less as an exceptional crisis than as an extension of expected filial and familial duty, particularly for women, a cultural expectation that can make the labour surrounding Smriti simultaneously more socially legible and more difficult to contest as unjust. This does not make Garland-Thomson's framework inapplicable, but it suggests that the gendered politics of care in the novel are inflected by specifically Indian norms of joint-family responsibility that differ from the more individualist assumptions underlying much Anglo-American feminist disability theory. This need for contextualisation is reinforced by South Asian disability scholarship, which cautions against

treating disability as a culturally universal category detached from local histories, kinship structures, gender relations, and representational practices (Ghai, 2018; Dawn, 2021; Singh, 2024).

Similarly, the near-total institutional silence surrounding Smriti's assault, the police indifference the novel depicts, reflects broader, well-documented patterns in the reporting and adjudication of sexual violence in India, where stigma frequently falls on survivors and their families rather than on perpetrators. Reading the novel's institutional failures through this local context, rather than treating them as a generic instance of patriarchal indifference, sharpens the paper's feminist trauma analysis: Smriti's silence is compounded not only by her physical condition but by a cultural climate in which speaking about sexual violence carries specific social costs for unmarried women and their families. A criticism attentive to this context can honour the specificity of the novel's setting while still drawing productively on trauma and disability frameworks developed elsewhere.

15. Reader Positioning and the Ethics of Witnessing

Because Smriti cannot narrate her own experience, the reader is placed in a position structurally similar to Jak's: an outside party piecing together a story from fragments, testimony, and inference. This positioning raises questions, central to trauma theory since Dori Laub's work on testimony, about what it means to witness suffering one cannot fully access or verify. The novel's withholding structure implicates the reader in the same interpretive labour it assigns to Jak, inviting a form of readerly complicity that mirrors his own risk of instrumentalising Smriti's body in service of narrative resolution.

A feminist disability-attentive reading asks the reader to notice this complicity rather than simply enjoy the pleasures of the mystery being solved. Just as Jak's investigation risks treating his daughter as evidence, the reader's desire to learn what happened to Smriti risks treating her comatose body as a plot device whose primary value lies in the answers it will eventually yield. Recognising this dynamic does not require

abandoning the pleasures of narrative suspense that the cyclone structure generates, but it does ask readers to hold those pleasures alongside an awareness that Smriti's embodied experience, whatever it may be, exceeds and is not exhausted by the mystery of her assault. An ethically responsive reading practice, in this sense, treats the withheld ending not only as a narrative payoff but as an occasion to reflect on the limits of what any outside witness, reader included, can claim to know about another person's embodied suffering.

16. Pedagogical Implications: Teaching Trauma and Disability Together

The dual framework developed in this paper has implications beyond literary interpretation for how *Lessons In Forgetting*, and comparable trauma narratives, might be taught. Classroom discussions of the novel that focus exclusively on gendered silence and voice risk reproducing the very conflation this paper has argued against, treating Smriti's coma as a symbol to be decoded rather than as an embodied condition to be understood on its own terms. Introducing feminist disability studies alongside feminist trauma theory in the syllabus gives students conceptual tools to distinguish between trauma as psychological event and disability as an ongoing, socially organised condition, a distinction that matters well beyond this particular text. Recent India-centred work in literary and visual disability studies further demonstrates the value of teaching cultural representation through intersectional attention to gender, class, sexuality, and embodied difference (Aneja & Vats, 2025).

Practically, instructors might pair close reading of Smriti's chapters with excerpts from Garland-Thomson or Wendell, asking students to identify moments where the narrative treats her condition metaphorically versus moments where it attends to the material specifics of her care. Such an exercise cultivates a transferable critical skill: the ability to recognise when literary texts use disabled characters as vehicles for other characters' development, a pattern feminist disability scholars have identified across a wide range of fiction, and to ask what a text would look like if the disabled character's own, however inaccessible, perspective

were held as consequential in its own right. Teaching the novel this way also opens productive comparison with other trauma narratives on the syllabus, encouraging students to ask, of any text depicting a psychologically or physically injured character, whose labour sustains that character's ongoing life, and whose story is being told through them.

17. Limitations of the Study and Directions for Future Research

This paper's analysis is limited by its reliance on a single primary text and by the necessarily interpretive nature of literary close reading, which cannot claim the kind of empirical verification available to social-scientific studies of caregiving or disability. The paper has also drawn primarily on foundational Anglo-American feminist trauma and disability theorists, Caruth, Herman, Garland-Thomson, and Wendell, whose frameworks, while widely influential, were developed with different cultural and institutional contexts in mind than the specifically Indian setting of Nair's novel. While this paper has attempted to note points of cultural specificity, a fuller account would engage more extensively with scholarship on disability and caregiving within South Asian contexts specifically, work that remains less consolidated in Anglophone literary criticism than the Western theoretical tradition this paper has drawn upon.

Future research might extend this dual framework to other novels in Nair's oeuvre and to comparable works of contemporary Indian English fiction that feature disabled or non-verbal characters, testing whether the pattern identified here, disability folded into trauma as metaphor rather than examined as embodied condition, holds more broadly across the tradition. A further avenue would be empirical or ethnographic research into the actual experiences of Indian families providing long-term care for comatose or severely disabled relatives, which could test, complicate, or enrich the literary claims this paper has made about the gendered distribution of caregiving labour. Finally, comparative work bringing feminist disability studies into dialogue with South Asian care ethics and joint-family norms could produce a theoretical framework better calibrated to texts like *Lessons In*

Forgetting than either Western trauma theory or Western disability studies applied alone. Such work could also draw on the expanding India-centred scholarship that connects disability with literature, media, gender, identity, and cultural representation (Dawn, 2021; Singh, 2024; Aneja & Vats, 2025).

18. Intertextual Resonances: Trauma and the Silenced Body in Related Fiction

Reading *Lessons In Forgetting* alongside other trauma narratives that feature non-verbal or severely injured characters clarifies what is generically familiar, and what is distinctive, about Nair's handling of Smriti. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, for instance, uses a figure who is neither fully living nor fully able to narrate her own history to force other characters, and readers, into an act of collective remembering; the community's labour of interpretation around *Beloved* has some structural kinship with the household's labour of interpretation around Smriti. Laurie Vickroy's work on trauma and survival in contemporary fiction has argued that such narrative strategies, in which a wounded or silenced body organises the plot without directly narrating it, are a recurring feature of trauma fiction across national traditions, precisely because they formally enact trauma's resistance to direct telling. What distinguishes Nair's novel within this broader tradition is the specifically medical, rather than supernatural or symbolic, register in which Smriti's condition is presented. Unlike *Beloved*'s ambiguously spectral embodiment, Smriti's coma is rendered through the concrete vocabulary of prognosis, physiotherapy, and nursing rotas, a choice that resists the more common literary tendency, which Wendell and Garland-Thomson both criticise, to dissolve disabled embodiment into metaphor or myth. Anne Whitehead's account of trauma fiction's formal innovations, its fragmentation,

repetition, and belatedness, describes techniques Nair also deploys, but Whitehead's framework, like Caruth's, was developed primarily around texts in which the traumatised figure eventually speaks or writes. Smriti's persistent non-verbality places *Lessons In Forgetting* at the edge of what trauma fiction theory typically anticipates, and this is precisely the pressure point at which feminist disability studies proves indispensable: it supplies a vocabulary for a trauma narrative whose central wounded figure may never regain the capacity for the kind of retrospective narration trauma theory usually expects of a survivor, and asks what ethical and interpretive obligations remain when that narration never arrives.

19. Conclusion

Reading Anita Nair's *Lessons In Forgetting* through feminist trauma theory alongside feminist disability studies reveals an identity-reconstruction narrative that is collective and embodied rather than purely individual and psychological. Meera and Jak's parallel journeys of memory and self-reconstitution are conventionally central to the novel's feminist concerns, but Smriti's disabled, comatose body deserves equal analytical attention, both as the material consequence of gendered violence and as an embodied condition with its own ethical demands that exceed its symbolic function within the plot. Attending to disability alongside trauma and gender does not diminish the novel's feminist force; it deepens it, exposing how the labour of care, largely performed and absorbed by women, is itself a feminist issue that literary criticism of trauma narratives has often left underexamined. Future scholarship on Nair's fiction and on Indian English trauma narratives more broadly, would benefit from sustained attention to disability as a category of analysis in its own right rather than as a figure for psychological states alone.

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