

Unclaimed Experience and the Belated Return of Trauma in Anita Nair's *Eating Wasps*

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HOW TO CITE: | ABSTRACT:

Jatinder Kumar, Showkat Ahmad Naik, Shafayat Hussain (2026). Unclaimed Experience and the Belated Return of Trauma in Anita Nair's *Eating Wasps*. International Journal of Special Education, 41(24s), 346 - 352

This paper examines Anita Nair's *Eating Wasps* (2018) through the lens of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, particularly the concepts of "unclaimed experience" and the belated return of trauma elaborated in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Nair's novel interweaves the stories of ten women whose lives are marked by patriarchal violence, sexual abuse, social ostracism, and psychological rupture. At its centre stands Sreelakshmi, a writer who dies by suicide in 1965; her calcified finger bone later circulates among contemporary women at a Kerala riverside resort, becoming a spectral witness that both embodies and transmits unassimilated trauma across generations. Drawing on Caruth's insistence that trauma is not fully experienced at the moment of its occurrence but returns belatedly through intrusive repetitions, flashbacks, and narrative fragmentation, the study analyses how the novel stages trauma as a crisis of knowing and representation. Sreelakshmi's ghostly presence, the recursive structure of the women's testimonies, and the metaphor of "eating wasps" itself illustrate the latency of traumatic experience and the difficulty of claiming it within conventional historical or personal narratives. Characters such as the child-abuse survivor Megha, the acid-attack survivor Najma, and the stalked journalist Urvashi exemplify the delayed, haunting return of wounds that resist linear narration and full assimilation. By reading Nair's multi-voiced, non-linear narrative alongside Caruth's theoretical framework, the paper argues that *Eating Wasps* does more than depict individual suffering; it enacts the ethical and literary imperative to listen to the "voice that cries out" from the site of trauma. In doing so, the novel transforms unclaimed experience into a collective, intergenerational witnessing that both preserves the enigma of trauma and opens the possibility of its belated articulation.

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Keywords: Anita Nair, *Eating Wasps*, Trauma, Unclaimed Experience, Desire, Feminism, Gendered Violence.

Introduction

Literary trauma theory, particularly as formulated by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), posits that traumatic shock is not fully registered at the moment of its physical occurrence. Instead, it remains an “unclaimed experience”, an event missed in real time due to its sensory overwhelm, which subsequently returns through intrusive repetitions, temporal dislocations, and narrative fragmentation. Caruth defines trauma as a fundamental crisis of knowing and representation: a breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and language that defies linear storytelling. When applied to contemporary Anglophone Indian women's writing, this framework illuminates how structural patriarchal violence operates not only as immediate physical coercion, but as an ongoing, intergenerational condition of psychological rupture and enforced silence.

Anita Nair's novel *Eating Wasps* (2018) provides a compelling literary formalization of Caruth's theoretical paradigm. Set along the banks of the Nila River in Kerala, the novel interweaves the lives of ten women across different generations, classes, and social positions, each bearing the weight of gendered trauma, ranging from child sexual abuse and cyber-stalking to acid attacks and societal ostracism. At the narrative's center stands Sreelakshmi, a mid-twentieth-century writer modeled in part on the Malayalam author Rajalakshmi, who dies by suicide in 1965 after facing public vilification for writing openly about female desire. Sreelakshmi's calcified finger bone, salvaged from her funeral pyre by her lover, circulates among contemporary women at a riverside resort, acting as a spectral witness that physically and discursively transmits unassimilated trauma across temporal boundaries.

Rather than treating trauma as a discrete, healable episode, *Eating Wasps* constructs a multi-voiced, non-linear architecture that refuses redemptive closure. Through its central metaphor, swallowing a stinging wasp in childhood under the mistaken expectation of sweetness, the novel

establishes how the initial wound produces a persistent, bitter aftertaste that shapes the characters' socio-existential realities. This paper explores how Nair's novel operationalizes Caruthian trauma theory to stage gendered violence as a problem of belated address, demonstrating how spectrality, material relics, and formal fragmentation transform isolated, individual suffering into a collective, intergenerational ethics of witnessing.

In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Caruth defines trauma as an overwhelming event that is not fully experienced or integrated when it happens. The traumatic encounter is missed in the moment; it exceeds the mind's capacity to grasp it in real time. Consequently, it returns later through intrusive, repetitive phenomena; flashbacks, nightmares, compulsive re-enactments, and other forms of involuntary return that breach the mind's ordinary experience of time and self. Drawing on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Caruth describes trauma as “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind,” a “breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world” that remains inaccessible until it “imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.”

Trauma is therefore fundamentally “unclaimed”: the most direct encounter with violence paradoxically takes the form of an inability to know or represent it fully. For Caruth, this crisis of knowing is not a failure of memory alone but a structural feature of trauma itself. The event is experienced “too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known” and is therefore not available to consciousness until it returns belatedly. Literature, she argues, does not simply describe trauma; it can bear witness to this crisis through formal rupture, through gaps, repetitions, temporal dislocations, and the refusal of coherent storytelling rather than through linear, redemptive narrative.

The truth of trauma, in Caruth's formulation, “in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and

our language” (Caruth 4). This insistence on the structural latency of trauma, its inherent forgetting, and its capacity to address others across time provides the theoretical framework through which Nair’s novel can be read as a formalisation of unclaimed experience.

Spectral Witnessing and the Materiality of Belated Return

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth emphasizes that trauma is characterized by its delayed appearance: because the mind fails to assimilate the overwhelming event as it occurs, the past continuously invades the present through involuntary, non-linear returns. In *Eating Wasps*, Nair formalizes this temporal disruption through the spectral presence of Sreelakshmi and the physical circulation of her preserved finger bone. Nair’s *Eating Wasps* embodies this Caruthian structure at every level. The narrative does not progress chronologically. It oscillates between past and present, interweaving the stories of Sreelakshmi, Urvashi, Megha, Najma, Liliana, Maya, and other women from different generations, classes, and social positions. These stories are not linked by causal sequence or progressive revelation. Instead, they are connected by the circulating “forgotten bone”, a finger bone retrieved from Sreelakshmi’s cremation by her lover Markose and by Sreelakshmi’s posthumous voice.

Sreelakshmi, modelled in part on the Malayalam writer Rajalakshmi who died by suicide in 1965, speaks from beyond death: “Once, I had a name Sreelakshmi. Once, I was a woman. Once, I was a writer, whose stories evoked love as much as disgust, inciting anger... Once, I had withstood sting of wasps” (Nair 4). Her spectral narration and the circulating bone function as the literal and figurative return of an experience that was never fully assimilated in life. The trauma of silencing, the public condemnation of a woman who dared to write about love and sexuality, and the final act of suicide remain unclaimed during her lifetime. They return only after her death, haunting the living women who encounter her residual presence. In Caruth’s terms, Sreelakshmi’s trauma is not resolved by death;

death itself becomes the site from which the unclaimed experience continues to address others.

The bone is not a relic of closure but a material sign of belated return, an object that carries the missed encounter into the present, forcing those who hold it into a relationship with what remains unknown and unintegrated. As the bone passes through the hands of various women at a riverside resort on the banks of the Nila, Sreelakshmi becomes both ghost and writer, able to “hear thoughts even if they don’t tell her” and to “read the silences and shape their stories.” This dual position; spectral and narrative allows the novel to stage trauma as something that continues to speak across temporal and generational divides without ever achieving full representational mastery. The calcified finger bone acts as a material signifier of latency: an unburied, unintegrated fragment of history that forces those who touch it into an implicit relationship with Sreelakshmi’s silenced past and their own repressed wounds.

Embodied Latency and the Reiteration of Gendered Violence

Beyond its overarching spectral structure, *Eating Wasps* illustrates Caruth’s concept of trauma as a crisis of representation through the specific, embodied experiences of its contemporary female characters. The novel’s controlling title metaphor; Sreelakshmi swallowing a wasp while expecting the sweetness of a honeybee enacts the exact mechanism of structural latency. As a child, Sreelakshmi mistakes a wasp for a honey bee and swallows it, expecting sweetness only to receive its sting: “As it came closer, I opened my mouth... No, that isn’t a honey bee. It’s a wasp with a sting that is very painful” (Nair 18). Later, her grandmother offers her honey to soothe the experience, but the wasp’s taste lingers, making honey itself unpalatable. This incident is not merely symbolic of punished female desire or the dangers of seeking autonomy within a patriarchal society. It enacts the very structure of trauma as Caruth describes it.

The moment of injury is not fully grasped at the time; the child cannot yet know the meaning of

what has entered her body. Its significance arrives only belatedly, as a bitter, repetitive aftertaste that shapes the entire narrative. The wasp becomes the figure of an experience that was missed in the moment of its occurrence, and that continues to return through memory, through metaphor, through the lives of other women as an unassimilable residue. Trauma here is not an isolated historical event that can be located, narrated, and overcome. It is a continuous temporal rupture that remains inscribed in fragmented, non-chronological form. The title itself, *Eating Wasps*, thus names both a childhood act of misrecognition and a lifelong pattern of encountering the bitter where sweetness was expected, of absorbing experiences whose full force registers only later.

This formal discontinuity mirrors the individual experiences the novel stages, each of which can be read as a further instance of unclaimed trauma:

Megha (Childhood Sexual Abuse and Familial Silencing): In Megha's story, Nair presents childhood sexual abuse not as a fully known or mastered event but as a scene whose violence exceeds the child's capacity for assimilation. Megha, a young schoolgirl, is groomed and violated by the van driver "Uncle Prem," who exploits her need for affection. When he forces his tongue into her mouth, the narrative registers the bodily violation without granting the child a coherent understanding of what is happening: "She opened her mouth obediently. His tongue felt like a snake. A fat, wet snake that probed her mouth and arched around her tongue" (Nair 32). The description captures the sensory overwhelm of the encounter while simultaneously marking the gap in knowledge.

Megha cannot fully claim the experience as abuse in the moment; it remains, in Caruth's sense, unassimilated. When she later bites Prem's hand in resistance, her family compounds the original wound by demanding that she apologise to her abuser in the name of social respectability: "I want you to apologise to the girl you fought with, and to Prem" (Nair 36). The second injury, the forced apology enforces silence and prevents the trauma from entering collective knowledge. What

was already unclaimed at the level of individual experience is further barred from recognition by the social demand for decorum. The result is a doubled trauma that remains unavailable to consciousness and returns only later, in the novel's fragmented and non-linear telling.

Nair writes about the traumatic condition of Megha in the novel when Urvashi finds her in a frightened state: "She flung open the doors of the cupboard and gasped. Inside sat a little child with eyes that seemed frozen in fright, her thumb in her mouth. Her face was pale and she sat crouched with her knees to her chin. Seeing Urvashi, she shrunk even further: 'No... no...Uncle...' she whimpered" (Nair 39). Urvashi further describes as "'Something has frightened her very badly,' she said softly, stroking the little girl's hair. 'She kept saying, No, no, Uncle. Who is this Uncle?'" (Nair 40). Megha's story thus exemplifies Caruth's insistence that trauma is not simply what happens, but what fails to be fully experienced and therefore continues to return. The child's obedience, the sensory detail of the "snake," and the subsequent familial silencing together produce a structure of latency: the event is registered bodily and sensorially, yet remains outside the realm of fully claimed knowledge until its belated narrative return.

Urvashi (Cyber-Stalking and Technological Intrusion): Urvashi's experience of cyber-stalking further illustrates the belated and repetitive character of trauma. After she ends an extramarital affair, her former lover subjects her to relentless digital surveillance, threats involving explicit images, and psychological terror. The messages arrive from ever-changing numbers: "Her phone beeped with a flurry of messages. Once again it was a new number. Each time she blocked his number, he appeared in a new guise, her stalker her own ten-headed Ravana" (Nair 74). The violence is non-physical, yet it produces hyper-vigilance, panic, and dissociation. The phone, once a neutral instrument of communication, becomes the site of repeated intrusion.

Crucially, the trauma is not located in a single, containable moment that can be isolated and processed. It returns compulsively through technological repetition, refusing closure and disrupting ordinary temporal continuity. Each new message reopens the wound, enacting the very structure of belated return that Caruth identifies. The digital medium intensifies the Caruthian logic: the traumatic address continues to arrive after the original relationship has ended, from positions that cannot be fully blocked or anticipated. Urvashi's experience demonstrates that trauma's belatedness is not limited to the psyche's internal repetitions; it can be externalised and prolonged through contemporary technologies of surveillance and harassment. In this way, Nair updates Caruth's framework for a digital age, showing how the "belated address" of trauma can be mediated by devices that ensure the wound remains open and repeatedly imposed upon the present.

Najma (Acid Attack and the Mirror of Confrontation): Najma's acid attack presents trauma as a wound that transforms the body itself into a permanent site of belated confrontation. After she rejects a man's advances, her face is burned with acid: "Do you know what it feels like to have acid on your skin? ... Do you know what it's like to look at yourself in the mirror with one eye and know you will never be you again?" (Nair 63). The physical injury is immediate, yet its full meaning, the attempted erasure of identity, the public marking of female refusal arrives only in the aftermath, through the repeated acts of looking and being looked at. The mirror becomes the scene of belated recognition: Najma encounters the consequences of the attack not in the moment of violence itself but in the ongoing, repetitive confrontation with her altered face.

Her decision to refuse the veil and to face the world does not resolve or master the trauma. Rather, it keeps the wound visible, forcing a continued encounter with what cannot be fully assimilated or erased: "She looked out of the window. 'Ammi, she told her mother, who sat drenched in attar in a Jannat free of hope and fear-for isn't that what heaven is like? I did it. I did what you asked of me, I faced the world. I

will never hide behind a burkha again...I am Najma'" (Nair 67). In Caruthian terms, Najma's scarred body becomes a site where the unclaimed experience continues to return and to address both herself and those who see her. The trauma remains, in an important sense, unclaimed; it is not overcome but kept in circulation through visibility itself. The body's transformation into a permanent marker of the missed encounter underscores Caruth's point that trauma is not a simple, healable event but a breach that restructures the experience of self and world across time.

Other women in the novel, including Liliana, Maya, Theresa, and Brinda, further extend this pattern of belated and unassimilated experience. Their stories of social prejudice, depression, online bullying, unfaithful partners, and the burdens of caregiving similarly resist linear resolution. Maya's struggle with widowhood and the care of an autistic adult son, for instance, involves a continuous negotiation with loss that cannot be fully processed or contained. Across these narratives, the circulating bone and Sreelakshmi's spectral voice create a network of address: trauma does not remain the private property of any single subject but passes between women, allowing each missed encounter to resonate with others without achieving full knowledge or closure. The novel's structure itself, oscillating, discontinuous, and multi-perspectival, mirrors the temporal rupture that Caruth identifies as central to trauma. There is no overarching plot that gathers these stories into a coherent whole; instead, the form testifies to the impossibility of such coherence when the subject matter is the unclaimed experience of gendered violence and silencing.

Across these narratives, Nair does not offer trauma as something that can be mastered, fully told, or redeemed through narrative coherence. The novel performs Caruth's central insight: that trauma's truth, "in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language" (Caruth 4). The circulating bone, Sreelakshmi's spectral voice, the discontinuous structure of the narrative, and the

recurring wasp metaphor all register the persistent gap between experience and knowledge. Storytelling in *Eating Wasps* does not claim to reclaim the unclaimed or to convert trauma into a completed story.

Instead, it testifies to the impossibility of full assimilation while allowing the address of trauma to pass from one woman to another across time. The novel becomes a literary space in which the missed encounter continues to speak, through fragmentation, through spectral presence, through the refusal of linear resolution. In this respect, Nair's formal choices; non-linearity, spectral narration, the material persistence of the bone do not merely illustrate Caruth's theory; they enact it. The text itself becomes a site of belated return, a structure in which the unclaimed experience of trauma continues to impose itself upon the reader without offering the consolation of full understanding or redemptive mastery.

Conclusion

Through its non-linear construction, spectral devices, and recurring motifs, *Eating Wasps* demonstrates that trauma cannot be reduced to a discrete historical event capable of neat narrative resolution. By reading Nair's novel alongside Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*, this study highlights how the text formalizes the very mechanics of trauma, its latency, belated return, and its refusal to submit to chronological order. The novel's strength lies in its refusal to offer easy redemptive arcs or therapeutic closure for its characters. Instead, the persistent circulation of Sreelakshmi's bone and the lingering aftertaste of

the swallowed wasp register trauma as an ongoing breach in the socio-symbolic order.

In this way, Nair formalises Caruth's theory within a specifically Indian, gendered landscape of desire, silencing, and patriarchal violence. Trauma appears not as a discrete historical event that can be located, narrated, and overcome, but as a rupture in time and representation that continues to return. The novel situates this rupture within the particular pressures faced by women in India across different historical moments: the constraints on female education and singlehood in the mid-twentieth century (as experienced by Sreelakshmi), the persistence of familial and social demands for silence around sexual abuse, the emergence of digital forms of harassment, and the bodily marking of female refusal through acid attacks. By interweaving these experiences without reducing them to a single narrative of progress or recovery, Nair insists on the structural latency of trauma even as social conditions change.

Ultimately, Nair's work expands Caruthian trauma theory by grounding its abstract, psychoanalytic premises within the specific socio-cultural realities of contemporary Indian womanhood. *Eating Wasps* transforms the individual, privatized pain of patriarchal oppression into a collective, intergenerational practice of witnessing. By allowing the "voice that cries out" from the site of trauma to resonate across temporal and spatial boundaries, the novel establishes an ethical imperative for literature: not to forcefully claim or overwrite the silenced past, but to create a narrative space that honours the unassimilated weight of unclaimed experience.

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