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MA Thesis

***Representations of Trauma in Selected
Contemporary Novels***

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master's Degree

By

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Under The Supervision of

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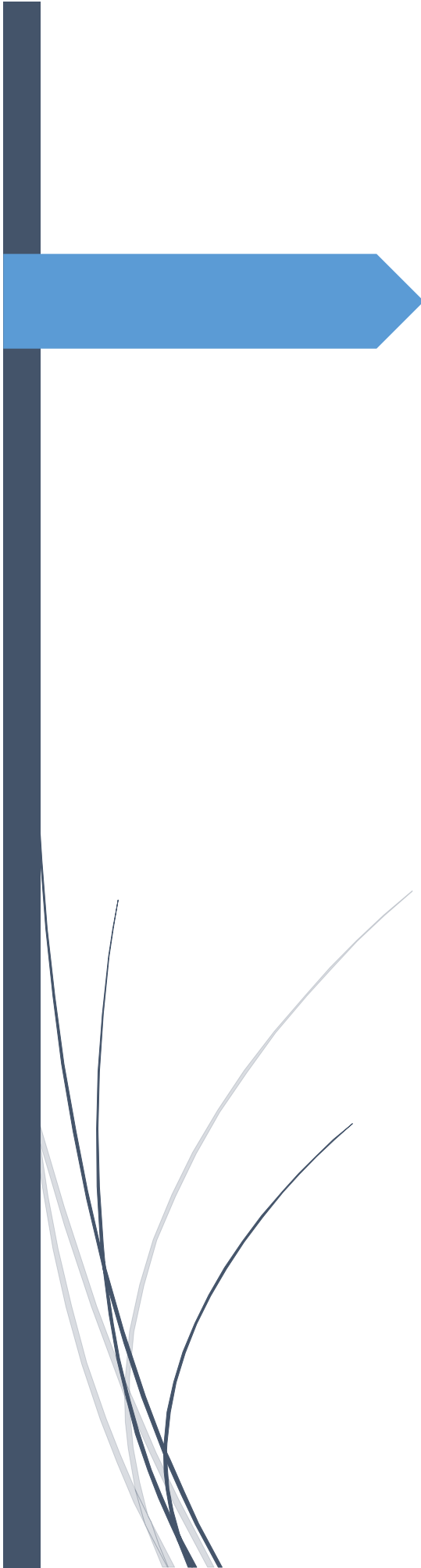
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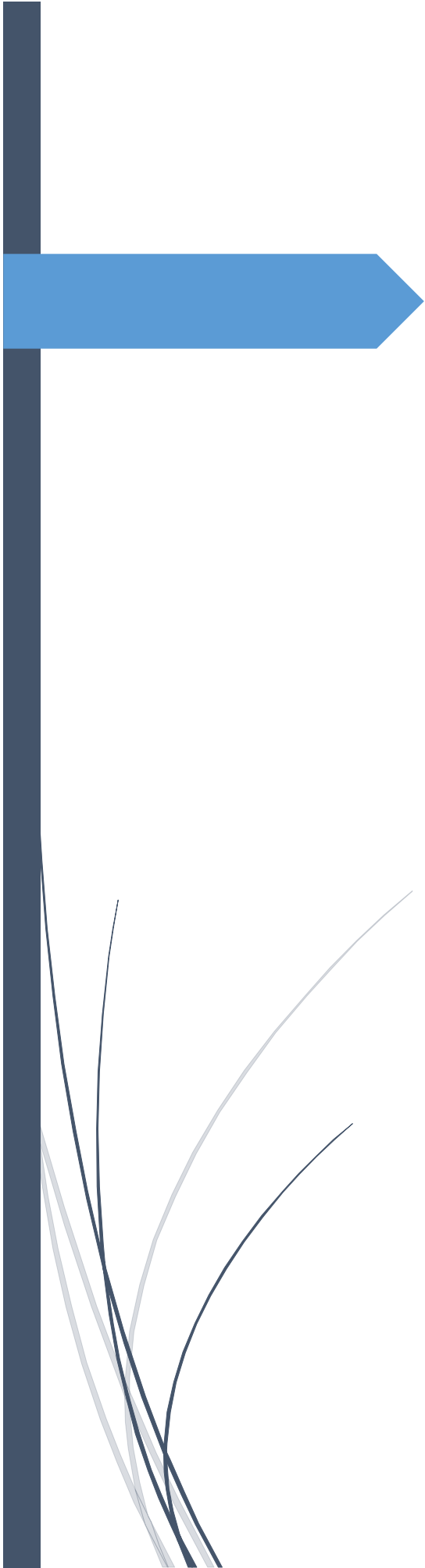
Outstandingly, he has been my role model and the one I look up to. I am truly thankful for his unwavering support and his unfailing belief and trust in me. He ignited my passion, gave me a boost, encouraged, uplifted and motivated me to make it through this stage confidently, steadily and successfully.

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PREFACE

Preface

“There are wounds that never show on the body that are deeper and more hurtful than anything that bleeds.” – Laurell K. Hamilton, *Mistral’s Kiss*

“Trauma shapes all our lives, in so many ways. We are walking wounds, but I am not sure any of us know quite how to talk about it.” – Roxane Gay, *Writing into the Wound: Understanding Trauma, Truth and Language*

“There is no pleasure to be had in writing about trauma. It requires opening a wound, looking into the bloody gape of it, and cleaning it out, one word at a time. Only then might it be possible for that wound to heal.” – Roxane Gay, *Writing into the Wound: Understanding Trauma, Truth and Language*

Throughout the centuries, trauma as an important ingredient of the human condition has been prevalent in distinctive distressing and disturbing life tragedies, in a very alarming way. Ever since the 1990’s, along with World War I and II, the interest in the literary study of psychological trauma has grown rapidly. The urge to attain insight, understanding, and awareness about the complexity of trauma, as well as its debilitating effects, makes this area of study and research of paramount importance. This is why I was drawn to trauma theory in specific, since it is more than just a literary theory that offers a theoretical framework for the analysis of literary works, rather a factual, down to earth approach and touches upon real life experiences. On one hand, it acknowledges existential issues such as vulnerability, suffering, and pain, yet draws upon the probability of healing and recovery, on the other hand. Thus, the significant role of trauma theory in literature is being a medium for recognition and expression of traumatic experiences,

as well as therapeutically voicing the traumatized, which indeed aligns with the line of thought of the above opening lines.

In an age profoundly defined and characterized by trauma, it is equally sad and surprising that the world is becoming increasingly more inclined to being numb and /or indifferent to trauma and its manifestations, silencing the traumatized, muzzling their mouth, and asking them to measure up against their suffering on their own. This drives and intrigues human beings to figure out the cause-effect relationship of traumatic incidents and their implications in order to unravel their causality, search for meaning, and make sense out of the events in their life arenas. Unlike the aforementioned tendency of desensitization to trauma, literature gracefully validates trauma, embraces the traumatized, and provides ample space for the exploration of traumatic experiences via introspection, retrospection, flashbacks, recalled memories and remembrances that feature trauma, pain, suffering, and wound. It is also empowering in the way it utilizes language to explore the inner world of the human mind. When being faced with human suffering and the universally shared experience of trauma, trauma studies in literature attempt to address this existential issue. According to Caruth (1995), literature is capable of representing the unrepresentable nature of trauma, since it specializes in catering and unravelling its complicated nature , comprehending it, expressing its peculiarity, and compensating the belittling watering down of its sophisticated workings and manifestations .

To seek better understanding of the complicated concept of trauma, “we must broaden our brush stroke beyond definitions derived by medicine, psychology, and neuroscience [...] [and] reach out to the world of language itself”, as argued by John Wilson and Jacob Lindy

(qtd. in Maurer 234). In *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, Laplanche defines trauma as follows:

An event in the life of a subject which is characterized by the fact that a set of physical and/or psychic stimuli affecting the personality exceeds the tolerance level of the individual's given developmental stage/ condition. The individual, therefore, is incapable by the usual means available of preventing, stopping or effectively processing this set of psychically damaging stimuli or of restoring the previous state of balance. (486)

With reference to the above, since psychological trauma is central to the thesis, I am keen to clarify how the term 'trauma' is used in the contextual literary trauma theory. In this study, psychological trauma refers to the destructive psychic wounds, which disrupt one's status quo or the current individual's experience of the present. Hence, the theory is concerned with the impact of trauma on individuals and offers an insight into their damaged psyche.

The thesis conducts an analysis of the representation of trauma in two selected novels of the early 21st century, which are *Trauma* (2007) by Patrick McGrath and *Life of Pi* (2001) by Yann Martel. The thesis examines the common trauma elements presented differently in terms of experience, manifestation, and representation. The first novel, *Trauma* by Patrick McGrath, elucidates the paradoxical nature of the absence/presence of trauma and its representation. The text unfolds the mystery of the protagonist who takes psychiatry as a profession through which he treats different cases of traumatized patients. Eventually, he

realizes that he has been living for ages since his childhood with a deep-seated trauma of which he has never been fully aware and that he has been *acting out* his suppressed traumatic experience without fully realizing it until triggered by an eye-opening event that begins the resolution of his hidden pain. The second novel *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel takes at its focal point the narration of a first-hand traumatic experience embedded in some events that befall the protagonist. It results in a cathartic journey of knowledge that wreaks havoc on his psyche where he tries to work through and survive a shipwreck, the loss of his family, guilt of his own survival, and the physical brutality of the incidents that befell him. As the novels analyzed in the thesis suggest, fiction is a medium of possibility, which has the ability to inscribe the impossible traumatic experiences better than other realistic forms of art. Albert Camus (1913-1960), author of *The Stranger*, believed that “Fiction is the lie through which we tell the truth” (qtd. in Collier 14). Accordingly, fiction writers have at their fingertips the ability to create and imagine alternative stories that acknowledge diverse traumatic encounters and responses, which correspond to the complexity of the individual survivors. Hence, both novels are an embodiment of actual real traumatic encounters and an exemplification of probable trauma representation through fiction.

The thesis will first set out to explore what really constitutes trauma and traumatic experiences. It will then provide an exploration of the manifestations of trauma and the controversy whether trauma responses are uniform or not. Lastly, the thesis will draw on the relationship between narrative and trauma, which is one of the central debatable issues in trauma theory. It argues that developing a narrative form is a necessary representation tool to account for trauma, yet it