

## THE REPRESENTATION OF UNCLAIMED EXPERIENCE IN MURATA'S *EARTHLINGS*

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the representation of trauma in Sayaka Murata's novel *Earthlings* through its protagonist, Natsuki, who experiences sexual abuse and domestic violence from childhood. This research aims to analyze how hidden traumatic experiences are represented within Cathy Caruth's framework of Unclaimed Experience. This research uses literary criticism methods to explain the trauma in the novel. The results show that Natsuki's trauma manifests in five main forms: dissociation, emotional numbness, sensory disturbances, unspeakability, and cognitive confusion. These findings indicate that traumatic experiences never fully claimed by consciousness continue to resurface in fragmented and unconscious ways, shaping the protagonist's inner world throughout the narrative.

**Keywords:** Cathy Caruth; *Earthlings*; Japanese Literature; Trauma; Unclaimed Experience

### **INTRODUCTION**

In many parts of the world, violence against children, particularly sexual and domestic violence, still occurs frequently but is rarely reported. A study by Cagney et al. (2025) published in *The Lancet*, which examined 204 countries, found that in 2023, up to 18.9% of girls and 14.8% of boys had experienced sexual violence. According to the National Survey on the Life Experiences of Children and Adolescents (SNPHAR) conducted by KemenPPPA (2024), 50.78% of adolescents aged 13 to 17 had experienced violence at some point in their lives. Furthermore, 70% of these cases involved the same victims who had experienced repeated violence. Nevertheless, KemenPPPA (2025) acknowledges that victims still struggle to speak out and feel threatened when attempting to report their experiences. The gap between actual prevalence and official reports reveals a deeply hidden social reality. These data represent more than just numbers; they symbolize children trapped by social expectations to follow the rules, lacking a safe space to express their trauma.

Caruth (1996, pp. 2–3) figures trauma as a wound that leaves a scar and takes a long time to heal: traumatic experience, in her account, is not merely the enigma of the victim's repetitive and unconscious actions but also the enigma of the distorted human voice

screaming from the wound, a voice that bears witness to a truth that cannot be fully known.

In Sayaka Murata's novel *Earthlings* (2020), psychological trauma is presented through Natsuki, a child who experiences sexual abuse by her teacher and violence from her family. First published in Japanese in 2018 and translated into English by Ginny Tapley Takemori in 2020, the novel reflects Murata's recurring concern with gender, reproductive norms, social conformity, and dystopian forms of everyday life. In *Earthlings*, Natsuki's trauma is not represented primarily through direct explanation; instead, it appears through the mechanisms by which her mind avoids events too painful to process. She does not immediately understand or consciously claim the abuse. Rather, she creates an alternative inner world that protects her from the pain caused by violence and abandonment. This representation reflects Caruth's (1996) view that trauma is not fully experienced at the moment of occurrence but returns through its lingering and disruptive effects. A literary work depends on characters who feel authentic and convincing: when an author brings a character to life through a strong and credible portrayal, readers more easily grasp the human experiences the narrative intends to convey (Khan, 2021).

Several previous researchers have examined *Earthlings* through various theoretical approaches. Hasnain & Hasnain (2025) use a Deleuzian philosophical framework to analyze identity construction, arguing that Natsuki's sense of self is produced through ongoing processes of de-territorialization rather than through a fixed, unified core. Alradaan (2026), using a Jungian psychoanalytical framework, argues that Natsuki's final act of cannibalism signifies the eruption of the collective shadow over the conscious mind as a consequence of long-repressed trauma and memories that were never consciously integrated. Dalmi (2022) analyzes representations of children's experiences of violence through Judith Herman's approach, which frames trauma recovery as a process of safety, remembrance, and reconnection after the traumatic event has been consciously acknowledged. Figueira and Ferreira (2025) examine the public, domestic, and sexual violence Natsuki endures, showing how her dissociative responses function as a protective strategy against mistreatment.

In addition to studies on Murata's novel, several scholars have applied Cathy Caruth's trauma theory to other literary texts, including Sartika (2020), Lu & Zhang (2023), Swarna & Karunambigai (2025), Dash & Sarangi (2025), Wajiran & Maslida (2025), Namboodiripad (2025), and Hafeez & Akhter (2025). These studies show that a Caruthian reading of trauma foregrounds belatedness, fragmentation, and the failure of consciousness to register an event when it occurs. This emphasis differs from identity-centered readings of *Earthlings*, such as the Deleuzian and Jungian approaches, as well as from Hermanian and sociological readings that focus on recovery stages or the social hierarchy of violence.

Although extensive research on trauma exists, there remains a lack of focus on contemporary Japanese novels, particularly Sayaka Murata's *Earthlings*. Researchers also continue to debate how trauma should be understood and measured in literary studies (Haleshappa V.V & Zaidi, 2024). Previous studies of *Earthlings* have not specifically

analyzed Natsuki's traumatic experience through Caruth's concept of Unclaimed Experience, which refers to traumatic events that are not fully present in consciousness when they occur and later return in disruptive, fragmented, and recurring forms. Herman's (1992) framework, as applied by Dalmi (2022), presupposes some degree of conscious recognition as a condition for recovery. By contrast, the Deleuzian reading by Hasnain & Hasnain (2025) and the Jungian reading by Alradaan (2026) focus primarily on identity fragmentation and repressed unconscious contents. Caruth's (1996) concept is therefore useful for this research because it specifically addresses trauma that resists consciousness at the moment of occurrence. This distinction is important because Natsuki's abuse is never witnessed, believed, or processed by those around her; consequently, a recovery-oriented or purely identity-oriented framework cannot fully explain why her trauma persists in fragmented and involuntary forms. This gap serves as the basis for the present research.

This research presents a novel perspective by defining trauma as a psychological experience that is not fully recognized by the individual at the time of occurrence. Trauma subsequently manifests in five forms of Unclaimed Experience identified in Natsuki: dissociation, emotional numbness, sensory disturbances, unspeakability, and cognitive confusion. The research question is: How does the novel *Earthlings* represent the protagonist's trauma within the framework of Cathy Caruth's concept of Unclaimed Experience?

## METHOD

This research employs literary criticism. It falls within the field of literary studies, specifically literary psychology, with a focus on analyzing literary texts that represent delayed trauma in contemporary Japanese novels. The researcher employs Caruth's (1996) trauma theory as the primary theoretical framework, specifically the concept of Unclaimed Experience, which serves as an analytical tool to understand how traumatic experiences are represented through the protagonist's unconscious responses throughout the narrative. This concept is used consistently as the single lens for interpreting all data, rather than as one of several competing frameworks, so that the analysis remains focused on the single research question guiding this research.

The data are derived from Sayaka Murata's novel *Earthlings*, translated into English by Ginny Tapley Takemori and published by Grove Press in 2020 (247 pages). The data are extracted from words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that reflect the protagonist's traumatic experiences and the responses to trauma. The data collection process was conducted in several stages. First, the researcher carefully reads the novel using a close-reading approach. Second, the researcher identified passages that indicate Natsuki's unrecognized trauma and highlighted relevant details. Third, the researcher consulted references related to trauma theory, literary psychology, and previous studies of *Earthlings*. The researcher then grouped the selected data according to recurring patterns in Natsuki's responses to trauma. The five analytical categories—dissociation, emotional

numbness, sensory disturbance, unspeakability, and cognitive confusion—were derived through repeated close reading of scenes in which Natsuki's trauma appears indirectly through bodily, emotional, linguistic, and cognitive disruptions. Finally, the researcher interpreted the data through Caruth's concept of Unclaimed Experience in order to answer the research question.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The novel follows the protagonist, Natsuki, who is still in elementary school when the traumatic events occur. She is portrayed as a character who experiences sexual abuse by her private tutor and suffers violence from her family and community. All data findings are drawn from the novel *Earthlings* by Sayaka Murata and analyzed through Caruth's (1996) framework of Unclaimed Experience.

### *Dissociation*

Dissociation is a condition in which trauma causes a fragmentation of the mind, where traumatic memories become separated from consciousness, leading to a lack of understanding of the event. Caruth (1996) argues that such extreme experiences can cause the victim to separate from their body and mind to protect themselves from the immense pressure resulting from the event. Within the framework of Unclaimed Experience, dissociation is a moment of consciousness leaving the body precisely as the traumatic event occurs, rendering that experience never truly present in the victim's consciousness.

The dissociation Natsuki experienced occurred precisely at the moment she was sexually abused by her private tutor, Mr. Igasaki. Datum 1 illustrates how Natsuki left her body using what she describes as magical powers, preventing her from feeling what Mr. Igasaki was doing to her.

#### *Datum 1*

*"Suddenly my vision crumpled. Before I knew it, I had left my body and was looking down from the ceiling at Mr. Igasaki holding my head. Wow, I must have summoned a super strong magical power. I had no idea how, since I hadn't used my wand or mirror. But despite this spectacular magic, I felt no emotion whatsoever and simply watched my own body in silence from the ceiling. Seeing Mr. Igasaki holding my skull and using my head as a tool, I vaguely understood. I'd thought I wasn't yet a fully fledged member of the Factory, but actually I was already one of its tools after all. Mr. Igasaki was talking to my body, which was now empty since I was up on the ceiling"*  
(Murata, 2020, p. 50)

This datum describes the moment when Natsuki's mind undergoes dissociation as an unintentional coping mechanism. As a child, Natsuki describes the experience as a very powerful magical force, demonstrating how the mind seeks to transform an experience the body cannot endure into something harmless. Natsuki experienced something psychologically excruciating, yet she was unable to acknowledge the event directly. This aligns with Caruth's (1996) view that the event occurred too quickly and unexpectedly, causing a dissociation of consciousness that left the experience never consciously

possessed. Natsuki's consciousness was present enough to observe, but she could not feel it directly.

The brief, fragmentary awareness Natsuki retains while dissociated is consistent with Caruth's (1996, p. 4) argument that trauma is not locatable in the original event itself but in the way its unassimilated nature – the way it was precisely not known in the first instance – returns to haunt the survivor later on. This datum does not show a protective mechanism failing, but rather an event that was never assimilated in the first place beginning, in fragments, to resurface. The dissociative state persisted until she returned home and fell asleep, as shown in Datum 2.

#### **Datum 2**

*"Afterward I went straight home. Hovering overhead, I watched myself walking toward my house. I didn't know when I would be able to return to my physical self. All I could do was watch, not thinking about anything. I saw Mom speaking to me. "So you got lost again," she said, looking exasperated. I felt terribly sleepy and went straight to bed without replying. Still out of my body, I watched over myself as I took off my yukata, put on my pajamas, and went to sleep. The moment my physical body's cheek flopped onto the pillow and fell asleep, my hovering self lost consciousness" (Murata, 2020, p. 51)*

Sleep is the only state in which Natsuki can return to her body, as it is the only condition where consciousness is no longer required. Dissociation is not under Natsuki's voluntary control; she cannot reinhabit her body at will. This aligns with Caruth's (1995) argument that trauma results in the individual being defined by the event rather than owning it. Within the framework of Unclaimed Experience, the events that occurred in Natsuki's body were never fully acknowledged by her consciousness. Although her body endured the traumatic experience and her consciousness watched from afar, there was no complete subject present to acknowledge the experience as truly occurring.

This reading of dissociation differs from Alradaan's (2026) Jungian account, in which Natsuki's dissociative and, ultimately, cannibalistic acts are explained as eruptions of a repressed collective shadow rather than as a defense produced by a specific overwhelming event. Read through Caruth's (1996) framework, Natsuki's dissociation is not evidence of an already-present unconscious content breaking through, as the Jungian reading would suggest, but the mind's response to an event so overwhelming that no unified subject can remain present to witness it. While dissociation shows Natsuki's consciousness leaving the body during traumatic violence, emotional numbness reveals a related response in which the body remains present, but feeling is suspended.

#### **Emotional Numbness**

Emotional numbness is defined as the diminished capacity to feel emotion after repeatedly experiencing painful events. Caruth (1996, p. 130), drawing on Freud, explains that trauma produces not only intrusive "positive symptoms" such as flashbacks, but also "negative symptoms" such as numbing, amnesia, and avoidance of triggering stimuli, effects that leave a void in the survivor's experience of their own body. The emotional

numbness experienced by Natsuki occurred when she faced harsh rejection from her mother after revealing the abuse she had suffered at the hands of Mr. Igasaki.

**Datum 3**

*"Mom had never hit me really seriously like that before. I felt a switch inside me click off. I couldn't feel anything in my heart. The pain had gone, as if I was under anesthetic. 'You totally flunked that last test of yours, didn't you? I swear that head of yours is empty. Isn't it? Isn't it?' She thwacked me on the head with the slipper again. 'Yes, you're right. I'm sorry.' My mouth kept repeating the words Mom wanted over and over like a spell." (Murata, 2020, p. 42)*

Natsuki's numbness doesn't erase the pain of her mother's abuse, but rather she simply doesn't feel the pain emotionally. Her body still feels the blows, but her consciousness is absent from the experience. Within Caruth's (1996) framework, this serves as evidence that trauma manifests not only as a psychological wound, but also as an epistemological wound that impairs Natsuki's ability to recognize the experience as her own.

This experience is also referred to as an unclaimed experience, meaning one that was not fully processed at the time of the incident. Natsuki did not process the physical violence she experienced because her consciousness was disconnected. The experience could not be integrated into her memory and remained as a buried wound within her. All of this is stored within her, even though at the time of the incident, the wound seemed to have vanished from the experience itself.

A second instance of emotional numbness appears in the aftermath of Natsuki's mother's most severe outburst of violence, shown in Datum 4. Unlike Datum 3, in which Natsuki likens her numbness to being under anesthetic, Datum 4 shows a related but distinct image, that of a body sealed away from the event, which strengthens the claim that emotional numbness is a recurring, patterned response rather than a single isolated reaction.

**Datum 4**

*"Mom had gotten herself so worked up she kept hitting me with the slipper, on my face, on my head, on my neck, on my back. The switch in my heart was off, so I didn't feel anything. I held my breath waiting for time to pass. I shut myself up in a pod, like a time capsule in the earth, and held myself absolutely still, barely managing to take my life forward into the future." (Murata, 2020, p. 43)*

Natsuki did not cry, resist, or panic while enduring this violence; instead, she describes herself as sealed inside a capsule, waiting for the ordeal to pass. Within Caruth's (1996) framework, trauma is a crisis between experience and understanding, in which an event is lived through but cannot be absorbed by the mind; by remaining physically present while her emotional response is suspended, Natsuki shows that unclaimed trauma need not always take the extreme form of leaving the body, as in dissociation, but can also take the form of a body that stays while refusing to feel. This flat, anesthetized response is not a failure to feel but, in Caruth's (1996) terms, an honest reaction to an event that leaves Natsuki no room to feel.

Dalmi's (2022) Herman-based reading of childhood abuse in Murata's fiction assumes that a victim's distress can eventually be named and processed once safety is restored.

Datum 3 and Datum 4 complicate that assumption: Natsuki's numbness persists precisely because no one around her ever creates the conditions of safety and belief that such recovery would require, leaving her emotional response suspended rather than gradually processed. If emotional numbness marks the suspension of feeling, sensory disturbance shows how the unclaimed event continues to be carried by the body through disrupted taste, hearing, and bodily ownership.

### *Sensory Disturbance*

Sensory disturbance affects the victim's reaction to physical stimuli following a traumatic experience. Kearney & Lanius (2022) explain that the brain may suppress external stimuli, causing victims to appear unresponsive despite the absence of physical sensory deficits. Within Caruth's (1996) framework, these sensory symptoms represent the body's way of storing traumatic experiences that have never been acknowledged by consciousness.

#### *Datum 5*

*"The moment I poured the lukewarm juice into my mouth, I felt something wasn't quite right. It didn't taste of anything. I thought maybe it had gone bad, but when I sniffed it, there was the usual sweet orange smell." (Murata, 2020, p. 51)*

Caruth (1996, p. 3) describes trauma as an event that is not available to consciousness until it reasserts itself later. Natsuki's loss of taste illustrates this belated return because she cannot connect the physical symptom with the abuse she has experienced. Instead, she searches for an explanation that fits her limited understanding. Her inability to interpret the symptom is therefore not simple denial but evidence that the traumatic event has not yet entered a coherent narrative.

#### *Datum 6*

*"Well, you see, my mouth was destroyed recently. So I can't taste anything, and it doesn't belong to me anymore. But everywhere else is still okay. My hands and feet and belly button are all still mine, so I want to touch you with them." (Murata, 2020, p. 65)*

Natsuki instantly knows which parts of her body are still hers and which are no longer hers. According to Caruth (1996), trauma is not only a physical wound but also a psychological wound. Natsuki consciously knows which parts of her body are no longer hers, but she doesn't know why. Trauma has created a condition in her body, but there is no narrative that shows how it happened. In Datum 7, sensory disturbances extend from her sense of taste to her hearing.

#### *Datum 7*

*"Mom practically forced me to take the receiver. I held it to my right ear. 'I'm here waiting for you,' Mr. Igasaki said cheerfully. His breath passed through the receiver and stuck fast to my ear. I couldn't move. From that day, it wasn't just my mouth that was broken but my right ear too. It wasn't completely broken like my mouth was, but sometimes I couldn't hear what was happening right in front of me and instead heard a sound like waves or a continuous buzzing." (Murata, 2020, p. 110)*

Natsuki's hearing disturbance does not stem from a new physical injury but from hearing the perpetrator's voice again. The damage occurs not through direct contact but

through a sound associated with the traumatic experience. This stimulus reactivates the same defensive response in a different sensory form. Caruth (1996) describes trauma as a wound that cries out and demands to be heard. In this scene, Natsuki's body signals that Mr. Igasaki is a threat. However, because she never has the space to consciously claim the experience and no adult validates it, no language is available to describe what has happened to her. As a result, the body takes over the task of testimony.

Kearney & Lanius's (2022) neuroscientific account explains the mechanism by which the brain suppresses external signals, but it does not, on its own, explain why this suppression selectively targets the mouth and the right ear, the very sites implicated in the abuse. Read through Caruth's (1996) framework, this selectivity is precisely what marks the symptom as a trace of an unclaimed rather than a generically stressful experience: the body does not merely register stress, it repeats the specific coordinates of a wound that consciousness was never permitted to register. Because the body can register what consciousness cannot, the next form of unclaimed experience appears in Natsuki's difficulty translating traumatic knowledge into language.

### ***Unspeakability***

Unspeakability is a condition where victims struggle to find words to describe the events they have experienced. Trauma victims often fail to meet expectations to provide information because the experience interferes with their ability to construct a coherent narrative (Busch & McNamara, 2020). The research findings indicate that language is absent as a foundational structure of the Unclaimed Experience.

#### ***Datum 8***

*"It's really hard to put into words things that are just a little bit not okay." (Murata, 2020, p. 34)*

Natsuki struggled to acknowledge that the experience had actually happened to her. The discomfort she feels is beyond her comprehension because she has not yet processed Mr. Igasaki's strange actions. Caruth (1996) asserts that trauma is not merely a psychological event but also an epistemological one, a condition in which the victim does not understand whether the event that occurred is real. Within the framework of Unclaimed Experience, this is one of the conditions that perpetuates the state of unclaimed. As long as she does not know what happened, that experience can never be acknowledged as something that truly occurred.

#### ***Datum 9***

*"What? No! That's not what I meant . . . I mean, he was a pervert." Kanae burst out laughing. "No way! Are you sure you didn't just dream it all? After all, you were only in elementary school back then. From what I saw of his photo on the news, he must have been really popular. Sounds like a fantasy to me." "No, you've got it all wrong. I hated him." "Well no, but —" "No, you're wrong. It wasn't like that at all." (Murata, 2020, p. 139)*

The narrative fails not only within Natsuki herself but also in the space between the victim and her listener. In the excerpt above, Natsuki attempts to recount the traumatic experience she endured as a child to her friend Kanae. She tries to correct Kanae's misunderstanding, but this fails to establish a convincing narrative structure. Natsuki

knew what she felt, but she lacked the language to bridge the gap between her experience and others' understanding.

Kanae didn't accept Natsuki's explanation not because she lacked empathy for Natsuki, but simply because the experience Natsuki recounted didn't fit Kanae's perception of Mr. Igasaki. She understood that a popular and respected man like Mr. Igasaki would never commit an immoral act like harassment. As a result, Kanae instinctively replaced Natsuki's truth with a narrative she could accept. She consciously reversed the roles of victim and perpetrator by saying that Natsuki should have rejected Mr. Igasaki if she didn't like him. Caruth (1995) explains that the inability to speak about trauma is not the victim's fault, but rather a failure of the surrounding social system to create a safe space where traumatic truths can be accepted and acknowledged. Unspeakability therefore leads directly to cognitive confusion: when traumatic experience cannot be named, it also becomes difficult for Natsuki to verify what happened and to organize it into memory.

### *Cognitive Confusion*

Cognitive confusion refers to disruptions in thinking processes experienced by someone who has undergone trauma. Within Caruth's (1996) framework, cognitive confusion is an inevitable consequence of events that have never been acknowledged. Trauma can shatter a victim's ability to discern the truth of what happened, creating a "crisis of truth," a crisis in the relationship between experience and understanding. Massazza et al. (2021) explain that this phenomenon often causes victims to feel disoriented and confused, unable to understand or process events, which makes it hard to form a clear story when remembering the experience. Olff et al. (2025) add that trauma can be seen as an event that is not fully understood or dealt with when it occurs, but can affect a person for a long time afterward.

#### *Datum 10*

*"Back in my room, I looked around feeling disorientated. My yukata and obi were neatly folded, and my pajama buttons done all the way up. It was just as my hovering self had observed yesterday." (Murata, 2020, p. 51)*

Natsuki had to verify her experience not by her own memory but by tangible evidence, such as the neatly folded yukata and obi and the fully buttoned pajamas. This was because the experience from the previous night was not claimed by her consciousness; thus, even upon waking up, she could not claim the experience as a definite memory. Caruth (1996) argues that a crisis is characterized not merely by a lack of basic understanding, but by the ways in which it simultaneously tests and demands acknowledgment. The fact that Natsuki must look to external evidence to validate her experience represents an Unclaimed Experience, an experience occurring outside of self-awareness.

#### *Datum 11*

*"Back when you were in cram school, the teacher fiddled with you, didn't he?" My throat constricted and I couldn't breathe. "Why . . . How... ?" "I saw you. The day of the festival, you*

*were late so I went to find you, and I saw you being taken by a man into a house. I was worried, so I went into the garden and looked inside. And you and your teacher were kissing." Had we kissed? My memory of that time was hazy, and I couldn't say for certain that we hadn't." (Murata, 2020, p. 158)*

The excerpt above illustrates Natsuki's confusion upon learning of something she has no memory of. The sexual abuse occurred at the same time her mind left her body. This means that while the incident was taking place, Natsuki was not consciously present and therefore did not fully witness it. She was unable to refute her brother's statement because she herself did not know the truth; she had no memory to rely on. As Caruth (1996) argues, in trauma, a traumatic experience is first encountered through the amnesia embedded within it. Natsuki's confusion aligns with the representation of that experience not as a present reality, but as an unfilled void.

The datum above reveals a truth about the past that does not originate within Natsuki but comes from others. Caruth (1996, pp. 2–3) illustrates this dynamic through Tasso's story of Tancred, who unknowingly kills his beloved Clorinda in battle and later wounds a tree from which Clorinda's voice cries out. For Caruth, trauma is not located only in the original wound but also in the way its unassimilated nature returns through a second encounter. In a similar way, the revelation from Natsuki's sibling functions as a second blow that reawakens the earlier experience. Natsuki's body reacts before her mind can process the situation, suggesting that something unclaimed forces itself into awareness. The event is real and she was present, but she has no stable memory with which to prove it.

This dependence on outside confirmation also sets Natsuki's case apart from the recovery-oriented model used by Dalmi (2022) for other abused children in Murata's fiction, as that model assumes survivors can eventually piece together a coherent story, whereas Natsuki's mental confusion demonstrates that for unclaimed experiences, such reconstruction is not guaranteed because the consciousness needed to verify the memory was missing at the time of the event.

Even though dissociation, emotional numbness, sensory disturbance, unspeakability, and cognitive confusion were discussed separately earlier, the evidence reveals that they are not five separate symptoms but rather five aspects of one underlying condition: an event that Natsuki was not conscious of when it happened. Dissociation pulls her awareness away from the event, emotional numbness halts her ability to feel it despite her physical presence, sensory disruption keeps the event trapped in bodily reactions instead of memory, unspeakability stops the event from being expressed in shared language, and cognitive confusion stops any returning fragments from forming a clear story. In other words, each form represents a distinct moment when the same unclaimed event fails to enter consciousness, aligning with Caruth's (1996) assertion that trauma is defined not by the event itself but by the fact that it was never fully known initially.

Comparing these findings with previous research on the novel shows what a Caruthian approach adds that existing literature does not. While Hasnain & Hasnain

(2025) attribute Natsuki's fragmentation to the failure of symbolic identification, and Figueira & Ferreira (2025) locate it within a hierarchy of public, familial, and sexual violence, this research locates it in a specific, repeatedly unclaimed event whose traces recur across five distinct channels of representation, extending rather than duplicating Figueira & Ferreira's (2025) account by asking not only which violences produce Natsuki's dissociation, but why that dissociation resists being resolved into a claimed memory at all. While Dalmi (2022) interprets the novel through a recovery-oriented lens that assumes eventual acknowledgment, this research demonstrates that Natsuki never receives such recognition within the narrative; her mother's and Kanae's disbelief, combined with her own inability to verify memories without external proof, block every ordinary path through which an unclaimed experience could become acknowledged. It is precisely this foreclosure, which persists across mind, body, and language, that the concept of Unclaimed Experience is uniquely suited to explain.

## CONCLUSION

This article finds that trauma in *Earthlings* does not appear only as a direct and conscious wound. Instead, it emerges through fragmented psychological and bodily responses that Natsuki cannot fully recognize as her own. By analyzing Natsuki's experience through Cathy Caruth's concept of Unclaimed Experience, this research shows that dissociation, emotional numbness, sensory disturbance, unspeakability, and cognitive confusion collectively represent trauma that cannot be fully absorbed into memory. The failure of family and social structures to protect and acknowledge Natsuki allows the traumatic event to remain buried while continuing to return through disrupted forms of perception, feeling, language, and thought. These findings confirm Caruth's argument that trauma is not simply an event that is experienced but an experience that is not fully known when it occurs. In this sense, the five forms identified in this research should be read not as a checklist of separate symptoms but as different points at which the same unclaimed event resists consciousness. This distinction clarifies the contribution of the present study and separates its Caruthian account from previous identity- and recovery-oriented readings of *Earthlings*.

For further research, researchers who wish to examine Sayaka Murata's *Earthlings* are advised to analyze the cultural and social dimensions of the novel, especially Japanese social norms around obedience, family honor, and the condition of unacknowledged trauma. In addition, the application of a theoretical framework can use Judith Herman's stages of trauma recovery or a gender studies perspective. Expanding this line of research to other Japanese literary works will further enrich the discourse on trauma representation in Japanese literature.

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