

**TRAUMA, MEMORY, AND THE BURDEN OF TRUTH: A CRITICAL
STUDY OF *THAT NIGHT* BY NIDHI UPADHYAY**

1.Ms. S. Subha

I -M.A. English, Department of English Muthayammal College of Arts and Science,
Rasipuram

2.Dr.A.Manjula M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.,

Assistant professor, Department of English, Muthayammal College of Arts and
Science, Rasipuram.

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Abstract:

This paper presents a detailed critical study of the psychological thriller *That Night* by Nidhi Upadhyay, a contemporary Indian English novel that explores the lasting psychological effects of trauma, guilt, and hidden truths. Published in 2016, the novel revolves around a tragic incident involving a group of teenage girls whose lives are permanently altered after a mysterious accident. Through a suspenseful narrative structure, the story examines how suppressed memories, unresolved guilt, and broken friendships shape individual identities over time. The novel not only functions as a thriller but also as a psychological exploration of how past experiences influence present behaviour. This paper analyzes the novel's themes of trauma, friendship, guilt, memory, and the search for truth while also examining the narrative techniques and characterization used by the author. The study argues that *That Night* goes beyond the conventions of commercial thrillers by presenting a complex portrayal of emotional trauma and moral responsibility. By illustrating the long-term consequences of a single traumatic event, the novel highlights the importance of confronting truth in order to achieve emotional closure and personal healing.

Keywords:Trauma, Memory, Friendship, Guilt, Identity

Introduction

In recent decades, contemporary Indian English literature has undergone significant transformation, expanding beyond traditional themes to explore new genres such as psychological thrillers, crime fiction, and emotional dramas. Many writers have begun to focus on the complexities of human psychology, social relationships, and moral conflict.

Among the emerging voices contributing to this literary development is Nidhi Upadhyay, whose works combine suspenseful storytelling with emotional and psychological depth. Her novel *That Night*, published in 2016, represents an important example of contemporary Indian psychological fiction. While the narrative contains elements of mystery and suspense, it also explores deeper issues related to memory, trauma, and the moral consequences of human actions. The novel focuses on a group of teenage girls whose lives become permanently connected through a tragic incident that occurs during a single night.

The title of the novel emphasizes the central importance of that particular moment. “That night” becomes a symbolic turning point that divides the characters’ lives into two distinct phases: the innocence of youth before the event and the emotional burden that follows afterward. Through this structure, the novel demonstrates how a single moment can dramatically alter the course of human lives. Unlike traditional thrillers that focus primarily on crime investigation, the novel emphasizes the psychological consequences of traumatic experiences. The story examines how individuals attempt to cope with guilt, fear, and suppressed memories while trying to continue their lives. Through its portrayal of fractured friendships, emotional turmoil, and the gradual revelation of truth, the novel raises important questions about responsibility, forgiveness, and the difficulty of confronting painful realities. Thus, *That Night* can be interpreted not only as a suspenseful narrative but also as a reflection on the complexities of human memory and emotional survival.

The narrative of *That Night* centres on a group of teenage girls whose close friendship initially appears typical of adolescent life. Their relationship is characterized by excitement, shared secrets, and a sense of youthful rebellion. Like many teenagers, they experience curiosity about freedom and independence, often attempting to challenge the boundaries set by family and society. However, what begins as an act of harmless rebellion eventually leads to a tragic accident that changes their lives forever. The details of the incident are gradually revealed throughout the narrative, creating suspense while also reflecting the fragmented nature of memory.

The novel uses this tragic event as the foundation for exploring the long-term psychological consequences of trauma. The characters carry the emotional burden of that night for many years, and their attempts to suppress the memory only intensify their inner conflict. One of the most significant themes in the novel is psychological trauma. Trauma in literature often refers to experiences that leave deep emotional scars, shaping the behaviour and identity of individuals long after the event itself has passed. In the case of the characters in *That Night*, the accident becomes a source of persistent fear and guilt. Instead of confronting the truth directly, the characters initially choose silence and avoidance. They

attempt to continue with their lives, hoping that time will erase the painful memory. However, the novel demonstrates that suppressed trauma rarely disappears. Rather, it remains embedded in the subconscious mind and continues to influence emotions and relationships.

The author illustrates how trauma manifests in various forms, including anxiety, emotional instability, and feelings of isolation. Even when the characters appear outwardly successful or stable, the unresolved past continues to haunt them. Closely connected to the theme of trauma is the concept of guilt and moral responsibility. The tragic event that occurs during that night is not presented as a simple accident; instead, it involves a series of decisions and actions that contribute to the outcome. As a result, each character struggles with questions of personal responsibility.

Guilt becomes a powerful emotional force within the narrative. It shapes the characters' interactions with one another and affects their ability to form healthy relationships. The burden of guilt also creates emotional distance between the friends, gradually weakening the bonds that once united them. The novel suggests that guilt can become destructive when individuals refuse to acknowledge the truth. By avoiding responsibility, the characters inadvertently prolong their own suffering. Another important theme explored in the novel is friendship and betrayal. At the beginning of the story, the group of girls shares a strong emotional connection built on trust and loyalty. However, the tragic incident introduces secrecy and suspicion into their relationship.

As the story progresses, misunderstandings and hidden truths begin to emerge. The characters start to question one another's intentions and memories of the event. This breakdown of trust illustrates how fragile human relationships can become when confronted with fear and uncertainty. Despite these tensions, the novel also suggests that friendship has the potential to survive even the most difficult circumstances. When the characters finally confront the truth about what happened, they begin to recognize the importance of honesty and forgiveness in rebuilding their relationships. Another significant aspect of the novel is its exploration of memory and truth. Human memory is often unreliable, particularly when individuals attempt to suppress painful experiences. In *That Night*, each character recalls the events differently, influenced by personal emotions and self-protection. This fragmented recollection of the past becomes an important narrative technique. By presenting multiple perspectives, the author allows readers to gradually piece together the truth behind the incident.

The gradual unveiling of the past creates suspense while also emphasizing the psychological complexity of memory. The novel suggests that people often reshape their memories in order to protect themselves from guilt or shame. However, the narrative ultimately demonstrates that confronting the truth is necessary for emotional healing. The characters cannot move forward until they acknowledge the reality of what happened that night.

From a stylistic perspective, Nidhi Upadhyay employs a narrative structure that effectively combines suspense with emotional storytelling. The pacing of the novel keeps readers engaged, while the psychological exploration adds depth to the plot. The author's language is simple and accessible, making the story appealing to a wide audience. At the same time, the emotional intensity of the narrative allows readers to connect with the characters' struggles and moral dilemmas.

The use of multiple narrative perspectives is particularly effective in illustrating how different individuals interpret the same event. This technique not only enhances the mystery but also reflects the subjective nature of human experience. The novel contributes to the growing popularity of psychological thrillers in contemporary Indian fiction. Readers today are increasingly interested in stories that explore the inner lives of characters rather than focusing solely on external action. By combining elements of suspense, emotional conflict, and moral reflection, *That Night* appeals to both casual readers and those interested in deeper psychological themes. The novel also reflects broader social concerns regarding responsibility, honesty, and the long-term consequences of individual actions. Through the experiences of its characters, the story illustrates how seemingly small decisions can lead to life-changing outcomes. In this sense, the novel encourages readers to reflect on their own moral choices and the importance of accountability.

Conclusion

That Night by Nidhi Upadhyay represents a compelling example of contemporary Indian psychological fiction. While the novel incorporates elements of suspense and mystery, its true significance lies in its exploration of trauma, guilt, and the complexity of human relationships. Through the experiences of its characters, the narrative demonstrates how a single traumatic event can shape the emotional and psychological development of individuals for many years. The story highlights the destructive power of suppressed memories and unresolved guilt, while also emphasizing the importance of truth and accountability.

The themes of friendship, responsibility, and emotional healing make the novel both relatable and thought-provoking. By portraying the psychological consequences of hidden secrets, the narrative illustrates the challenges individuals face when attempting to reconcile

with their past. The novel suggests that genuine healing can only occur when individuals confront the truth rather than avoid it. By acknowledging their mistakes and accepting responsibility, the characters are able to move toward emotional closure. Through its engaging narrative and psychological insight, *That Night* contributes meaningfully to contemporary Indian English fiction and demonstrates the growing importance of psychological themes in modern literature.

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