

**Tribhuvan University**

July 2023

**Traumatic Childhood in Gregg Araki's *Mysterious Skin***

Bhoj Raj Budha

**A Thesis Submitted to the Central Department of English, T.U.  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts in English**

Traumatic Childhood in Gregg Araki's *Mysterious Skin*

**By**

**Bhoj Raj Budha**

**Symbol No.: 280662**

**T.U. Regd. No.: 6-2-404-74-2015**

**Central Department of English**

**Kirtipur, Kathmandu**

**July 2023**

## Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled “Traumatic Childhood in Gregg Araki's *Mysterious Skin*” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, by Bhoj Raj Budha has been approved by the undersigned members of the research committee.

Members of the Research Committee:

---

Dr. Anju Gupta

Internal Examiner

---

Mr. Pradip Raj Giri

External Examiner

---

Prof. Dr. Jib Lal Sapkota

Head

Central Department of English

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my thesis supervisor Dr. Anju Gupta, Lecturer of English at the Central Department of English, for making this work possible. Her intellectual guidance, critical comments, and genuine suggestions carried me through the entire stages of writing the paper.

I would also like to give my warmest thanks to Prof. Dr. Jib Lal Sapkota, the Head of the Central Department of English, for approving this thesis paper in its present form. I am grateful to him for his valuable suggestions and guidance.

I would like to convey my special thanks to my teachers and friends who motivated and supported me in preparing this thesis.

Finally, I would wholeheartedly thank my parents for letting me through all the difficulties. I experienced their guidance, continuous support, and understanding when undertaking research and writing my project. It is your prayer that sustained me this far.

July 2023

Bhoj Raj Budha

## Traumatic childhood in Gregg Araki's *Mysterious Skin*

### Abstract

*This paper analyzes child molestation as trauma in Gregg Araki's directed movie Mysterious Skin in the light of trauma studies. The movie explores the aftermath of child molestation through the stories of two young men, Neil and Brian. Neil is a young hustler who remembers being molested by his Little League coach. Brian is a young man who believes he was abducted by aliens. This research paper, therefore, focusing on Brian and Neil, protagonist of the movie, deals with three specific questions: what purpose does the movie serve while portraying characters like Brian and Neil? Why are the protagonists depicted in physical and psychological discomfort? And how the movie illuminate's trauma as the consequences of child molestation? To answer these questions, this paper embodies Cathy Caruth's analytical observation of trauma, most specifically 'unclaimed experience' and slightly adopts Dominick Lacapra's notion of 'working through,' with special focus to demonstrate how the two characters strive to curtail the impact of trauma. The paper argues, Araki's film is a powerful and disturbing exploration of the long-term effects of child molestation. The film shows how the trauma can manifest itself in a variety of ways, including depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and self-harm, depicting how the trauma can damage relationships and make it difficult for victims to trust others. The paper reveals that Mysterious Skin is an important film that raises awareness of the issue of child molestation which is a valuable resource for victims of child molestation and their loved ones. The sexual urges principally associated with the skin is the mysterious agency of human beings that does not merely changes the body reaction but also change the experiences, reality and destiny of human beings.*

Keywords: Molestation, Sexuality, Trauma, Memory and Hallucination

Gregg Araki's *The Mysterious Skin* is a projection of trauma because of child molestation through the narrativization of two significant characters, Brian and Neil. The composition of the movie is to reveal how childhood experiences remain a perpetual haunting reality for an individual despite the years passing. Human psychosis is a stubborn mechanism that holds the uncanny experiences forever until and unless the experiences are unraveled or discharged through painful realization and revelation. The most compelling element of the universe, time, is also incapable of healing the pain endowed by the trauma and these experiences are the implicit concern of the movie.

The movie ventures a complex and multi-layered story that follows the lives of two young men, Brian and Neil, who were both sexually abused by their Little League baseball coach when they were children. The story is narrated from both of their perspectives, and their stories are interwoven throughout the book. Brian is a quiet and introverted young man who has always felt that something is not right with his life. He begins to have vivid dreams about being abducted by aliens and becomes obsessed with the idea that these dreams are memories of something that actually happened to him. He seeks the help of a therapist, who encourages him to explore his past and uncover the truth about what happened to him.

Neil, on the other hand, is a charismatic and outgoing young man who becomes a male prostitute to deal with the trauma of his childhood abuse. He is searching for meaning and connection in his life and finds it through his sexual encounters with older men. As the novel progresses, the stories of Brian and Neil begin to converge. Brian discovers that Neil was also abused by their baseball coach, and the two begin to piece together the details of what happened to them. They confront their abuser, who has since become a respected member of the community,

and the novel culminates in a powerful and emotional confrontation that brings closure to both characters.

The narrative is told from the perspectives of both Brian and Neil, and their stories converge toward the end of the movie. As the two characters come to terms with their shared trauma and its impact on their lives, they find a connection that helps them confront their pasts and move forward with their lives. Throughout the movie, Araki explores themes of trauma, sexuality, identity, and how the past can shape our present and future. The story is powerful and emotional, dealing with difficult and controversial topics in a sensitive and thought-provoking way

The movie, based on Scott Heim's novel *The Mysterious Skin*, released in 2004 caught global attention because of its less common, if not uncommon, sexual content, most specifically, gay sexuality. As Michael Koresky writes, "Araki has purged himself of Queer Cinema's fuck-you hedonism by supplying his misfit heroes with a thick undercoating of psychological motivation for their sexual discombobulation, and by finally finding a suitable context for one of Araki's favorite motifs: the equating of teen alienation with extraterrestrial intervention" (73). Koresky satirically explicates that Araki, the director of the movie, has featured a strange mode of expression to represent his filmy qualities which is perhaps Araki's choice of action but beyond the expectation of the social sphere. Indeed Koresky is right if contextual relevance is taken into consideration. Here, 'contextual relevance' means the trend of the movie by then and the societal spectacle to look upon the third gender. However, it is equally important, I argue, to unravel the composition of the story before evaluating its potency. The storyline itself is more important than 'whose story.' In fact, the action is the focus of the movie followed by the consequences where the characters are mere representatives of the event participants.

The characters of the story are limited and the story is fixed; specific characters are chosen to expose the intensity of the story. As Mark Olsen illustrates, “The film follows two boys . . . as they each deal with the psyche repercussion of the sexual abuse they endured years earlier at the hands of their Little League Coach” (57). In the same light, Joel Dossi assesses the movie in the following ways:

While *Mysterious Skin* examines the disturbing story of the childhood sexual abuse of two young boys in a raw and unflinching way, instead of a punk-ridden milieu, Araki's film is filled with lush imagery, poetic language, sympathetic characters, and highly stylized camera work and lighting that tells a story that unfolds throughout a decade rather than just a weekend. (65)

Olsen and Dossi both exemplify the movie as a pathetic story of two characters who were both inflected by fatal childhood abusive experiences. Dossi specifically elaborates on movies as a reflection of the trajectories of events, embedded with the artistic features of the filmmaker. More extensively, reflecting the historical dimension of the prevailing discourse, Berlant Lauren claims, “Yet the paradoxical logic of anachronistic self-periodization in *Mysterious Skin* is harder than usual to track—and in this . . . it is exemplary of a cluster of queer and independent docudramatic narratives emerging in the mid-1980s and continuing into the present” (193). Berlant evaluates the movie from the structural domain. To be more specific, he defines *Mysterious Skin* as the dramatization of the real happenstances during a particular historical period. Undoubtedly, the movie has made trending fashion a subject matter and as far as the content is concerned, it has mirrored the social atmosphere of the mid-1980s. However, isn't it a matter of today's concern? Wasn't it used to be and won't it be in the future? The movie, as I argue, has depicted a perennial issue that is ahistorical and eternal, at least till human beings exist.

The movie is, indeed, a common story of two male characters who turn themselves into two distinct individuals with time, while taming their psychological disturbances. In this relevance, this research paper examines the psychological characteristics from two major vantage points: childhood molestation and trauma. The research will take the childhood incident as an inflicting action or as a cause of trauma whereas, since the trauma is a broader term with multiple definitions, the research adopts Cathy Caruth's definition as a measuring rod. For Caruth, trauma is "the enigma of a human agent's repeated and unknown acts" as well as "truth" one cannot fully know" (3). Caruth describes the effects of trauma as, quite literally, a poetic or virtual space-time that possesses no set beginning, no end, no before, no during, and no after. To place it more palpably, Caruth comprehends trauma as a recurring experience of the past event with no specific duration or limitation. The connection of the past with the present is so vehement that it is indispensable at least for those who go through traumatic experiences. Dominick Lacapra describes this relationship in the following way:

With respect to trauma, a simple postulation does not suffice to distinguish between past and present, and it may function to occlude the role of trauma and post-traumatic effects. The ability to make an effective, nondeceptive distinction depends on working through traumatic and post-traumatic experience in a way that requires *inter alia* memory work that situates the trauma in a past related to—even in a sense still bound up with live issues in, but not repeatedly relived or conflated with—the present. (377)

Lacapra defines trauma can make it difficult to distinguish between the past and the present. This can lead to problems such as reliving the trauma or having flashbacks. To effectively deal with trauma, it is important to work through the experience and



process the memories. The trauma can continue to hurt the person's life, even if they are aware that it is in the past. The only way to effectively deal with trauma is to work through the experience and process the memories. This can be a difficult and painful process, but it is the only way to truly move on from the trauma.

The protagonists of the movie go through similar experiences as Caruth and Lacapra define trauma. Both Brian and Neil have experienced abuse in their lives. For both the characters the experience becomes a wound in their psychological space. In other words, both are inflicted by the tortuous deed of their coach resulting in a victim of trauma because as Donald D. T Trunkey argues, “Trauma is the medical term for a personal injury or wound” (28). To be more specific, in the words of Ron Eyerman, “The term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind' - a wound inflicted by an emotional shock so powerful that it breaches 'the mind's experience of time, self and the world' and eventually manifests itself in dreams and flashbacks” (42). Brian and Neil were physically abused by their coach and this incident flashes to their memory time and again in their life. Most importantly, both of them are traumatized because as Brian Cavanaugh argues, “Traumatic experiences may include physical or sexual abuse, neglect, experiencing or witnessing domestic violence, exposure to community and school violence, natural or man-made disasters, terrorism, suicides, and war” (41). In this sense, the way both characters confronted sexual molestation is the root of their traumatic experience.

Most specifically, Brian suffers from the memories more than Neil. The reason why Brian is intensely wrecked can be analyzed from the narration he utters at the beginning of the movie. As he says, “The Summer I was 8 years old, 5 hours disappeared from my life. 5 hours—lost. Gone without a trace” (0:02:25-0:02:35). Brian has no idea what has happened to him when he was lost. He has a blank in his

memory and subsequent history of nosebleeds and blackouts. In fact, Brian has no concrete evocation of his lost five hours. Only does he have memories of before and after the events. He says, “Last thing I remember I was sitting on the bench at my little league game. It started to rain. What happened after that remains a pitch-black void” (0:02:43-0:02:52). Brian uses the word "void" to suggest that he feel a sense of emptiness or loss. This could be because he lost his memory of what happened, or because he lost something else during five hours, such as his sense of safety or security.

The experience of the pathetic event is so horrific that he could not figure it out in those lost hours. As the movie shows him, he appears as a vulnerable character in a dark corner, bleeding in his nose and trembling as if he has a diabolical nightmare. Brian’s condition can be examined more palpably from the following figure.



Fig 1. Child Molestation

The child in Figure 1 emphasizes the child’s isolation. Perhaps they are captured in a dimly lighted room, with stark shadows in the background, symbolizing the darkness

and secrecy which is often associated with trauma. His messy hair and widened eyes convey a sense of fear and also the blood from his right nose indicates vulnerability. Likewise, the shoulders look like they are hunched as they may be holding onto themselves tightly searching for comfort and protection. Moreover, the position of the camera placed higher signals its domination which also places the boy in a docile situation. The child's expression is of profound sadness filled with a mixture of sorrow and uncertainty.

Brian was molested by his coach; nevertheless, he is unaware of the real event. His memory has been ruptured and consequently, he created a pseudo-reality of his life. He is convinced that he was abducted by the alien. For example, when, in the fall of summer 1991, they start watching the news Brian's mom says, "It's probably going to be a little silly. The commercial showed this crazy old man claiming aliens beamed him upright out of his bathtub" (0:29:05-0:29:12). Brian replies, "If you're going to make fun, I'd just as soon watch by myself" (0:29:14: 0:29:18). He believes that the dark five hours was erased in his memory because he was also taken away by UFO. He is so entrenched with this thought that he goes to meet Avalyn, a thirty years old unmarried—part-time secretary, who according to the news was also abducted by the alien.

Indeed, the movie conspicuously depicts that Brian was in a psychological distortion. In other words, the reality in which Brian was living was tormented and far removed from the basic principle of human casualty. However, the question is why the movie strives to implicate such a reality of the protagonist. Is it merely a purposeful strategy to entertain the audience with manipulated plot structure? In this regard, I argue, Araki has used this hallucinatory state of mind of the protagonist to expose the psychological distortion of an individual inflicted by trauma. As Debra

Kaminer and Gillian Eagle argue, “Trauma can have an impact on our belief and meaning systems that go beyond trying to develop an explanation for why the trauma happened” (72). Kaminer and Eagle highlight trauma can challenge our core beliefs about ourselves, the world, and other people. It can lead to feelings of guilt, shame, and worthlessness, leading to changes in values, priorities, and sense of self-identity.

The new way of understanding the pattern of his life makes Brian always in distress. It is because, “after a traumatic event, most people will experience some degree of distress as they try to adapt to what has happened. Common reactions include feelings of anxiety and mild depression, having distressing thoughts and memories of the traumatic event, difficulty sleeping, and feeling hyper-alert to any signs of danger” (29). Traumatic events can have a significant impact on people's mental health. After a traumatic event, it is common to experience a range of emotions, including anxiety, depression, and fear. These feelings can be overwhelming and make it difficult to cope with everyday life. The problem with Brian was that he was unaware of the event but something uncanny memory frequently visits his mental space, trying him into meticulous trouble. For example, he faints, bleeds, and believes in UFOs.

Brian confronts challenges as a symptom of Trauma or more precisely he is traumatized by the events in his past. For Caruth, “To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4-5). Brian, though unaware of his terrific past, is always in a constant battle between his present and the images of the bygone days. As Caruth further argues, “The traumatic symptom cannot be interpreted, simply, as a distortion of reality, nor as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as the repression of what once was wished” (5), Brian in this relevance is in the edge of traumatic symptoms. In other words, Caruth exposes that the

traumatic symptom cannot be interpreted as a manipulation of materiality because the event actually happened. Nor can it be interpreted as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, because the person is often aware of the event and its impact on them. Nor can it be interpreted as the repression of what once was wished, because the person does not want to forget the event. In this regard, Brian's suffering is not an outburst of his unconscious desire nor is it an exposition of his repression but rather flashes of past images roaming around his present.

Brian withstands traumatic symptoms several times in the movie but most specifically when he meets Avalyn in the evening when they happen to discuss the aliens. Since Brian has a blurred memory of the past and he is always fascinated to know about the past that he is unaware of or in other sense he has forgotten. And possibly, this reason drags him to visit Avalyn frequently even in phone calls if not physically. In the scene, when Avalyn shows the dead cow to Brian and drags his hand to touch the sex organ of the calf, the sensation triggers Brian to recapitulate the incidents during his molestation. To be more precise, the touch works as a mechanism to flash the memories of the dark secret. The following image describes the consequence when he happens to visualize the memories of the molestation through the sensation of the sex organ.



Fig 2. Brian in close shot

The close shot of a teenage boy, Brian, in Figure 2 is filled with distress. His eyes are downcast filled with astonishment revealing the intense terror. The blood from his right nose conveys his anxiety and tense environment. The background of the image is dark adding a sense of uneasiness. Connecting with the scene of the movie, the shot captured was at the time when the teen touches the body of dead calves and it triggers a painful memory he has experienced in the past. The atmosphere of the image conveys a somber tone, reflecting the weight of the teen's fear and the impact it has on his well-being. The shot represents the impact of the traumatic experience while sensing the past through the flashes of the images.

The aforementioned action happens when Brian touches the sex organ. It is the sensation that triggers Brian's memories of the molestation. This event reflects upon important issues related to the realities of the victim and the perpetrator. The situation can be more intense if Avalyn's word is considered. As she says, "The aliens, they experiment on the cattle because the poor things are so defenseless. Us, on the other hand, they can't kill us, so they just live behind the hidden memories, of what they have done. Which in a way is almost worse" (0:52:46-0:52:58). Avalyn tries to convince Brian that aliens attack those who are powerless or defenseless but at the same time the reason why Brian was molested reveals metaphorically. Brian's coach can be interpreted as an alien creature who inflicted his sexual desire on an innocent eight years old Brian. The dialogue also reveals the ill and evil desire of the bad-doers who deliberately choose a vulnerable individual or character to fulfill their desire. Indeed Brian's coach might have had sexual problems but whatever he did was a deliberate and strategic move especially choosing the less powerful individual. In other words, what the coach approached might be because of his abnormal sexual urges but how he made a victim is deliberate.

It is important to remember that everyone experiences trauma differently. The impact of trauma can vary depending on the individual, the nature of the trauma, and the support they receive. Amanda L. Giordano et al. argue “The experience of trauma is multifaceted and can refer to one acute event, a series of events, or responses to sociocultural factors such as poverty or oppression” (56). This is evident if the experiences of Brian and Neil are compared. Neil and Brian are two 16-year-old boys who grew up in the same small town. Neil is a hustler who is mature beyond his years, while Brian is a geek who is convinced he was abducted by aliens. The two boys' paths diverge when Neil moves to New York City. Brian eventually follows Neil to New York, and the two boys reunite. However, their reunion is not easy, as they have both been through a lot in the past few years. Neil has been abused, and Brian has been struggling with his mental health. The two boys must work through their trauma to move on with their lives. In this connection, Phillip Villani and Maycon Lopes discuss the movie in the following ways:

It is necessary to underline that, in the film, if on one side the relationship of abuse and violence which establishes itself between the coach and Brian is very clear, on the other side, it does not appear so well defined when looking at Neil and his relationship with the same coach. This is because in the second case, the abuse is more complex when we take into account that the experience lived by Neil appears to be permeated by pleasure. From the first time he sees his coach, Neil desires him as a realization of his precociously self-avowed fetish for mature, masculine men. (713)

Villani and Lopes expose that the magnitude of the trauma determines the situation of the victim. Both the characters are victimized by the same experience; however, Brian suffers more than Neil because his degree of suffering is intense and of high

magnitude. In this relation, Tom O'Connor proclaims, "Exposing the reality that no single abstract or universal form of trauma exists, Araki's *Mysterious Skin* juxtaposes the zombifying (or numbing) effects of sexual abuse on its two narrators, Neil and Brian (George Webster/Brady Corbet), in the small town of Hutchinson, Kansas" (59). The aftermath of traumatic events is, in a deep sense, highly pictured in the movie to show the range of effects that trauma can inculcate in a specific character. The way a patient goes through the dark secret of his or her life emulates the vehemence of trauma and this is one of the immense features of the movie.

Neil, the other character, is not depicted as vulnerable as Brian. Loren Damayanti writes, "The sexual abuse that happens to Neil corresponds to the development of his *id* in which sexual desire from his first sexual encounter (with coach) define his *libido*" (127). Brian's response to the abuse he endured is to distance himself from any situation that could involve romance or sexuality, as a means of self-protection. On the other hand, Neil's reaction to the abuse takes the form of engaging in hyper-sexual behavior. The switching story between sporty, good-looking Neil and awkward Brian reflects the tragic story differently. Neil remembers it all vividly, and through his eyes, we see the coach's grooming process in excruciating, but not explicit, detail. The movie skillfully creates aesthetically rich scenes with the coach, instilling each moment with nostalgic details that are inherent to almost everyone's childhood. These details include a variety of packs of cereal, Halloween, baseball, and summer rain. However, there is a dark side to these childhood images. Next to the thrill of hitting a home run during a baseball game or wearing a scary costume while trick-or-treating, the horror of being abused by a trusted adult looms. This duality elicits contradictory emotional responses from both the victims and the audience.



Unfortunately, Neil doesn't fully comprehend that what he went through was abusive. Consequently, he struggles to process his emotions healthily. To cope with the trauma, Neil has constructed an idealized reality within his mind, where things seem perfect and mysterious. This alternative world serves as a coping mechanism for him, helping him navigate the complexities of his past experiences. At this part of the story, Neil is unable to see things clearly or maturely because of the distortions caused by his past experiences. Being young and immature, he prefers to keep his emotions separate from other people. Neil, in this sense, is a character who is haunted by the past but at the same time expresses his memories in the form of external agency. He is a traumatized character because as Caruth claims, "Trauma, that is, does not simply serve as a record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned" (151). Neil does not merely celebrates the past, in a literal sense, but also imbues those experiences of which he is consciously unaware.

Neil tells at the start of the movie that he didn't know how to handle his feelings. It felt like he had to reveal them in front of a crowd, which made him feel ashamed since he had experienced sexual and romantic feelings at a young age. This statement hints that Neil recognizes the power of expressing his experiences and wants to develop that ability. As a gay man, Neil's approach to his adult sexuality reflects the impact of his traumatic past. Neither his mother nor his company give him proper care to overcome the situation. Therefore, as Debra Kaminer and Gillian Eagle argue, "Trauma exposure . . . is unlikely to come to the attention of outside authorities unless parents or caregivers report such exposure on behalf of the child. It is clear that the more violent and conflicted any society, the more children will be exposed to extraordinary life stressors" (123). Perhaps, because of his uncontrollable societal and

familial status, he chooses sexuality as a mechanistic force to bridle his impregnable experiences of the past.

Instead of seeking a meaningful romantic connection, Neil feels compelled to engage in prostitution, as if trying to regain control over his past by occupying a position where he can be in control and receive payment for sex. It's not a coincidence that the men who pay for sex with him are around the same age as his abuser when the abuse began. When Neil is still being molested by his coach, that's the only time he ever exhibits any sexual response to someone his age. Indulging in a nasty sort of eroticism one Halloween, Neil forces a boy to put bottle rockets in his mouth before lighting them, unfortunately, the boy is Brian. Neil reassures his friend Wendy that she shouldn't be concerned when she notices that the youngster is bleeding as a result of the rockets by rubbing the boy's genitalia and then engaging in oral sex with him. Wendy is appalled by these actions, which highlights not only how unintentionally enraged Neil has become against his peer as a result of the abuse but also how detached he has grown from any notion of morality. Araki, in the movie, alludes to the idea that Neil's behaviors are better understood as either unsuccessful or successful attempts towards becoming rather than as symptoms.

Neil recalls the molestations with a distorted perception, finding them positive and beautiful, while Brian is unable to comprehend or remember them, leading to the repression of his sexual feelings and memories. Brian's attempts to understand his past provide a plausible explanation for his inability to recall certain events and the nosebleeds he experiences when trying to remember. These physical reactions symbolize the emotional trauma he endured. In the words of Caruth, "The traumatic nightmare, undistorted by repression or unconscious wish, seems to point directly to an event, and yet, as Freud suggests, it occupies a space to which willed access is

denied” (152). The traumatic events are stored in the unconscious sphere of both characters; however, the responses differ because of the situational and external atmosphere they go through. Moreover, the conception they hold and the calamities they endure have a different impact on their psychological senses that changes the way they express their traumatic behavior.

Brian's repressed memories have transformed into elaborate fantasies, becoming his fixations. These fixations allow him to distance himself from his past while simultaneously granting him a sense of control and involvement in the investigation. Due to the story of being kidnapped, Brian's life has turned into a lonely and disconnected job where he feels obligated to continue this investigation until it's finished. The unsolved mystery acts as a strong obstacle, preventing him from pursuing other opportunities in his life. As a result, he remains trapped in this one and only objective. This uncomfortable situation is an unconscious response towards his inevitable past. As Caruth puts, “The trauma is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge—that cannot, as George Bataille says, become a matter of “intelligence” —and thus continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time” (153). In this sense, Brian's confrontations are the result of his trauma and the way he withstands is not what he really did; instead, it is the remark and flashes of the horrific memories that have become his exact replication in which he participates in the present.

The conditions of Brian and Neil are differently posited and differently renounced. In the case of the rape, Neil is diminished and devalued by being labeled as a "slut" or an object. Similarly, the narrative of alien abduction also creates a distorted perception. The rape, with its fantastical story, gains a sudden and intense impact, unfolding rapidly and causing fear. Similarly, the fantasy of abduction, or

rather the hastiness in believing it and the need to reproduce it, serves as a way to suppress the truth of trauma and influences Brian's life. However, despite their actions are a means to overcome their traumatized psychology, they are merely temporary way to deduce their discomfort. In fact, they are not the permanent solution because as Gabriele Schwab argues, "Yet trauma can never be completely silenced since its effects continue to operate unconsciously" (79). In this sense, Brian and Neil both try to recuperate their situation; nevertheless, their attempt are merely to curtail their pain instead of healing it.

Neil, in terms of impacts, is more relaxed and psychologically healthy than Brian. However, the way he changes his pattern of life to sustain his life is more problematic than Brian. To be more precise, Brian is psychologically disturbed; he is submerged in a hallucinatory reality, rupturing the pleasure of the present. But Neil, since he is aware of the incidents, he makes past as his mode of enjoyment in the and denounces the guilt he commits. In either case, whether Brian or Neil, both are formulating their present being based on their past experience. In other words, Brian, because of the molestation, creates an imaginary reality whereas Neil becomes slut because of the rape case. In this connection, both characters are constantly stabbed by the events poking and prying their memories. As Lacapra assesses:

Trauma brings out in a striking way the importance of affect and its impact on memory, pointing both to traumatic memory in the form of post-traumatic effects (repetition compulsions, startle reactions, overreactions, severe sleep disorders, including recurrent nightmares, and so forth) and to the challenge to work through them in a viable but perhaps never totally successful fashion.

(377)

Lacabra reveals that trauma highlights the significance of emotion and its impact on memory. It can make it difficult to forget traumatic events, and it can also lead to intrusive thoughts and flashbacks. Perhaps, Brian and Neil, though they restrain their past to a large extent, they are incapable to omit because the event has traumatized them which in resstably provoke them to recall the memories.

The experience of a traumatic wound is always connected to the narrative of how that wound continues to affect and disturb the survivor. This connection goes beyond a linear or straightforward understanding of time. Instead, it represents a rupture in the survivor's perception of time, making any attempt to represent orpict the trauma challenging. Schwab claims “Sometimes, especially during early childhood or in traumatic circumstances, splitting is necessary for surviving terrifying assaults on our bodies or psyches” (102). The child's voice becomes a repressed energy that remains dormant due to a perceived inability to fully comprehend or articulate their experiences, especially those related to sexuality. This suggests that children are often not regarded as active participants in society, but rather as incomplete individuals, merely absorbing the influences of culture. Consequently, this places them unavoidably in a position of vulnerability.

Brian and Neil both confronted sexual abuse during their childhood and the waves of effect continuous in the present. Trauma has a historical relationship with an individual and this impact is conspicuous in the life of Brian and Neil. Indeed both try to normalize the situation and that is the best way to segregate self from the nexus of Trauma. In the words of Lacabra:

Trauma and its causes are indeed a prominent feature of history, which should not be airbrushed or denied. But to construe trauma as evoking essential incomprehensibility is to obscure dimensions of traumatic events and

experiences that are amenable to at least limited understanding, which may help to avert the incidence of trauma or to mitigate and counteract its effects.

(378)

Lacabra contends trauma and its causes are a common part of history. We should not ignore or deny them. However, if we view trauma as something that is incomprehensible, we will miss important information that could help us prevent trauma or reduce its effects. The act of Brian and Neil resemble the words of Lacabra. The traumatic event is their history; they cannot erase them but at least they can give their full attempt to rescue themselves from the grip of diabolical reality they are going through.

However, in a deep sense, Neil is more capable to understand such vehement situation because he has accepted the reality and made his fashion. Indeed Neil converts himself as a slut but that is the best way Neil finds to overcome the trauma. As Schwab claims, "Only a process of breaking traumatic silence and revealing a buried secret can help to exorcise its ghostly alien presence from the inner world. Such a process entails one's taking responsibility for one's actions, working through guilt and shame, and mourning unbearable loss" (80). The process of healing from trauma is not easy, but it is possible. An individual may be afraid of being judged, or may not want to deal with the pain of remembering what happened. However, keeping the secret can actually make the trauma worse. It can cause to feel isolated and alone, and it can make it difficult to heal. Taking responsibility for one's actions, working through feelings of guilt and shame, and mourning unbearable loss are the process through which trauma can be redeemed. And significantly, Neil is more capable to pragmatically deal with the situation adopting these facts.

Brain is less capable to handle the situation because he does not recall the events but instead believes in fantasy like alien and UFOs. In a deep sense, unconsciously, he knows something went wrong when he was lost for five hours. Perhaps those traces of the memories are the striking factors for Brian that makes him search or investigate the events. In other words, the unknown mystery invigorates his journey to pursue the reality. He is so into with the lost faculty of his life because Ruth Leys claims, "There is . . . no genuine forgetting of the prior traumatic origin, because there is no trauma to forget" (180). An individual who suffers from a traumatic event or who is traumatized cannot forget the deadliest past. In fact, the individual is defenseless to outcast the experiences he has gone through because the flashes of memories constantly overwhelm the incidents or stimulate the images with unstoppable forces.

The two major character of the movie are sexually abused. The portrayal of this event and its underlying enduring significance in their lives serve as an exploration of what can be referred to, when considering existence in a philosophical sense, as a particular form of existence. However, what does the concept alluded to in the title of the film mean? Why is the skin enigmatic? It reveals that skin is the largest organ in the human body and that it operates as a medium of interaction between ourselves and the external world, intimately connecting us with the very essence of worldly existence. It oscillates between betraying us and aiding us, sometimes causing pain and other times providing pleasure. The title itself is more closely associated with the enigma of its potency. Both the character are confronting disastrous present just because of skin. The skin is the commonest part of human beings but that is the most mysterious origin that could entire manipulate and dilute the controlling power of our mind. The flexible premises of the skin is ostensibly represented in the movie

to amply exemplify the immensity of the skin that could change not only the psychology, behavior and present but also the possibility of reality and destiny.

The enormity of a particular organ that dominantly calls for the fate for an individual is one of the major themes of the movie. Perhaps, this is one of the reasons Tom O'Connor writes, "Gregg Araki's 2004 *Mysterious Skin* can be read as challenging the fundamental assumptions inherent in a psychoanalytic approach to trauma studies, they provide an alternative way of understanding the bodily and psychic effects of trauma, as well as a potentially more thorough means of transforming them in a real-world context" (55). Connor opines *Mysterious Skin* as an alternative way to read the traumatic effect and as an apparatus to metamorphose trauma in the pragmatic domain of the world. Indeed, the movie skillfully integrates imaginative metaphors, such as zombies, aliens, and religious icons, into the ordinary aspects of reality. This incorporation serves to demonstrate how the genre of the fantastic, whether in literature or cinema, can effectively tackle real-life problems and concerns. Given the deliberate and creative use of the fantastic, the main objective of the film's protagonist is to harness the transformative potential as he aims to employ these elements of fantasy and interpretation to achieve both subversive and healing outcomes.

The movie undoubtedly presents sexual content as the principle mechanism to articulate the traumatic reality of human sphere. At the same time Joel Dossi writes, "The film also questions the accepted, stereotypical image of a pedophile by portraying the victimizer in a sympathetic manner. Often endearingly referred to simply as "Coach," he interacts with his victims on a loving, one-to-one basis like any good authority figure" (65). In this sense, the movie is also a form of resistance that advocates for the voice for marginalized or victimized individual in society. In other



words, the Coach is a representation of the perpetrator and Neil and Brian are the subordinated group of people. Most parts trauma plays a significant role, most specifically as a thread to connect the dots. The suffering of the victims because of trauma is the depiction of how individuals are traumatized and made vulnerable, taking the benefit of their defenselessness and innocence. However, there are counter narratives, claiming the movie to be beyond the periphery of sexual and traumatic orientation. For example, Evangelos Tziallas argues:

Many critics believe the film is “mature” because its style is more conventional and its story is more focused and cohesive. At the same time, many critics believe the film is also about child molestation and abuse. Most of these (presumably straight) critics fail to see that the film is not “about” child molestation. These critics lack critical knowledge about queer cinema and because of this lack, they misinterpret the film’s focus and are unable to see how radical the film’s narrative and aesthetics are. (27)

Tziallas rationalizes the movie from aesthetic dimension refuting the movie’s primary concern to be abuse and molestation. Indeed Tziallas is right in a sense that that movie is tilted towards queer aesthetic and spectrum; however, he failed to acknowledge the root of the movie. The queer aesthetics come in to play merely after the protagonists are molested. The dominant role, in terms of gay sexuality, is played by Neil, and he traumatized by the molestation which makes him take homosexual behavior as a normal phenomena. In fact, had Neil not been abused he would not have been involved in queer sexual behavior. In this regard, Tziallas merely enjoyed the superficial aspect of the movie, devaluing its foundation. To be more precise, to neglect abuse and molestation part of the movie is to buy shoes for those without legs.

Critics no doubt have made harsh comment on the principle motif of the movie. Nevertheless, the movie is predominantly about the traumatized life of the victims because of the abuse. The incident is the major frame of the character in the movie that changes the dynamics of their life. Innocent Brian becomes a fanciful introvert character whereas stubborn Neil becomes a homogenous sex worker. Indeed, the surrounding atmosphere also plays a pivotal role to shape their life, for example the growing rumors of UFOs for Brian and punk fellows for Neil. Nonetheless, the sexual abuse is the major cause that derails them from their independent way of life. It would not be wrong to say the days they confront up to their youths, certainly in the future, are the consequences of what they did in the past. To make such proposition may sound logocentric; however, the truth is that the past determines the present and present determines the future. Brian, for example, does not know about the past, thus, to know the truth becomes his primary purpose of his life. And Neil who entertain the molestation makes the habit as profession. Both of them are monitored or driven by the past, either consciously or unconsciously.

Brian tries to overcome the trauma by searching the answer to the question what had happened that night and Neil tries to normalize trauma involving in sexual behavior, making it a common phenomena. For Brian it is a mystery and for Neil it is fate. In case of Brian, since he has closed circle, it becomes more difficult for him to naturalize the thing. His vision is oblique and lacks standpoint to judge himself. These casualty is the consequence of trauma because as Anne P. DePrince and Jennifer J. Freyd believe, “Although there is little dispute that traumatic exposure is often associated with negative consequences, controversy has surrounded the extent to which traumatic exposure has an impact on basic cognitive processes of attention and memory” (488). Brain’s memory is locked but not destroyed. There are in effect of

molestation in his mind. That is why he bleeds when he touches the sex organ of calf and when he ultimately recalls the real event at last.

More importantly, Brian has forgotten the real incidents but its imprints are ineradicable entities of his memory. If he had lost the essence of being lost then why would the lost time matter a lot to him? Simple, though the superficial spectrum of memory might have been occupied by a clear cover which was not strong enough to conceal his past permanently. The urges were constantly asking him question to get exposed of the reality. As Schwab assesses:

Trauma is enacted somatically, the story of the body remains hostage of the buried secret, haunted by an unknown phantom history or presence. A different language is needed to trace the “phantom effect” of a memory without memory, to eliminate the presence of the phantom from the inner world, its encryption inside the self. (81)

Schwab opines trauma can be expressed through the body, even if it is not consciously remembered. A different approach to therapy may be needed to help people process and heal from trauma. Although as Anne P. DePrince and Jennifer J. Freyd say, “Traumatic exposure - particularly exposure to chronic and repeated trauma - has been associated with many deleterious consequences, such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), alterations in neuroendocrine function, and depression” (448), there are possibilities through which the traumatic condition of an individual can be normalized. The same reactionary reality is presented in the movie as well. To reconcile the unbearable bitter truth of the past, Brian listens those terrific events that illuminates the dark side of his reality, unlocking the box of delusion and demystifying the concealed part of his life. The following picture is the climax of the movie when Brian happens to know his verity of life.



Fig 4. Neil and Brian, the scene of revelation

The image of Figure 4 picturizes two boys sitting on the floor in a bluish light emanating from the background. The light creates a somber atmosphere, reflecting the weight of the revelation they have recently experienced. Moreover, the bluish light in the background can be interpreted as a metaphor for the revelation of truth. It symbolizes the illumination that comes after confronting difficult truths. The boy on the right, Brian, is leaning his shoulders against the other boy, Neil, on the left, probably, seeking comfort. His face reflects a mixture of vulnerability, relief, and emotional exhaustion. His body language which is slightly tilted toward the left suggests a sense of surrender and experiencing a sense of comfort in the presence of the other boy. The boy, Neil, on the left, supporting his friend, exudes a sense of understanding and empathy. His facial expression shows compassion and concern, and also astonishment for not being able to help his friend when in distress. His body postures that are providing support to other boy emphasizes his willingness to be there for him during a difficult moment. The opening of his mouth suggests that he is offering comfort.

In fact, the shared experiences of both the characters are the manifestation of the diabolical past that paved the way for their future. It is the moment when they both express their deep reality which was the source of their trauma. And, importantly, their process of contestation with their hardship is indeed a process of healing because as Priscilla Dass-Brailsford and Amie C. Myrick argue, “A diagnosis of PTSD requires exposure to a traumatic event in which a person experiences or witnesses an event/events that involves real or threatened bodily harm, resulting in feelings of intense fear, helplessness, or horror” (202). Until and unless the trauma victim exposes the dark secret, s/he persistently ruptured by traumatic incidents. Thus, it is only through the revelation the trauma could be healed. To this, both Brian and Neil is in the process of healing their wound through their exposure to the darkest past. It is not possible to erase those wounds because they are inextinguishable from the historical traces of an individual. This bitter truth is more palpable when Brian says, “I wish there was some ways to go back and undo the past but there wasn’t. There was nothing we could do” (1:41:04-1:41:13). The dialogue suggests the vulnerability of the patient or the victim who is deteriorated by the trauma.

Trauma cannot be healed until it attains its magnitude of maturity. As Laplace Dominic claims, “The trauma would proceed, as it were, to a kind of self-extenuation, but without losing its nature, until it reached a certain limit, that limit being precisely what we call psychical trauma” (130). In this relevance, the movie when reflects the vulnerable confrontation of the characters with different disturbing situation strives to articulate the range of difficulty they withstand. These encounters drag them to the summit of trauma, ultimately leading them to their redemption through exposition. Thus, in doing so, they not merely establish the way for their recuperation but also

learn to live with the painful experience because they realize trauma cannot be healed but be normalize.

Cinematography, the art and technology of motion picture photography. It involves such techniques as the general composition of a scene; the lighting of the set or location; the choice of cameras, lenses, filters, and films stocks; the camera angle and movements; and the integration of any special effects. All these corners may involve a sizable crew on a feature film, headed by a person variously known as the cinematographer, first cameraman, lighting cameraman, or director of photography, whose responsibility is to achieve the photography images and effects desired by director. In this regards director Scoth Heim beautifully presented the cinematography in this film. This film has its own way of cinematography.

To sum up, the film does not shy away from the graphic details of the abuse, but it also shows the emotional and psychological toll that the abuse takes on the victims. The film's depiction of the trauma is both heartbreaking and hopeful. The film shows how the victims are able to find healing, but it also shows how trauma can never truly be forgotten. The film is a reminder of the devastating effects of child molestation, and it is a call to action for everyone to do their part to prevent child abuse. The fatality that the characters encounter is the vehement articulation of the undeniable consequences of childhood memories, which is imbued with dark, carnal and terrific experience regardless of irresistible condition they go through.

## Works Cited

- Berlin, Lauren. "Structures of Unfeeling: 'Mysterious Skin.'" *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, vol. 28, no. 3, 2015, pp. 191–213. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24713009>. Accessed 25 May 2023.
- Cavanaugh, Brian. "Trauma-Informed Classrooms and Schools." *Beyond Behavior*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2016, pp. 41–46. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26381827>. Accessed 26 May 2023.
- Caruth, Cathy: "Unclaimed Experience: *Trauma and the Possibility of History*" from *Yale French Studies*. 181-192.
- Dominick LaCapra: "*Writing History, Writing Trauma*" from *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. 09-29.
- Damayanti, Loren. "Children Sexual Abuse in Araki's Mysterious Skin." *Universitas Airlangga*, 2004, pp. 124-131.  
<http://journal.unair.ac.id/download-fullpapers-allusionb5c478883b2full.pdf>.  
Accessed 25 May 2023.
- Dass-Brailsford, Priscilla, and Amie C. Myrick. "Psychological Trauma and Substance Abuse: The Need for an Integrated Approach." *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, vol. 11, no. 4, 2010, pp. 202–13. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26638083>. Accessed 28 May 2023.
- DePrince, Anne P., and Jennifer J. Freyd. "Forgetting Trauma Stimuli." *Psychological Science*, vol. 15, no. 7, 2004, pp. 488–92. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40064137>. Accessed 28 May 2023.
- Dossi, Joel. *Cinéaste*, vol. 30, no. 3, 2005, pp. 65–66. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41689881>. Accessed 25 May 2023.
- Eyerman, Ron. "Social Theory and Trauma." *Acta Sociological*, vol. 56, no. 1, 2013,

pp. 41–53. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23525660>. Accessed 25 May 2023.

Schwab, Gabriele. *Haunting Legacies: Violent Histories and Transgenerational Trauma*. Columbia University Press, 2010.

Giordano, Amanda L., et al. “Addressing Trauma in Substance Abuse Treatment.” *Journal of Alcohol and Drug Education*, vol. 60, no. 2, 2016, pp. 55–71. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48514566>. Accessed 26 May 2023.

Kaminer, Debra, and Gillian Eagle. “TRAUMA AND CHILDREN.” *Traumatic Stress in South Africa*, Wits University Press, 2010, pp. 122–45. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.18772/22010105096.9>. Accessed 25 May 2023.

—. *POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER AND OTHER TRAUMA SYNDROMES. Traumatic Stress in South Africa*, Wits University Press, 2010, pp. 28–59. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.18772/22010105096.6>. Accessed 25 May 2023.

Koresky, Michael. “Mysterious Skin.” *Film Comment*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2005, pp. 73–74. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43457939>. Accessed 25 May 2023.

*Mysterious Skin*. Directed by Gregg Araki, Screenplay by Joseph Gordon-Levitt and BaryCorbt, TLA Releasing, 2004.

O’Connor, Tom. “Trauma and Becoming Art in Gregg Araki’s ‘Mysterious Skin’ and Asia Argento’s ‘The Heart Is Deceitful Above All Things.’” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 21, no. 1 (78), 2010, pp. 54–76. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24352337>. Accessed 25 May 2023.

Olsen, Mark. “Northern Exposure.” *Film Comment*, vol. 40, no. 6, 2004, pp. 57–58. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43456230>. Accessed 25 May 2023.



Ruth, Leys. *The Ascent of Affect Genealogy and Critique*, University of Chicago Press, 2017

Trunkey, Donald D. "Trauma." *Scientific American*, vol. 249, no. 2, 1983, pp. 28–35. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24968962>. Accessed 26 May 2023.

Tziallas, Evangelos. "Looking Beneath the Skin: Reconfiguring Trauma and Sexuality." *Stream: Culture/Politics/Technology*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2008, pp. 22-39, <https://journals.sfu.ca/stream/index.php/stream/article/view/3/3>. Accessed 25 May 2023.

Villani, Phillip and Maycon Lopes. "Mysterious Skin." *Sexuality and Culture*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2014, pp. 710-718. *Springer*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-014-9232-7>. Accessed 25 May 2023.