The Architecture of Unclaimed Trauma: Exploring Belatedness and Locus of Control in Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale*

Hoda Shabrang*(Corresponding Author)

Associate Professor of English Language and Literature, Department of English Language, Faculty of Humanities, Khatam University, Tehran, Iran.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9721-1781
Email: h.shabrang@khatam.ac.ir

Mina Bozorgian

MA Student of English Language and Literature, Department of English Language, Faculty of Humanities, Khatam University, Tehran, Iran.

https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1200-1662

Email: M.bozorgian.7825@khatam.ac.ir

Abstract

Kristin Hannah's novel *The Nightingale* (2015) narrates the endurance and agency of women in wartime. The aim of the present article is to analyze the concepts of war trauma and locus of control in the main female characters of Hannah's novel, under the lens of Cathy Caruth's and Julian Rotter's theories. Caruth posits that trauma emanates from an overwhelming incident that surpasses the individual's capacity to apprehend it at the moment of occurrence. The experience demonstrates belatedly through flashbacks or nightmares, and it is later integrated with the help of witnessing. Additionally, Rotter argues that the social environment triggers individuals' beliefs regarding the degree to which the consequences in their lives are affected by their own actions as opposed to external forces. These approaches are not generally fused as synchronized accounts, though applied as heuristic objectives at diverse levels of analysis. The analysis therefore requires a thorough reading of characters' interior monologues and symbols of suppression. In this novel, Hannah represents war trauma's belatedness, leading the protagonists to undergo double trauma. The first trauma is caused by the cruelty of war itself, and the second one is generated from the heroines' shattered sense of personal agency.

Pre-print version

Keywords: Belatedness, Locus of Control, Social Learning, Unclaimed Experience, War Trauma.

1. Introduction

The German occupation of France (1940–1944) exposed French civilians to conditions that surpassed the expository capacity of existing wartime narratives: food shortages, forced lodgings, the expulsion of Jewish citizens, and the constant threat of reproach. Women notably held a double position in this landscape— they were not only responsible for preserving domestic life under occupation but also excluded from the official narratives of resistance and combat that prevailed in postwar memory. It is this under-examined aspect of the war, the psychological burden on women who were neither soldiers nor official opponents but who nonetheless endured and withstood, that Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale* (2015) shines a light on.

Kristin Hannah, born in Garden Grove, California, in 1960, is a notable American novelist. Hannah graduated from the University of Puget Sound Law School and practiced law in Seattle before becoming a professional author. Inspired in part by real-world figures like Andrée de Jongh, who established an escape route for Allied soldiers, the plot follows two sisters, Vianne Mauriac, a mother and schoolteacher who survives through silent acts of liberation, and Isabelle Rossignol, who joins the Resistance under the code name The Nightingale.

Pre-print version

Kristin Hannah captures the epic perspective of World War II and highlights a part of history seldom seen: the psychological impact on women during times of war. The novel's crucial reception has been grounded in its portrayal of female resilience, but its deeper accomplishment lies in its representation of war trauma as a specifically gendered and relational phenomenon. In fact, the sisters' wounds are inflicted by the occupier; they are further endured, aggravated, or partially healed by the presence or absence of listeners who can receive and understand their testimony.

Existing research on *The Nightingale* tends to approach the novel through the lens of gender and resistance.

> After analyzing Hannah's, *The Nightingale*, the first tone one is that women's discrimination during the wartime exists in the novel. There are four kinds of discrimination experienced by French women. Those are marginalization, subordination, stereotype and violence. The second one is that the female characters respond to discrimination differently. (Ratri 2018, 251)

Such analyses do not postulate the psychological mechanisms by which trauma is endured, delayed, and eventually witnessed. What remains under-examined is the novel's formal and

psychological architecture: how traumatic experience is portrayed as belated and unprocessable, how the novel forms the basis on which testimony becomes probable or improbable, and how characters rebuild a sense of agency in a world where action and outcome have been fiercely dissociated.

This study addresses that gap by reading *The Nightingale* through two theoretical frameworks that are held in tension rather than fused. Caruth's trauma theory illuminates how disturbing incidents exceed the psyche's capacity to integrate them at the moment of occurrence and return belatedly; this delayed reappearance manifests as repetition compulsion, the psyche's compulsive recreation of the traumatic event. "Cathy Caruth attributes the shock experienced by the people in a traumatic event to the fact that the people do not have access to the reality of trauma, which necessitates its recurrence, which would provide an opportunity for the same person to experience it again"(Rahimi and Ahmadzadeh Heravi 2024, 69). Her statement of testimony as a mutual act presents a communication for the novel's staging of witnessing. Julian Rotter's social learning theory, and specifically his concept of locus of control, describes how individuals form generalized expectancies about whether outcomes are dependent on their own behavior. Consequently, Caruth's subject is largely shattered and never fully self-conscious, while Rotter's subject functions through contingencies that can be consciously designated. As Herman states, "Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning" (1992, 33).

Pre-print version

The central issues the study proceeds with are therefore how *The Nightingale* dramatizes the shift from unclaimed trauma toward testimony and later witnessing, and how its female protagonists rebuild a practicable form of personal agency when the conditions of control that Rotter's model presumes have been devastated. In order to tackle the issues, the study examines the novel's depiction of belatedness, repetition, and testimony alongside its depiction of characters' dynamic expectancies about control.

2. Literature Review

This review encompasses three grounds—trauma theory, locus of control, and criticism on *The Nightingale*—and pinpoints the gap: no integrated account of how Hannah's female protagonists move from unclaimed war trauma toward witnessing and recovered agency.

In "Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form" (2007), Greg Forter elaborates on how Caruth and other well-known critics efficiently incorporated Freudian psychoanalytic concepts with deconstruction to study collective violence throughout history.

Forter effectively distinguishes punctual trauma from chronic systemic trauma and notes that Caruth's model tends to structuralize trauma. In *Trauma* (2020), Lucy Bond and Stef Craps explore the historical, institutional, and gradual shift of the concept of trauma from a decentralized physical wound into a predominant style of contemporary cultural and literary criticism. They validate reading trauma through literary form but offer no sustained deployment of a specific author's narrative strategies, the task this study conducts.

Ritwika Verma and Shachi. S. Shah's article "A Comparative Study on the Usage of Locus of Control between Men and Women" (2017) finds Individual Control dominant in both sexes and genders by using Levenson's three-factor scale (Individual, Powerful Others, Chance) on 120 young adults. The authors emphasize that locus of control is an environmental spectrum, not an unchangeable trait. This is relevant to reading Vianne's shift as probable movement along a spectrum.

Raden Muhammad Ali and Amelya Yunita's "Woman's Struggle to Fight Against Nazi as Reflected in Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale*: A Feminist Approach" (2020) emphasizes Isabelle Rossignol's characterization as rebellious and fearless, concentrating on her resistance against alliance with the Nazi regime. It construes resistance as a fixed trait rather than a process, so it cannot clarify what happens to agency after capture and torture. Arfianing Ratri, in French Women Discrimination and Their Responses During World War II in Hannah's *The Nightingale* (2018), rationalizes the heroines' discrimination (marginalization, subordination, violence) and divides their reactions into fighting and accepting, attributing the latter to childhood trauma.

Pre-print version

In consequence, trauma theory has rarely been applied to Hannah; locus of control has been examined measurably; and existing criticism classifies discrimination without theorizing the psychological shift between trauma and agency.

3. Theoretical Framework

Cathy Caruth introduces contemporary trauma studies and then redefines how trauma is interpreted in literature, history, and psychoanalysis. Caruth's framework questions traditional historicism by suggesting that the very pattern of trauma—its belatedness, its duplicity, its resistance to direct narration—reflects how history itself is endured and documented. In her book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Caruth states that trauma is the aftermath of a devastating event that surpasses the individual's ability to wholly comprehend or assimilate at the moment of happening. Rather, the overwhelming experience

reveals itself belatedly, often through intruding repetitions such as flashbacks, hallucinations, or neurotic behaviors, disrupting linear narratives of memory and history. As Caruth writes: “The belated experience of trauma shows that history is not only the passing on of a crisis but also the passing on of a survival that can only be possessed within a history larger than any single individual or any single generation” (*Unclaimed Experience* 1996, 71).

The broader implications suggest a connection between individual traumas and the joint historical wounds of WWII, such as the Holocaust. Consequently, this underscores Caruth's view of trauma as a shared moral imperative to testify, highlighting literature's role in bearing witness to history's unclaimed experiences and suffering. Caruth claims, “This notion of trauma also acknowledges that perhaps it is not possible for the witnessing of the trauma to occur within the individual at all, that it may only be in future generations that ‘cure’ or at least witnessing can take place” (*Unclaimed Experience* 1996, 136). The concept of belatedness -- a term Caruth adapts from Freud-- is vital for comprehending why trauma is an unclaimed experience. According to Caruth's viewpoint, “The shock of the mind's relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the missing of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced in time, it has not yet been fully known (*Unclaimed Experience* 1996, 62). The subject is present, though the devastating nature of the event prevents it from being owned as a meaningful, private memory.

Pre-print version

War trauma is formed to keep the victim aware of their unbearable experience through its voice. It is generally cured when it is brought to the surface of consciousness. The psychological wound eventually assumes the form of an address; it demands another person who may receive, listen to, and testify to an experience that cannot be handled by either the survivor or the receiver.

Caruth's statement of trauma proposes a tough question for any theory of recovery: if the traumatic event is precisely left unexperienced, and if the subject is essentially unlinked from its own experience, how can one speak of or reclaim agency in any way? It is at this point that a second theoretical objective becomes practical—not to complete Caruth, but to note a tension. Julian Rotter's social learning theory offers a model of the subject as a competent interpreter of contingencies, one who generates generalized expectancies about whether outcomes are contingent on their own actions. Rotter's theory, unlike Caruth's, is presumed to be capable of conscious credit. The present research therefore does not fuse these frameworks but posits them in constructive tension.

In *Social Learning and Clinical Psychology* (1954), Rotter states that behavior cannot be perceived merely through external reinforcement; alternatively, individuals actively explicate situations, develop expectations regarding future results, and attribute different values to probable outcomes. Rotter highlights "lowering the expectancy that a particular behavior or behaviors will lead to gratifications or increasing the expectancy that alternate or new behaviors would lead to greater gratification" (*Social Learning* 1954, 338).

Within Rotter's broader social learning theory, locus of control represents one of the most influential concepts for explaining individual differences in expectations regarding personal influence over outcomes. Julian Rotter's "Generalized Expectancies for Internal Versus External Control of Reinforcement", composed in 1966, asserts the dominant claim that the effect of reinforcement on behavior relies not only on the objective presence of reward but on the person's perceived contingency between performances and the following consequences. He asserts that individuals translate the source of reinforcement differently on the basis of their learned expectations instead of, as traditional behaviorism suggested, reinforcement automatically stamping in behavior. As Rotter notes, "The effect of a reinforcement following some behavior on the part of a human subject, in other words, is not a simple stamping-in process but depends upon whether or not the person perceives a causal relationship between his own behavior and the reward" ("Generalized Expectancies" 1966, 1). Rotter differentiates between two broad-ranging attitudes toward control: internal and external. Individuals with an internal locus of control suppose that outcomes are dependent on their own actions, decisions, and personal traits. In comparison, individuals with an external locus of control interpret outcomes as influenced by chance, destiny, powerful others, or the natural volatility of the environment.

Pre-print version

Caruth and Rotter somehow intersect on a single point—that the act of address, of speaking and being heard, is integral to what comes after trauma—however, they differ fundamentally on what that act fulfills. For Caruth, testimony does not overcome the traumatic event; it bears witness to the subject's powerlessness to overcome it. The survivor narrates not from a position of revived agency but from the position of one who has been narrated by the event. For Rotter, on the other hand, the conception of contingency between action and outcome is literally what empowers the individual to act. This research posits that *The Nightingale* dramatizes this very discrepancy, portraying characters who attempt to revive a sense of contingency in a domain where Caruthian trauma has disbanded it.

The convergence of Caruth and Rotter in this study is not an endeavour to coordinate psychoanalytic and social-cognitive accounts of trauma. To analyse a single literary text based on both accounts is to venture a sort of theoretical inconsistency. This study manages that venture by addressing the two frameworks as heuristic objectives rather than hypothetical claims. By applying these approaches to Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale*, key traumatic events are discerned, their delayed influences on characters are efficiently analyzed, and it is explored how these severe disruptions form personal and collective identities. Ruth Leys cites that, "The history of trauma itself is marked by an alternation between episodes of forgetting and remembering, as the experiences of one generation of psychiatrists have been neglected only to be revived at a later time" (2000, 15).

War obscures the differentiation between skill-based and chance-based situations, where effort matters in the former and luck in the latter. Soldiers and civilians likewise may interpret their survival as entirely chance-based, enhancing external control expectancies. From Caruthian perspective, the external control expectancy is not solely a belief but a structural segment of traumatic experience itself—the event was never at the subject's disposal to begin with, and the belated repetition is the return of that which could not be assimilated into a coherent narrative. Hannah's novel portrays characters who endeavor to preserve internal control in environments where action and righteousness do not ensure safety.

Pre-print version

The Nightingale stages the tension between Caruth and Rotter, instead of resolving it. Vianne does not obtain an absolute internal locus—they cannot undo the trauma, revive the dead, or eliminate the violence that shattered their former life. What she attains is closer to what Caruth names an "ethical relation to the real" (Unclaimed Experience 1996, 92): a relevance that does not control the real; however, reacts to, addresses, and beholds it. The novel, therefore, offers a reading in which Rotter's notions of expectancies and contingencies are used to describe a subject who, in Caruth's terms, never fully attends to herself, yet who nevertheless acts.

4. Discussion

Hannah's *The Nightingale* suggests that female resistance during war—whether through quiet protection or daring rescue missions—represents a reclaiming of agency that is both enabled and limited by trauma. The women act not because they control their circumstances but because they refuse to be entirely controlled by them. Hannah's narrative structure can be interpreted as creating a chain of testimonial transmission. *The Nightingale,* hence changes the act of reading

into a form of witnessing. The reader receives the story of wartime suffering along with its hiddenness, time gaps, indirect utterance, and undetermined losses.

4.1 War Trauma and Personal Agency

As war trauma proceeds, personal agency—the characters' sense that their actions can control their outcomes—is manifested, undermined, and challenged by the belated return of trauma. Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale* is a historical narrative, unfolded in France at the time of World War II, depicting two sisters, Vianne Mauriac and Isabelle Rossignol, as they navigate the cruelty of Nazi invasion through defiance and survival. As Forter argues, the field has "difficulty accounting for those forms of trauma that are not punctual, that are more mundanely catastrophic" (2007, 260). Trauma here is not a punctual injury but a chronic condition.

Throughout the interconnected narratives of the two heroines, Vianne and Isabelle Mauriac, the novel probes how individuals experience, assimilate, and react to war trauma under drastic conditions. After hearing General de Gaulle's broadcast declaring that "the flame of French resistance must not and shall not die" (Hannah 2015, 82), Isabelle vows to fight. Caruth asserts that,

Pre-print version

> Trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival. It is only by recognizing traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognize the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience. (*Unclaimed Experience* 1996, 58)

"Isabelle hates to be a loser. She hates to be a passive person like Vianne did" (Ali and Yunita 2020, 61). Vianne's experience of occupation demonstrates this paradox. When she finally receives word from Antoine, a prisoner of war, his letter becomes a lifeline: "Because of you, I can survive. I hope that you can find strength in me, too, V. That because of me, you will find a way to be strong" (Hannah 2015, 183). After Beck's death at her hands, she sits in his room holding his family portrait, unable to reconcile the man she killed with the man who shared meals with her daughter. The unclaimed experience of killing a man she had come to know as decent haunts her in silence.

Caruth's deconstructive model argues that trauma fractures the psyche and the illusion of immanent control: the subject is possessed by an unprocessable past, and agency is weakened by the unconscious, where the event remains unclaimed. Conversely, Rotter's social-

cognitive model holds a pragmatic belief in self-efficacy —a conscious, generalized expectancy about whether actions shape outcomes. The two function at different levels: Caruth clarifies why the traumatic event cannot be mastered, while Rotter clarifies how characters deliberately interpret and endeavour to regain control in its aftermath.

Rotter's concept of locus of control presents the mechanism by which the following analysis marks the destruction and recovery of agency in the conscious state. Rotter's concept of locus of control operates as a framework that illustrates whether individuals interpret the outcomes of their actions as measured by personal attempts or by external forces. It examines how wartime experiences, social reinforcement, and unstable situations reshape Vianne and Isabelle's expectations of personal agency.

> While the traces of the past are all around us, the memories that exert the deepest pull on our emotions are often those connected to violent histories. Traumatic experiences leave deep scars that can remain unresolved for decades, generations, even centuries. Being bound to the past while struggling to overcome it is no short order. (Bond and Craps 2020, 2)

Pre-print version

Vianne Mauriac embodies the gradual erosion of internal locus of control under occupation. Initially sustained by domestic predictability—her husband Antoine, her children, her farm—the German invasion systematically dismantles her sense of agency. Antoine's conscription, the requisitioning of her home, and the constant threat of violence shift her generalized expectancies from internal to external control.

After losing her teaching position for questioning a Gestapo officer, she spirals into despair: “Out of money. What kind of woman was she to even think of sending a letter like this to her prisoner-of-war husband?” (Hannah 2015, 194-95). Her dependency on Beck for food further erodes her agency, even as she rationalizes it: “What mother could let her child suffer? Was Vianne really supposed to let Sophie starve to prove her loyalty to France” (Hannah 2015, 243). However, Vianne's transformation from fearful housewife to courageous resistor, hiding Jewish children and joining the Resistance, demonstrates that internal locus can be reclaimed even under extreme external constraint. When she takes Rachel's son Ari, she acts decisively: “She knew now that no one could be neutral—not anymore—and as afraid as she was of risking Sophie's life, she was suddenly more afraid of letting her daughter grow up in a world where good people did nothing to stop evil” (Hannah 2015, 289).

When Ari is taken from her to live with relatives in America, she must let him go, knowing “he will need to forget you, Madame, to start a new life” (Hannah 2015, 443). Her resilience at the end of the novel, her ability to rebuild and love, does not erase the past but demonstrates Caruth's paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival. Isabelle’s unrelenting pursuit of action can further be interpreted as a psychological fragmentation of untreated trauma: her mother’s early death, her father’s severe emotional neglect, and her constant sense of unbelonging. Her internal locus of control functions both as a stress reliever and a form of repetition, where she replicates previous losses.

The war paradoxically provides Isabelle with the structure to develop functional internal locus through her Resistance work. Each successful mission offers clear reinforcement: effort directly correlates with consequence, skill and courage rewarded with survival. When she first leads pilots over the mountains, she thinks: “For the first time in her life, she knew exactly what she wanted to do” (Hannah 2015, 240). She reflects: “All she really knew was that in this terrible, frightening world, she had stumbled into something unexpected. And she would not let it go again” (Hannah 2015, 337). However, her capture, torture, and imprisonment at Ravensbrück systematically annihilate any vestige of internal control—the camp environment makes personal effort meaningless.

Pre-print version

During her interrogation, she endures horrific abuse: “He hit her with an iron ruler across the cheek, so hard she felt her skin break open and blood spill” (Hannah 2015, 386). Even after liberation, the external locus imposed through such extreme trauma leaves lasting consequences that no resilient internal orientation can fully overcome. Both sisters exemplify Caruth's legacy of incomprehensibility—trauma that cannot be fully spoken or integrated but that nevertheless shapes identity and capacity for future action. Their survival depends on the ability to act meaningfully while carrying the weight of what remains unassimilated.

4.2 The Home as a Contested Space of Agency and Trauma

In war literature, generally, the domestic zone materializes as a shelter from combat, a private property detached from the mass violence of the battlefield. However, *The Nightingale* thoroughly deconstructs this detachment since, for Vianne, the home does not function as a refuge, but rather as the initial phase of war trauma and, afterwards, the primary site of personal agency. “The trauma that causes neurotic symptoms becomes less a matter of punctual events

intruding upon an unprepared psyche than an effect of the interplay between two moments" (Forter 2007, 264).

Vianne's trauma intensifies through the constant breach of her physical, emotional, and ethical boundaries within this domestic sphere. The two German officers, Captain Beck and later Captain Von Richter, do not disturb Vianne's privacy or attack her on the street; they infringe upon her rights in her own kitchen, her living room, and her bedroom. This spatial intrusion is integral to comprehending her primary external locus of control. The occupation permeates the most intimate sphere of her life, and the sexual assault she endures under the power of Captain Von Richter forces her into a situation where stillness is no longer a practicable survival plan. On that account, Vianne's trauma is doubled: she suffers not only from the sudden violence of war but also from the lasting pressure of memories that exist partially unclaimed, tormenting her well into old age.

A closer look at Rotter's theory shows how the home itself shifts Vianne's sense of control. Under the occupation of German commanders, her home becomes a place of constant watching and surveillance, where the line between the public war and private safety disappears. From a Caruthian perspective, this invasion of space creates a special kind of trauma. "To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth 1995, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 4-5). Vianne cannot escape the source of her emotional pain; she must cook, sleep, and raise her child within the very geography of her oppression. To survive in this stifling environment, Vianne develops a localized, inner sense of control. This transformation is visible in the novel when Vianne forges false identity papers at her own kitchen table:

Pre-print version

> She took out her own identity papers and studied them in minute detail. Then she took out the family Bible and opened it. On every blank space she could find, she practiced forging signatures. At first she was so nervous that her penmanship was unsteady, but the more she practiced, the calmer she felt. When her hands and breathing had steadied, she forged a new birth certificate for Jean Georges, naming him Emile Duvall. (Hannah 2015, 364)

The historical period of World War II portrayed in *The Nightingale* functions as a system of violence that systematically initiates, accelerates, and cements trauma. When the German army occupies Carriveau, Vianne witnesses the immediate transformation of her world: "Up and down the street, windows and doors slammed shut. People disappeared so

quickly Vianne found herself suddenly standing alone on the sidewalk with her sister and daughter" (Hannah 2015, 76). This erasure of ordinary life is compounded by anti-Semitic legislation, as Vianne watches her friend Rachel forced to wear the yellow star: "We have to stitch them onto our clothes—the three pieces of outerwear we are allowed—and wear them at all times in public" (Hannah 2015, 254). The collective denial is noticeable in the novel; a quote from the elderly Vianne imparts this kind of denial: "I come from a quieter generation. We understand the value of forgetting, the lure of reinvention" (Hannah 2015, 6). When Cathy Caruth's theory of unclaimed experience is applied to this collective catastrophe, it becomes evident how historical and war trauma bypasses immediate psychic assimilation, embedding itself into the structures of daily life and persisting long after the geopolitical conflict has ceased.

The war trauma she accumulates through starvation, the fracturing of her community, and sexual assault is directly tethered to this political apparatus of invasion. When Von Richter rapes her, she endures the violation in silence: "She did not make a single sound. Nor did she look away" (Hannah 2015, 396). Because this violence is too massive to be integrated into consciousness at the moment of occurrence, history is preserved in her psyche as unresolved memory. Bond and Craps declare that:

Pre-print version

> Historical trauma relates to a specific instance of loss and carries the possibility of being worked through in time, allowing a productive re-engagement with the future, traumatic memories may be passed across generations and may even be assumed by people with no direct connection to the original experience. (2020, 8)

Her son finds her in the attic, and she thinks: "If I had told him the truth long ago, or had danced and drunk and sung more, maybe he would have seen me instead of a dependable, ordinary mother" (Hannah 2015, 10).

The novel's disrupted chronology, fluctuating between the elderly Vianne's present and the wartime past, reflects this structural temporal intervention. The narrative does not advance in a direct line from cause to effect. Alternatively, it loops backward, rotates around psychological fragmentations, and returns to times Vianne cannot precisely describe. In addition, her son's role as an unaware viewer reflects Caruth's remark that trauma commonly demands an external listener – someone who did not witness the traumatic event – to become describable.

Isabelle Mauriac operated within the French Resistance under the codename the Nightingale (translated as Rossignol in French). A steady symbolic reading uncovers that the codename serves as a primary site of unclaimed experience, a scene where Isabelle's untreated past reemerges indirectly, disguised as a heroic identity. Isabelle's decision to use the codename is a direct but secret response to the suppression mechanisms of the Nazi totalitarian regime. In a war where speaking the truth could lead to destruction, the nightingale's song becomes a form of endurance. She cannot tell her childhood trauma directly; instead, she acts it out through dangerous behaviors. She unconsciously and continually positions herself in circumstances that simulate her childhood helplessness.

This cycle of repetition reaches its tragic and inevitable endpoint in the concentration camps, where her hyper-agency collides with absolute structural violence. After liberation, her mind reenacts the camps; the repetition does not bring closure or peace—it only reconfronts her with the same unclaimed horror. Rotter's framework explains that individuals who operate with strong internal orientations may suffer from a total mental collapse when faced with unmanageable, systematic trauma. "Although extreme internals could be so obsessed with personal responsibility that extreme guilt could produce maladjustment and extreme externals would become social misfits that are surely maladjusted" (Verma and Shah 2017, 166). This collapse is reflected in the novel through Isabelle's severe physical decay and emotional fatigue within the camp, where her previous confidence gradually yields to numbness, submission, and a sustained erosion of agency. Caruth's framework clarifies this psychological fragmentation and transition as the outcome of trauma's irresistible force; the cruelty Isabelle endures entirely overtakes her psyche's ability to comprehend the experience.

Pre-print version

4.3 Belated Narrative and Secondary Witness

Vianne has carried wartime flashbacks for decades, but their persistent existence within her consciousness does not autonomously change them into testimony. They turn to testimony when she begins to narrate them and when another person becomes capable of receiving them. This transformation is not simply thematic but rather radical; the novel pictures it through its non-linear narrative and its tactical use of silence. Earlier in the novel, Vianne's son was identified as an external listener whose curiosity participates in the reveal of an experience that has remained partially impervious to comprehension. The frame narrative—set in 1995, with the son returning to the family home and confronting the past—is the mechanism through which the novel magnifies Caruth's statement that trauma can only be witnessed belatedly, by

another, some time later. The same pattern exists between Vianne's son and the reader. The reader, like the son, did not experience the sisters' wartime history directly. The novel thus situates the reader as a tertiary witness: the son receives Vianne's testimony, and the reader receives the novel's narration of that reception—a chain of secondary witnessing that solemnly simulates trauma's structure of delayed communication. The novel posits the reader as a secondary listener who witnesses the traumatic past through reflective narration.

The novel's non-linear temporal pattern augments this argument. The narrative fluctuates between the wartime past and the 1995 present; thereby, the reader interprets the war not as a straightforward sequence but as a return—a formal ratification of the belatedness Caruth designates as trauma's defining temporal manner. The past is not simply recalled; it encroaches upon the present, structuring the son's realization of his mother's and aunt's buried histories as an act of belated witness. Silence operates as another structural device. What Vianne does not speak about, what Isabelle never survived to narrate, and what the family has suppressed for decades establish the novel's negative space—the unclaimed side of the experience that resists direct delineation. Testimony in this novel is established as much by the breach of silence as by the words communicated.

Pre-print version

Isabelle's actions disclose something about her traumatic past, but she never fully undertakes the position of a narrator who can organize and transmit that history to another person or generation. This contrast gives rise to one of the novel's most critical ethical subjects. If Isabelle is absent to confirm her own experience, the perpetuation of her story relies on secondary witnessing. As a result, Vianne assumes two positions simultaneously: she is a survivor of her own trauma and the keeper and bearer of Isabelle's. This is the " passing on of a crisis but also the passing on of a survival that can only be possessed within a history larger than any single individual or any single generation" (*Unclaimed Experience* 1996, 71). What could not be narrated in the wartime present—Isabelle's unclaimed devotion—is transmitted intergenerationally only through Vianne's belated testimony and her son's sympathetic witnessing.

Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale* offers a deep psychological insight into how trauma and agency interact and change human thought. Through the lenses of Caruth and Rotter, the novel suggests that regaining control over one's life – whether through active resistance, protecting the vulnerable, or the crucial act of telling one's story –lies at the heart of enduring tragedy. Even as the lasting scars of history continue to shape identity through generations,

reclaiming the narrative transforms the nightingale's solitary song from a personal lament into a shared and lasting testament of survival. What makes this transformation formally meaningful is that the novel requires each reader to assume the role of the secondary witness and consequently complete the transmission that the wartime narrative could not fulfill by itself.

5. Conclusion

This study begins by examining a key gap in the existing criticism on Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale*. Cathy Caruth's foundational work on unclaimed experience and Julian Rotter's psychological framework of locus of control are both added to our understanding of how people process overwhelming events; nonetheless the two have rarely been brought together in literary analysis, particularly in women's wartime narratives. The present study interprets the novel as dramatizing the disparity between Caruth's belated, unmanageable trauma and Rotter's conscious attributions of control. The novel, first, represents the essence of war trauma as architecturally belated: its non-linear chronology, strategic silences, and 1995 frame narrative formally depict Caruth's claim that trauma returns later through repetition and disturbance. Second, it marks agency along the Rotterian spectrum and third, the home functions not as a refuge but as the primary site where trauma is imposed and agency restored.

Pre-print version

Most importantly, this study defines and supports the concept of the double trauma, which refers to the overlapping and compounding nature of traumatic experience, where the survivor faces not only the immediate devastation of war but also the psychological fragmentation and loss of personal agency that arise as they try to cope with the aftermath. The novel illustrates the Caruth–Rotter tension without unraveling it: what Vianne regains is not a sheer internal locus but something closer to Caruth's ethical relation to the real—a relevance that does not control the real yet responds to and observes it. To conclude, reclaiming agency is closely tied with reclaiming history.

Funding: There is no funding support.

Authors' Contributions: The authors have written the article in complete collaboration.

Conflict of Interest: This article does not conflict with personal and/or organizational interests.

References

Ali, Raden Muhammad, and Amelya Yunita. 2020. "Woman's Struggle to Fight Against Nazi as Reflected in Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale*: A Feminist Approach." *Ahmad Dahlan Journal of English Studies* 7 (2): 55-67. http://dx.doi.org/10.26555/adjes.v7i2.15659.

Balaev, Michelle. 2018. "Trauma Studies." *A Companion to Literary Theory*. edited by David H. Richter. John Wiley & Sons. 361-71. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324563875_Trauma_Studies.

Bharti, Manu. 2025. "From Home to Warfront: Women in World War II Narratives." *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences* 10 (2): 263-66. https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.102.42.

Bond, Lucy, and Stef Craps. 2020. *Trauma*. Routledge. 1-11

Boubchir, Amel, and Adidi Megherfi. 2024. "Kristin Hannah's The Nightingale (2015) and Zohra Drif's Inside the Battle of Algiers (2017): A Comparative Study." Master's diss., Mouloud Mammeri University of Tizi-Ouzou.

Caruth, Cathy. 1995. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Forter, Greg. 2007. "Freud, Faulkner, Caruth: Trauma and the Politics of Literary Form." *Narrative.* The Ohio State University Press 15 (3). 259-85. https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2007.0022.

Hannah, Kristin. 2015. *The Nightingale*. St. Martin's Press.

Herman, Judith L. 1992. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books.

Kadhim, Fatima Essam, and Maha Qahtan Sulaiman. 2024. "Ethical Conduct of Billeting Soldiers in *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah." *Journal of College of Education* 57 (2). 567-582. https://doi.org/10.31185/eduj.Vol57.Iss2.3939

LaCapra, Dominick. 2001. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Leys, Ruth. 2000. *Trauma: A Genealogy*. University of Chicago Press.

Mandagie, Danny Kristofer. 2025. "The Influence of the Setting on the Character Development of the Central Characters in Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale*." *Jurnal Penelitian Ilmu Sosial & Ilmu Budaya* 2 (1). 13-18.

Meretoja, Hanna. 2020. "Philosophies of Trauma." *The Routledge Companion to*

Pre-print version

Literature and Trauma. edited by Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja. 23-35.

Oanh, Dang Hoang. 2021. "The Concept of Trauma in Literature Viewed from the Transitioning Models of Trauma in the West." *VNU Journal of Foreign Studies* 37 (4). 97-110. doi:10.25073/2525-2445/vnufs.4752.

Putra, Alvons Satria Mandala. 2020. "Women's Resistance During Nazi Occupation in Kristin Hannah's *The Nightingale*." *Lingua Litera: Journal of English Linguistics and Literature* 6 (2). 35-43. http://journal.stba-prayoga.ac.id/

Rahimi, Ahmad Reza and Shideh Ahmadzadeh Heravi, 2024, "A Study of Trauma in Jhumpa Lahiri's 'A Temporary Matter'". *Critical Language and Literary Studies*, 20 (31). 55–71, doi: 10.48308/clls.2023.103738

Ratri, Arfianing. 2018. "French Women Discrimination and Their Responses During the World War II in Hannah's *The Nightingale*." *English Language and Literature Journal* 7 (3). 242-52.

Rotter, Julian B. 1966. "Generalized Expectancies for Internal versus External Control of Reinforcement." *Psychological Monographs: General and Applied*. University of Connecticut 80 (1). 1-28.

Rotter, Julian B. 1954. *Social Learning and Clinical Psychology*. Prentice-Hall, Inc. https://doi.org/10.1037/10788-000.

Verma, Ritwika, and Shachi S. Shah. 2017. "A Comparative Study on the Usage of Locus of Control between Men and Women." *The International Journal of Indian Psychology* 5 (1). 163-72. https://doi.org/10.25215/0501.117.

Pre-print version