CINEJ CINEMA JOURNAL
ISSN 2159-2411 (PRINT) ISSN 2158-8724 (ONLINE)

Is She Still There?: Child Sex Trafficking, Traumatic Memory and Resilience in Mischa Marcus' Film *I Am Still Here*

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Volume 13.2 (2025) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2025.730 | http://cinej.pitt.edu

Abstract

This paper aims at contextualizing child sex trafficking, trauma, and resilience from the atrocities of sexual violence based on the reading of Mischa Marcus' film *I Am Still Here*. The analysis makes its way from violence, trauma, and PTSD to resilience through the cinematic representation of sexual abuse. The film portrays the experiences of a child who is trafficked and the subsequent impact on her psychological state, using non-linear narrative techniques and sensory triggers to reflect the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. This study also includes a conversation with the director, which offers new insights into her directorial approach to depicting trauma and recovery, emphasizing realism without exploitation. Through consulting the aspects of the camera and theories on traumatic memory, PTSD, and resilience, the paper analyzes the fragmented nature of traumatic experiences and how they subvert common media tropes. Further, it also discusses the importance of supportive relationships in recovery, highlighting how the film depicts the crucial role of emotional support in healing from the trauma of sexual violence. Thus, this study is focused on a survivor of child sex trafficking, delving into a deeper understanding of child and adult resilient behaviors in dealing with trauma.

Keywords: child sex trafficking; sexual violence; traumatic memory; resilience; PTSD; cinematic representation

Is She Still There?: Child Sex Trafficking, Traumatic Memory and Resilience in Mischa Marcus' Film *I Am Still Here*

Sheetal Kumari

Introduction

I Am Still Here (2017), written and directed by Mischa Marcus, is a tale of a 10-year-old girl, Layla (played by Aliyah Conley), who is abducted and descends into a life of sex slavery. The film depicts the first forty-eight hours of violence and abuse immediately after Layla was kidnapped. The major parts of the film are in flashbacks when Layla (played by Ciara Jiana) becomes 17 years old. The film won the Best Feature Award at the Nice International Film Festival on the French Riviera (I Am Still Here, 2019). The film was shot in Los Angeles, but despite this, it feels as though it could be anywhere in USA because crimes like kidnapping and child trafficking occur anywhere in the country (Marcus & Bell, 2017). The conversation between Marcus and Bell revealed that there is no racial, age, or gender discrimination in child sex trafficking. Individuals involved in human trafficking may come from many socioeconomic origins, as well as varied racial and cultural backgrounds. They might originate from both blue-collar and white-collar individuals in general. The victims could be from any race and often little kids of 8 or 9 years old. The film deals with the atrocities of a Black girl. Given that the film centers on a 10-year-old black girl who is the protagonist victim, risk factors that African-American girls are more likely to experience include being a female, having a history of sexual

and physical abuse, and experiencing instability and disruption in their community and family. More than any other racial group, 52% of all juvenile prostitution charges include African-American adolescents, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. 40% of sex trafficking victims were African-Americans, according to a two-year analysis of all suspected human trafficking occurrences (2014, Table 43B). The film is rated 'R' because of the subject matter and language. An interview with Mischa Marcus reveals that it is inappropriate for children to see and target people in their 20s and older, "You won't enjoy *I Am Still Here*" (Donovan, 2017).

The film focuses on the victim's (Layla) experiences of sexual abuse, the trauma she endures, and how she copes with it. In addition to exploring her path to empowerment and healing, it also explores her inner battles, such as feelings of dread, remorse, and humiliation. The cinematic representation of acts seeks to present sexual assault and trauma in an authentic and unvarnished way. The influence that such abusive encounters have on the victim's emotions and psyche is also not overlooked in the scenes. Layla's horrific experiences are portrayed in the film through cinematic techniques of flashbacks and recollections. In order to mimic the shock and disorientation that survivors may experience, such sequences of sexual violence are frequently shown in a fragmented and non-linear fashion. Violence comprises the use of force, tremendous strength, and sternness to limit human freedom, inflict bodily pain, and impede

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natural processes without a valid reason (Gökulu, 2013, p. 67). It also includes severe psychological and emotional harm to the victim. According to this interpretation, the concept of violence also includes verbally harmful and psychological acts of torture. When violent acts attack a person's most private area and go against their physical, mental, and spiritual integrity, they are considered sexualized violence. The word 'sexualized violence' is defined here as including physical acts of aggression, assaults, and the unapproved transgression of bodily boundaries. They can include rape and overt sexual advances. This study employs the framework of trauma theory, particularly drawing on psychological theories on concepts of traumatic memory, to analyze the impact of child trafficking and sexual abuse as depicted in Marcus' film.

Existing Scholarship on child sex trafficking and trauma has largely been approached from psychological and sociological perspectives, and criminological perspectives, focusing on PTSD, resilience, and social determinants of exploitation. While trauma studies in literature and film have emphasised the fragmented nature of memory and the ethical stakes of representation, little critical work has explored the intersection of cinematic form and child trafficking narratives, particularly in the context of independent films. Previous studies on rape narratives and sexual violence in cinema have examined genre conventions, audience perception, and

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cultural memory, but have seldom considered how cinematic techniques specifically mediate the psychological turmoil of child survivors. This article addresses that gap by situating Mischa Marcus' film within trauma theory and analysing how its non-linear structure, flashback, and sensory triggers articulate traumatic memory and resilience.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The paper focuses on understanding how the trauma of sexual violence affects memory and behavior, using cinematic representation as a medium to explore the experiences of these atrocities. It critically engages Cathy Caruth's conception of trauma as a belated and fragmented experience, Bessel van der Kolk's emphasis on the body's retention of traumatic memory. Also, how the film avoids sensationalizing abuse and instead emphasizes the psychological consequences and resilience of the survivors of sex trafficking, using media representation theory to evaluate the ethical portrayal of violence in the film. Furthermore, it integrates the concept of PTSD, dual representation theory, which explains the interplay of verbal and sensory memories, and recovery from trauma, which clarifies the film's non-linear narrative structure and the victim's psychological condition after surviving and coping with it, mirroring the disjointed character of traumatic memory and its sensory triggers.

The multi-approach, combining trauma theory with media analysis, provides a comprehensive lens to the article through which to understand both the psychological and social

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dimensions of the trauma of child sex trafficking as portrayed in the film. This article also includes an interview with Mischa Marcus, the writer and director of *I Am Still Here*, which enriches the analysis by offering firsthand insights into the creative decisions behind the film's portrayal of the trauma of child sex trafficking (See Appendix). Marcus' insights from her research, directorial choices, and the ethical considerations involved in depicting child sex trafficking, sexual exploitation, killing, and pornography of minors provide valuable context that deepens the discussion. This conversation with Marcus enhances the understanding of theoretical concepts, analysis of the film, practical filmmaking, and the article's exploration of trauma and resilience from continuous sexual violence.

Cinematic representation of sexual violence against children and trauma

Watching terror, cruelty, and violence in films offers a protective barrier that keeps our bodies safe from damage. The ability to conjure up unseen horrors, warp the terror it depicts, and sway conversations about actual violent incidents makes it a potent and freeing kind of media (Elm et al., 2014, p. 2). When we discuss trauma, we are referring to intense feelings of fear, shock, and disgust (p. 3). Trauma is often depicted in films through traumatic iconographies, past noises, and the instability of intra-film chronology, which Michaela Krützen calls "backstory wounds" due to the use of flashback structures. This entails the film reenacting the actual event, creating societal trauma through modified and mediatized methods (Elm et al.,

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2014, p. 5; Turim, 1989). The film has the power to alienate society by reviving suppressed imagery, lost iconographies, and acute flashbacks, thereby triggering or creating trauma. Stress problems and uncontrolled anxiety episodes may be caused by traumatizing memory pieces that are difficult to reconcile into one's own or collective narrative (Wilson & Agaibi, 2006). Building on van der Kolk's concept, the theory of traumatic memory suggests that cinema not only conveys the traumatic event itself but also reflects it through elements like sound levels, camera angles, and the interplay between diegesis and acting. These are complemented by sensory triggers, emotional responses, and sudden, visceral sensations that are translated into cinematic language (Elm et al., 2014, p. 10).

The way that Marcus directed the violent and sexually abusive sequences in which Ricky and his clients tormented Layla and other children gave viewers the impression that they are both secure and experiencing their pain and trauma. The portrayal of Layla's descent into the dark world of human trafficking is so brutally realistic that it resonates with our own personal suffering. The film employs traumatic iconographies and non-linear chronology to depict Layla's experience. Flashbacks are a recurring motif, disrupting the film's timeline and reflecting the instability of Layla's mental state. These backstory wounds, as Krützen describes, reenact the traumatic events that Layla endured, forcing both her and the audience to relive the horror. The flashbacks are not just narrative tools but are deeply embedded with sensory

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triggers—sudden shifts in sound, jarring camera angles, and fragmented visuals—that replicate the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. These elements make the trauma feel immediate and unprocessed, much like how it is experienced by survivors. The film also makes use of sensory cues to arouse the terrifying sensations associated with trauma. There is a clear correlation between Layla's psychological suffering and specific noises, for instance, abrupt silences or clanging of metal, because these sounds are connected to her horrific experiences.

In order to reflect Layla's emotional turmoil and her fight to retain a sense of reality, the camera work frequently switches from close-ups to disoriented wide shots. With the use of these cinematic devices, the spectator is able to viscerally experience Layla's dread and anxiety by expressing the nonverbal, physical effects of trauma. The camera is handled expertly in scenes where Layla, Bee Bee, and others are coerced, deceived, and humiliated by her abductors, highlighting the cruelty of their circumstances, which intensifies viewers' terror. In keeping with the idea that trauma obstructs the formation of a coherent narrative, the film alienates both Layla and the audience by bringing back repressed imagery and mediatized memories. This alienation is further amplified by the film's exploration of societal trauma, as Layla's individual experience is depicted as part of a larger, systemic issue of abuse and exploitation. The film's representation of Layla's trauma thus resonates on both a personal and

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societal level, illustrating how cinema can mediate and communicate the complex, often overwhelming nature of traumatic memories.

Rape stories often depict rapes that align with beliefs and prejudices about actual rape, such as betrayal or forceful subjugation, which is shaped by genre structure, social, legal, and cultural factors (Henry, 2014; Young, 2010, p. 44). According to Sarah Projansky (2001), rape narratives in films help to structure intricate concepts like gender, race, class, and nation, which in turn help to organize and comprehend the social environment (pp. 7, 17; Spallacci, 2019, p. 2). Allen Meek's (2009) trauma theory combines witnessing, testifying, and traumatic occurrences, while Cathy Caruth's theory suggests traumatic memories are influenced by flashbacks or nightmares experienced by survivors (p. 8; Spallacci, 2019, pp. 2, 4). This approach links symptoms to the occurrence and views them as proof, which is important in circumstances like rape without witness or material evidence, validating the survivor's story (Spallacci, 2019, p. 3). The films depicting rapes advocate that the victim may use deadly force against her perpetrators as a result of the horrific experience of being raped. (Young, 2010, p. 45). The methods employed in the film to depict a rape scenario have a big influence on how viewers interpret sexual violence. Concepts and imagery in media have lasting power, shaping personal and collective memory and societal perception of survivors, causing viewers to feel pity or revulsion when viewing close-ups (Plantinga, 2009, pp. 3, 5).

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In this line of thought, Ahmed (2004) argues that emotions are socially produced since their emotional value stems from their connections to people, things, ideas, and events (pp. 4, 11). These portrayals often dehumanize victims, especially women and children, perpetuating derogatory discourses. A sexual assault scenario illustrates the reality that sex workers are more frequently raped with objects and subjected to more severe harm during rape. The film's portrayal of Layla's rape resonates with the common narrative structures that depict rape as a brutal act of betrayal and subjugation, echoing societal and genre-based expectations. However, it also subverts these expectations by focusing on the long-term psychological impact rather than sensationalizing the violence.

Layla experiences flashbacks and nightmares, which shed light on the fact that rape is not just an act of physical violence but also a violation that causes lasting emotional and psychological wounds. In accordance with Cathy Caruth's theory that trauma is an experience that is continually replayed in the survivor's mind, this approach places more emphasis on the interior trauma of Layla than merely outward occurrences. The film also tackles the social production of emotions by showing how Layla's trauma of sexual exploitation is socially and emotionally processed by herself and others around her. Through close-ups and intimate but violent scenes of Layla and her reactions, the audience is made to feel the terror and revulsion

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that evoke empathy and a deep feeling of injustice. The film challenges the viewer to confront their own perceptions and biases about sexual violence and its victims. The film's portrayal of sexual violence against Layla also engages with how such events are remembered and perceived within society. The lasting impact of the sexual violence and abuse on Layla's life, depicted through her struggles with PTSD, underscores how media representations of rape contribute to shaping societal attitudes and collective memory about sexual violence. The film highlights the need for these portrayals to be sensitive and accurate, as they have the power to influence how survivors are perceived and treated in real life.

Diana Russell (1993) contends that the widespread availability of heterosexual pornography mixes sex with female abuse (p. 3) and causes some men to mistakenly identify violent scenes as pleasurable ones by associating them with sexually suggestive elements such as female nudity (p. 129). This has led to an increase in the popularity of films in America that show women being raped, tortured, and killed (pp. 6, 261). As Kaplan (2005) points out, some cinematic representations can imitate the structure of trauma by encroaching on narratives without offering meaning or providing closure. Hirsch and Smith contend that traumatic memory acts for survivors require particular settings and actors (Kaplan, 2005, p. 131; 2002, p. 7). The film challenges the normalization of violence against women in media by presenting Layla's experiences with raw, unflinching honesty. Unlike the problematic trend Russell

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describes, where violent and sexual imagery becomes intertwined and normalized, the film avoids eroticizing Layla's abuse. Instead, it focuses on the profound psychological impact of her trauma, depicting her suffering with sensitivity and depth.

Kaplan's observation about cinematic representations imitating trauma is evident in the film's use of fragmented narrative and disorienting flashbacks, which mirror the disjointed nature of traumatic memory. Layla's story is not presented as a sequence with neat resolutions but as a series of distressing episodes that reflect the ongoing and unresolved nature of her trauma. This approach underscores the point that authentic portrayals of traumatic memory require specific settings and interactions to convey the survivor's experience meaningfully. A series of flashbacks showing Layla with John in her early years often recur in the story, as though leading up to an admission of the traumatic event and moments of feeling safe around him. The information about Layla's alcohol and smoking addiction, the physical scars, and the memories of her personal relationship with John stifled her traumatic experiences. The memories preceding John's non-witnessed occurrences are crucial as they reveal the truth about John using Layla for pornography and highlight the trauma and traumatized memory as links in a larger repressive chain.

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Posttraumatic stress disorder and Layla's traumatic memories

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), as asserted by Ruth Leys (2012) as "a disorder of memory" (p. 2), is brought on by traumatic events that are severe enough to endanger life, such as natural catastrophes, warfare experiences, or unexpected accidents. The conversation focuses on how invasive historical events may be in the present, which can occasionally cause people to lose touch with reality and relive parts of the event, acting as though they are actually there (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 236). In its initial clinical manifestation, post-traumatic stress disorder PTSD is sometimes seen as a temporal condition pertaining to an individual's perception of time. There is a risk that the past will push the present aside and the future will be engulfed, creating an unstable temporality. Post-traumatic stress disorder is characterized by defensive reactions such as startle reactions, emotional numbness, forgetfulness, intrusive recollections, and cognitive avoidance, causing difficulty in reliving and escaping trauma-related experiences. It can also cause sudden and unwarranted recollections, often disrupting daily life (Brewin et al., 1996, p. 670).

Long-term memory analysis distinguishes between retrievable trauma memories and flashbacks, which are recalled during deliberate cognitive activity, unlike spontaneous reenactments that require the resynthesis of emotions. Although full-fledged flashbacks can be avoided by trauma survivors by purposefully remembering and describing their experiences,

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they may eventually be triggered by specific details or unanticipated reminders. The formation and appearance of different types of trauma have been greatly impacted by the interaction of politics and science, which is why trauma histories are frequently portrayed as behaving like it. In discussing different episodes of trauma, Ruth Leys (2012) makes the case that they are not part of a continuous historical trauma that is happening. She draws attention to the traumatic events' disruptive nature, emphasizing how they are felt as though, for the first time, they have the same shock or disruption qualities as the trauma itself (p. 10). Judith Herman (1992), in her work with survivors of sexual abuse, emphasizes that PTSD is a unique condition resulting from a traumatic event that surpasses typical human life adaptations, not because it happens infrequently (p. 33).

In the film, Layla's experiences vividly illustrate PTSD as a disorder of memory. The film portrays her trapped in an unstable temporality where the traumatic past continually intrudes upon her present, making it difficult for her to distinguish between past and current realities. This is evident in her flashbacks, where she relives the horrors of her abduction and abuse as if they are happening again, highlighting the disorienting and invasive nature of PTSD. The film also depicts PTSD's characteristic defensive reactions in Layla, including emotional numbness, cognitive avoidance, and sudden recollections. Her startle responses and

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hypervigilance reflect her continuous struggle with trauma, where the line between memory and immediate danger blurs. Layla's attempts to suppress these memories only lead to their resurgence in the form of intrusive flashbacks, disrupting her life and reinforcing the notion that PTSD is not merely a condition of the mind but of temporality.

Layla's trauma memories oscillate between deliberate recollections and spontaneous flashbacks. Even when she tries to control her narrative through conscious memory, unexpected triggers force her into involuntary reenactments, underscoring the persistent and unpredictable nature of PTSD. The scene of the hospital, where Layla is admitted after being found in the garbage and interrogated by Detective Amy Walker, unfolds the trauma she is carrying and her future recovery as the detective says, "I know you can't talk now, but you will" (Marcus, 2017, 00:01:12). It has been seven years since Layla is enduring the pain of sexual harassment and abuse. The detective's questions about her last name and whereabouts disturb Layla, and the flashbacks of Ricky, the abductor, sexually harassing her and calling her 'My mustang' appear. This leads Layla to have breathing difficulties, and further, she faints. Bee Bee, one of the white girls, was a good companion to Layla when they lived with the abductors. Bee Bee was brutally harassed by one of the customers, which led to her death. Layla was in denial and not ready to accept that Bee Bee was dead. The abductors abuse her and forcefully try to get her out of place, but Layla dissents, "I'm not leaving her" (Marcus, 2017, 00:40:15). When Ricky says that she

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is gone, Layla opposes, “She’s here” (Marcus, 2017, 00:40:50). Layla, after being rescued, is still not in a state to accept the truth; she asks the detective, “Where’s Bee Bee? … Find Bee Bee. You have to find her” (Marcus, 2017, 00:45:26). Also, Layla admits that she does not remember much and does not want to remember things when the detective interrogates her.

Also, in the case of John Marley, a pedophile, who is one of Layla’s customers, who took many naked pictures of her and runs an online business producing child pornography and sexual materials. He was gentle with her and took care of her. Layla has a place for him in her heart because he treated her well. When the detective reveals that John was a criminal, Layla denies it and says, “John was a good man” (Marcus, 2017, 01:03:13). The trauma and fear of Ricky are so deliberate that she keeps seeing him when John flees with her. She hallucinates Ricky saying, “You really think you can get away, that easy? Like it or not, I’m inside of you” (Marcus, 2017, 01:11:53). Layla experiences nightmares and sleep difficulties due to her condition. Layla also always hallucinates, in which Bee Bee accuses her of abandoning her since the sights and memories of Bee Bee’s death are so horrific.

Even while autobiographical memories are probably detailed, anxiety’s enhanced attentional selectivity and reduced short-term memory capacity may make them selective. Emotional and physical responses, sensory characteristics, and the perceived significance of an

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experience are all revealed by verbally accessible memories (VAMs) (Brewin & Holmes, 2003, pp. 356-357; Brewin et al., 1996, p. 676). An additional set of subconsciously accessible representations is formed when a distressing incident is extensively processed non-consciously. When someone experiences physical characteristics or meanings that are comparable to a traumatic scenario, either outwardly through exposure to previous traumas or inwardly through conscious thought, context, and representations are instantly retrieved. There will be notable differences between the two depictions, even if there may be some parallels as well. Although vocally available knowledge cannot be altered, autobiographical memories and situationally accessible memories (SAMs) can be because of limits in processing ability (Brewin & Holmes, 2003, p. 357; Brewin et al., 1996, p. 677).

The emotional intensity of Layla's experiences probably makes her autobiographical recollections vivid, but her fear also makes them selective. Short-term memory function and cognitive focus are negatively impacted by anxiety, which leads to this selectiveness. The predominant visuals in her memory are her bodily and emotional reactions, sensory information, and the perceived importance of her trauma, which are elements of verbally accessible memories. Her narrative about her perception of the world is shaped by these experiences, which she can consciously recall, express, and verbalize. These memories, however, are scrambled, and her capacity to remember them clearly is compromised because

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of the intense nature of her trauma. The VAMs demonstrate the depth of Layla's experience and trauma of sexual violence, but they are also fixed, meaning a subsequent experience and newly acquired knowledge cannot readily alter them. They are always affecting her mental state and how she responds to questions asked in the hospital; they seem to be stuck in time. Layla's trauma and fragmented memories are also reflected in situationally accessible memories, which are created when upsetting events are processed subconsciously. The SAMs Layla becomes activated when she comes into contact with certain triggers, which frequently leads to trauma reactions like dissociation or flashbacks, such as when she gets to know that John is a pedophile and he was using her naked pictures for his website, the flashback of John loving Layla occurs. SAMs are more adaptable because they are closely linked to the sensory and emotional contexts of the event than to the conscious memory.

Layla's experiences of sexual exploitation as a child and her memories of it, which do not follow a linear storyline, are fragmented and obtrusive, which frequently overwhelms her capacity to function in the present. Layla's trauma manifests through the complex interplay between her VAMs and SAMs. While her VAMs provide a verbal account of her trauma, they are incomplete and selective, leaving gaps that are filled by the non-verbal, sensory-rich SAMs. The differences between these two types of memories lead to a fragmented sense of self and

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reality for Layla. The inability to integrate these memories coherently exacerbates her PTSD, trapping her in a cycle of reliving her trauma. So, the trauma and survival of Layla are depicted in dual representation; firstly, the flashbacks of the atrocities are verbally accessible during her interrogation with the detective, and secondly, her memories of love and care with John actually shatter when his reality is revealed.

Emotional support and (ongoing) recovery from the trauma of sex trafficking

What is often known as 'trauma' is a sequence of traumatic and stressful events that make it difficult to adjust to and cope with daily life. It is defined as experiencing, witnessing, or confronting situations that involve death, injury, or a danger to one's bodily integrity by the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013, p. 467). Therefore, the notion of resilience to traumatic experiences begs the question of what resilient behavior is like during and after peritraumatic periods. In the face of extreme stress that tests a person's ability to cope, resilience refers to fortitude, adaptability, mastery, and the ability to resume regular functioning (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Richardson, 2002, p. 313). Also, it is a behavioral style with recognizable thought, perception, and decision-making patterns in a variety of contexts (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005, p. 197). Resilience refers to a robust recovery from severe stress and adversity characterized by inquisitiveness, intellectual prowess, and the ability to analyze issues (Wilson & Drozdek, 2004; Block & Kremen, 1996, p. 351).

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Moreover, it involves resource mobilization and strong extroverted personality traits like hardiness, ego resilience, self-esteem, and assertiveness (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005, p. 198).

To comprehend the nature and dynamics of resilience, analyses have been done on multirisk settings, psychobiological (Caputi, 2003, p. 12), and sociocultural factors. Judith Herman (1992) has highlighted the characteristics of high-risk individuals, circumstances, and responses to traumatic stressors in relation to psychological trauma. He also proposed a matrix analysis of the effects of their interaction on coping and adaptation (Agaibi & Wilson, 2005, p. 198). Age and gender do not affect resilience, nor does it increase or decrease with age, but rather, it affects the development of the mind and shifts in emotional and cognitive abilities (Zeidner & Endler, 1996; Folkman, 1997, p. 1213; Fredrickson, 2001, p. 220; Fredrickson et al., 2001, p. 365). Since vulnerability and resilience reflect the two facets of trauma and the manner in which individuals react to it, they are related concepts in the context of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Zuckerman identified various vulnerability factors for PTSD psychiatric aftereffects, including genetics, personality traits, biological changes, cognitive style, and information processing, which contribute to the unique challenges faced by individuals (True et al., 1993, p. 260; Agaibi & Wilson, 2005, p. 203).

Layla's experiences and trauma create a peritraumatic period—a time during and

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immediately after the trauma—where her resilience is tested. Layla demonstrates remarkable fortitude and adaptability, key components of resilience, as she navigates the brutal environment of her captors. Her ability to endure and attempt to escape signifies the behavioral style that is characteristic of resilient individuals: she remains alert, resourceful, and determined, even in the face of overwhelming odds. Layla demonstrates resilience as a behavioral style throughout the film, which is evident in the way she thinks, perceives, and makes decisions under pressure. She exhibits a certain degree of power over her situation, even though this control over herself is constrained by her surroundings and the extreme psychological and physical stress she experiences. Her ability to choose who to trust, how to avoid danger, and what to hide illustrates that she can assess her environment and make decisions that will increase her chances of escape and survival. Layla's cognitive processing of the trauma and her behavior are both contributing factors to her resilience. Her ability to cope with the trauma on a psychological level while experiencing intrusive memories and flashbacks is a testament to her resilience. Even though her condition causes her to become emotionally numb and forgetful, her tenacity allows her to keep going.

While the film does not specifically explore her upbringing or cultural background, it does imply that her resilience is a result of her innate personality, such as assertiveness and a strong feeling of self-worth. Layla's experience demonstrates both her resilience and sensitivity

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to the trauma, which highlights the dual nature of vulnerability and resilience in the context of PTSD. Her experiences are shaped by her personality and cognitive factors, which make her prone to emotional dysregulation, flashbacks, and the trauma's lingering consequences on her daily functioning. Yet, her resilience is what allows her to survive and, ultimately, to seek a way out of her traumatic situation.

Survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA) may experience severe and long-lasting consequences, such as a higher chance of developing post-traumatic stress disorder (McLean & Gallop, 2003, p. 170). There are several ways that PTSD symptoms can appear, such as intrusion (feeling upsetting memories or flashbacks), avoidance (avoiding reminders of the trauma), and hyperarousal (being on edge or quickly startled). These symptoms can have a substantial negative effect on a person's mental health and ability to function on a daily basis, which emphasizes the need to give CSA survivors the right kind of support and therapy (Rahm et al., 2013, p. 269; Sanjeevi et al., 2018, p. 626). Women who have previously (during childhood) been sexually abused have been shown to be more susceptible to signs of depression and anxiety disorders (Haileye, 2013, p. 36). The early phase of drug use in teenagers is substantially anticipated by CSA. A history of abuse particularly indicates early drug and cigarette use, and it also significantly correlates with alcohol use (Sartor et al., 2013, p. 998).

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After being abused, some victims resort to alcohol or illegal substances to help them deal with the psychological damage, trauma, and emotional misery that come with their prior experiences. Although using substances might momentarily alleviate these emotions, over time, they can also result in addiction and dependency.

In addition, the experience of abuse can lead to the formation of unhealthy relationships, low self-esteem, dysfunctional coping mechanisms, and other psychological problems, all of which can raise the risk of drug use disorders (Dolan & Whitworth, 2013, p. 200; Fergusson et al., 2013, p. 667; Ulibarri et al., 2015, p. 48; Sanjeevi et al., 2018, p. 627). CSA survivors may find it difficult to maintain positive, mutually beneficial relationships since the trauma they have experienced can damage their sense of self-worth, self-esteem, and how others perceive them. To deal with unresolved trauma, some survivors may find it difficult to show or receive affection from others, while others may exhibit patterns of insecure attachment or pursue destructive relationships (Dolan & Whitworth, 2013, pp. 200-201). Individuals who have undergone sexual abuse as children frequently experience flashbacks of the assault during contemporary sexual encounters. It may be extremely upsetting and detrimental to relationships and sexual functioning to experience flashbacks during sexual engagement. It can cause emotions of terror, guilt, humiliation, or detachment, which makes it difficult for survivors to have satisfying and desirable sexual relationships (Sanjeevi et al., 2018, p. 630). Different cues,

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including particular sexual actions, sensations, or even emotional states evocative of the abuse, might set off these intrusive recollections.

Layla frequently experiences intrusive symptoms, particularly through flashbacks that transport her back to the moments of abuse. These flashbacks are vividly portrayed in the film, disrupting her ability to function in her present reality. The re-experiencing of her intimacy with Ricky while her moments of taking a shower with John highlight the deep psychological scars left by violence and abuse, and underscore the chronic nature of PTSD in survivors. Layla clearly exhibits avoidance behaviors as she makes an effort to keep anything that brings up the trauma in her memory. This entails avoiding close contact with John and removing herself from the environment after knowing the truth about John, which can bring up her memories. Additionally, the consequences of child sexual abuse on Layla's relationships and self-esteem are explored throughout the film. She feels sentiments of affection for John, but the truth about him and her trauma severely undermines her sense of self-worth, making it impossible for her to build healthy, trustworthy relationships. Layla is seen to struggle in connecting with family and people because of the emotional and psychological harm inflicted by her abusers, which feeds a vicious cycle of distrust and isolation. The film explicitly shows substance use, including drugs and cigarettes; Layla's psychological discomfort implies that she is susceptible

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to these coping mechanisms. While using drugs and alcohol to dull the pain is a common response among survivors of child sexual abuse, it is a dangerous route that can result in more problems, including addiction and dependency.

In addition to promoting healthy development and mitigating the consequences of trauma, a loving and reliable caregiver may offer emotional support, affirmation, and a sense of security to the child and adult victims. Safe attachments may be fostered by warm and responsive caring, and these bonds are linked to improved emotional control, coping mechanisms, and social functioning in later life (Fairweather & Kinder, 2013, p. 542; Williams & Nelson-Gardell, 2012, p. 53). A child or adult victim's rehabilitation can be greatly aided by non-offending parents or other caregivers who offer emotional support, safety, and affirmation (Spaccarelli & Kim, 1995, p. 1172). These relationships can bring the victim comfort, confidence, and a sense of security that helps them deal with the challenges of healing from sexual assault in a secure and supportive environment. Encouragement from other family members or extended relatives might also help the victim become more resilient (Yancey et al., 2013, p. 38). This works as an additional loving, caring, and supportive source for the victim, which would increase their sense of familial belonging (Lam & Grossman, 1997, p. 175). In addition, when survivors seek emotional support in a wider community, they get access to other resources, validation, and a sense of belonging in their family (Valentine & Feinauer, 1993, p. 217; Williams & Nelson-

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Gardell, 2012, p. 55). Community support, such as peer networks, advocacy groups, counseling services, faith-based communities, and support groups, facilitates the process of connecting survivors with like-minded others, allowing them to share their experiences and get empathy and support (Edmond et al., 2006, p. 2). Furthermore, with the community's support, the shame, embarrassment, and feelings of isolation that are often associated with sexual assault can be diminished. By fostering empathy and a sense of community, this leads to help survivors express themselves, seek help, and take an active role in their own healing.

Layla's situation, being discovered next to garbage, highlights the disastrous consequences of not having proper care. In addition to robbing her childhood, the abusers also destroyed any feeling of security or trust she may have had. The absence of a protective and nurturing adult during her days with abusers and when she survived intensifies her trauma and deprives her of the emotional support required to develop emotional stability and resilience. The intense feeling of helplessness and loneliness is exacerbated by this absence, which makes her healing process even more difficult. As the film progresses, Layla's interaction with characters like John, who is a pedophile in disguise, makes her seem at ease and endearing. The detective acts as a member of the community, as she has experienced sexual abuse herself, and also shows affection for Layla. Lalya's familial relationships (her mother and brother) also start

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to demonstrate the transformative power of emotional support when she is taken to her home from the hospital. Though tentative and fragile, Layla finds moments of comfort, validation, and a sense of belonging in her interactions with John and the detective—things she has long been denied. The film shows how these relationships, however brief and over time, progressively assist Layla in regaining her trust in others and her feeling of self-worth—two essential elements of her emotional healing. As she begins to recover, she organizes a proper funeral for Bee Bee and asks other victims who have faced similar traumas to give statements against Ricky. Through these activities, she develops a sense of understanding and unity that helps lessen the stigma and loneliness she experiences. The end scene of the film shows that she is in the same kids' garden with her brother, where she was abducted years ago. This shows Layla's ongoing recovery journey, offering not just emotional solace but also the strength to reclaim her life.

Conclusion

I Am Still Here offers a nuanced and impactful exploration of the portrayal of sexual violence, the aftermath of abuse, trauma, and possible recovery from it through various cinematic techniques and narrative structures. Marcus mirrors the fragmented and eerie nature of traumatic memory effectively using dizzying camera angles and a non-linear narrative framework. Layla's intrusive memories and flashbacks are not just narrative devices; they are

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carefully crafted to depict the visceral experience of trauma. By using these techniques, the film creates an immersive experience that lets audiences experience the emotional and psychological turmoil Layla goes through. The film explores the significance of human relationships and resilience by showing Layla's journey and her interactions with both supportive and unsupportive characters. With a focus on how media representations might influence societal attitudes toward trauma and resilience, the film addresses broader emotional and societal issues. The film is a sympathetic and informed addition to the conversation on sexual abuse and its aftereffects by portraying Layla's trauma and PTSD in a way that evokes empathy and understanding.

In addition to reflecting the survivor's mental turmoil and suffering, the unsettling flashbacks and non-linear and fragmented storytelling techniques encourage viewers to interact with the content in a deeper and more contemplative way. The study models a survivor-centred, ethics-aware method for studying child-trafficking cinema, extending the field beyond genre or event-centred accounts. It demonstrates how cinematic form mediates dual representations of traumatic memory and resilience, offering a vocabulary for reading PTSD on screen and its social reception. Thus, *I Am Still Here* sticks out as an engaging and thought-provoking film that delicately and deeply tackles the subjects of child sex trafficking, sexual abuse, trauma, and

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possible recovery from it. Through challenging mainstream media portrayals and highlighting the significance of community networks and human relationships, the film offers insightful perspectives on the effects of trauma on individuals and society. Future research could test this method comparatively across national cinemas and streaming docudramas, examine audience reception and survivor responses, and trace how such representations inform pedagogy, advocacy, and policy on child protection and trauma-informed care.

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Appendix

Interview with Mischa Marcus

Sheetal Kumari (SK): Your film uses fragmented narrative structures and disorienting camera angles to convey the experience of sexual violence and trauma. As a film director, could you elaborate on your creative process in designing these elements and how you aimed to visually represent Layla's psychological state?

Mischa Marcus (MM): Through my research on sexual assault and trafficking survivors, I found that many survivors do not always remember their traumatic experiences in a linear format. The brain, at times, will protect those who suffer from traumatic sexual and physical abuse by shielding painful memories and experiences, so those memories seem fragmented. I felt it was important to show the reality of that both in the camera angles and in how the story unfolds.

SK: *I Am Still Here* does not shy away from depicting the act of sexual violence and the brutal realities of it on a child, which is not common in such films. As a storyteller, what motivated you to take this approach, and what challenges did you face in ensuring the film maintained its raw and realistic portrayal of sexual abuse?

MM: While working with child actors, we were cautious in the making of this film. As storytellers, our priority was always to protect the welfare of our child actors on set and ensure they felt safe and supported while portraying the story as authentically as possible. We only provided the scenes with the children, so they were not reading anything too graphic or horrific. Even our lead child actress, Aliyah Conley, thought she was portraying an abducted child in the film until she saw the completed film at our premiere. The scenes of "sexual violence" are always cut out before any implied abuse is shown on screen with the child actors. I chose this because it has a much stronger impact on the audience to fill in the blanks by requiring the viewer to go to dark places in their minds. I knew that for people to understand the traumas of what these children go through, we had to show the build-up to the violence and abuse so audiences could begin to understand what it is like to walk in a trafficked child's shoes. I had pitched *I Am Still Here* to a few production companies, and they loved the story but wanted to do it with older actors so that it would not make audiences uncomfortable. We decided to make the film without a major studio as a low-budget indie film. This gave us more control over the directions we took in telling this story. I felt it was absolutely necessary to portray the reality of child trafficking by casting child actors in those roles.

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Human trafficking affects millions of children all over the world, and I was not making this film for audience comfort; I was making it to raise awareness about this horrific issue.

SK: Your use of flashbacks and sensory triggers in the film aligns closely with the aspects of trauma. How much did trauma influence your directorial choices, and did you consult any specific strategy or experts during the development of the film and the character of Layla?

MM: I read a few psychology books to familiarize myself with trauma responses. I then took over twenty interviews I conducted with child abuse and child trafficking survivors and filled in the blanks as authentically as I could to give their stories the realism they deserve.

SK: The film challenges conventional portrayals of sexual violence by focusing on the survivor's journey rather than the act itself. How did you balance the need to tell a compelling story with the responsibility to avoid re-traumatizing viewers or perpetuating harmful stereotypes?

MM: As a female filmmaker, my goal and responsibility were to share the realities of stories like Layla's while also illustrating how all human beings experience different forms of trauma, but with support, we can overcome them. It is estimated by the World Health Organization that "…across their lifetime, 1 in 3 women, around 736 million, are subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner or sexual violence from a non-partner" (2021). Many people cannot even fathom those numbers and how pervasive sexual assault/abuse is. Most victims of sexual assault do not even report their abuse, so the WHO's (2021) figure may actually be considerably higher. The sex trafficking survivors I interviewed do not like to be referred to as "victims". They refer to themselves as "survivors" because that is exactly what they are. Their strength is admirable, and these women and men who shared their stories are incredibly brave. As I mentioned earlier, cutting a scene before anything too horrific is shown forces the audience to go to dark places within themselves. As a filmmaker, I think the act of having to do that stays with the audience even after they have finished the film.

SK: The film emphasizes the importance of supportive relationships in healing from trauma. How did you develop the characters that provide emotional support to Layla, and what message did you hope to convey about resilience and recovery?

MM: I felt it was important to have Layla reconnect with the family she was stolen from. Her mother and siblings were also robbed of their time with her, and reconnecting with someone after the horrors that Layla experienced required delicate support from those who loved her and always

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hoped to see her again. For Detective Amy Walker, I wanted her to be a sexual assault survivor, so she felt passionately about resolving Layla's case and taking monsters that prey on the vulnerable off the streets because she knew first-hand the damage they do. In many parts of the world, trauma and mental health are not as prioritized by governments and healthcare institutions as they should be. If men and women who have experienced trauma or abuse had the ability to be supported, they would have a chance at rehabilitation from those painful experiences. Having a support system is essential to healing because those relationships provide a safe space while you are reflecting and processing the highs and lows of starting your life over after trauma. There are days when a person feels free, and others when they still feel affected or trapped by their experiences or abuser, and being able to talk about those feelings acts as a catharsis and is an essential part of the healing process.

This conversation with Mischa Marcus provides important details about the film's creative process, especially in depicting trauma in a fragmented manner that reflects the psychological state of the survivors. Marcus asserts the significance of accurately highlighting the realities of child trafficking while avoiding sensationalization or victimization – a balance that was meticulously upheld throughout the production process. Her commitment to authentic storytelling that avoids retraumatizing the viewers while bringing attention to the brutal reality of sexual violence is evident in the directorial choices she made, which were informed by interviews with survivors of human trafficking. This interview is conducted through the exchange of emails.

Acknowledgment

I want to express my heartfelt gratitude to Mischa Marcus for her insights and for making this work more valuable. I am grateful for her time, thoughts, and support, which helped me a lot to write this article. I want to thank my supervisor, Dr. Sarbani Banerjee, for her insightful feedback.

Disclosure statement

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Volume 13.2 (2025) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2025.730 | http://cinej.pitt.edu