

Exploration of Trauma in Anuradha Roy's '*All the Lives We Never Lived*'

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Abstract

In western literature, there are ample instances where the texts show a woman prioritizing her dreams over social expectations. But in Indian English literature, there are rare texts identified where a woman chooses her dreams over the image of a sacrificing mother that too in the Gandhian era. This woman is Gayatri, the radical protagonist of *All the Lives We Never Lived* by Anuradha Roy, who abandoned her 9-year-old boy and a socially harmonious marriage in pursuit of her dreams. She prioritizes her dreams over the idealized concept of all sacrificing and giving mother. But this sudden abandonment of a child by his mother turns into a traumatic event for the child Myshkin. For Gayatri, the incident gave her a sense of freedom, but to her child Myshkin it was the start of his childhood trauma. This paper aims to unravel the concealed trauma of a child. It will investigate the concept of abandonment and childhood trauma in Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived* via the modern lenses of Trauma Studies.

Keywords: Trauma, Childhood Trauma, Motherhood, Indian Literature, Abandonment

People have been fighting several wars at different points in time. This immediately brings us to the realities of warfare. Initially, warfare was the reason behind traumatic events, and it was a civilizational process, as human beings could never sustain themselves without war. And therefore, this idea was explained by many theorists later on. For example, Thomas Hobbes says in *Leviathan*, "So that in the first place, I put for a general inclination of all mankind a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death" (61). Further, he adds, "that it is that kings, whose power is greatest, turn their endeavours to the assuring it at home by laws, or abroad by wars: and when that is done, there succeedeth a new desire; in some, of fame from new conquest; in others, of ease and sensual pleasure; in others, of admiration, or being flattered for excellence in some art or other ability of the mind" (61).

This warfare and civilisational process gave birth to imperialism, colonialism and the rule of the dominant culture. With this came the colonial trauma, the holocaust trauma and the survival trauma. The growth of modernity and the emergence of science and infrastructure led to discoveries. Industrialisation and railways brought benefits and disadvantages, as they brought an increase in human accidents and untimely death caused due to industrial accidents led to traumatic events. Modern technology leads to both positive and negative impacts and gives birth to human suffering or traumatic incidences. It showed both modernity and anthropogenic activities in negative ways like disrupting human life, industrialization, biodegradation etc.

'Trauma' is a Greek term that means wound. Initially, it was a wound to the body or a physical wound, but later it was discovered as a wound to the mind or a psychological wound. Trauma is multidimensional as it gradually evolved from a physical to a mental wound or, historical, sociological and cultural. Trauma is today just as likely to refer to emotional wounds, even though the Greeks solely used the term to describe physical wounds. We now understand that psychological effects from a traumatic experience can last for a very long time after any physical wounds have healed. Post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, is recognised as the psychological response to emotional trauma. Depression, anxiety, flashbacks, and recurrent nightmares are some of its symptoms. It typically manifests after a highly stressful experience, such as a battle in the war, a natural disaster, or sexual or physical abuse.

Trauma as a reality, a critical idiom, began to be searched in the 17th century. But then trauma was only seen as physical reality. Later on, with the advent of time in psychology and psychoanalysis, trauma acquired tone and colour. So trauma is an event which creates distress, disharmony, shock, suffering, pain, disassociation, fragmentation etc. In the state of trauma, one may experience hallucinations, flashbacks, nightmares, repressed and distressed conditions. In the state of trauma, the binaries between mind and body, memory and forgetting, speech and silence, inwards and outwards, private and public, and individual and collective are all blurred. Judith Herman, the neurologist in his book *Trauma and Recovery*, states that:

the study of psychological trauma has a curious history—one of episodic amnesia. Periods of active investigation have alternated with periods of oblivion. Repeatedly in the past century, similar lines of inquiry have been taken up and abruptly abandoned, only to be rediscovered much later. Classic documents of fifty or one hundred years ago often read like contemporary works. Though the field has in fact an abundant and rich tradition, it has been periodically forgotten and must be periodically reclaimed(4).

Psychiatry is a medically specialised term for diagnosing and treating mental illness and its pathological nature. At the same time, Psychoanalysis refers to all dimensions of the human mind and cognition, growth of consciousness, perception and knowledge, desire and instinct, emotion and obscene. Medical science started looking within the mind after the introduction or advent of psychology as a subject in the 19th century. Earlier, medical science

only looked at the physical wound. Jean-Martin Charcot, the French neurologist, examined the result of physical injury into psychological disorder or nervous disorder, which resulted in some neurological development called 'Aphasia' and 'Amnesia'. Gradually, this shellshock of war resulted in the condition of 'Hysteria'. The Hysteria revealed the unconscious layer of the human mind. The neurologist discovered that the unconscious layer had traumatic experiences, and they wanted to connect them through certain pathological practices.

Trauma studies initially emerged around the 1990s. Based on Freudian theory, the study of trauma flowered as it acknowledged a systematic study where the unconscious could be expressed. After considerable research on traumatic experiences and their relevance to memory, Freud collaborated with Josef Breuer and published his ideas in *Studies on Hysteria*. In this critical work, they state that the actual encounter with a traumatic experience is not so traumatising, but its remembrance is. Freud takes his theory forward and describes 'trauma' in his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as the defence mechanism of the ego, also the genesis and upshot of trauma on one's psyche.

The field of trauma theory in literary criticism gained significant attention in 1996 with the publication of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Cathy Caruth's work is highly influential and contributed vehemently to trauma studies. Her work *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative and History* is considered the stepping stone towards trauma studies gaining popularity. Now, 'trauma theory' is one of the significant theoretical discourses in contemporary theory and criticism. Cathy Caruth, in the 'Introduction' to her book *Unclaimed Experiences*, explains that 'trauma' "is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past but rather in the way that it is very unassimilated nature- the way it was precisely not known in the first instance - returns to haunt the survivor later on" (4). Presently, 'Trauma Studies' comprises a vast discipline that keeps whole troops of theorists, research scholars, philosophers, and historians busy.

In our world, which is experiencing several humanitarian, political, and ecological crises, experiences of bodily and psychological injury are common. These crises frequently spiral out of control and cause traumatic suffering that is lengthy and multifaceted. These hurtful events disproportionately impact some environments and populations during these worldwide crises. The likelihood of experiencing trauma is increased in the global South, where most of the world's population resides, by elements including conflict, poverty, displacement, and disenfranchisement. However, because the majority of research in these disciplines is done in the global North, it is possible that the realities, settings, and needs of the victims and survivors in the global South are not fully understood and represented. However, the literature that is now available does not adequately capture these realities and the underlying layers of disempowerment, despite the fact that women, particularly women of colour, have been disproportionately exposed to numerous forms of sustained and systematic violence. Therefore, the ways in which women's voices have been muted have significantly impacted how trauma is documented and dealt with and the agency of the survivors.

Anuradha Roy is an accomplished author who has demonstrated her talent in a variety of contexts as a novelist, journalist, and editor. Recently, she was awarded Sahitya Akademi

Award 2022 for her work *All the Lives We Never Lived*. Roy's most recent work, *All the Lives We Never Lived* (2018), does not portray external violence, death, and societal "unbelonging" as the source of familial dissolution, in contrast to her other texts covered in this book. Instead, the main character feels the trauma of losing his mother, Gayatri, through her flight from home, where she was cruelly reprimanded by patriarchal dominance. In the novel, the mother's purposeful separation from the family is a complex trigger for a painful breakdown. Her purposeful absence causes the fundamental rift she needs to survive emotionally and psychologically. The protagonist's sense of identity and "belonging" is simultaneously disrupted, and this results in disintegrative events.

K. Suganya and A. Selvaraj write in "Quest for self in the novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* by Anuradha Roy" that how woman's roles in society are changing and quotes Betty Friedan's book *The Feminine Mystique* and points out that "Women should find their passion to seek their own identity. Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived* depicts the same idea of women's identity" (2300). They analysed the text from the perspective of how women should give priority to their own selves.

Shailendra P. Singh writes in the article "Memory and Loss in Anuradha Roy's '*All the Lives We Never Lived*'" that in this novel, Anuradha Roy organises the narrative so that Myshkin and his mother Gayatri's anxieties permeate the entire story. Salman Rushdie, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and other notable artists have frequently addressed history from the perspective of memory and demonstrated how "Memory which is often degraded as a means of reconstructing history has been a valid epistemological tool for knowledge construction which the western scientificity and rationality disapproved off and the non-west is trying to assert in various narratives to suggest that it should be taken as seriously as fact-based history" (83).

Tuhin Shuvra Sen, in the research paper titled "Rejecting 'the Feminine Mystique' in Quest for Self-fulfillment: A Study of Meena Kandasamy's *When I Hit you: Or, A Portrait of the Writer as a Young Wife* and Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived*" discusses how Anuradha Roy addresses essential issues regarding antiquated ideas of femininity and long-held cultural ideals that support the supremacy of men over women in Indian society. He further adds that "Existing between the societal demand of being subordinate to the masculine world and her commitment to the assertion of her womanhood, a woman always inhabits a bipolar world. For Gayatri as a married woman, the problem is always simply being someone's mother or someone's wife without any chance of establishing her own identity" (461).

At the beginning of the novel *All the Lives We Never Lived*, the boy discloses his life narrative and locates himself as: "the boy whose mother had run off with an Englishman" (9). Gayatri, his mother, unintentionally abandons him because of patriarchal domination. Simultaneously, Myshkin, the child protagonist, suffers from trauma which was caused by the loss of his mother. This resulted in a traumatic experience caused due to the sudden departure of his mother, Gayatri. The socially embarrassing incident serves as Myshkin's defining characteristic throughout his boyhood and exposes the weighty nature of the situation. The socially created and maintained shame around his mother makes the grief of this

abandonment much worse because it has become so ingrained in his identity. The separation is permanent and irrevocable effects are most clearly seen in Myshkin's perspective of his life as being divided. His grandfather would question him about certain events' timing "Was it before your mother left or after?" (147).

Myshkin's early loss of his mother had a terrible effect on him. He developed an introverted personality as he awaited his mother's arrival. He was never able to learn why his mother abandoned him until he received a package of letters written by her mother in which she explained why she had fled Muntazir. No one could fathom Gayatri's motivations for making this decision; they just accepted the news that she had abandoned her husband and fled with a foreigner out of love. According to the letters, Gayatri did not abandon her family and nine-year-old child to travel to Bali because she was in love with the German.

In such a circumstance, Gayatri tries to cope with her "loss" by planning to pursue her artistic passions to give her own self some wings. But in order to take this flight, she was forced to leave nine-year-old Myshkin on his own, which would haunt him for the rest of his life. He struggled with the loss of his mother when he was a young child for the rest of his life, but he also chose to ignore it. It was because it was a scandalous period in his life that he thought was better left alone. Still, when he encountered his mother's letters, he realised that in order to find some comfort for himself, he must deal with the notorious part of his history. He discovers that women in the Indian system were never treated fairly, which leads her mother, Gayatri, to take a step that is considered scandalous as he attempts to piece together Gayatri's life.

Myshkin was so traumatized by her mother's sudden departure that he started to question his existence, and also, he started to find things which, no matter what would never leave him and the following lines, Myshkin narrates:

As a child, I would place my back against one of our trees and feel its reassuring solidity, its immobility. It was not going to move, it would never go anywhere, it was rooted to its spot. For as long as they are alive, trees remain where they are. This is one of life's few certainties. The roots of trees go deep and take many directions, we cannot foresee their subterranean spread any more than we can predict how a child will grow. Beneath the earth, trees live their secret lives, at times going deeper into the ground than up into the sky, entwined below with other trees which appear in no way connected above the ground (82).

He was not only abandoned by his mother, Gayatri, but his father, Nek Chand, also left home, who involved himself in the freedom movement. Both parents abandoned this nine-year-old little boy, one for seeking her own freedom and the other for the freedom of the nation. Myshkin compares people with trees, as people have the tendency to move and can leave at any point in time. But trees are immovable and stay forever. This was the reason he didn't get married throughout his life. The trauma of abandonment changed his perspective towards life, and Myshkin devoted his life to nature and became a horticulturist.

The narrative of *All the Lives We Never Lived* revolves around the lives of Gayatri and Myshkin. Gayatri is a bold woman who aspires to create her own identity rather than remain voiceless. And Myshkin, on the other hand, is a sensitive, introvert and helpless child who experienced the loss of her mother at such an early age. The mother, Gayatri, makes her own unique decisions to achieve personal freedom and carry out her vision for pursuing her passion. She courageously decides to abandon all of her feminine responsibilities because she longs to be free like a bird. But the novel depicted the childhood trauma of Myshkin and how it affected his future. The universal cause and effect phenomenon led to trauma in the child protagonist's life. Trauma is something which can hit anyone at any point in time.

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