

Pangs Of Trauma In Anita: End Of A Beginning And A Life Apart

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Abstract: The word trauma is the Greek term for injury or wound, but nowadays it is an umbrella term for all kinds of wounds, be it physical, emotional or psychological. According to trauma expert Bessel van der Kolk, “Trauma is not the story of something that happened back then,” but “It’s the current imprint of that pain, horror, and fear living inside people.” Also, he notes that trauma is specifically an event that overwhelms the central nervous system, altering the way we process and recall memories. Though trauma is generalised in definitions, trauma and its effect on the victims vary from person to person. This paper explores the notion of trauma and its impact on the central characters of the novels: Anita: End of A Beginning by Renuka Guru and A Life Apart by Neel Mukherjee. The kind of traumatic event, the durability of the trauma and at what age the characters experienced such events are analysed in this paper.

Keywords: trauma, abuse, misuse of power, betrayal, fear, guilt.

Trauma is ‘an inescapably stressful event that overwhelms people’s existing coping mechanisms’ (qtd. in Spring). A trauma usually happens after a very distressing event, like physical or sexual abuse, natural disaster, wars, betrayal, abuse of power, death of loved ones etc. Its symptoms are mood swings, guilty, nightmares and flashbacks, insomnia, hopelessness, avoidance, depression, anxiety, negative thoughts, inability to formulate, fear, lack of trust etc. It is not necessary that these causes induce trauma in people as it can alter from person to person, that is it is subjective. Cathy Caruth in her book, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History asserts that in present times, trauma has become universal and bewildering both as an experience and as a subject of study.

Renuka Guru’s Anita: End of A Beginning deals with the tale of a young Scottish girl, Anita, who was adopted by a Hindu Indian couple. When the child grows in these sets of background, the novel explores the benefits and difficulties that the child faces. Neel Mukherjee’s A Life Apart traces the saga of a young homosexual man, Ritwik, who flees from the miserable life in India to the freedom of Britain. But in London his life takes an unexpected turn that ends in a catastrophe.

Anita: End of A Beginning, lights on the life of a young girl who was adopted by a Hindu Indian family. She was three months old when she was accepted by Krishnans’ (Ramaa and Gopalan) for foster care. Though she was adopted to ease their son Hari’s difficulties to adjust in Edinburgh, she soon became an integral part in Krishnans’ family. Her life was even and joyful until she went to learn to play keyboard with her best friend Katie, who is also their neighbour. The music teacher Bert Sanders took separate classes for girls and boys and abused Anita, Katie and their batchmates. She blamed Ramaa for what happened because for her Ramaa was the one who forced her to go to keyboard classes. Soon after that Krishnans’ visited India and went to many places and later Anita understood about the futility of life and impending death that awaits everyone. She fell in love with Roger, her new classmate from Glasgow. But her parents didn’t like her company with Roger and asked her to stop it. She reminded them quite a few times that ‘this is Edinburgh, not India’.

After her eighteenth birthday, Gopalan revealed to her about the properties and assets that she inherits from her blood parents. Soon after that they went to India, there she was accompanied by Dilip, her neighbour and his friends. Though Dilip tried to keep her away from all the threats, her immaturity and cultural differences made her fall prey to Avinash, the spoiled son of a politician. He raped and blackmailed Anita. The Indian media celebrated it as a sensational news which had thrown her deep into depression. Anita, heartbroken, returned to Edinburgh alone and detached herself from her loved ones. She spent most of her time in a pub, drinking. She was found unconscious in the pub by Roger and later he took care of her. He recalled that Anita was everything a sensible girl could be, but now she became a soulless body and he tried to bring her out of her depressed state in both soft and hard ways. He even inflicted her with pain to tempt her to react, but she never cried. Finally, he decided to seek help from Katie and asked her to come to their room where both Roger and Anita lived. Anita was not willing to meet Katie, but when she came to know that Katie’s days were counted, she met her. Katie’s last days were spent together with her best friend Anita. When the novel ends Anita finally contacts her father and “for first time in years, she began to cry” saying that “Katie is gone”.

Neel Mukherjee’s A Life Apart unravels the life of Ritwik Ghosh who escaped from the hardships of Calcutta and fled to England for salvation. The novel carries a parallel narrative—of Ritwik’s miserable life in Calcutta and England in the 21st century and of Maud Gilby, an English woman who lived in India during the British Raj. Ritwik, a twenty-two-year-old homosexual left for Oxford on a scholarship after the sudden death of his parents. He grabbed the chance to start his life afresh but for that he needed to move on from his dreading past. But in Oxford he went through identity problems, dislocation and loneliness. Thus, to overcome his loneliness Ritwik began to write a novel about Maud Gilby and the British partition of Raj Bengal in the early 1900s from Miss

Gilby's perspective. Miss Gilby is actually a side character in Rabindranath Tagore's novel *The Home and the World*.

After reaching Oxford, Ritwik was somewhat relieved from his past agony but his illusion of the ghost of his mother and the memories of his abusive, poverty-stricken childhood haunted him. He slowly involved himself in gay sexual practises with strangers in public toilets and this helped him to escape from his depressing past. Certain incidents in England took Ritwik back to his childhood days in Calcutta—days of starvations quarrelsome family, intimidating, abusive mother, his fears and anxieties. He trembled in fear when he learnt from his friend about child abuse and that he was also a victim of the abuse. Subsequently, he discovered that he could earn money by having sex.

Meanwhile, Miss Gilby, just like Ritwik was a fish out of water in Bengal when she came to India. Later, she was invited by Nikhilesh Roy Chowdhury, a zamindar, to his house to teach his wife, Bimala, English language and improve occidental etiquette. Eventually she got adapted to the Chowdhury environment and she and Bimala became great friends. But the only thing which she couldn't digest was certain traditions and customs that acted like restrictions on women. In the course of time, she noticed a lot of meetings taking place in the house, Nikhilesh not being his self lately and she felt something was about to happen that would change a lot of things.

Once his visa and scholarship expired Ritwik moved to London to take care of Anne Cameron, an eighty-six-year-old lady, in exchange for a free room. Ritwik now an illegal immigrant was in need of a job and it was then he met his Pakistani neighbour Shahid Haq who introduced him to Saeed Latif, an illegal broker. Ritwik with the help of Saeed did a few arduous jobs and met many illegal immigrants, heard their heart-breaking stories which once again reminded him about his tough past. Anne Cameron's life was like a jigsaw puzzle for Ritwik. All he knew about her was that her whole family was dead—husband died due to some disease when they were in India, son committed suicide—and she had a great knowledge about birds. Most of the time she was silent and whenever she talked, she revealed something about her, but all in fragments. Ritwik took a break from his tiring job and went to King's Cross where he once again met strangers, had sex and began to earn money. It was during one such night he met a rich Arab man Zafar with whom he had sex and in return Zafar generously paid him. A few days later Ritwik narrowly escaped from an acid attack which made him tremble with fear and it was Zafar who helped him to recover from that trauma. They met each other twice more when Zafar warned Ritwik to stop his sex business and that he would provide Ritwik money if he needed. Ritwik found Zafar having different passports with different details and got suspicious about Zafar. During their last meeting Zafar gave Ritwik a note that had his man's name and number and asked him to contact this person for money. He was shocked when the man turned out to be Saeed Latif about whom Ritwik was already sceptical. One day Ritwik sneakily found out that Zafar would be visiting Gloucestershire on May 13 and exactly on the same day Ritwik saw on news about a campaign against arms trade in front of the Defence System and Equipment International Exhibition at Gloucestershire. A shocked and curious Ritwik decided to follow Zafar and went to Gloucestershire. His curiosity and attempt to find the truth of Zafar became his own slayer.

Parallely, Miss Gilby witnessed a lot of political changes happening around her—the 1905 Partition of Bengal, Swadeshi movement at its peak, rift between Hindus and Muslims and protests in front of Nikhilesh Roy Chowdhury, the zamindar of Nawabgunj. Miss Gilby could sense an impending misfortune approaching and she was proved right when the riots broke out in the village. Even she was a victim of the riot and was forced to move out from the Chowdhury family. While staying at her friend Ruth's house, Miss Gilby received a letter revealing that Nikhilesh Roy Chowdhury was killed in on such riots.

These two narratives go side by side—between Ritwik's gay sexual activities in a London's public toilet and Miss Gilby coming to terms with the notion of the revolutionary boycott of English goods. Both the characters seem to reach some kind of cathartic insight at the hands of a violent gang.

Sexual violence, emotional abuse or natural disasters can cause trauma. The trauma worsens when the victims of sexual abuse find it difficult to articulate their issues. Renuka Guru portrayed this in her novel *Anita: End of A Beginning* through her protagonist Anita and her best friend Katie who were abused by their music teacher, Bert Sanders. Bert conducted competitions in his class and towards the end of each class a best performer was selected, who would be taken to the 'special room' to play his 'special piano'. Katie was the first victim of his child molestation and after returning from the room the high-spirited Katie became tight-lipped. The next day she muffled her cries and warned Anita, "Don't go to that room, ever" (pg. 48). This became a routine for Bert and after a few weeks it was Anita's turn to be his new prey. Unlike other girls Anita screamed and ran out of the class, but Bert grabbed and threatened her saying "If you do not go into the special room, I will tell your mother you are no good at keyboard. Your music will be finished, forever" (pg. 50). Out of fear Anita followed him back to the room and in the following weeks Anita was frequently chosen as the best performer. Anita tried to articulate this predicament with her mother but failed miserably and was compelled to go to the music classes. The impact of the sexual abuse which longed for six months were—loss of appetite, anger, guilty, fear, headache and stomach pain as a result they missed their school classes.

Trauma-related guilt refers to uneasy feeling of remorse resulting from the belief that one could or should have done something different during the traumatic situation. Ramaa went through the same situation when she came to know that her daughter was continuously abused. The worst thing was that Ramaa couldn't decode the hints

Anita was giving her about the abuse, “Her little girl felt betrayed. All she stood for in the name of motherhood had crumbled to pieces today” (54). The guilt was eating Ramaa and she imposed self-punishment by isolating herself from her family, spending most of her time in kitchen and kept herself starving. The outcome was a rift between the mother daughter duo.

The whole family went on a holiday trip to India hoping to restore the peace and happiness that the family had lost. They visited many places along with Marina beach. They planned to spend the whole evening in the beach, but Gopalan forcefully took them back to the hotel. When they reached the hotel what they had seen on the TV was the heart-rending visuals of tsunami hitting the shores of Marina beach. All of them were horrified to see those visuals, but what made Anita angry was Gopalan’s words, “very sad, bad karma” (pg.64). When two individuals live through terrifying events, like natural disasters, one may be unaffected while the other may be traumatised. The traumatised person may go through hopelessness and sense of lingering doom, inability to formulate and frustration. All these negative emotions were evident in Anita when she was overflowing with questions and nobody was able to answer or console her. All of a sudden Anita felt matured and learnt about the inconsistencies, unfairness and futility of life, “There was nothing serious about living...Most of all, God didn’t matter” (pg.65). Anita’s agony never diminished even after the holidays, instead it intensified. She suffered from nightmares and was sceptical about the indifference from her family after such a heart wrenching disaster. This traumatic incident made a scar in Anita’s heart and there was a transition in her character. She lost faith in God and religion but she went to church only for the sake of music.

The painful process of healing from sexual assaults takes ample time. The trauma caused by rape is more severe than other types of trauma and that is clearly portrayed through Anita. Avinash, whom she considered as a good friend, invited Anita for a date when she was in India. She neglected her family’s warning and went on a date and got raped. Renuka Guru tried to evaluate the misuse of power by people in different realm. Avinash exploited his father’s political powers by threatening Anita, the media celebrated and distorted the real facts about the rape and the police officers were not ready to register the complaint and behaved rudely with her. All these incidents had a traumatising effect on Anita and her family. It took a while for Anita to accept the fact that she was raped and after admitting that fact she never cried. Along with that she experienced avoidance, shame, guilt, detachment and loss of interest. She shut herself away in a hard shell and began to curse herself for the pain and anxiety she had inflicted upon her parents. She assumed herself as a bad daughter and began to hate herself. After reaching Edinburgh, she kept herself aloof from her loved ones and began the habit of drinking.

Anita now was a completely changed person, “Her spirit was gone, leaving a ghost behind that was bent on self-inflicted torture” (pg. 200). It was not just Anita who was traumatised by these events, her parents were also deeply affected. “Gopalan was torn between duty, love, responsibility, and guilt” (pg.190). For the first time Anita shared her thoughts and feelings to Katie and she regained her sense of control and rebuilt her self-worth. Trauma, as described by Cathy Caruth in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History*, can be an “overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.” (*Unclaimed* 11). The visual facet of an episodic memory is one of the major characteristics of trauma where the memory is highly activated and stays alive for a long time without getting amalgamated with other memories.

Neel Mukherjee deftly traces such episodic memories of Ritwik in *A Life Apart*. One night, in London, Ritwik hallucinates the ghost of his mother, Bidisha, in his room and he began to quiver with fear. This fear takes Ritwik back to his terrible memories with her— her brutal, sadistic punishments even for trivial mistakes when he was just six. The aftermath of these memories on Ritwik was that, “He is pissing, shaking and sobbing beside his desk...” (pg. 47). He was viciously punished by his mother who didn’t leave a single chance to hit him, kick and beat him until she saw blood. Once she did something really savage because the six-year-old Ritwik couldn’t memorise a sentence from his textbook, “...she picked him up by his shirt collar, lifted him clean off the floor and flung him, as one would a rag doll or a bag of rubbish, to one corner of the room.... she rushed to him, dragged him out of the space and then threw him, again, in the opposite direction” (pg.151). As for Bidisha all her punishments were for disciplining her children and for their own betterment and well-being. The brutal abuse and its scarred memories had a lifelong impact on Ritwik. If someone glared at him or he saw tools or weapons in someone’s hand he would be taken to his dreading past, his mother and his heart beat would rise and his body shook in fear. These terrifying memories with his mother in Calcutta was one of the reasons why Ritwik escaped to London.

It was through his friend Sarah, Ritwik came to know that abusing children is a crime and he himself was a victim of child abuse. The thought itself made him shiver and he felt an uneasiness creeping in. The inability to articulate and recollect the disturbing events are major symptoms of trauma. When Ritwik realized that he was a victim of child abuse he tried to contact the organization which worked for such cases. But when he tried to share his experience, he found it very difficult and it was broken. Suddenly he cut the call as he himself was confused about his plight and his thoughts were all fragmented. All this while he thought that the brutal punishments, he got from his mother was a way of disciplining him and his brother and so he couldn’t digest the reality all of a sudden.

Death of loved ones is painful, but the sudden, unanticipated death is more agonising and it becomes traumatising when there is continuous tragic death one after the other, that too unexpected ones. Then the impact it creates will be severe—constantly avoiding the things or events related to the dead ones, sleeplessness or nightmares, living in another world thinking about the dead ones, blaming oneself for their death, guilt etc.

Anne Cameron, Ritwik's eighty-six-year-old landlady was an enigma for Ritwik from the beginning. Most of the time she was silent and seemed to be in some serious thoughts and at other times she talked in fragments. But he was sure about one thing that nothing missed her eyes or ears even though she seemed to be in another world. She used to enter Ritwik's room at odd hours for trivial things. Sometimes she used to take some names—Richard, Clare and Christopher—and Ritwik had no idea who they were in the beginning. Later on, Anne herself revealed to him in broken pieces that Richard was her son who committed suicide, Clare was her daughter who drowned at the age of two and Christopher was her husband who died due to Malaria while he was in India. The death of her entire family one after the other had traumatised Anne badly and she hold herself responsible for her son's death, "... about how she could never look after things. People. Richard. Clare. Christopher." (pg.224). Her introvert, secretive son was craving for her love, care and much more but by the time she realised this it was too late—he shot himself. Neel Mukherjee employed the stream of consciousness technique to express Anne's agony and guilt, "she had read him wrong all along misread his silences misread his secrecies his opacity...she had misread everything and shut the book but the book was now gone taken away irreversibly from her..." (pg.268).

People who suffer from trauma is always in a complex situation where the past is always present in people, haunted by dread frozen in memory of the traumatic events. Trauma demands a mode of representation that textually performs trauma and its incomprehensibility through, for example, gap and silences, the repeated breakdown of language, and the collapse of understanding. The literary works, Anita: End of A Beginning and A Life Apart are analysed through the main traumatic events happened in the life of the characters. Anita was a prey to child molestation in her childhood, was deeply affected by aftermaths of tsunami and was raped in her adolescence and all these tormenting events had a great effect on her life. In the case of Ritwik, he was a victim of his mother's barbaric physical abuse and its repercussion remained throughout his life. Anne Cameron was traumatised from a long time due to the recurring deaths of her family members. Thus, the paper analyses the theme of trauma depicted in the central characters belonging to different backgrounds, gender and age. Even though both the novels have different settings, the impact trauma generates on the characters is universal.

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