

Childhood Trauma Leads to Mental Agony: A Psycho-Analytical Reading of Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived*

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Abstract

Childhood trauma has a long-term effect on an individual. However, the type of trauma in one's early age leads to the consequence one faces in one's later stage. A sense of detachment develops as soon as a child is exposed to a traumatic event. Even a small instance in one's childhood period can develop into Trauma in the immediate future. In order to overcome Trauma, unconsciously, children in their teenage are highly prone to developing unhealthy habits. Since children are liable, they need care and support from their families. Self-criticism in their later age can make the present situation even worse and can leave the sufferer demoralized. Myshkin, the protagonist, has manifested a difficult situation at an early age and that becomes an upsetting episode as days go by. This article examines the sufferings of Myshkin, the central character, which he faced in his childhood and how he longs to annihilate the horrifying event and how his memory surpasses and puts him down even in his later life, as well.

Keywords: Childhood Trauma, Sufferings, Self-Criticism, Detachment.

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The novel, *All the Lives We Never Lived*, written by Anuradha Roy talks about the childhood trauma of an individual named Myshkin. Roy creates intriguing thoughts and powerful emotions in the minds of the reader. Her works are contemporary and most of them deal with how an individual's self-consciousness drives one's life. The title of the novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* talks about the longingness of Myshkin and how he wishes to spend time with his mother. Myshkin, at the age of 60 re-experiences the tragic life that he had witnessed. His parents abandoned him when he was 9 years old. It remained an emotionally punishing event in his life.

It is a serious novel that talks about the sufferings of Myshkin, all through his life because of the traumatic experience. Memory acts as a powerful tool in his life by reminding him of all the petrifying actions. He is constantly haunted by his childhood trauma through various forms that his memory creates. Roy reiterates, "Our memories come to us as images, feelings, glimpses, sometimes fleshed out, sometimes in outline" (22).

According to Fischer and Riedesser (1999), trauma is a person's experience of vital disparity between the external factor and the individual's potential to withstand. There are various factors by which an individual tries to manage the traumatic event. Initially, an individual tries to escape any situation which reminds them of the tragic past. Furthermore, they try to process the situation through which it can be settled (Sar 8). Children who are exposed to complex trauma have certain imperfections in the development of interpersonal attachment. It culminates in additional risk factors such as addictive unhealthy behavior and impatience. Furthermore, that leads to a family problem and a serious mental illness (Cook et al. 2). Myshkin, who had lost his mother's care at an early stage of his life had witnessed various difficulties throughout his life. He now looks back and realizes that he doesn't seem to have had a life that a normal child would usually have had.

War, assassination, child maltreatment, vehicle accident, and bullying are some of the common types of childhood traumas (De Bellis 185). This can cause serious issues in their later ages such as developing PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and PTSS (Post Traumatic Stress Symptoms). Myshkin in this novel shows various traumatic

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symptoms when he realized that his mother could no longer be with him and pamper him anymore. Though he tries hard to erase the memories he had with his mother, the moments he cherished with his mother keep resurfacing and leave him hopeless. Memories he had at the age of nine are still spanking and make him feel miserable. The one trait of his mother that Myshkin could not rub out of his mind after the trauma was her "Motherly comfort" when he says:

Some nights, my mother sings the song from Santiniketan. She only sings it when she and I are alone on the roof...when I was little she would scoop me up in her arms and whirl me in a circle as she sang, and now she wafts around the shadowy rooftop with her arms outstretched, a bird in flight. (Roy 61)

Anxiety and Depression are the common risk factors that child develops after being exposed to trauma (Hovens et al. 6). The level of Traumatic Distress is high in adults who have experienced trauma in their childhood (Lindert et al. 359). Anxiety disorder is a plausible threat development seen in adulthood (Lochner et al 376). Myshkin shows a high level of anxiety disorder when he realizes that some parcel has come from his mother, after so many days, ever since she eloped with Mr.Spies: "The package has something to do with my mother, I know, and I hesitate to open it. What if it contains nothing of consequence? What if it does?" (Roy 14). This shows that Mushkin was not ready to face the situation though he was not sure of what that parcel contained. The fact that it was from his mother, stops him from unpacking it. He was "anxious" when he could not put away the thoughts that would haunt him when he said, " I could put away my thoughts of gloom and doom and open the parcel, but I decided not to. For the moment there it sits, pulsing with the energy every unopened letter in the world has" (Roy 15).

Depression is an additional risk factor of childhood trauma, seen in an individual, during the phase of 'adulthood' (Heim et al. 693). Stress is one of the major causes of Depression (Heim et al. 703). It changes the normal functioning of an individual and disturbs the assumption of how the world functions and questions the 'self' (Nelson 801). "I cannot remember my mother... The tune of some song that she used to him while rocking my cradle" (Tagore). Myshkin quotes Tagore's poem, wondering how he has not

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been able to remember his mother whom he had lost at the age of 14. He is now desperate to forget the images of his mother whom he had lost at the age of 9 even before he could differentiate the good from the bad. This makes him even more depressed because his mother is present in every element. Not only her thoughts, but also her vivid images are sharp in his mind and he cannot escape from remembering her:

Present in every detail and yet imprisoned in a different element, unreachable. Entire conversations come back to me, incidents, arguments, the way she would like her eyes with kajal, the fresh flowers in her hair, the circle of red *kumkumam* on her forehead which was invariably smudged by mid-afternoon. (Roy 22)

Loneliness is developed in an individual, in his/her adulthood, as a result of depression and anxiety. It is because of one's experiences based on lack of parental caregiving, misunderstanding, loss of parent and abandonment (Ambre). Though Myshkin in this novel feels depressed and angry towards his mother's act, at the end of the day, he longs for her love and affection. He is angry, yet he needs her. He is frustrated, yet he longs for her love. Her memories act as a driving force in the life of Myshkin, which he constantly cherishes though he sometimes wants to run away from them. There is an imbalance seen in his behaviour and a great loss in expressing his thoughts. The lack of regulations in his daily routine put him down and makes him feel all alone and eventually he longs for his mother. His anger towards his mother is not for eloping with Mr. Spies but for leaving him abandoned amidst the family where everyone is occupied with their own work:

I did not care anymore that he had taken my mother away, I wished he has taken me too... In the time that had passed, my sense of her physical existence had dwindled...I wanted to be where she was. I wanted to do what she was doing. My life was going on elsewhere without me. (Roy 188)

The concept of anger acts as a mask in which an individual subdues a provoking experience that makes a person feel vulnerable, rejected and unimportant (Devlin). Although fear is recognized as a key factor that defines an emotional disorder that an individual experiences in the aftermath of trauma, anger is a must-seen emotion through which an individual hides one's distress (Welty 245). Myshkin realizes that his mother

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has eloped with Mr. Spies. He feels lost - no more comfort, no more love and affection can be seen in his life. In addition, he feels rejected as his own mother has betrayed him. At the same time, he has gone through emotional trauma. Finally, he comes to the conclusion that he cannot see his mother anymore. At this juncture, a sense of anger replaces his insecurity.

It was a betrayal impossible to forgive. My mother knew when she left that she poured petrol and set a match to every bridge between herself and her family. After such desertion, what forgiveness? She could never return, not even for me. (Roy 140)

An individual usually wants to feel protected during a trauma (Webb). But Myshkin has nobody to take care of him and he feels helpless. He says, "She had felt stifled and she had broken free...she left her child and husband for a lover" (Roy 141). Prolonged anger can lead to internal symptoms such as avoidance and external symptoms like lashing out (Win et al. 3). In this novel, the external symptom of anger is seen in the life of Myshkin at the age of 13. His mother, Gayathri leaves a lifetime strain on Myshkin's life which eventually becomes a trauma. Gradually he starts isolating himself from people and develops a habit of smoking, which harms both him and society. He smokes in order to get away from his constant recurring memories of his mother's presence in her absence. He is detached and the only way he feels lightened is when he lashes out his anger whenever he remembers his mother. He says:

There was a time in my life long ago - I was thirteen and had just started smoking - when u thought that if I had a picture of her in front of me, I would press the glowing end of a cigarette into the circles of her eyes...i would blind her. I would kill the spell cast by her absent present. (Roy 15)

Traumatic Distress and its causes are enhanced through dreams, either by means of positive or negative aspects. As Barrett has rightly put it, "Dream Constitutes a unique window on trauma and its effects" (1). Exposure to aggression causes stress in an individual and is more likely to cause sleep disturbances and dreams (Schafer et al. 18). Myshkin who is highly stressed thinking about his mother, gets dreams and nightmares:

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"Late night, probably because of all this dredging up of memories, I woke from a dream ...I Switched in the light" (Roy 64, 65).

All of his dumped memories of his mother interrupt his sleep and disturbs him by evoking dreams. The dreams in which he has images of his mother filled him with great delight. Even then he no longer can live in the imaginary world he created because he knew the reality. He even wakes up from the dream and closes his eyes just to preserve and feel his mother's presence a little longer (Roy 65).

Emotional development and social adversaries have a consequential influence on memory development because they retrieve the traumatic experience and eventually affect the structure and function of the brain (Cordon 115). Explicit memory is crucial and plays an important role in everyday life as it helps in producing the recalled information (Gregoire 2). The sufferer is doubly victimized as his explicit memory makes him feel isolated. Myshkin consciously remembers the times when his mother felt him as a burden: " My arrival had stifled my mother "(Roy 94). He doesn't remember the incident intentionally, rather, the consistent flashing of memories like an episode leaves him speechless. When Myshkin penned down the partial memories that he had, at first, he thought of it as if it all would be able to complete. When he started writing, all the events flashed in front of his eyes: "I find that as I dwell more and more intensely in the time I am describing, it is as if incidents from my childhood are playing out before my eyes again" (Roy 94).

Among semantic and episodic memories, episodic memories involve the conscious remembrance of the past which is concerned with the experience that an individual has gone through. (Episodic Memory: Overview, Comparisons, and How to Improve It). Myshkin in this novel remembers how his mother left him for the sake of her own happiness. She did not seem to have any concern towards his life, rather she was self-oriented and made her choice without having any second thoughts about how her son would survive without her. An argument that he constantly recalls as a series of episodes was the time when his mother and father brawled at each other. The situation ended, "As though nothing else matters. As though every other part of the world stopped after Myshkin came into it" (Roy 92). This statement left him grief-stricken. Not

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once does Roy mention Myshkin's grief, but twice and she italicizes the font enabling the reader to empathize with the struggle that Myshkin goes through. "*Myshkin. Myshkin. As though nothing else matters. As though every other part of the world stopped after Myshkin came into it*" (Roy 94).

Childhood Trauma leaves a child with self-criticism which is associated with self-harming behaviour (Shahmoradi et al. 321). It is even worse when an individual is exposed to social criticism in the immediate future of one's traumatic experience. Myshkin has experienced both criticism and also self-criticism in his life which he thinks he can never eliminate, from his memory. Self-criticism is evident when he says "My arrival had stifled my mother" (Roy 94). He starts doubting whether he has a reason for the traumatic experience he had witnessed. The parallel criticism from people around him makes him feel vulnerable. He cannot hold out against people who are bad-mouthing which eventually made him agree to what they say even though he was not what they talked he was. "People think of my solitude as an eccentricity or a symptom of failure, as if I am closer to animals and trees because human beings betrayed me or because I found nobody to love" (Roy 63).

A traumatic experience in children leaves them with a feeling of shame while they are building a view of themselves (Deblinger 365). A negative self-concept is not the only responsible factor in making a person feel hopeless, rather it is also the negative psychological event which contributes to despondency (Ozgul 57). Childhood Trauma can develop shame which constitutes inculcating unhealthy activities such as drugs and alcohol (Reid 4) which is evident in Myshkin's life when he started smoking at the age of 13 (Roy 15). Be it simple or complex trauma, the sufferer witnesses' shame and guilt as a regular factor seen in PTSD (Wilson 122). Myshkin developed a sense of shame when people started bullying him after the traumatic event that happened in his life. At an early age he couldn't completely understand what they talked about or criticized but as the days went by things became forever etched in his mind.

Development of Dissociation such as "emotional detachment and feelings of depersonalization" (Foa 208) are seen in a person who witnesses trauma. He keeps himself away from everyone. He says, "It has become my lifelong habit to live

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unnoticed" (Roy 193). Myshkin wanted to detach himself from the people around him and wanted to be with his mother. He feels safe and comfortable being around her. He associates everything he sees with his mother's image. He feels isolated even if he is surrounded by many of his family members. It seems impossible for him to connect with people around him anymore and writes a letter to his mother asking when he can be back with her again? This is evident when Gayatri writes "He asks me what time next week he should go to the station so that he can come to me: oh, that broke my heart!" (Roy 247). Also, he feels detached from his life which was cruel and filled with pain "I didn't not know where I was in the year 1941 or in the present" (Roy 213). Depersonalization is when a person feels detached from their body and is usually a mental escape from reality (Michal 693). Myshkin also willfully depersonalizes from reality in order to escape from the sufferings that he goes through. "No, I had popped out of my body, as a pea from its pod, and rolled onto that deck that chair. I could feel wind in my hair, damp warm air, a rocking motion in my body" (Roy 156).

Sufferers are caught awfully in the continuous revisiting of their past life until they find their own autonomy and an auspicious way to approach any situation in a hopeful way (Ahlers 8). Myshkin, at his late age, is intentionally mindful of his traumatic event, making him stand still between his present and past life. Neither he is showcasing a positive sign to lead a happy life nor he is re-establishing his self-consciousness to make his life perfect. Living in the present, he is burdened with his past life. Symptoms of PTSD, and signs of traumatic distress define the life of Myshkin. He is lost in the middle of an ocean where his life is dodged and is left stranded. Myshkin dwells on his past life and rethinks how his life is filled with misery, agony, and suffering. Life is no more a hunky-dory to Myshkin as his childhood trauma is deeply ingrained in his mind.

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