

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Vol. 7, Issue- 3 [June 2016]

7th Year of Open Access

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

The Criterion



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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxymrj.com

Rupa Bajwa's *The Sari Shop*: An Epitome of Indian Women's Trauma

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Abstract:

India is one of the male-dominated countries of the world where women are subjugated and oppressed for religious and socio-cultural reasons. Indian women's rights are thwarted, their abilities and capabilities limited, their biology defamed and their birth devalued and regarded as an ill omen. Till date, one of three Indian women suffers the threats and horrors of a violent partner and/or of the society she belongs to. RupaBajwa's *The Sari Shop* however, is a typical prototype of women and their trauma in an Indian society. This paper seeks to explore the traumatic experiences of Indian women in its multiple facets as represented in *The Sari Shop*. While it incorporates trauma theory, it would find out women's response and strategies employed in management of trauma.

Keywords: India, women, victims, trauma, *The Sari Shop*, RupaBajwa, IPV

INTRODUCTION

Trauma theory is a modern theory considered to be an offspring of Freud's psychoanalysis which is said to be first used by Cathy Caruth. It narrates experiences that are emotionally aching and troubling and that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope. Elissa Marder, a professor of French and comparative literature at Emory University, in her essay *Trauma and Literary Studies: Some "Enabling Questions"* observes that: In the late 20th century, Cathy Caruth, a distinguished research professor of comparative literature and English who is considered as one of the leading pioneers of trauma theory, theorized the concept of trauma in the light of literature. That, literary texts are means through which the nature of trauma is revealed by its witnesses. Trauma theory, though not yet very popular as other famous theories, deeply explores the damaging effects of trauma, identifies its causes and relates it through narration and witnessing.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF INDIAN WOMEN

India is one of the male-dominated countries of the world where women are subjugated and oppressed for religious and socio-cultural reasons. Indian women's rights are thwarted, their abilities and capabilities limited, their biology defamed and their birth devalued and regarded as an ill omen. Glancing at the past, it is believed that Indian women enjoy more respectable positions in the epic ages when there wasn't any such thing as 'sati', or female infanticide. Then, women were said to be treated with honor and shared equality along with their male counterparts. Therefore, there wasn't any existing reason for the women to be traumatized.

However, with the passage of time, women's liberty was snatched. They got reduced to nothing, their social potentials became contemptible, their rights were ignored, abilities were squashed and hence, they ran the risk of being endangered due to internal turbulences.

However, in the work of writers like; Sashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Toru Dutt to name a few feminist writers and social reformers like; Mahatma Gandhi, Raja Ram Mohan Roy the horrifying situations subsided a bit but the trauma still remains. The search for identity and quest for equality continues to be road map whose destination points seem to be far off points.

Today, women in India are still treated as the inferior gender. Absolute obedience bordering on submission to their husbands and the male patriarchs is an expected and an accepted norm. The fairer sex be it an adult woman or a girl child they do nothing beyond his wish, they are expected to take cruelty, be it physical abuse or mental affliction as a due if they have dared to annoy or question the male patriarchy. The perspective towards rape too is shockingly sad; the matriarchs too either remain silent or blame their own sex for purporting the rape upon them. Sadly, the victim is victimized during the rape and even after the rape. In the guise of modernity or equality the matriarchs have found a new role for themselves, that of a juggler. A working woman is not relieved of her domestic chores or responsibility rather is expected to juggle the dual role either with efficiency or with guilt. She is an office goer and a homemaker too. ChitarajanKazhungil rightly observes;

“According to Indian tradition, a woman must defer to her husband in every possible respect. She must make the marital home pleasant for him. She must cook the meals, wash the dishes, and take care of the children. She must never enquire about money and she must acquiesce to her husband's every demand”.(Kazhungil 3)

In India, women undergo trauma as a result of reasons like; sexual harassment, witness of communal violence (Hindu-Muslim riots, partitions), caste discrimination, domestic violence, societal intolerance, religious limitations and limited rights which forces them to commit foeticide or infanticide against their wish. According to a Swachetan (A twelve-year-old non-profit organization, New Delhi) report, studies on rape victims from all over India show that women undergo a high level of trauma. Among the symptoms they show are; constant feeling of dehumanization, hopelessness, loss of meaning, flashbacks, body image disturbance, guilt or alienation. As L. N. Suman, a professor of clinical psychology and a consultant in a trauma recovery clinic of Bangalore, India, observes in his article, ‘*Domestic Violence, Psychological Trauma and Mental Health of Women: A View from India*’ that:

“Several social ills that plague Indian society target the girl child and women. These include female foeticide, neglect of the girl child, sexual abuse of the girl child, trafficking of girls and women, dowry harassment and domestic violence. Such violence against girls and women impairs their physical and psychological health which necessitates health professionals to be sensitive to such issues. Health professionals, including mental health professionals, need to be made aware of the underlying psychological trauma in order to ensure adequate and appropriate interventions. The government of India has passed legislations to punish abuse and violence against girls and women by treating them as crimes”. (Suman 3)

Kumar. S, *et al.* report on ‘*Domestic violence and its mental health correlates in Indian women*’ consistently indicated a relatively high prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) in India. In literature, many writers both in English and other Indian languages have mirrored the pitiful conditions which the Indian women find themselves in. Girish

Karnad's *Nagamandala*, Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali*, Sashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* are few examples.

THEMES OF TRAUMA IN *THE SARI SHOP*

TRAUMA OF POVERTY

Kamla's story begins as a little girl who lives peacefully with her father, mother and brother in a ramshackle known as their home in Jandiala a village in Punjab. Born in a low income family, she never gets the chance to taste the goodness of a luxurious life, but was happy and content with her life especially with the two frocks she wears interchangeably. Losing her mother at the age of eight, subjects her to choice less child labor. She has a father who works with a local soap powder factory and a brother, an apprentice in a tailoring shop yet, she has to work very hard to cater for her needs. Her upbringing was similar to the stereotyped rearing of the girl child. Being a female, she is taught that the principle of hard work is but a natural fulfillment for being born as a girl and hence she is trained to work hard right from her early age. Her mother washes her thirteen years old brother's clothes but expects Kamla to wash her clothes herself. Why? It is so because she is a girl, not just a girl but an Indian girl. These little things that appear to be normal; as if they do not really matter for her and her parents, tacitly develops in what later becomes injurious to her psyche. In a way, her freedom and happiness were thwarted right from childhood. Losing her mother not only meant that she had to cater for herself now, but she also replaced her dead mother by shouldering almost all of her mother's duties and responsibilities. Her aunt- the Bua- says to her: "Now, after your mother, you will have look after the house. You will have to take your father and brother, okay? Behave like a big girl now. Kamla nodded" (Bajwa 143)

At an early stage, Kamla's trauma begins to develop due to poverty. She works at three different houses as a maid to make ends meet. Earning four hundred rupees in a month was a big deal for her. Her whole life from childhood to adulthood is enclosed and engulfed within a limit of certain income and expenditure. "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in childhood abuse is known to increase the risk of repeated victimization in adulthood". (DeJonghe et al. 295)

In addition to that, she suffers much more financial hardship in her matrimonial home especially when her husband Chander lost his job. In an article on a review of *The Sari Shop* by Lotusreads, the blogger observes that,

"Chander, another Sari Seller is an alcoholic and added to his fold is an alcoholic wife. Kamla, his wife was not always prone to drink. Circumstances --- poverty, the accidental death of her mother to which she was witness, the loss of job ... all contributed to driving her to alcoholism and madness that has her feared in her shanty town neighborhood" (Lotusreads 1)

The effects of the penury she undergoes from the beginning till the end of her life vehemently contributes to her trauma. It however made her only see the darker side of life. In that, she feels deprived of an opportunity to live a life like humans should. A child shouldn't earn for himself. The least that any society could do for their children is to give them a childhood from which they don't have to 'recover'. Neither should a wife be allowed to suffer the continuous pains of destitution.

Thus, RupaBajwa reveals the extremity of Kamla's poverty and its mental effect as a tale of what some Indian women undergo especially the lower castes, like Maheshwa Devi has done in her *Rudali* through the characters of Sanichari and Bikhni whose poverty and caste reduces them to none-entities in their society. However, the epicurean lifestyle lived by the Kapoors triggers a question for Kamla's own pathetic life. Is it her fault to be a woman? Why must she be this poor? In trying constantly to find answers to these questions and to the disproportion between her life and others', she ends up developing an internal wound. The injury of the mind is both the cause and result of the psychological disturbance and hence, penurious trauma.

TRAUMA OF EMOTIONAL MISHAP

Kamla's trauma on emotional level is due to multiple factors. It is based on undue blames, shocks and threats she experienced. It is generally believed that there is a strong bond which nature instills between a mother and her offspring. At first Kamla has a short lived joy of getting to know that she is to become a mother. However, very sadly Kamla is not destined to see her baby. She is subjected to the pain of losing her child. The pain of losing an unborn child is not minimized for any mother. No logic or reason refutes the pain of a mother of losing her child be it after birth, prior to birth or sometime after birth. Kamla's pain is doubled because the child in her womb was the only solace to her otherwise sad miserable life. She did look at her pregnancy as the breakpoint of her otherwise lonely and desolate life; weaving dreams of a living a lovely life in an environment where she is otherwise considered an outsider.

Kamla had a miscarriage in the third month of her pregnancy. Feelings of fear and anger for the strange situation and absence of a mother, husband or a mother-in-law all grew in her. Having been formally informed by the rude doctor that she has lost the baby and would never conceive again, Kamla is emotionally shattered and devastated. "There was something savage about her hardened face. It was deeply lined" (Bajwa 104).

"Overwhelming emotions can do damage to our bodies as well as our psyches" says Sandra Bloom. Her feeling of despair and hopelessness heightened when Chander turns his back at her, at the very moment when she needed him the most. Instead of consoling her by letting her cry on his shoulders as she expected, he blames her for everything; for losing the child, his job and everyone's dismay and for his parents too, who had recently died.

"You have been very unlucky for me, Kamla ever since I married you, I have been having nothing but bad luck....."

Then he raised his voice, you have a black heart a black heart a black heart he repeated you killed your mother. You ate up your own father. Your brother lost his job. You have eaten up my child. Soon you will also devour me" (Bajwa 156-7)

Kamla is shocked at this, her wound run deep, her hopes are wrecked and so, more injuries occur in her psyche. Professor Cathy Caruth rightly venerated the concept of double wound in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narratives and History*, that, "As the repeated infliction of a wound...the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind". (Caruth3)

Kamla's emotional ruin is an echo of her earlier mystification. At sixteen she is married off to Chander the son of her father's friend and colleague, who takes her away from

her home and family to a completely new environment (Amritsar a 20KM far city from where she is born and brought up). The feeling of nostalgia, loneliness, resulting from the amount of time Chander spends away from home leaving her alone to the new environment and haunting memories of her past come together and merged with the devastation that embraces her in her new home heighten the development of Kamla's emotional trauma. Similar to this, is the situation of Rani in Girish Karnad's *Nagamandala*. Bajwa very poignantly through Kamla portrays the upshot of emotional trauma in Indian women.

TRAUMA OF PHYSICAL AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) is a globally acknowledged and renowned phenomenon due to the intense havoc it causes on its victims. In India today, many women suffer from domestic violence in one form or the other. Rupa Bajwa highlights the plight of this category of women through the creatively crafted character of Kamla.

Kamla, now trying to run successfully her marital home, is subjected to the hectic everyday chores from cooking their meals, washing their clothes, cleaning the entire house to darning of holes in old clothes Kamla is a completely submissive wife who dedicates all her life, might, energy, power and will to the growth and development of her marital home. What does she get in return? Without any assumptions or expectations if one is supposed to carry out the duties or responsibilities of life and relationships it is but natural for the woman to be shaken and devastated when beatings and criticisms come from her husband.

“She had begun to brood, had begun to be tired of her life. Chander drunk often and beat her up. This was presently common, she knew. Men often beat up their wives. It was a matter of routine, nothing personal. It shouldn't have worried her” (Bajwa 152).

Kamla continually withstands the physical abuse of her violent natured husband. She becomes repressive and withdrawn from herself and the reality of life. Things grew worst as she couldn't register the situation into her mind, the harder she tries to make things right, the more her insolent husband distorts her by complicating issues. Even when she tries to play the role of a patient wife, “Chander would return home frustrated each night, usually drunk and he would fight with her slapping her face and throwing her against the wall”. (Bajwa 159).

Depression clouded Kamla, she becomes vulnerable to her instinctual desires and resorts to drinking alcohol and thereby developing aggression in a quest for an escape route. De Jonghe in an article on post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Intimate partner violence, observes that, “the nature of the abusive behavior itself (of male partners) may place women at increased risk of post-traumatic stress disorder”. (295)

The extent of Kamla's exposure to battering imperils her to minimal madness. Her inability to accommodate the frighteningly violent nature of her villainous husband that life has seemed to give her evokes sympathy in us and makes us wonder if spouses are such is it not better off that an individual remains single or rather should not an Indian girl be equipped to defend and safeguard herself against the risk of being a wife of such a husband. The more she drinks the more he beats. The more he beats her, the more the victim finds refuge in the alcohol. Sadly, Kamla becomes a victim of dual suffering. The misery born out of wrecked marital life and the misery born out of addiction to alcohol, in either way have engulfed

Kamla in its thongs. The husband never wanted to know what ails her; neither puts in efforts to bring her back to her innocence which she has lost long ago. Realizing that she is now a full-time alcoholic, “Chander beat her up more harshly than usual”. Kamla consequently got exposed to psychological disorder and subsequently started to misbehave. As DeJonghe venerates, “The timing and exposure to Intimate Partner Violence affects women’s mental health”.

As such, the total innocence of Kamla is lost as her husband reduces her to nothing by molesting her, being ungrateful to her sacrifices, blaming her for his failure and then by physically assaulting her which tends to be the worst for it doesn’t only gives physical pain to her but also causes great psychological ruins that are sickening. Mary Whipple in her review on *The Sari Shop* observes that;

“Wrested from her home and sent to Amritsar in an arranged marriage, she tries to cope, but when one of Chander's previous employers cheats her husband of three months salary and then closes the company, leaving him out of work and in debt, they both snap. Both drink, she becomes a slattern, he begins to beat her, and she embarrasses both him and herself. While he is able to drag himself to work most days, she has no real outlet for her anger”. (whipple 1)

However, Kamla’s trauma not only leads to her seeking escapism in alcoholism but also leads to her mental disintegration and disassociation. Kamla’s mental faculty dissolves and shatters, in that, she hardly could make out the difference between right and wrong. She is unable to either take care of her thoughts or her body neither was she in control of her actions. She becomes ‘foul-mouthed’ rains insult on people and does several questionable actions. She becomes a disgrace to herself, her husband and to the society she belongs to, as a result of the trauma she undergoes.

“After a traumatic event..... there may be two distinct phrases. There is an initial breakdown when the protective shield is breached by trauma and there may be a catastrophic disruption of functioning” (Curnow 2007)

In addition to Kamla’s psychological crises, we see catastrophic disruption of functioning like mentioned earlier. In trying to vent out her anger and to deal with the cause of her problems, she resorts to throwing stones and raining insults at the Kapoors. Kamla openly grants them the reasonability of their (herself and Chander’s) adversity. Unfortunately for Kamla, the Kapoors are the no-go-area of the society she finds herself. As a punishment for protesting against the unfair treatment of her husband which pioneered all their misfortune, she was arrested by the Indian Police who mischievously raped her on several occasions.

“While they were having dinner, Kamla was being raped by two police officers who had brought her in. Then one of the Policemen, a married man, went home to his wife, while the other stayed back, drinking cheap rum and listening to film songs on the radio, hoping to have another go at Kamla in the morning before bailing her out”. (Bajwa171)

What else could be more tragic for Kamla in this deteriorated situation of hers, than being raped by the disgusting policemen? According to a Swanchetan report, “Rural women suffer more rape trauma than urban women”. Trauma, being a response to an event is consequently in place right here in Kamla’s presumed condition. Jerrold R. Brandell strongly distinguished

relatively impersonal trauma from interpersonal trauma by highlighting its magnitude. She acknowledges Allen 2001, and says:

“Other psychoanalytic writers have made useful distinctions between “relatively impersonal trauma” (e.g., natural disasters, technological disasters, automobile accidents) and “interpersonal trauma” (e.g., criminal assault, rape, sexual harassment, war, and political violence), arguing that traumas associated with the latter group are, generally speaking, far more problematic and likely to culminate in serious mental disorders than those in the former group”

TRAUMA OF SOCIETAL DENUNCIATION

Society plays a very crucial role in the psychological development of humans, just like it does in destroying it. Kamla’s trauma continues from start to finish of her life. The society which she is part of, deserts her and blindly blames her for not being a good wife, not good enough for an Indian husband like Chander.

“A woman should know her place. Maybe she has had difficulties, maybe she has had problems, but it is a woman’s duty after all to take care of her husband and his home first, and later think about herself” (Bajwa 120)

Moreover, she is a victim of liberation. Her major fault is ‘why she had to openly revolt against the Kapoors’ who are the root cause of her problem as the Kapoor’s sent thugs who beat her up, paraded her naked in the streets and finally burnt her to death. But before this incident, what role did the society play in saving her? What attempt was made to save or rescue her from these thugs? None! The society neither attempts to protect her nor even find a way to cure her. The best they could do is to speak ill about the situation that she was in. Kamla’s trauma worsened due to the response she gets from her neighbourhood; as she is laughed at by her neighbours and treated as “the other” in the same environment where she thinks she belong. On one hand the women and children treat her as a laughing stock, like some kind of mad woman and on the other hand, the men think she deserves to be punished for going rogue.

“Traumatic experience can produce a sometimes indelible effect on the human psyche that can change the nature of an individual’s memory self-recognition and relational life” (Laurie Vickroy 22).

It is indeed a paradox to see, along with Kamla’s trauma afflicted by insensitive society, is that of the high class women of the society who live under the subjections of a society where a woman’s identity is governed by a preconceived notion. Ironically the ‘dolling up’ of the rich and the elite women is a disguised subjugation.

The high class women of the society live under the subjections of a society where a woman’s identity is governed by a preconceived notion. These women are respected, liberated, empowered and non-competitive with their male counterparts. They seem to be modern, satisfied with their marital (sexual) lives and also manipulate their home making roles with drudgery and exuberance. But behind all these abilities and privileges lurks the dying wish of a simpler and more sincere life, truthfulness to one’s self and freedom from the shackles of the society. They choicelessly do all what they engage themselves in because the urban society which they live in, not only expects such from them but also demands from them.

“Modern women prefer to exercise—her choice and break away from her traumatic experiences. Women are now portrayed as more assertive, more liberated in their view, and more articulate in their expression than the woman of the past. Instead of downgrading the elements of suffering at the hands of her lover or husband or man, she has started asserting her substantive identity in action, not in words.” (ChitaranjanKazhugil 5)

Mrs. Sandhu, the wife of a chief engineer, who is excessively interested in interior decoration. “She has planned the construction as well as the furnishing very carefully”. (Bajwa 12). Due to her earnest quest to reach to and to satisfy the socially constructed notion of a well-to-do house wife, she has taken much effort than required to make her house beautiful with the aim of living up to the standards expected out of her. Bajwa projects the underlying subjugations of such urban women too who go beyond miles to live up to social expectations.

Similarly, one other well sketched character of the same brand of women is Mrs. Gupta the wife of a merchant, who is more concerned with her body fitness than anything else. With careful diet and regular exercise, she is able to keep a younger physical look than she is. This is exactly what plagues the modern urban women of this century; physical looks. Almost every urban Indian woman is doing one or two things to get rid of body fat or to lose weight with a goal of looking slimmer. Physical fitness is a pseudo projection of a deep underlined fear to be sexually attractive to the male specie.

In the garb of modernity and freedom of expression the women of elite class so often wear minimum clothing or tight fitted clothes that display either the sculpted form or and the voluptuous feminine form of the human anatomy. In either way the women are subjected to the ‘male gaze’. Ironically, the rich and the elite have no qualms over it where as if the poor and the deprived women have not much to cover her anatomy she is subjected to disgust apathy along with the ‘male gaze’. Although in her fifties, Mrs. Gupta looks much younger by paying much heed to maintenance of her physique with “her careful diet and regular exercise On the dressing table below the room reflection, stood a Jar of L’Oreal anti-ageing cream, a bottle of “Lakme cleansing milk, packs of deep red bindis and a bottle of perfumes... these were the things that she used every day” (Bajwa 14).

In the same vein, Mrs. Bhandari is a woman in her forties a onetime beauty contest winner who at present, is a social activist. Besides organizing charity programmers, one other thing which preoccupies her is her taste for good cooking. She busies herself in cooking one food or the other trying to do away with idleness as well as to maintain the social knots tied between her and her neighbors. To stand out as the best among others, she needs to practically do her best in the kitchen if not for show-up then for gratification. To preserve her social outlook before her neighbors and others, she has to live a life of pretense, keeping a happy face doing her tedious errands just to have them say “she could bake the most marvelous cakes that could beat the cakes in Delhi’s best bakeries (Bajwa 26).

This shallow life style is what Ayn Rand daunts in her philosophy of objectivism, where she encourages individuals to live by reality and discard convention. The question of framing and maintaining a particular identity is what appears to traumatize these modern, upper class women as samples of Indian aristocracy. Bajwa has excellently pictured these identity conscious women and their trauma which appears to be obscure.

TRAUMA MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

RupaBajwa's *The Sari Shop* did not only showcase varieties of women's trauma but also highlights trauma management techniques adopted by Indian women of various classes. Kamla who is a victim of multiple emotional misshape, whether it be, domestic violence, sexual assault, penury and lack of social support etc. Kamla's first response to traumatic distress however, is flight from the terrific situations into alcohol which tempered with her sanity and provokes her to fight the root cause of her problems. Since the Guptas are responsible for her husband's breakdown; which has affected her in many ways, she decides to go and howl her misery before them. At this, Kamla's fate is sealed. The wives of Gupta, Bandhari, Sandhu and Kapoor on the other hand, neither tried to fight their trauma no fly away from it. They have learnt to live with it as part and parcel of their lives. Thus, it can be analyzed that Indian women respond to trauma through various methods; depending on its weightage.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, some major and/or possibly the root causes of trauma among Indian women have been identified and analyzed in this paper. Specifically, domestic violence, sexual assault and societal inflicted trauma, trauma of poverty as well as that caused by tyrannical leaders. In India, lots have been said on women's right via socio-political activists, feminist and others, but very little effort has been paid to the aftermath of a devastating situation. In other words, less heed is paid to traumatized victims. As such, it is of utmost importance to create trauma management awareness among individuals and also make provisions of effective trauma care centers to heal traumatized women in India.

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