

## **From Survival to Reclamation: Exploration of Trauma in *All the Lives We Never Lived***

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### **Abstract:**

Trauma is a worldwide phenomenon that impacts nearly every individual's daily life. Michelle Balaev defines trauma as "a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts the previous notion of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society" (Balaev 3). The emotional reactions to trauma do vary significantly due to individuals' emotional turmoil in response to any particular incidents, upending their established sense of identity and societal benchmarks. To understand the depth of human experiences, trauma studies have emerged, revealing a wealth of possibilities for exploring the impact of trauma on characters in literature and individuals in society by analysing their psychological and cultural significance. Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived* examines how characters navigate personal and collective histories marked by memory, loss, flashbacks, and other distressing traumatic events. This research engages in a fictional exploration of trauma to capture the multiple voices within the narratives and to examine the relationship between words and wounds. Another primary concern of this paper is to discover how the pursuit of identity aids in overcoming traumatic experiences and to uncover and develop an understanding of the conditions of individuals affected by trauma.

The paper employs a qualitative method of textual analysis, drawing on theoretical insights from trauma theory. Through the works of trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Michelle Balaev, Geoffrey Hartman, and Kali Tal, among others, the study explores how, in the present novel, *All the Lives We Never Lived*, trauma disrupts cognition, leading to fragmented memories and silent voices.

**Keywords: identity, isolation narratives, silenced voice, trauma.**

## Introduction

Literature facilitates a nuanced understanding of the cultural and societal nexus, capturing the complexities of human existence. There is a space for memories, introspection, retrospection, flashbacks, and painful remembrances, all of which are overshadowed by the wounds and trauma they evoke. As Geoffrey Hartman (1995) also articulates, Literature offers pathways for giving testimony. Being alive is to feel, and feelings come in all flavours. Much of human life is characterised by suffering, which is unavoidable, even for the strongest. Every human mind is uniquely designed and experiences things differently. Understanding the depths of human experience and its impact has long been a focus in the social sciences and humanities; literary scholarship often draws on branches of psychology, particularly psychoanalysis, to uncover the mysteries of the human mind. In the late nineteenth century, the term ‘trauma’ came to describe emotional wounds. Furthermore, there was a paradigm shift in the mental sciences, which altered medical attitudes towards nervous disorders. Roger Luckhurst, in *The Trauma Question* (2008), notes that ‘the shocks of modern life’ increased and were measured in the nineteenth century. The rising interest in nervous disorders during the mid-to-late nineteenth century can be directly linked to social, economic, political, and technological developments that brought notable changes to daily life. As a result, there was a sharp rise in cases of mental illnesses such as hysteria, neurosis, nightmares, and other psychic disorders, which in turn led to a surge in clinical and psychological research focused on the invisible scars. Cathy Caruth maintains that trauma is a wound inflicted upon the mind and, as such, is not a simple, healable event like some physical injuries or ailments. She asserts, “Trauma is much more than pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality that is not otherwise available” (Caruth 4). The specificity of trauma resides, in the fact that the pathology in question cannot be defined by ‘the event itself’ nor in terms of a ‘distortion of the event’ but

rather in 'the structure of its experience or reception', which is why it returns to haunt the survivor later on, possessing them instead being possessed by them as an 'ordinary' memory.

Trauma specifically pertains to the psychological condition recognised after the onset of Western modernity. The cultural canon of trauma theory is primarily built around the horrors of the Holocaust and, more recently, 9/11. The role of trauma in literature is more diverse and complex, as it crosses many interconnected boundaries of geo-cultural contexts, language, and genre. Therefore, when exploring universal human responses to adversity, anguish, suffering, and trauma, the observations are as diverse as the individuals and cultures themselves. Covering different aspects of trauma in South Asian literature is challenging, yet when focusing on Indian English fiction, we observe various narratives of trauma ranging from intense communal rivalries, the complexities of partition, colonial disempowerment, forced migration, and colonial pillage. Beyond these factors, gender is closely linked with trauma, offering a deeper understanding of women's experiences. Studies often focus on issues such as women's roles as caretakers in genocidal contexts, their memory practices, and survival strategies. Works like Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) and *Voices in the City* (1965) give us an insight into agonising inner dilemmas, neuroses, and despairing existential crises that female characters face due to the construction of social norms. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) shows the mental suffering and emotional consequences for women as they struggle to reconcile their own aspirations to meet social and familial expectations. Likewise, in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988), we see the muted and unresolved frustrations and internal conflicts of many middle-class Indian women and the problems that stem from trauma endured in silence. Through these diverse narratives, Indian English fiction reflects personal, collective, and historical experiences within a social and cultural framework.

Anuradha Roy, like other postcolonial writers, such as Anita Desai, Meena Alexander, Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapur, depicts the interior landscape of the female mind and the psychic

elements of women from a unique perspective, moving beyond conventional notions of traditional femininity. Here, in the present narrative, *All the Lives We Never Lived* (2018), Roy focuses on several multilayered and interrelated facets that characters face due to psychological and emotional scars. Her writing often entails a comprehensive reading of interwoven trauma, emphasising the impact of personal and societal histories on individuals, and depicting how emotional, psychological, or cultural experiences shape the characters' lives and decisions. It further incorporates the struggle of characters that experience different risks, vulnerabilities and reactions in the face of traumatic events.

### **Echoes of the Unheard: Navigating Trauma and Identity**

*All the Lives We Never Lived* by Anuradha Roy presents rich narratives that capture deep exploration of personal sufferings, the scars of historical upheaval, and an attempt to reinstate a sense of self in the aftermath of loss. Trauma does not inherently refer to a particular incident but rather to a frame of consciousness caused by a constellation of experiences and fractional occurrences, a persistent ailment, or a symptomatic situation. Hartman associates trauma, which marks “the disjunction between experiencing...and understanding” (Hartman 5), with figurative language. The novel delves into the complexities of human existence through distinct lenses, exploring trauma intricately linked to the characters' relationships with their environment and each other, highlighting the resilience of shared experience. The novel is intricately woven around questioning the choices made by Gayatri over personal stories with the fabric of national identity and memory, and its long, complex psychological effect on her son, Myshkin.

Most post-colonial works are interwoven with issues of community, cultural identities, and nationhood, seeking to retrieve a pre-colonial past to help define the nation and reconstruct it without the frames of reference used by the colonial masters. Eventually, the different voices

sought to write their histories in the dominant cultural narratives. The same goes for the novel *All the Lives We Never Lived*, set at the cusp of Independence and sailing through the troubled waters of 20th-century history, examining Gayatri's journey of self-actualisation, leaving a deep emotional and psychological development in the characters, especially her son, Myshkin. The novel revolves around Gayatri's complex life and unfulfilled desires through a rich tapestry of interconnected narratives, highlighting the profound impact of personal choices and societal constraints on one's sense of self and belongings. Taking instance from Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*, "It forced me to leave my house, but also freed me" (Caruth 20), weighs how Freud emphasises the act of leaving as a kind of freedom. Likewise, Gayatri, the mother of nine-year-old Myshkin, left her family to navigate her quest for liberation for artistic expression, transcending the boundaries of gender, politics, and personal identity. The novel contrasts the 'lived' and 'never lived' dichotomy woven within different forms of exploring self-identity, with characters such as Gayatri and Myshkin being paralleled with the nation's identity. Gayatri's life reflects the fragmentation of identity within the context of an emerging nation. She endeavours to reconcile her desires with societal expectations, seeking to fabricate a sense of self that is not dictated by external forces.

Myshkin's identity is profoundly connected to his experiences and relationships, especially with his mother, loss, love, and existential enquiries. In this sense, Myshkin seeks connection and understanding in the lives of others, especially his mother, which becomes paramount to his identity. Myshkin draws a comparison between his loss and that of Rabindranath Tagore, noting, "The poet lost his mother when he was fourteen; I was only nine the year my mother left" (Roy 22). He is trying to authenticate or come to terms with his feelings by seeing them reflected in someone else's story, suggesting this loss occurred at a pivotal, formative time in his life and has likely shaped his development. He is perpetually searching for meaning and a sense of belonging within the broader context of the nation. The novel explores the theme of

intergenerational trauma, intertwined with the characters' narratives, illustrating how trauma is not merely an individual experience but a collective one, passed down through generations. The characters' emotional and psychological struggles are shaped by their histories and the broader cultural, political, and social forces that influence their lives. Myshkin's emotional struggles are rooted in the trauma of his family, particularly his mother. His mother's life was filled with pain, unfulfilled desires, and the weight of choices. Myshkin carries the historical trauma and the emotional legacy of his mother's experiences. Gayatri's losses, her emotional isolation, and the decisions she makes about love and freedom all reverberate into the next generation, creating a cycle of unresolved grief and longing. Associating trauma with identity and memory presents as an intermixing of external and internal forces on individual character traits and cultural factors, creating a broader appreciation for the links between the singular and collective traumatic experience. As Balev also suggests, "identity is formed by intergenerational transmission of trauma" (Balev 2). Gayatri and Myshkin's representations of extreme experiences of trauma are intermingled within the constraints of each other's identity and memory, reflecting how trauma is carried out through history. It reflects the larger theme of how the past affects future generations, particularly in terms of individuals' personal histories.

In South Asian culture, marriage makes unreasonable demands on the woman, stressing the subjugation and suppression of women. Nek Chand, Gayatri's husband, was rooted in social responsibilities with constructed and narrow beliefs. As Nek Chand remarks, "Painting, singing, dancing, these are wonderful things. Everyone needs hobbies. But there are hobbies and serious matters. (Roy 35). For Gayatri, art was not just a hobby or a profession; it was her means of survival. Their relationship reflects a sense of unfulfilled longings, as her husband prioritises stability and societal expectations, while Gayatri yearns for a more vibrant, artistic existence. Despite their love for each other, their conflicting values create a rift, making it

difficult for them to adjust to each other's views. Nek Chand mentions, "The trouble with you, Gayatri, is that all you want to live off your memories. Past glory" (Roy 24). A complex power dynamic marks Nek Chand's character, highlighting the concept of "logic of domination" given by Karen Warren, portraying how the underlying power structure stifles individual agency. Her inner turmoil stems from the clash between societal expectations and personal ambition, compounded by the stresses of emotional strain. Her desire for self-identity and freedom is continually at odds with her responsibilities as a wife and mother. This confinement leads to a deep sense of dissatisfaction and frustration, which constitute a crucial aspect of her trauma. At one point, Gayatri posits, "What will the great nation's freedom do for me? Tell me that! Will it make me free? Will I be able to choose how to live?" (Roy 90). This psychological and emotional imprisonment of Gayatri to remain within the constructed boundaries connects her to the development of trauma.

In the book *The Myth of Normal*, Gabor Maté, a Canadian psychologist, talks about big T trauma and small t trauma. The big T trauma talks about the responses to extraordinary events, while the small t trauma is about mundane experiences of stress and adversity, not getting the love and acceptance that is needed, not being given the freedom to experience all the emotions, whatever happens, and many more instances come under the category of small t trauma. Things went quite the same with Gayatri; her loneliness, compounded by her husband's emotional absence, leads her to seek solace and purpose in particular artistic inclinations. Still, the social constraints did not allow her to do so freely. These unusual events become a burden inside, creating an emotional wound, though there is no special kind of event that provokes a traumatic reaction; it is not the event itself, but rather the mental experience of it, that constitutes the psychological trauma.

Gayatri chooses to live her life far from domestic drudgery, escaping to Bali in pursuit of art. From childhood, Gayatri was whimsical, creative, and vivacious, but she married a man who

was deeply rooted in social responsibilities and more aligned with traditional forms and concepts. Art plays a crucial role in holding both metaphor and as a means for characters to express their deepest desires, fears, and frustrations. Gayatri is raised by a father who indulges her ambitions of becoming an artist. Having spent her time at Shantiniketan, her acquaintance there, particularly with Rabindranath Tagore, weighs themes of artistic freedom and adds to the theme of both physical and emotional liberation. Desire is not something women are expected to articulate, as Gayatri's marriage, too, demanded certain boundaries. As Gayatri mentions, "I've stopped everything. I don't sing. I don't dance. I hardly ever paint. What more do you want?" (Roy 35). It shows her suffering and entanglement with the deep theme of selfhood, identity, and belonging. Gayatri, both as an individual and as an artist, embodies the feeling of disillusionment due to the shift in her identity. This shift creates internal conflict and contributes to her feelings of trauma, as she finds it challenging to navigate the tensions between who she wants to be and what she is expected to be. Gayatri's decision to leave her family and move to Bali is a culmination of this rupture or split within the self due to the unknown traumatic events. In Caruth's account, as an 'unclaimed experience', trauma remains essentially unknowable. The dissociative break in time causes both emotional suffering and the inability to identify or 'locate' the event. Gayatri's sudden disappearance was the effect of the inherent latency of trauma and emotional turmoil emerging from her past experiences, creating a temporal gap in which the meaning and value of the experience become indeterminate.

The novel opens with the statement, "In my childhood, I was the boy whose mother has run off with an Englishman" (Roy 9). It takes readers back to Myshkin's childhood with a heavy weight of touch and a sensuousness that captures all the fraught emotions of childhood. This long-lasting and irreversible impact of this separation stands out most notably in Myshkin's life. As Caruth also mentions, trauma is "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” (Caruth 11). Therefore, trauma returns in its exactness or literality at a later time. Myshkin points out, “At odd times, especially in the first few months when I woke up and did not find my mother, or came back from school to the house without her, the emptiness was a shock, like waking from one of those dreams where you are falling from the sky-falling forever with nothing below” (Roy 157). The line captures the perplexing and profound emptiness that Myshkin faces due to his mother's departure, reflecting the pain of adjusting to a new and awkward reality. Angela Onwuachi-Willig, an expert in critical race theory, has talked about the “trauma of the routine”, a cultural trauma that can occur even when routines are simply reaffirmed. There is an interplay between history and the accumulation of the “routine”, which harms meaning in cultivating a cultural trauma narrative. We see how the complex emotions of abandonment, longing, and resentment continue to haunt Myshkin later due to the “trauma of routine”. However, trauma is not something that happens to you, but what happens inside you. Gayatri's disappearance is a critical point for Myshkin, shaping his psyche and making it difficult for him to reconcile the idea of love. Her absence haunts him, driving much of his internal conflict and struggles for identity and connection.

Apart from Gayatri, Nek Chand, to a certain extent, adds to the trauma of Myshkin. Nek Chand's presence in Gayatri's life indirectly influences Myshkin's sense of abandonment, as it is part of the larger web of emotional events that led to his mother's departure. Nek Chand is part of the larger narrative that impacts Myshkin's emotional development. He also left home, as he was involved in the freedom movement at a time when Myshkin needed much care and affection. Later, when Nek Chand brings a lady and child home, Myshkin compounds the feeling of loss and displacement. This incident deepens Myshkin's internal conflict, reinforcing the emotional distance between him and his father. Childhood trauma has a long-term effect on

individuals. This trauma haunts him throughout his life, influencing his identity, his relationships, and his ongoing search for meaning.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) describes the response to sudden catastrophic events, providing the link between the psyche and external violence. It is accompanied by 'intense fear, terror, and helplessness' and causes 'significant distress in most people'. Myshkin also undergoes sudden fear and hallucinations after his mother's departure, as he says, "The package has something to do with my mother, I know, and I hesitate to open it. What if it contains nothing of consequence?" (Roy 14). This shows that Myshkin does not want to remember the traumatic event. He might fear that the letter could either offer him an explanation of the truth or deepen his unresolved emotional trauma. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), according to Gabor Maté, is a coping mechanism generally found in early childhood that is no longer working for you. Still, it had a function when it first came along. We could see some behaviours in Myshkin that could potentially be linked to the symptoms of ADHD. Myshkin at a point says, "I was thirteen and just started smoking-when you thought that I would picture of her in front of me, I would press the glowing end of the cigarette into the circles of her eyes. I would blind her. (Roy 15). It certainly shows how Myshkin lashes out in anger, remembering his mother's involvement in the persistent patterns of hyperactivity and impulsivity related to trauma. However, Myshkin's challenges are more associated with emotional and psychological distress.

The narratives continue, shifting back and forth in time to reconstruct cultural memory through individual perspectives, adopting testimonial qualities and offering insights into how extreme events shape identity, the unconscious, and remembrance. At one point, Gayatri states, "There was a trapped bird inside me beating its wings. I had to tear my chest open and let it free. It lets me bleed, it hurts beyond the words" (Roy 223). This reflects the unfulfilled lives and stories Gayatri carries, along with deep emotional and psychological wounds. The bird may symbolise

her artistic passion, fluttering its wings to soar freely in an open, unlimited sky without restrictions. However, allowing the bird to fly resulted in little more than a painful and daunting task because of her sense of obligation towards Myshkin. As Gayatri also mentions, “Fear and miser to think of little Myshkin all alone” (Roy 219). Myshkin also contemplates his mother's choices as he says, “They were two people stranded on an island together with no common language” (Roy 36). As Myshkin matures, he reflects on his past and begins to grasp the complexities of his mother's life. He moves from a place of ache and confusion to a more nuanced understanding of her desires and motivations because, at the time of the traumatic event, the level of fright destroys the mind's ability to comprehend it. Caruth mentions that the simultaneous occurrence of the event with the repetitive flashbacks finally paves the way to liberation from the event. However, by the end of the novel, Myshkin's traumatic memory also resolves, and he seeks to understand not only his mother's life but also his identity and desires and needs a break from the constraints of past norms. As Myshkin states, “I am making the same journey as my mother, by train, ship, steamer, boat, across the Indian Ocean, past a thousand islands, stopping every few days, pausing until I want to go on” (Roy 328). Here, Myshkin is metaphorically retracing the journey his mother once undertook. This journey is not merely a physical voyage but also an exploration of his mother's life, choices, and the paths that shaped his existence and identity. Myshkin's emotional and physical journey becomes an act of remembrance, discovery, and reconnection with his mother's past. He, too, chooses to embark on a journey similar to his mother's quest for self-discovery and reconciliation. This act of travelling signifies Myshkin's acceptance of his mother's life and the realisation of change beyond fixed societal norms.

## **Conclusion**

Stories serve as a means of understanding the world we inhabit. They are essential to our efforts to perceive the world; they shape how we organise, interpret, and transform information into

reality. Through any particular narrative, we get a sight of our world, our histories, and ourselves, providing a framework to organise and interpret reality. Martha Nussbaum, in *Poetic Justice*, asserts that literature and narratives cultivate empathy and moral imagination, thereby fostering a more profound sense of connection and responsibility towards others. One of the key findings of this paper is how story, history, and narrative represent trauma, allowing us to understand and incorporate how horrific events occur in everyday life distinctly. Roy employs non-linear storytelling to explore different timelines in the novel. The narrative seamlessly shifts from Myshkin's childhood to his adulthood, with mere chronicles of events. Myshkin narrates his own experiences, while his mother, Gayatri, reveals her side of the story through a series of letters. Stories help us foster a more profound sense of connection and responsibility toward each other; likewise, "trauma is never simply one's own, but precisely the way we are implicated in each other's trauma" (Caruth 24). The trauma of Myshkin and Gayatri is interconnected through their shared emotional vulnerability, with the struggle to reconcile with the harsh realities around them. Roy establishes herself as a post-modern writer through her distinct narrative approaches, thematic explorations, and formal innovations that align with key features of postmodernism, which is another major finding. Roy challenges the notion of a single truth and highlights the subjectivity of personal experiences, inviting readers to navigate the complex lives and unfulfilled desires of her characters. This is quite suggestive of the postmodern analysis of the concept of truth, deconstructing reality by tracing the historical development of the idea and then emphasising the cultural context in shaping our understanding of truth. According to poststructuralist philosophy of trauma, trauma is fundamentally impossible to represent, express, or articulate fully- it resists language, experience, and narrative as means of representation. We see how Myshkin learns the truth of his mother's abandonment gradually, primarily through her letters, memories, and a renewed understanding as an adult.

Trauma, substantially, does not merely record the past but captures explicitly the force of an experience that has not yet been wholly owned. The experience of trauma may never be narrated or identified; it functions like a bolt in consciousness that wounds the self. The event is absent in everyday awareness, preserved beyond the limits of understanding in a timeless, wordless state, and continues to affect the psyche. Roy explores the complex relationship between trauma and self-reclamation through the characters' journeys. This paper scrutinises how the pursuit of identity can facilitate overcoming traumatic experiences and lead to new insights. The narrative explores multilayered and integrated forms of trauma, foregrounding the literary depiction of deeply disruptive experiences and psychological suffering. The characters navigate their past while seeking autonomy and meaning, transcending genre boundaries and narrative authority in their efforts to overcome trauma. Dominick LaCapra (1939) also notes that the key to surviving trauma is not surrendering to endless repetition but reconnecting knowledge and feelings so that survivors can re-engage with the present and look towards the future. Thus, throughout the novel, we see how Trauma studies intersect with postcolonial theory in exploring how the legacies of colonial violence shape individual and collective psyches, as well as the cultural memories and identities of postcolonial periods. In essence, *All the Lives We Never Lived* demonstrates how postcolonial works address issues of community, cultural identity, and nationhood, intertwined with relationships, emotions, histories, and memories.

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