

Widowhood, Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Psychological Aspects in Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth*

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Abstract

The correlation between literature and trauma has become increasingly evident. As a multidisciplinary area of study, this field integrates various domains, such as education, anthropology, literature, philosophy, history, psychology, and sociology. Trauma operates on both individual and collective levels and is pervasive in the human psyche. When discussing trauma or a traumatic experience, it is essential to consider the role of memory, specifically the processes of remembering and forgetting past events. This paper studies the traumatic past, liminal space, and unhappy memories such as trauma, guilt, dislocation, loss, death, and longing. The lengthy discussion of trauma opens a new area for research into Anuradha Roy's novel *The Folded Earth*, where a widow, Maya, suffers from trauma accompanying her husband's sudden demise and shows how she deals with that trauma. This paper will examine the workings of memory and how it affected and shaped the life of the characters who suffered.

Keywords: Trauma; Memory; Remembering; Forgetting; Widowhood; Grief

The word 'trauma' seems ubiquitous as it is used every day and often refers to any event ranging from the casual to the catastrophic that usher inscrutable pain and suffering. There is much bewilderment in the origin of the word 'trauma.' It is derived from the Greek word of the same name, meaning 'wound.' Michelle Balaev states that trauma is "a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society" (Balaev 150). Presently, trauma is referred to as both physical and mental wounds as an outcome of an incident which leaves a deep scar on one's life.

Literature plays a crucial role as it illustrates the various forms of trauma. In literature, trauma is primarily psychological. It is related to an emotional pain that results from a traumatic experience drawn from war, harassment, physical, psychological, or sexual abuse, bullying, domestic violence, natural disasters, sudden loss of a loved one, and particularly childhood experiences. The study of trauma is still controversial, but many writers have defined it understandably. Christa Schonfelder, in her book *Wounds and Words*, says, "Originally situated in the domain of medicine and then psychology, the study of trauma has, over the last few decades, become relevant in literary and cultural studies. Indeed, as trauma

has become a prominent topos in life writing and fiction, trauma studies have emerged as a new field within the humanities” (Schonfelder 28). Indeed, after working for decades, the scholars who pioneered the interdisciplinary area of trauma studies and literature undertook a comprehensive analysis of the subject.

‘Trauma’ has now paved its way into the broader fields of other subjects and their studies like psychology, genetics, neurosciences, comparative literature, cultural studies etc. The representation of trauma is not just drawn from wartime experiences such as world wars, the 9/11 attacks, the cold war, etc. Still, it is present outside the war fields or within four walls of the home within the domestic setting and with or without any external factor affecting it. This present research is conducted to bring in front the trauma of an individual, where the unheard is heard, the unvoiced is voiced, and the silence maintained by a suppressed is broken.

Trauma studies initially emerged around the 1990s. Based on Freudian theory. The study of trauma flowered as it acknowledged Freud’s intent to provide a systematic study where the unconscious could be expressed. After a considerable study on traumatic experiences and their relevance to memory, Freud collaborated with Josef Breuer and published his ideas in *Studies on Hysteria*. In this critical work, they state that the actual encounter with a traumatic experience is not so traumatising, but its remembrance is. Freud takes his theory forward and describes ‘trauma’ in his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as the defence mechanism of the ego, also the genesis and upshot of trauma on one’s psyche. Freud describes trauma as a violent occurrence that resurfaces in fragments in the unconscious, even if the person who experiences it is not consciously aware of it. He says that traumatic events fabricate disputes in the ego, which results in a “split off” from the ego and are repressed for some time; however, later return often in flashbacks. As a result, those conflicts create traumatic neurosis, “a consequence of an extensive branch being made in the protective shield against stimuli” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 35).

Research carried out in the interdisciplinary field of trauma and literature in the contemporary era automatically blends any literary creation with psychoanalysis, or it is often expressed from a psychoanalytic perspective. Trauma theory in literary criticism garnered special recognition in 1996 following the release of Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Cathy Caruth’s work is highly influential and contributed vehemently to trauma studies. Her work is considered the stepping stone towards trauma studies gaining popularity. Now, ‘trauma theory’ is one of the significant theoretical discourses in contemporary theory and criticism. Cathy Caruth, in the ‘Introduction’ to her book *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative and History*, explains that trauma “is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that it is very unassimilated nature- the way it was precisely not known in the first instance - returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 4). Presently, ‘Trauma Studies’ comprises a vast discipline that keeps whole troops of theorists, research scholars, philosophers, and historians busy.

The study of trauma, formerly restricted to medicine and psychology, has recently gained importance in literary and cultural studies. Trauma studies is a brand-new humanities discipline as trauma has become a prominent topos in fiction and life writing. To answer the question of whether fictional texts can portray or can-do justice to the traumatic experience is well justified by Geoffrey Hartman, who grants that “[l]iterary verbalisation, however, remains a basis for making the wound perceivable and the silence audible” (“Trauma” 259)

The present era is an age of trauma. The prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has led to a heightened awareness of this condition among the general population, thereby positioning trauma as a pertinent public health concern. According to J. Roger Kurtz, "If trauma has become a conceptual touchstone in the culture at large, this is also true in literary studies" (Kurtz 1). Roger raises fundamental inquiries regarding the contemporary emphasis on trauma, the correlation between trauma and literature, and its implementation in literary works. Roger answered that "These wounds, like words, require interpretation. What trauma means in the lives of individuals and communities, and how to promote the healing of this type of wound, are the principal concerns of the capacious field of trauma studies" (Kurtz 2). Literature serves as an appropriate medium for representing suffering and the resulting trauma, allowing for the interpretation of pain and anguish.

The article "The Significant Role of Trauma in Literature and Psychoanalysis" by Negin Heidarizadeh discusses that "considerably, literature has influenced the lives of human beings. It has an empowered language to display the inner world of man. There is a space for memories, introspection, retrospection, foreshadowing, flashback, and awful remembrances that are coloured by pain, wound, and trauma." Heidarizadeh's work also addresses the present-day circumstances and the current situation in the global context, highlighting these aspects "now is the time of producing the plot of anxiety in the modern world" (The Significant 788).

Memory is a storehouse of past reminiscences, experiences, and events. It is not easy to imagine that we cannot free ourselves from these clutches of memory. It is interesting to observe here that memory has many ramifications and types. Certain varieties of memory exist, such as propositional, habit, declarative, episodic, or recollective memory. Memory studies is a discipline that is volatile, recent, and picking up the pace. The definition of memory varies massively from one person to another. Since memory is an abstract term with multiple meanings and is democratic too. For example, historians look at the study of memory differently; psychologists look from another perspective; philosophers have different lenses, and students of literature and writers look at memories differently. The very core of Memory studies is comprised of the following neurological process: Remembering, Forgetting, and Recollecting.

Psychology and sociology lie around the evolution of memory studies. The focus of memory studies is the study of historical, cultural, social, and group memory in modern times. However, the thrust of memory studies is based on individual psychological phenomena. It paved through individual memory to social memory and later collective memory. Memory has subtypes 'individual memory,' 'social memory,' group memory, historical memory, collective memory, etc. Memories can be perceived through the lens of an individual or group. Collective memories of an individual are created by fusing their past experiences. Collective memories are created based on shared beliefs, ideals, and the current situation the group is in. The capacity to recall every experience throughout one's life, starting from childhood, is a significant component of one's ability to define their identity. By synchronising the neurons involved in the actual event, memory is the reconstruction of previous experiences. It would be more accurate to compare the action of memory encoding in the human brain to a collage or jigsaw puzzle.

What is the correlation between traumatic experiences and memory retention? When examining the topic of trauma or a traumatic history, it is imperative to acknowledge the persistence of memories and the complexities involved in the processes of recollection and

suppression. The discipline of trauma theory was established through the scholarly contributions of critics such as Geoffrey Hartman, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dori Laub, among others. Trauma can be comprehended through various disciplines, such as psychology, literature, history, films, fine art, and confessional TV shows.

Talking about individual traumatic experiences and collective traumatic experiences are very different things. When we talk about collective trauma, it mirrors the history, war, genocide, and something which happened to people in masses. Their narratives came together to form a collective description of the past. While talking about personal trauma, we talk about sexual assault, childhood trauma, rape, accidents, death, loss, domestic violence, gender abuse, etc., because the individual trauma narrative deals with the personal traumatic past which shatters or changes the future.

The internationally acclaimed author of five novels, Anuradha Roy, is an Indian writer who has been writing since childhood. Her writings include, *The Earthspinner*, *Sleeping on Jupiter*, *An Atlas of Impossible Longing*, *All the Lives We Never Lived*, and *The Folded Earth*. She is a budding writer in Indian English Literature, and her fiction deserves a critical appraisal, more so as one who is credited for rewriting history from a feminist perspective. Themes in Roy's work include respect, love, attention, loneliness, freedom, comfort, abandonment, individuality, childhood trauma, traumatic past, identity exploration, longing, family ties, parent incompatibility, retaliation, etc. Her writings also touch on social issues like racism, inequality, male dominance, hypocrisy, molestation, cruelty, and child abuse.

The notion of widowhood has existed since the inception of human civilization, particularly within the Indian cultural framework. Rabindra Nath Tagore adeptly portrayed his characters, particularly the female ones, in his short stories during a time when women were grappling with issues of identity and societal positioning. In Western literature, the characterization of women was established. Tagore's portrayal of the psyche and sentiments of women in his literary works was unparalleled among his contemporaries. Analogously, a comparable phenomenon is observable in the literary works of Anuradha Roy, who meticulously fashions her female characters akin to the way Potter fashions their pottery. Like Binodini in Tagore's "Chokher Bali," the character Maya in Roy's *The Folded Earth* bears several resemblances. As a widow, she does not repress her physical, mental, and sexual desires. Similarly, she desires to lead a mundane existence by relinquishing her previous life and coming to terms with the demise of Michael.

"Examining personal objects, often everyday utilitarian things or objects with emotional value attached to them, can precipitate memories of home, loved ones, and the past," writes Angel Maria Varghese in her article "Trauma and Memory through Erasure or Preservation of Objects and Places." Individual trauma and memory are as crucial as collective trauma and memory. Both individuals and collective narratives are essential for the formation of history, for representing a particular class, a particular race, or a particular tribe. Maya, having PTSD, represents all those widows out there who suppress their voices to save the family's honour.

N. Arularasi and S. Kumaran, in their article "Portrayal of Women in Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth*," start by discussing how women characters are seen mainly from the stereotypical quality. However, Anuradha Roy, in her novel *The Folded Earth*, talks about a widow, Maya, and her struggles to break down the submissive stereotyped character and how patriarchy imposes all this on her. According to them, "Women characters portrayed in this

novel depict the changing role of women in Indian post-colonial literature” (Portrayal 29). Further, they talk about how a woman suffers in the system of patriarchy, racism and class discrimination, and their concern was on the “depiction of women and their physical and psychological suppression in the patriarchal society” (Portrayal 30).

In “Reflection of Nostalgia from Nuance in Anuradha Roy’s *The Folded Earth*,” Sanjay Haribhau Zagade argues about nostalgia, patriarchy, culture, identity, and religion like the religious identity of women in India, the suffering of women due to nostalgia and says that “The novel encompasses the layers of nostalgia from nuance through the exploration of the women sufferings in the male-dominated culture” (Reflection 678).

The Folded Earth is being used for the current research out of all Roy’s contributions as it portrays how protagonist Maya suffers from the trauma of her husband’s death, also how she tries to overcome the grief and survival of a widow from the concept of ‘New Women.’ On the surface, it seems as though the book is about social issues, corrupt politics, male dominance, betrayal, racism, exploitation, helpless women, etc. However, looking beyond the curtain, one will discover underlying overtones of psychological issues such as loneliness, isolation, reclusiveness, and an undiscovered yearning for dissociation. The presiding research deals with the personal memories of a widow Maya, who represents all the widows still struggling to make a space in society through her widowhood struggles and survival representatives. Maya gives voice to those voiceless widows who suffer in silence.

The author quotes a young aged widow Maya, who is traumatised by the untimely death of her beloved husband. She gives up her kind parents and a luxurious, comfortable living for her love. She left aside all her worldly wants as she engaged in a love affair. Maya could not figure out whether her spouse loved her as much as she loved him. Her marriage did not last long. Getting a random call and hearing about your loved one’s death is a trauma. Maya was expecting a call from Michael, but news of his demise left Maya shocked and what she did after that was the cause of that news. She was not in her senses and left home to wander the streets hopelessly. This fact was not so easily acceptable that the person for whom you left everything is no more with you.

Even though she was only twenty-four, the death of her spouse ceased her existence. This paper makes it quite evident how much a widow would endure overall, with the burden of painful memories leading primarily to sadness, anxiety, and suicidal tendencies. The concerned person must take a few steps to overcome their traumatic experiences. Maya seeks refuge in Ranikhet after the tragic death of her husband, Michael. This helps ease the agony his loss has inflicted on her, but Maya’s encounter with Veer, the nephew of Diwan Sahib, causes these wounds to reopen. A sobering realisation of the traumatic past is crucial since Maya is trying to forget her traumatic past by finding a refugee in a small town. She tries to erase her past, but the guilt of her past mistakes and the death of her husband makes the situation and her survival traumatic.

The sudden demise of her husband makes her survival difficult as she shows the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). She refuses to open Michael’s bag as said by Thompson Andrea in a review “Peaks” that “Overcome with grief, she stows away his backpack, recovered from the accident scene, and refuses to inspect its contents. She cannot bear to know the details surrounding his death.” Maya indulges herself in forgetting more than remembering. She tries to forget her past, but the more she pushes it back, the

more she remembers. As remembering and forgetting are connected activities, Maya tries to forget her past by recognising the faults in her relationship.

The depiction of trauma in Maya's life is seen through her loneliness, sense of freedom and guilt. Since childhood, she was burdened by her father to support him with his business, and her dreams and desires were suppressed. Michael, a christening, belongs to a Western culture where women are given freedom and their dreams are valued. Somewhere Maya had the exact expectations that marrying Michele would set her free; it would give her freedom as an Indian, or the patriarchal society never let her set free. Nevertheless, life had other plans, and within a few months of their marriage, Michael died on a mountain expedition, leaving Maya devastated. She left everyone for Michael, her family, and her friends. Maya expresses her feelings earlier in the novel by saying, "I was alone. I had no contact with friends: I had lost them over the years of being wrapped up in Michael. I had, in fact, no family, although my parents did live in the same city" (Roy 11)

With the firm belief that this study will contribute to the field of trauma studies, this study of trauma, its representation in literature, and its relevance to contemporary times serve as the focus of this research. Writings of contemporary writers are essential from the post-colonial study perspective, but it showcases the history and its formation with contemporary times. Anuradha Roy, through her character Maya very delicately presented the widows' sufferings, trauma, and mourning in India. Maya suffered a combination of emotions in the form of devastation, hopelessness, powerlessness, despair, and mainly existential fear. While remembering her memories, she feels existential fear because her husband, Michael, is no longer. Maya left her family and everything to live with Michael. Since Maya had no one who could look after her, she was shattered and hopeless after her husband's sudden demise and remembered both Traumatic and Healing Memories from her past because memories were all that had left of him. She was in mid of something where she could not even figure out what to do and where to go. The field of trauma studies contributes a lot to understanding human tendencies. Also, it deals with the proper understanding of humans' mental states while shedding some light on the underlying compulsive behaviours, psychological barriers, and probable causes. Authors like Anuradha Roy bring forward the dynamics of human life and the changing nature of civilisation. Their works contribute to putting forward the dynamic nature of human beings. Identification of trauma, its causes and its aftereffects are something which makes the writings more real. Readers can connect more because each of us must go through trauma at least once in our lifetime. The study of trauma contributes to educating people about how a simple catastrophic event in someone's life can affect them mentally and lead to severe disorders. Prolonging quality and untreated trauma can lead to severe mental disorders.

The plot is adaptable to anyone's life and can be based on a real-world environment. Individuals in contemporary society are believed to have a fundamental purpose of experiencing and expressing affection. Individuals also aspire for commitment to realise their potential; however, it is undeniable that partnerships are seldom perfect. Even true love cannot perfectly match two individuals. People have various interests, ambitions, and passions; some choose to remain in their familiar surroundings, while others yearn for exploration and new experiences. Being able to love someone erratic and unsure of themselves is not impossible, but it can be not easy. Respect allows us to overcome challenges constantly. Because death intervenes in every one of our relationships, love and commitment cannot endure. The inevitability of mortality and uncertainty in life and relationships necessitate preparedness as a crucial aspect of human existence. Individuals

exhibit acceptance and appreciation towards each other's imperfections within romantic relationships. Love entails acknowledging and embracing the unique qualities of others while also acknowledging the potential for eventual separation. On the surface, it seems as though the book is about social issues, corrupt politics, toxic masculinity, betrayal, prejudice, exploitation, hapless women, etc. However, if someone tries to peek behind the curtain, they will discover dark psychological undercurrents, such as loneliness, solitude, and a secret longing for dissociation.

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