

## Representation of Body as Victimized and Triumphant in Anupama Chandrasekhar's *When the Crows Visit*

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### Abstract

Theatre is a medium not only for entertainment but also for shedding light on core aspects of society, connecting the audience directly with those experiences so they can feel them. This paper aims to understand how the violation of the body generates identity through a critical reading of Anupama Chandrasekhar's *When the Crows Visit* (2019). Anupama Chandrasekhar is one of the contemporary playwrights whose plays showcase the fragility of women's bodies in India. Her play, *When the Crows Visit*, exposes the pervasive culture of gendered violence in India. Identity is not a fixed entity but an evolving, ceaseless journey. Hema herself was violated by her late husband, and her son's atrocious behavior towards women caused her to remember those painful memories. Through a close textual and thematic analysis of the play, this paper attempts to investigate how an oppressed woman, who once failed to protect herself, attempts to oppose and becomes the safeguard of another body from being tortured and damaged. This paper examines how a wounded body embraces suffering while simultaneously trying to shield another body from it.

**Keywords:** Gendered violence, atrocious behavior, fragility of body, oppressed, sense of identity.

### Introduction

Literature is often regarded as a mirror of society, reflecting the various elements that compose it. Theatre not only showcases societal norms but also connects with the audience through its nuanced performances. While Indian literature excels across various genres, theatre continues to be overlooked and underappreciated. As one of the vital forms of performative arts, theatre remains marginalized and unrecognized. The participation of women in theatre is notably lower than that of men, as societal perceptions often devalue women's contributions to this art form compared to those of others. Aston highlighted that playwright Honor Moore's investigation revealed a key reason for the shortage of female practitioners: men have historically obstructed women from assuming roles across genres (Aston, 1995). In the post-independence era, Indian theatre experienced a resurgence, marked by the emergence of playwrights such as Asif Currimbhoy and Pratap Sharma. However, there remains a notable absence of women playwrights in the canon. In the 1990s, India witnessed the rise of female playwrights whose works illuminate the spectrum of women's experiences, from the domestic sphere to broader social contexts, offering fresh perspectives. These plays provide a vivid portrayal of how women are treated within Indian households.

In line with this representation of women, Anupama Chandrasekhar emerges as a contemporary playwright whose plays address gendered issues. Her plays reflect the original

voice of the women trapped in the web of this pervasive patriarchal society. She shows the reality of a woman, often shattered by a harsh, merciless society. Her plays, such as *Free Outing* (2008) and *When the Crows Visit* (2019), deal with the atrocities committed against women by a dominant patriarchal society and how they become reawakened. Anupama Chandrasekhar's play *When the Crows Visit* (2019) tells the story of a family tangled in the mesh of patriarchal oppression, traumatic history, and fractured present. The play explores trauma, guilt, oppression, and torture within the intimate space of a family home. The play centers on Hema, a middle-aged woman who has transformed from a silenced victim into a defiant protector determined to shield another victim. There have not yet been any critical works done on Anupama Chandrasekhar's *When the Crows Visit* (2019). While Anupama Chandrasekhar's other plays have been studied, this work remains comparatively underexplored.

This paper seeks to address the gap by examining how Hema becomes a revolutionary figure while suffocating herself within the household boundaries. The paper intends to argue how a body can be represented paradoxically as both vulnerable and victorious. The paper aims to locate how a body once subdued has prevailed and become a protector of another body. The paper has integrated Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma to understand Hema's suffering. This paper has included Judith Herman's theory and Carol Gilligan's theory of care to analyze how Hema has not only tried to recover from her trauma but also helps others from sharing the same trauma. Through close textual analysis, this paper will foreground the journey from an unheard voice to a rebellious voice. This paper will help explain how an exhausted and dispirited body can also serve as a shelter for another body.

### **The Oppressed Body: Recalling and Repetition of the Past**

Oppression is not innate, but it is produced through the power dynamics that render women vulnerable to violence. No one is born as a persecuted individual; rather, circumstances shape one into that role. In a patriarchal society, women are often oppressed, seen as inferior and powerless in comparison to men. When a person suffers deep wounds, the impact lingers far longer than one might expect, resulting in a paralysis that hinders their ability to return to normalcy. A woman who is not only brutally ripped out of skin but also mentally drained, such experiences leave lasting scars that are nearly impossible to heal. Trauma manifests as that unsettling, unspoken experience that vividly recounts a painful past, as stated by Caruth, "trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response often appears in a delayed and uncontrolled manner, leading to repetitive hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth 11). This involuntary recollection of the past is distressing and painful, as it hardly resembles a fond memory. Hema's harrowing past of domestic violence is not narrated in detail, but through the fragmented recalling of the past. After the death of her husband, the moments that she had lived with him are not fond memories; they become a site of terror. Her past recollects painful experiences from which she desperately seeks escape, yet ultimately cannot find a way out. Hema's helplessness to trounce her trauma is reflected in the conversation:

"Jaya: They do not want to be forgotten.

Hema: We have not. No matter how hard we try" (Chandrasekhar)

This conversation underscores the profound pain and suffering that Hema has endured over the years. The trauma inflicted by her husband lingers, making it nearly impossible for her to forget.

Trauma often returns as a belated, fragmented reaction that does not occur at the point. One is so anguished in real life that no imagination can cause her any pain. Hema's broken self is reflected when she expresses her desire to play a game with Akshay. This remark is visible in the conversation between Hema and Akshay:

“HEMA. I do not want Scrabble or cards. Put that bloody game back

AKSHAY. Ma, it is not a game for women –

HEMA. I have lived with your father. I can play *Urban goddamn Killing Fields*”.  
(Chandrasekhar)

The scene demonstrates Hema's completely emotionless nature, as she does not feel her lived reality, which is so terrific that the stimulated violence of the video game fails to evoke horror in her.

Trauma manifests in repetitive ways; it shows up in recurring actions. Hema experiences both physical and mental torment at the hands of her husband, which is now reflected in her son's behavior. His actions seem to mirror her husband's, creating an unsettling parallel she never wished for. She feels as if it is not her son who is acting, but her husband who is somehow performing again. Her frustration is reflected in her painful mourns.

“I sent you to a boarding school so you would be away from him and safe. I came back to the devil so you could have a good life. I let him violate me every night. I bore the brunt of his temper so you could be a man worthy of everyone's respect. I wanted you to be better than your father. I wanted you to be a good man”.  
(Chandrasekhar, 2019)

This reflects Hema's shattered, fragile self as she tries to save her son from becoming like her husband. The dialogue not only shows Hema's vulnerability but also reveals her fear of losing her son. Thus, the play portrays trauma not merely as the recall of the past, but as a recurring force that shapes a person's life.

### **The Conquering Body: A Voice of Resistance**

Being conquered does not mean overpowering someone; rather, it implies the internal realization and work required to become strong. A woman becomes resilient not only by acting but also by negotiating and working through all the trauma she endures. Hema's dealing with her trauma can be analyzed through Judith Herman's theory of trauma. Judith Herman, in her seminal book, *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), has shown how trauma can be recovered through some stages. She prescribed three steps to recover from one's trauma- first, emotional safety, then remembering and mourning, and lastly, reconnecting. Herman (1997) has argued that once the victim can feel emotionally secure and remember the past without feeling afraid, that person can achieve victory over her trauma. She has argued that it is the victim's sense of belonging to society that connects her to other victims: “She has mourned the old self that the trauma destroyed; now she must develop a new self” (Herman 215). The new self is always rooted in reconnecting with self and others. Hema, unlike Jaya, is not a weak, fragile woman. Her mother-in-law, Jaya, being a victim of domestic violence, has kept the pain to herself. Hema shares the same fate as hers. However, Hema differs from Jaya. She has learned to negotiate the pain and suffering of her past. She has embraced these scars as parts of her life, not as a sad reality, but as something to make her stronger. She does not try to escape from her battered, traumatic past, but she has evolved through her trauma. So, when her own son committed such an obnoxious crime and did not feel anything, she could not

control her anger. She sees herself in the victim's place, which leads her to resent him for not even knowing the name of the victim he has made. She feels the victim's pain, as she herself has gone through the same journey. She reconnects with her because that incident reminds her of her past. In the words of Chandrasekhar,

“Hema: Her name was Manisha.

AKSHAY. I do not know why! It is the truth. I felt... angry. Then I lost my head. I only wanted to hassle her a bit. It got out of hand”. (Chandrasekhar)

Hema feels agitated at her son's behavior. Even after taking the best care of him, he ends up a failure at protecting a woman. Her son is not even able to remember the name of the woman whom he has made a victim. Hema's confrontation with her son portrays how strong Hema should be not to defend her son for this atrocious behavior. She performs the humane role of becoming a shelter for another woman.

Hema has herself carried through all the past traumatic experiences alone. However, the moment it was happening again before her eyes, she could not resist herself. She does not want another woman to become a victim or be battered the same as her. Her resistance can be analyzed through Carol Gilligan's theory of moral development. Caril Gilligan, in her book *In a Different Voice* (1993), has used the term 'ethics of care' to explore the moral development of women. She has stated that women's moral understanding is not about justice but is more grounded in relationships. A life crisis is not the cause of the woman's downfall; rather, it becomes a turning point for her (Gillman 109). She has argued that a woman's sense of care is rooted not only in herself, but in others. Hema's son has already killed someone, but she can see another victim waiting for her downfall before her eyes. Akshay tries to get close to Ragini, not because he cares for her, but because he wants to dominate and exercise his power over her. Hema was silent in her life, but she raised her voice out of empathy and care for another woman. Hema fails herself to save herself from being violated, but this time she does not want to fail. She feels the pressure of responsibility and a sense of justice to serve Ragini. Having gone through the lone battle herself, she does not want the same journey for Ragini. Jaya wants to stop Hema from calling out for help, but this time Hema does not respond. She speaks her own language, and that is screaming for help to save her from Akshay's monstrous nature. She knows if she does not react, there will be another victim by her family. So, in the last scene, when Akshay was trying to rip Ragini apart in the presence of the family and Gopi, Jaya tried to drown out the noise of the violation, but Hema stood against it.

“HEMA. Gopi na! Wait! Do not go! We are not alright. We are locked in.

JAYA. No, Hema!

HEMA. The woman... help her! It is my son...” (Chandrasekhar)

This scene conveys the duality of two women in response to a single ignoble incident. Both Jaya and Hema are victims of patriarchal domestic violence, but they stand apart from each other. Where Jaya remains unresponsive as she has been, there Hema becomes responsive. Hema collects her thoughts about the thorned past; she becomes courageous and bold-faced to save a life from harm and death. In the end, Hema not only breaks free from the shackles of victimhood but also conquers her terror, becoming a new self. She creates her own identity not as a victim, but as a symbol to end the horror of violation. She creates her own voice, which is not only heard but heard at the fullest.

## Conclusion

The play concludes with Hema crying out for help, not for herself but for another woman. She has lived her life in a devastating marriage due to her husband's violence. Both she and her mother-in-law have been oppressed, which has left them voiceless. They forget how to voice against this doleful subjugation. Hema's husband had passed away, but left a kind of legacy in their son. Her son's actions regenerate the pain that she has suppressed for so long. Hema's dialogue conveys how devastated and failed she feels, unable to raise her son as she wants to. Her son resembles her husband in the course of treating women. However, this time, she does not let herself lose. Her response to her son's vicious crime does not indicate the obliteration of her trauma; it marks a positive change in how trauma is negotiated and transformed. By refusing to let her past control her present, she demonstrates that the present is unrelated to the past and can be changed. Both Hema and Jaya are victims, but they respond differently to Akshay's behavior towards Ragini. While Jaya chooses to remain silent, Hema finds the strength to protect Ragini. Even though it is her own son. Hema did not hesitate to seek help for Ragini. Hema's strength lies not in her escapism but in her resilient nature. Her victory over her traumatic silence inscribes her tremendous transformative journey. In her final scream, Hema emerges not merely as a survivor but as an agent of justice. Even though the patriarchal society represses women, they can reawaken as a strong, defiant force to question the societal norm. This study suggests that healing is not found in forgetting the past, but in working through it to break the cycle of torment. The paper will help establish a paradoxical understanding of the body as both violated and inspiring, and the transition from being a meek, quiet person to a woman who can raise her voice against her own son, a criminal.

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