

Challenges In Woman Empowerment: A Study On Contemporary Literature Through The Lens Of Cognition And Trauma

Shanantha T

PhD Scholar, Department of English
PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore

Dr. M. Samundeeswari

Associate Professor, Department of English
PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore

Abstract

This article focuses on challenges in empowering women in terms of cognition and trauma impacts in Lahiri's *Whereabouts* and Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter*. Protagonists of both the works are female and they represent the impacts of trauma. Lahiri in *Whereabouts* introduces her unnamed protagonist with her profession of instructor which is not the ambition of her life. Her connection to the ambience revolves with a sense of solitude throughout the novel. This solitude as an impact of trauma is compared to the protagonist of Anuradha Roy. Nomi is the protagonist in *Sleeping on Jupiter*. She travels back to India in search of a childhood friend and grows nostalgic with the sense of violence and sexual abuse which is traced to be the impacts of trauma. Trauma studies line the trauma impacts in literature and society by analyzing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance. Trauma studies was first developed in the 1990s and relied on Freudian theory to develop a model of trauma. This model of trauma indicates that suffering is unrepresentable. As per the new model of Pluralistic Trauma Theory, the processes of memory remain central to the depiction of trauma's impact. Maintaining a concept of memory as a fixed process wherein all life experiences are stored exactly and literally lends itself to the traditional trauma model since the traumatic experience remains frozen in a timeless, haunting state.

Key words: Trauma, solitude, violence, memory, Cognition, Women Empowerment

Introduction:

Womanhood in rural parts of a nation encounter the traumatic impacts on a daily basis which is usually unnoticed. The similar impacts can be traced among the urban womanhood also. For instance Lahiri's *Whereabouts* establishes the unnamed protagonist as an instructor

and the narrative style is the first person point of view. The description runs in the reader's perception and one can witness the view of the narrator keeps shifting with the sense of solitude. It is hard for her to get connected to society. She feels relieved when left alone and ends up with loneliness at the same time. Her attraction towards a married man puts her more into solitude when she realizes only the emptiness within and nothing to do with romantic attraction. The narration in the novel is by the protagonist in the first person point of view and thus she becomes the narrator. The narrator, in retrospection regarding her relationship with parents, realizes that her father played an intense role in her complications than mother. Averseness is identified with the narrator contrary to the dreadfulness towards the death of her mother. She visits her father's grave and figures out that her emptiness and solitude is instilled from her father which in turn led to the tendency of trust issues. The novel concludes where the narrator tries to balance the desire of solitude with the desire of relationships and leaves the city for a year to take up academic fellowships.

The novel *Sleeping on Jupiter* begins with the protagonist Nomi recounting her childhood past. Her family was killed by the soldiers in a conflict. Nomi survived the conflict and fled away. The narration keeps shifting in terms of flashback and present. Nomi is traveling to a village called Jarmuli in India. She meets three other women Vidya, Latika and Gowri in the train who are traveling to the same place and explains that Jarmuli is her origin and she lives in Oslo. Nomi is heading to Jarmuli to research for a documentary film company. The novel continues with a series of flashback where Nomi undergone violence and sexual abuse. She also meets few people in Jarmuli and grows nostalgic with the sense of violence. The novel ends with the roaming of Nomi in search of Piku, her childhood friend. Both the protagonists fit into the new model of Pluralistic trauma theory where the bitterness in the memory influences with the life experiences and impacts the psyche of the person in terms of solitude and emptiness (*Trauma Studies – Literary Theory and Criticism*, n.d.). Few incidents revolving around the protagonists are compared to highlight the impacts of trauma and the similarities along with their cognitive perception towards the society. Solitariness makes the individuals find their social world threatening, hold negative social expectations, and remember more negative social events than normal people. These cognitions increase the behavioral confirmation processes and produce negative social interactions and thus they lack personal control or social value (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2009). The below discussion covers the victimized journey and solitariness of the protagonists

Trauma as a challenge in Empowerment

The novel *Sleeping on Jupiter* by Anuradha Roy has ample references to traumatic experiences of the protagonist Nomi. The novel tracks the journey of the protagonist through the lens of trauma. On the whole, it can be viewed as a victimized journey. There are certain incidents in the novel which makes this traumatic journey clearer. The lines 'Don't you wish it could happen? Your mind wiped clean like a hard drive? Start again without memories?' (Roy, 2016, p.112) shows the way in which the character tries to get rid of the bitter past. It is vivid that she wishes to forget all terrible incidents that took place right from her childhood which affected her in all possible ways. Similarly, the author portrays the mindset of Nomi through the following line. 'Don't you feel like disappearing from your life sometimes?' (Roy, 2016, p. 36). This clearly states the trauma in her mind which she carries for a very

long period of time. The lack of belongingness can also be understood in such lines through which the nature of the character was expressed by the author. 'I looked at myself in the mirror and said in a whisper, 'Chuni, Chuni, I'm wearing your rings. I will never take them off.' (Roy, 2016, p.14) The author makes a mention of this incident in one of the early chapters of the novel. Once, when she was young, Nomi's family members were killed. During such tough times, a woman took care of Nomi. Nomi sincerely believes that it was her earrings that protected her from all kinds of dangers she overcame throughout the novel. These lines highlight the connection she has with the earring and her assurance that she would never take away those earrings. Even after becoming an adult who travels a lot, Nomi did not give up her opinion upon the ring and she wishes to safeguard it throughout her life.

All such incidents portray the difficulties and trauma Nomi had faced. In addition to it, her response towards those incidents was also very clear. Therefore, it is vivid that Nomi had long-lasting impact of trauma which is portrayed by the author in the novel. Apart from this trauma, there was also a sense of solitude in the character sketch of Nomi which remains similar to the characteristic trait of the protagonist in the novel *Whereabouts*.

Cognition and Solitude in *Whereabouts*:

Jhumpa Lahiri, in her novel, *Whereabouts*, picturizes an unnamed narrator who lives a life of solitude which becomes the major reason for her cognitive impacts. The author has highlighted the solitude of her protagonist and how far it impacted throughout her life. The lines, 'Solitude: it's become my trade. As it requires a certain discipline, it's a condition I try to perfect. And yet it plagues me, it weighs on me in spite of my knowing it so well.' (Lahiri, 2018, p.154) shows how far she tried to get used to the existing conditions. She tries her best to handle almost every situation in the state of solitude. These lines also reflect the pressure upon the narrator mainly due to the fact that she is unable to connect with anyone around her. The following lines were also used by the narrator to reveal her mindset about the life she is leading and the efforts she had put to have belongingness under any circumstance. 'And yet, even as my life shattered in pieces, I felt as if I were finally coming up for air' (Lahiri, 2018 p.108)

The narrator throughout the novel expressed the way in which she feels alienated wherever she travels. She makes a note of the city she lives in and adds how the ambience was in general. The author also expresses her feeling of isolation through these lines. 'The city doesn't beckon or lend me a shoulder today. Maybe it knows I'm about to leave. The sun's dull disk defeats me; the dense sky is the same one that will carry me away.' (Lahiri, 2018, p.122). The author has used specific terms in order to reveal the solitude of the narrator. Such a mindset paves way to enhance the traumatic experiences of the narrator as well. As a result of the cognitive interruption, she also has bewilderment which the author has mentioned in various chapters of the novel (Cave, 2016). There are numerous incidents which show the nature of contemplation of the narrator. One such incident is when the narrator expresses,

Always waiting either to get somewhere or to come back. Or to escape. I keep packing and unpacking the small suitcase at my feet. I hold my purse in my lap, it's got some money and a book to read. Is there any place we're not moving through? Disoriented, lost, at sea, at odds, astray, adrift, bewildered, confused, uprooted, turned around. I'm related to these related terms. These words are my abode, my only foothold (Lahiri, 2018, p.140)

There are also incidents in which the author has revealed the longingness of the narrator. As the narrator was in a state of solitude and lacked belongingness, she was looking for a place which would offer some sort of relief to her. ‘I grow sad looking at all those brand-new suitcases, all of them empty, waiting for a traveler, waiting for various things to fill them, waiting for someplace to go’ (Lahiri, 2018, p.56). Such incidents are the traces of cognitive interruption through the solitariness of the protagonist in the novel *Whereabouts*.

Path to Empowerment – overcoming the traumatic and cognitive barriers

The protagonists of both the works have undergone a similar episode of trauma which fits into the model emphasizing the suffering caused by an external source that makes internal changes to the mind and irreversibly changes their identity. These changes are traced to be the cognitive influence with the evidence of how the protagonists deal with their difficulties towards the society. This effect of trauma on the sketch of characters is brought out to the light through the observation made. Both the authors portrayed the major characters as victims of trauma. The way in which the character responded to such scenarios remains the same. This abstract concept of trauma and cognitive interruptions caused by the external factors are also real hurdles that every woman comes across in daily life. The notable point is that such suffering goes unnoticed most of the time. Even in the feminist perspective the comparison can be made and clearly remains similar. Thus, the impact of trauma in the light of women’s character is obvious and it is vividly described in this article.

Conclusion

Trauma is represented as a mental suffering which is unrepresentable. Pluralistic trauma theory denoting the process of hitched memory is the central representation of trauma impacts and the gathering of life experiences connects the memory to intensify the impacts. In both the novels *Sleeping on Jupiter* and *Whereabouts*, both the protagonists carry bitter past experiences in the memory. Further the life experiences get connected to the memory and they suffer with the impacts which are evident from the terms used by the authors like victim, violence, lack of belongingness, alienation, sense of solitude, disoriented, lost etc. This in turn can also be taken as autobiographical elements of female authors. The first and foremost ideal of feminism is to promote and provide equal rights for women thereby eradicating gender inequality. The cognitive and psychological elements discussed in this article prove to be a challenge for Women Empowerment.

Works Cited

1. Cacioppo, J. T., & Hawkley, L. C. (2009). Perceived Social Isolation and Cognition. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 13(10), 447–454. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2009.06.005>
2. Cave, T. (2016). Cognitive Conversations. In T. Cave (Ed.), *Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism* (p. 0). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198749417.003.0002>
3. Lahiri, J. (2018). *Whereabouts*. Penguin Hamish Hamilton.
4. Roy, A. (2016). *Sleeping on Jupiter*. Hachette India.
5. *Trauma Studies – Literary Theory and Criticism*. (n.d.). Retrieved July 24, 2023, from <https://literariness.org/2018/12/19/trauma-studies/>