

CORRELATING TRAUMA WITH GENDER ROLES: A STUDY ON CONTEMPORARY INDIAN FICTION

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Abstract:

The impact of trauma along with the voice of an individual were silenced for a long time but at present it gets reflected in multiple ways. Literature also encompasses many such traumatic narratives in various dimensions and expresses the same to bring a change. Trauma with relevance to gender calls for a distinct attention as new perspectives can be drawn in this aspect. This paper focuses on contemporary Indian fiction which includes *When I Hit You* by Meena Kandasamy and *Em and The Big Hoom* by Jerry Pinto along with the traumatic experiences of major characters. In addition, it also deals with the significance of the gender factor and nuances of the same. Yet another important element to consider with respect to trauma is the domestic ambience. This research also brings out to light, the dysfunctional domestic conditions which paves way to trauma. There are various gender identities like caring masculinities which are gradually evolving and the role of such identities is also dealt in-depth in this analysis. Therefore, this article attempts to correlate trauma with various gender roles as a result of which the effect of trauma can be brought out in a vivid manner.

Keywords: Gender, Trauma, Contemporary, Caring masculinity, Dysfunctional domesticity

Introduction:

Trauma and its impact in a familial condition was expressed vividly by both the writers Meena Kandasamy and Jerry Pinto. Meena Kandasamy in her novel *When I Hit You*, expresses the trauma the protagonist faces after her marriage. The narrator of the story conveys to what extent she was victimized by the acts of oppression from her husband. To add more to her trauma, even her father does not address to the issue directly as that would eventually lead to divorce. Her father considers this as an embarrassment. The narrator did not get enough support from her mother as well as she tries to convince her daughter that gradually things would get better. The physical and mental trauma that the narrator undergoes as she was ill-treated by her husband is portrayed well by the author. It is due to the abuse of her husband; she could not concentrate on her career as a writer. The novel also tries to show the adverse effects a woman faces due to the oppressive nature of a male. The author reveals how far gender-oriented suppression is still possible in the society.

The author Jerry Pinto in his novel, *Em and The Big Hoom*, portrays a family which specifically focuses on Imelda, the mother of narrator. Imelda was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. The psychological trauma of Imelda brings the members of the family together as they remain supportive to her. The narrator and his sister Susan address their parents as Em and The Big Hoom though their names are Imelda and Augustine respectively. The narrator, being curious for his age, tries to talk to his mother to identify the conditions which led her to this stage in which she experiences trauma. Though the mental trauma of Imelda does not cause any dysfunctionality, it is the general ambience in the family which the author focuses in this novel. The narrator keeps saying that his father Augustine is the biggest support that the family has at present as he is the one who takes care of the children and also remains attentive towards his wife's health issues. The narrator also feels that if his father also gets affected by nervous breakdown, then he would have to take up the responsibility of supporting the family. This concern for his family is present in him from a very young age and this is portrayed well by the author.

Trauma and domesticity in *When I Hit You*:

The traumatic experiences of the narrator in terms of domestic violence and oppression are brought out well in the novel. The narrator expresses that she was beaten up by her husband and that caused a dysfunctionality in her home. She even quits her marriage at last and this was expressed by her in the following lines. "I ran away from my marriage because I was being routinely beaten . . ." (Kandasamy 3). In her married life, she did not experience any sort of freedom because he had always

made attempts to control her life. He tries to reply her mails and just made her voiceless. The narrator's husband also forced her to terminate all ways in which she could make social connections. "I find that he has answered some of my emails . . . I feel robbed of my identity" (Kandasamy 55). Even when such traumatic experiences were shared by her to her parents, they did not understand the impact upon her. As she aspires to be a writer, she fears that if such conditions exist for a longer period of time, she would definitely not be able to write anymore. "Mom and Dad, this will kill me as a writer. Mom and Dad, I will go mad. They do not get it" (Kandasamy 59).

The narrator feels that she is tired explaining her situation in her domestic ambience and instead of arguing, she remains silent. This also adds trauma in her life as she is refrained to make communication. "I do not argue any more. I go silent" (Kandasamy 60). Yet another time in the novel, the narrator expresses the factor that she was unable to communicate what exactly was she going through because no one was ready to pay attention and sort out issues for her. "I do not have anyone I can talk to about what is going on behind these closed doors" (Kandasamy 69). Throughout the novel, the narrator felt that the will to write in her is more than the existing conditions. This was expressed by her in the following lines. ". . . but the writer in me is stronger than the woman in me" (Kandasamy 205). The narrator, though comes out of her married life in the end, she had a trauma between maintaining her household chores, according to her husband's demands and writing, to not let the spark within extinguish.

Familial support during trauma:

Em and The Big Hoom by Jerry Pinto is a novel about a family which genuinely tries to cope up with the nervous breakdowns of Imelda. The family's support in handling the trauma and Augustine's efforts to make sure that the order of the family is not collapsed play a vital role in the novel. The narrator explains that everyone as a family need to address the traumatic experiences of Imelda and should not succumb to circumstances (Pinto 12). The author brings out Imelda's emotions when she says that her husband stayed faithful to her in spite of her nervous breakdown. The author, highlights the characteristic feature of Augustine through such lines in the novel. "But he said, 'No, if it's okay by you, I'll just stay faithful.' What to say to a man like that?" (Pinto 38).

The narrator expresses that this father Augustine and his mother would go for a short walk, in a nearby park when she has got any mild issues with respect to her mental health. The narrator and his sister would take care of their home in their absence and this is one of the ways in which they supported her lowest phase (Pinto 49). The author also conveys the role of Augustine in the family when the narrator explains that his father provided a constant support to them despite difficult situations in their lives. Though, they did not have enough time to think about his routine life, Augustine was always for them (Pinto 64). Thus, the family of the narrator revolves around Imelda and her bipolar disorder and how far traumatic experiences could draw in the supportive nature of the family. The narrator conveys that they could not make payments for nursing and even during the times they could, it did not go well due to lack of care and concern from the nurse. It was expressed by the narrator in the following lines. "We could not afford full-time nursing. And even when we could and did have a nurse, things still went very badly wrong" (Pinto 102). So, the family stands strong and united to help and be there for Imelda during her traumatic condition.

Evolving gender identities:

In the context of the novels *When I Hit You* by Meena Kandasamy and *Em and The Big Hoom* by Jerry Pinto, the traumatic experiences of major characters are portrayed in a vivid manner. Augustine in Pinto's novel handles dysfunctionality in family which is disguised as trauma and also absorbs the pressure well in complicated ambience. Whereas, in *When I Hit You*, the narrator undergoes trauma that arose due to her husband's acts of oppression. Though the experiences vary, the impact of the trauma in a dysfunctional domesticity remains the same. There are various gender identities that are evolving at present. One such category is Caring masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity is a well-known category among various identities which is all about the dominant position of men in society and how does the very characteristic feature affect the rest (Panades (PhD) and Drew (PhD)). Caring masculinity, a new gender identity, by definition is against hegemonic masculinity, which insists that men can also take care-giving roles and be supportive in a

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family's growth ("Caring Masculinity"). In *When I Hit You*, the narrator's husband comes under hegemonic masculinity whereas Augustine from *Em and The Big Hoom* comes under caring masculinity. The major element to consider is that hegemonic masculinity caused trauma and caring masculinity tries to sort it out. The quality of hegemonic masculinity to dominate other gender and make them subjugate to one's demands is reflected in the novel by Meena Kandasamy. It is obvious that the hegemonic tendency has the potential to initiate the trauma, specifically in domestic ambience. However, from Jerry Pinto's novel *Em and The Big Hoom*, it becomes clear that men who support their family and hold the responsibility to take care of the members have traits of caring masculinity.

Conclusion:

Therefore, it is obvious that independent women and caring men in the domesticity can create a trauma-free ambience. Though such new gender identities like caring masculinities are still evolving, it provides fresh perspectives which uphold gender equality. These evolving gender roles and identities support and make efforts to understand the struggle and trauma of both men and women. From the novels chosen for research from the contemporary Indian fiction, the trauma that exists in dysfunctional domesticity is clear. To eradicate trauma as a whole, such analysis which correlates trauma with gender studies would be beneficial as it contributes positively to the society.

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