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Trauma of shared past in Avni Doshi's *Girl in White Cotton*

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Abstract--Voicing the unvoiced thoughts of the human psyche and human demeanour finds its appropriate representation in literature through explorative narratives. Literature represents an unsettling, tenebrous side of human existence that has been tainted by trauma and pain. The term "trauma" is derived from a Greek word which means "wound" or "infiltration." Trauma becomes a metaphor for the struggles and demanding situations of late-twentieth-century life in a society captivated by suffering and victimization. Literature plays an important part in depicting human experiences, emotions, and representations of conventional trauma tales. Motherhood is the most significant and heavenly duty in a woman's life. Throughout childhood, a child is constantly exposed to his or her surroundings, from which they acquire their first lessons. As a result, a mother's relationship with her child during childhood has a significant influence on the child's future behaviour. Trauma is a psychological wound inflicting the mind, causing long-term damaging effects. A child's trauma symbolises a multitude of circumstances, including abandonment and maltreatment. It had a bitter experience in its previous incarnation, that lasts for the rest of its life. Avni Doshi's *Girl in White Cotton* explores the inner trauma of central female characters Tara and Antara, as well as mother-daughter relationships. Avni Doshi describes Antara's experiences growing up without any affection, care, or love from her mother, Tara,

who abandons her husband to follow a Baba in an ashram. Tara is unable to provide Antara with even the most basic sense of support and security that a mother can provide. The novel explores the consequences of childhood trauma as well as Antara's struggle to reconcile with the past, which haunts her relentlessly. Trauma exacerbates a person's experience of alienation and isolation, both of which are unpleasant and staggering to their life. Antara's trauma is exacerbated by Tara's loss of memory and her misfortunes, and she suffers from alienation, which was a part of her early childhood. This paper delves into the inner traumas of primary characters Tara and Antara as they attempt to reconcile the realities of the present with the torturous recollections of the past.

Keywords---trauma, postpartum depression, shared past, intergenerational trauma.

Introduction

Humans have been haunted throughout history by memories filled with horrors, fears of the passions of weakness, detestation, vengeance, and a distressing sense of irreplaceable loss. According to Cathy Caruth, "*trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (3). *Girl in White Cotton* delves into the toxic mother-daughter relationship of two opposing characters, Antara, a failing artist, and her mother Tara, who is suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Antara's childhood upbringing is depicted in the novel as being ignored or robbed of her mother's love, passion, care, and pampering. She is utterly deprived of happiness in her life because her mother Tara left her loveless unhappy marriage to live in an ashram, which she liked from a young age, in order to become a follower of a Guru.

Avni Doshi emphasizes the impact of childhood trauma, in which Antara is a victim of a painful past. Antara is an artist whose main tasks include accumulating data, information and detecting irregularities. Her mother's deteriorating health and misery allow her to embark on a journey through memories of their haunted past. Tara, Antara's mother, begins to forget everything, even ordinary events, and is unable to identify her only daughter. Tara and Antara are both burdened by the distorted memories of alienation, isolation, and abandonment that they both shared in the past. Antara embarks on a quest to find meaning in her existence, attempting to free herself from her mother's life. But on the other hand, she is forced to act as a caretaker to her mother as she starts forgetting. Antara works as an artist in Bombay, and the sudden deterioration of Tara's health forces her to take care of her mother who completely ignored her daughter's existence during her childhood.

Trauma is commonly defined as a profoundly distressing experience that has a profound influence on the self and one's perspective of external reality. It engulfs its unlucky victims and hurls them into a roaring sea of pain, helplessness, and melancholy. Antara falls into a state of loneliness, having no one to share her haunting memories of her past with. She is perplexed about how to take care of

her mother, who hasn't reciprocated her affection. Antara struggles to find meaning in herself and feels disconnected from her surroundings. Past memories hurt her like a sharp knife, destroying mind and existence. Scrupulous attention paid to the alluring memories of their past transforms slumber into a rival, and thus life becomes monotonous. Trauma jolts the mind, staggers the thoughts, and freezes the body. Antara is torn between her haunting memories of the past and feelings of hatred, love, and sympathy for her mother, who once betrayed her. Antara is engulfed in a world that no longer provides her with hope. As Sigmund Freud explicates, the state of trauma is "fixed to a particular point in their past, that they do not know how to release themselves from it, and are consequently alienated from both present and future" (284).

"Developmental trauma refers primarily to the psychologically based issues that are usually a result of inadequate nurturing and guidance through critical developmental periods during childhood" (Levine and Frederick 21). Antara suffered greatly as a child at the hands of her mother. As a result, she developed a dislike for and aversion to her mother's existence. Her attitude towards Tara's condition is revealed in the opening lines of the novel: "I Would Be Lying If I said my mother's misery has never given me pleasure" (1). Antara is helpless in her mother's situation; she never finds a way to make her mother remember things she has done in the past, no way to cast blame on her mother. Antara is irritated by the sympathy Tara elicits from others as a result of her condition. Tara, even in her insanity, tries to humiliate her daughter and draws Antara into a world of tenebrosity and pain.

During the first few years of her marriage, Tara's life was devoted to the process of waiting for her husband. Days went by with no conversation because her husband was only concerned with excelling in his studies in order to visit America. Tara's life ended in the gloom, and she began to feel alienated from her own, as her own mother refused to acknowledge her concerns and complaints, further exacerbating her distress and loneliness. As a result, she acclimated herself to white cotton in the process of remaking herself and embarked on a journey to find her own identity. The same white cotton distanced her from family, making Antara's life a prison. Antara believes that forgetting is a convenient tool for her mother, as Tara does not want to remember the things she has done in the past. Tara is able to escape the harsh realities of her life by forgetting, even though her mind is still affected by the disturbing memories of her past. Antara feels unconnected and distanced from her mother. Tara breaks her ties with her family and decides to devote her life to the ashram. She unshackles herself from the captivity of loneliness and insipidity she felt in her husband's home and culminates with Baba.

According to Cathy Caruth, for example, "Trauma is known only in the way it returns to haunt the individual, often many years after the original event" (48). Antara's life at the ashram had a profound effect on her psyche, leaving an imprint on her behaviour and her life. Kali Mata served as a solace to Antara's existence and provided her with the motherly affection she craved from her own mother. Antara had a strong emotional bond with Kali Mata, with whom she shared her room. Tara disregarded her family's advice to leave the ashram, as they considered it a place of congregation of "foreigners and whores". She defied

her family's wishes by accepting the ashram as her home and Baba as Antara's father. Antara suffered even more as a caregiver, as her mother suffocated her mind even more. Tara made an unexpected appearance in front of Antara, whom she hadn't seen in weeks. She even thought her mother had forgotten about her and wondered if she was dead. She is troubled by the fact that no one gave her permission to see her mother while Baba had access to her. Antara lived in a strange place, leading a miserable life, crying without slumber, water, or food. Even she is subjected to torture in the form of scolding from the sannyasin's in the ashram. She is coerced to live a life under constant treatment from them for the sake of their mother and Baba.

As she gets older, she finds herself engaging in obligations to distract herself from the harsh realities of her life. She helped out in the kitchen and was capable of taking care of her daily needs. She finds solace and warmth in Kali Mata's concern and care. Her mind was filled with so many questions about her own mother, but she never received any answers. Past memories remained as a deep wound in Antara's psyche. Trauma elicits a variety of responses in Antara, such as nightmares. MacCurdy suggests that "when accompanied by other factors, such as social isolation, repeated trauma, or horrific images, it can lead to delayed and uncontrollable, repetitive, intrusive phenomena such as nightmares and flashbacks" (16). Antara's identity has been shattered and is inextricably linked to the past. Antara manages her best attempt to cope with the demanding situations of her time, despite her total disregard for life. She even suffered in her bad dreams: "I woke up in the morning with blood on my pillows and scratches on my face" (103). Antara never told her mother about her longing for the fullness of her life. She was frustrated in her current life because she couldn't understand her mother's decisions, which drew Antara into a world of despair.

Antara wages a war with her surroundings that is indifferent to her. "I have grown up in a place that's always at war with itself, accustomed to its own inner turmoil" (107). She has become estranged from Dilip, her husband, who knows far too much about his mother-in-law. Dilip even employs her mother as a weapon turning against Antara. She has come to a halt in her thinking, which expresses her wishes that she hadn't confided in him, wishing as if he is a stranger to her. Dilip shares his thoughts on Antara and her mother's relationship:

Do you think she should live with us? You can't stand each other for more than a minute. It's hard,' he says, for me to understand your relationship with her sometimes. Being around her is very stressful for you. And the other way round. To be honest, I wonder if you'll make her worse or better (111-112).

Antara is in a quandary, unsure of how to care for her mother, who has previously neglected her. Avni Doshi depicts Antara's complete helplessness in caring for her mother, who never showed any love or concern for her only daughter when she craved the security that only a mother can provide. For example:

I wonder how I will love Ma when she is at the end. How will I be able to look after her when the woman I know as my mother is no longer residing in her body?

When she is no longer has a complete consciousness of who she is and who I am, will it be possible for me to care for her the way I do now, or will I be negligent, the way we are with children who are not our own, or voiceless animals, or the mute, blind and deaf, believing we will get away with it, because decency is something we enact in public, with someone to witness and rate our actions, and if there is no fear of blame, what would the point of it be? (117).

Tara tries to humiliate Antara even by commenting on her job, which alone provides her with a source of solace from the burden of harsh realities. This enrages Antara, prompting her to physically harm her mother. Nobody agrees with her, and Dilip even tells her to stop working since it troubles his mother-in-law. Tara sets fire to Antara's studio, igniting the flames of hatred in the mind of Antara. Her mother's distress heightens her fear that she will harm herself. Antara feels most secure and safe in her marital home. Tara is a burden, inflicting agony and misery to her daughter's psyche.

Tara's life was rendered meaningless when Baba discovered another golden one to take her Ma's place. It compelled her to depart from the ashram without speaking to anyone else. Antara didn't have the foresight to see that her mother didn't have any other plans where to go. Antara calls her mother's decision "completely disheartening" because "she has no idea where we would go, who would agree to take us in, and under what conditions" (127). When they left the ashram, their lives were full of disappointments. Tara made her daughter beg, and those in the club who knew her grandparents were perplexed and skeptical of their pleadings. She lives in squalor, chasing happiness with her dog, Candle. Her father came to her aid, leaving a lasting impression on her mind. Her father, to her chagrin, never invited them to join him and instead left them at their grandparents' house. Tara shut herself away in a room, pretending that the people around her didn't exist. Antara was living in the ashram without her mother, and she yearned to see her. They are, however, now always close. Her painful past memories led her to believe that she could live without her mother, as her mother's presence was a source of unhappiness. Tara's life became devoid of meaning after Baba took another woman. Tara's eyes were fixed on the ceiling as if she was speaking to it. She was even prone to falling asleep as if she hadn't slept in years. Antara discovers the source of her mother's alienation and isolation as Tara constantly struggles to contact her husband as he plans to remarry. She becomes a victim of insanity when she tries to call her husband's residence with the intent of abusing him.

Traumatic event, according to Dejonghe, is "experiencing or witnessing an event involving that of fear or physical integrity that results in feelings of fear, helplessness or horror" (Dejonghe et al. 294). When they leave the ashram, Antara's life at the boarding school takes a turn for the worse, and she is unaware of the danger that awaits her. Antara wished she could see her Ma turn around and gaze at her, but Tara vanished without looking back. Mini Mehra was her lone friend in boarding school. Antara's existence at the boarding school was perilous, painful, and evil from the start. The headmistress, Maria Teresa, called "Terror" by the students, locked Antara up in the office. Antara was tormented and severely injured in the chamber as the headmistress banged, squeezed her

cheek, and even pierced her palm with a pencil, erecting it into her hand, creating a hole.

She was estranged from the other females and tried to isolate herself from everything, eating very little food. As a consequence, she fainted and was brought to the hospital before being sent home. Everyone at her Nanny's house was living in their own universe, in distinct realities. Nobody cared about the scars on her body. "The acts of omission and inclusion we made in our memories were creative acts, through which we authored our lives" (Spiegelman 247). The doctor informs Antara that she and her mother share some version of her mother's objective reality and that she will be better off if she distances herself from Tara. He claims that memory is always rebuilt, and Tara will alternate between forgetting and recalling her history. For Antara, the deep feeling of isolation is produced by the delusions that haunt her past, and every time a bit of recollection slips through, like particles through a sieve. Antara compares a fly freely wandering and exploring the borders of the room without attempting to escape to herself as being confined within the walls of her own existence. However, she learns to live within her limits since she is linked to the comforts or goods of her life, even if she has the potential to escape from them.

According to Antara, a person's life is a summoning of liabilities that, like a gunshot, might explode at any time. The realm of existence was indecipherable for Antara as her journey to womanhood was disdained by her mother, as there was no one to unravel the mystery behind the bodily changes happening to her both intellectually and physically. She was usually very uncomfortable in her body since she sensed another female arising in her at times. Antara was taught that infancy was a period of waiting, and she waited impatiently for the chance to live. Antara observes Tara's sudden decline following Reza Pine's departure, which shocked her because she loved him more than anybody else. Antara's act of carving out the faces and objects from old photographs reflects her wish to forget the memories of her prior life. She used her art to code and decode her history, to write and rewrite it, by picking the best and leaving the rest behind.

Antara is afraid of having a kid since it will bind her more to Dilip and he will not abandon her. Antara sometimes feels that she is transposing into her mother, and she despises being married. The conversation between the psychologist and Antara about her mother's background caused her to avoid recalling the narrative of her parents' abandoning her. The therapist's inquiries troubled her and left her with no answers. As a result, the questions she couldn't answer tormented her in her nightmares. "It would be easier if I could just kill her off, in story at least – tell everyone that Ma is dead" (221). Antara's loathing for her own mother is portrayed in this sentence when everyone inquires about her. Because of her mother, she even despises the word "Pune". At the same time, she feels terrible about it and it causes her grief.

Antara's connection with Reza Pine had a strong element of vengeance and embodied her mother at the same time, as he was initially Tara's lover. As a result, being with Reza allowed Antara to achieve both goals at the same time, which was a deep subconscious yearning of hers. "Lies hold me captive" (224). Antara feels imprisoned by the falsehoods she keeps from her husband, Dilip,

about her prior secret concerning Reza Pine, the man in her drawings. Antara and Tara are both confined to their pasts as a result of her mother's awareness of Reza and his image. The world and its surrounding continues to taunt and suffocate Antara within prompting Antara to escape from the cruel clutches of fate and destiny. Tara used to taunt her own daughter, Antara, about her ugliness, comparing and discouraging her whenever she could. Antara is continuously trying to figure out why she sees her mother as her adversary. She also reflected on abandoning the world as if her mother had not been born. Because of the existence of the traumatic past, Antara can't feel happy in the present: her soul crumbles within and thus life becomes disorderly.

Antara suffers from postpartum depression following the birth of her baby. She notices the release of hormones and variations in her body, is concerned by the arrival of her child and attempts to conceal her dissatisfaction with having a child from others. She grows weary of her baby and loses interest in it. She is getting closer to insanity day by the day, and even the baby fell down because of her negligence, and she is unable to handle things. She is terrified, intimidated, apprehensive, and irritated. Antara even loses touch with reality and succumbs to hallucinations and delusions. "The difference between murder and manslaughter is intention" (255). Antara tries to destroy her mother Tara's memory by giving her sugar every day in order to keep her secret from being disclosed. She is torn between the urge to improve and the want to harm her mother. Antara is caught between insider and outsider anxieties.

Tara's dementia provides her an opportunity to escape from the harsh reality of her existence. Antara, on the other hand, has been subjected to constant treat for her terrible recollections of the past. Antara ultimately learns that she is not dissimilar to her mother, Tara. Antara, while being married to Dilip, is estranged from him, having little communication with him, as her mother did in the early years of her marriage. Antara's life was surrounded by individuals who never cared or attempted to comprehend her emotions. Even Dilip's company brings little consolation to her traumatized experiences. Avni Doshi embarks on a voyage into the minds of Antara and Tara, both of whom are unfortunate victims of suffering.

Avni Doshi renders the intergenerational trauma that is carried down for three generations. Tara grew up with a certain amount of sullenness and rage. Tara and Antara are mirror images of each other, despite the fact that they feel they are not. Their names are being reversed. Tara called her baby Antara because she despised herself and desired for her daughter's life to be different from her own. Antara was actually Un-Tara, which means she is not like her mother. Antara eventually inherits her mother's pain since they have a common background that plagues them both equally. Both are miserable in their marriage and despise being with their husband and daughter. Avni Doshi portrays Antara and Tara's inner pain and their struggles to free themselves from the torturous memories of their past. She explores the mother-daughter bond in this work, delineating a taunting and unnerving aspect of human existence. Tara became a source of trauma that was passed down from generation to generation, showing the painful truth of human life.

Childhood trauma has a catastrophic influence on the protagonists' minds. The scarred past crushes the feminine identities. Avni Doshi illustrates Antara's journey from anguish and pain to a deeper awareness of her inner self. Antara is haunted by her childhood trauma, which has caused her misery and fury in her adult life. Doshi delves deeply into the inner lives of both female characters, carefully examining their profound thoughts and feelings. Literature provides a venue for the correct communication of the truth of human life, which is laced with terrible occurrences. The scarred past drives them to travel from the present reality into an imaginative realm. Trauma fiction serves as a medium or weapon for characters to express their anguish and suffering. Avni Doshi looks into the minds of characters who are unhappy with their life and the world around them.

Trauma is a rival in people's life. It floods at times and torments. It is the breach that prevents human psychology from functioning as it should. Actually, the severity of this invasion might range from minor to lethal, but it always leaves a wound and a weakness. In traumatology, trauma alludes to substantial upheavals and disasters that cause severe agony. The trauma experience, whether permanent or frozen in time, refuses to be embodied as the past, but is constantly re-experienced in a painful, alienated, traumatic present.

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