

Examining Traumatic Experiences Of Childhood In Neel Mukherjee's *A Life Apart*

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ABSTRACT

This research paper attempts to examine the traumatic experiences of the protagonist by analyzing the novel Neel Mukherjee's *A Life Apart*. A man's inner world is typically revealed through the psychological trauma that he has experienced. It can upset and overpower one's ability. Neel Mukherjee is widely regarded as one of the most accomplished novelists in the English literary canon. His works effectively portray the complexity of human emotions and psychological turmoil. *A Life Apart* is the story about a boy named Ritwik Ghosh who has gone through physical abuse in his childhood. His mother used to beat him and his brother. That's why his childhood was traumatic and eventually he develops childhood trauma. He goes England to study but his traumatic memories keep on haunting him. Memories are very important, and the main character makes connections between memories from the past and memories from the present. He wants to get rid of his traumatic past but he finds no one who can be his support system. This makes his situation worse. To escape from his past, he finds solace in homosexual relationships. Due to his trauma, he also goes through anxiety, depression and guilt. Throughout his life, he keeps on struggling with the bad memories of physical abuse. Apart from that, this novel also projects the Indian Parenting system. Indian parents think that their children should behave according to their will and if they fail to do so, they deserve punishment. That's why the novel also raises the serious questions about parenting style. Because, the protagonist of this novel faces trauma due to failed parenting. Psychoanalytical theory and Trauma theory have been used to analyze the psyche of Ritwik Ghosh. The main idea of this paper is to show how the main character in Neel Mukherjee's novel *A Life Apart* is going through a terrible time.

Keywords: frustration, childhood trauma, psychological turmoil, memories etc

Introduction

Trauma refers to an unexpected, sudden, and typically violent event that challenges a person's coping abilities. It can result from several situations, including physical or sexual assault, natural disasters, conflict, or accidents. Webster's New College Dictionary defines trauma as; "an emotional shock that creates substantial and lasting damage to the psychological development of the individual, generally leading to neurosis; something that severely jars the mind or emotion" (1173). Trauma has a complicated and multifaceted effect on a person's psychic formations, which can cause big changes in how they think, feel, and act. According to the *American Psychiatric Association*:

Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. While these feelings are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives. (Qtd. in Vincet 15-16)

For each person, trauma is different, but one way to describe it is as an event or set of events that seriously threaten their physical or mental health. Among other things, traumatic events can be physical or sexual abuse, natural disasters, being exposed to war or battle, and medical trauma. Cathy Caruth defines trauma in following words; "trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of the hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (qtd. in Unclaimed Experience 11).

There can be various events that can cause trauma but there is also a type of trauma that is based on a particular age's traumatic experiences and it is known as childhood trauma. According to *Blueknot* website; "Childhood trauma can occur when a child witnesses or experiences overwhelming negative events in childhood. Many childhood experiences can overwhelm a child. These can occur in relationship such as with abuse, assault, neglect, violence, exploitation or bullying" (web *Blueknot*).

Many people believe that childhood is nothing more than the initial stage of life that comes before attaining maturity, which is a time of dependence and, on occasion, servitude. Rather, a person's youth is the primary factor that determines their adulthood. Childhood is a period of a person's life that is considered to be the most formative years. Unfortunately, life is uncertain, and there are times when things happen that could have a negative effect on a child's mental health for a long time. Children face various types of discrimination and abuses as they are the vulnerable creatures. They can't raise their voice and articulate their emotions. Loveleen Kacher defines child abuse as:

Child abuse refers to any action or failure to act, that violates the rights of the child and endangers his or her optimum health, survival and development. Child abuse or maltreatment encompasses all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment and commercial or other exploitation resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power (*Childhood Betrayed* 4).

This effect can turn into serious suffering over time and show up as trauma. What constitutes a foundation of attitudes, actions, experiences, and behaviors is the foundation upon which an active and dynamic adult existence is constructed. An individual's success or failure as an adult can be traced back to their formative years. For a variety of reasons, including sociopolitical and legal issues, the age at which childhood genuinely ends, also known as the boundary between childhood and adulthood, differs from country to country and culture to culture. Within the context of the contemporary world, a sizeable percentage of children and adolescents are subjected to traumatic life experiences and suffer from the adverse effects that these experiences have. These traumatic experiences lead to childhood trauma. The National Institute of Mental Health (USA), describes Childhood Trauma as; "The experience of an event by a child that is emotionally painful or distressful, which often results in lasting mental and physical effects" (web).

Traumatic experiences can negatively impact individuals' physical and emotional health, relationships, and overall well-being. Trauma theory explores the impact of trauma on individuals and society, drawing on psychology, neurology, sociology, and other domains. Eaglestone emphasizes the function of trauma theory; "to look closely and more carefully not simply at the trauma, but at the structure experiences within which trauma is made manifest" (Eaglestone18). There is a connection between literature and psychoanalysis because both look at the human mind and show how characters in literature are like people in real life.

Neel Mukherjee's debut novel *A Life Apart* tells the story of Ritwik Ghosh, a young man, the protagonist of the novel. It takes place in the 1990s in Calcutta, India. It starts with the funeral of his parents. When Ritwik is twenty-one, he moves to England. Oxford has awarded him a scholarship to pursue higher education. In this novel, Neel Mukherjee presents the traumatic experiences faced by Ritwik, the protagonist of the novel. Ritwik has faced traumatic events in his childhood that causes various dysfunctions in his psyche. It has been shown that Ritwik is having mental turmoil deep down in his psyche. On a daily basis, he faces various situations that make him think about things like sexual abuse, marital violence, and discrimination.

When the novel opens, it is being shown that Ritwik is performing the duties for his mother's funerals. But he is not happy or sad at his mother's demise. The reason behind his emotional numbness is her mother's attitude and atrocities which he had faced in his childhood. From the time he was six years old, Ritwik often saw family violence. For small reasons, his mother used to abuse or beat him. His traumatic childhood destroys the normal functioning of his brain. He is driven to do things that are wrong. He has faced physical abuse by the hands of his mother. Kacker gives an apt definition of physical abuse when she writes; "Physical abuse of a child is any action that results in actual or potential physical harm resulting from an interaction- or lack of one- which is reasonably within the control of a parent or person in a position of responsibility, power or trust. There may be single or repeated incidents" (*Childhood Betrayed* 5). Later, the effect of abuse takes the form of trauma. The traumatic experiences of a child directly influence the structure of brain functioning. Judith Herman rightly remarks; "Repeated trauma in adult life erodes the structure of the personality already formed but repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality" (*Trauma and Recovery* 96).

Ritwik's family used to be a joint family. His mother was very responsible for taking care of the whole family. She was having a hard time getting her husband and her to work out their money problems. They used to fight with each other. Because of this, she beat her kids a lot, especially Ritwik. This shows how an Indian family is set up and how hard their life is. When it comes to emotional bonds, Indian families are often seen as perfect example but sometimes this family system also acts like a burden on the family members. In fact, Ritwik's family became a problem after that. The relationship ended because of the weight of duty. When Ritwik's parents fought, he was sad and worried. Loveleen Kacker writes; "that parents make mistakes; they abuse their children and they often take decisions that are not necessarily in the best interest of the child. All the abuse and trauma that children face are because they are considered the property of the parents who can do what they like with a child. *Sab chalta hai*. They are only children, after all" (*Childhood Betrayed* 3).

In childhood, his mother used to vent her frustration by beating his children, especially Ritwik; "Have you done your homework? Have you? Why are you wasting time then? He got a sharp slap across his face, or was dragged

by his hair across the room and pushed to the corner where his schoolbooks were piled. 'Now don't dare move until you've done the lesson. If it's not ready in an hour, I'll finish you off,' she screamed (Mukherjee 104). This shows Indian parents think only they are capable of thinking for the best of their children. Sometimes they even destroy the most tender years of a child just to protect his/her future. That's what Ritwik's mother did. He explains while remembering the torture by his mother:

While losing his balance and skidding across the floor Ritwik caught, in the peripheries of his field vision, the blur of his mother pulling a belt from the nylon line on which his father's clothes hung, shabby and limp. He lay on the floor, a foetal quiver of fear, as the first lash from the leather belt cleanly cut a menacing crack through the compact air and landed on him with the sting of fire. The fiery flowers bloomed rapidly across his legs his thighs his back his scalp, now all one clarifying tingle of pain, and his hairs took life in rising to attention to this rain of weals. Maybe he was sobbing maybe crying *please spare me spare me I'll never do it again never again never stop* but this was not just any rain of fire, it was a deluge, which didn't know when to stop, until she put an end to it and started kicking his head his stomach his chest then stood on him with her fierce weight of fury. He felt choked and air air was all he wanted to breathe in, air in, not this hollow of nothing of craving to inhale; then there is only dark, only a saving obliterating blackness (Mukherjee 46-47).

From a very young age, his parents made him feel angry all the time. Ritwik says that the age of 25 is the right one to deal with big things like death, duty, and so on. In a strange twist, though, both of his parents die when he is twenty-one. Ritwik faces discrimination in many ways while he studies in Oxford. The English people look down on him due to his skin color and terrible accent. He feels very angry about these biases. The narrator explains:

Ritwik also realizes, in slow stages, that his is a type of minority appeal, catering to the 'special interest' group rather than the mainstream, because of his nationality, looks, skin color. He keeps pushing the word 'race' away. The mainstream is blonde, white, young, slim. Or more accurately that is the desired mainstream (124).

Ritwik's psyche is already disturbed with frightening experiences and this discrimination in England acts like a fuel to the fire. Like other traumatized persons, he also feels threatened. He is always plagued by recollections of his past, as seen by the way he looks at and feels about his room. He feels the presence of his mother in his room. According to the narrator:

Look her in the eye if she comes back again.

So far, she hasn't come back while he has been in his room, but occasionally, when he returns at night, turns the key in the lock, pushes the door open and, leaning forward, quickly switches on the light with an outstretched arm while still standing outside, he knows she has been in the room. No, nothing has been moved or hidden, nothing has been disturbed. There is no trace, no evidence, only a gathering together of the air into its normal Brownian motion after it has been sliced through and agitated by a recent presence. It is like water restored to calm after the ripples generated by a lost stone have died out but the water still remembers. The air in his room sometimes has that quality of remembrance. That's all. And he's afraid of that memory of air (Mukherjee 95).

Ritwik wants to talk about his mental condition to his friend Gavin, "oh, Gavin, by the way, my mother keeps appearing in my room" (Mukherjee 96) but he stops himself thinking that he will mock at him. Sarah is a fellow student of Ritwik and his companion at Oxford University. She holds a part-time position with an organization known as *The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children*. This entity can be classified as a form of charitable trust. It serves to protect children from child labor, domestic abuse, physical and sexual abuse, as well as parental violence. As Sarah discusses the issue of child exploitation, Ritwik reflects on his painful past experiences in his homeland. Mukherjee underscores the imperative of child care as illustrated through the character of Sarah. He provides a description of child laborers engaged as tea-shack boys and domestic servants in various locations throughout England. Underage adolescents are engaged in labor for durations ranging from twelve to sixteen hours in exchange for minimal sustenance. Frequently, these children experience physical punishment for inadvertently breaking glass. Children around the globe, often characterized by their innocence, are subjected to overwhelming workloads and stressors at an age that is typically below ten years. Mukherjee is a writer and, more significantly, a revolutionary figure who upholds the principles of children's rights. Consequently, he emphasizes the entitlements of children. The findings from the survey on child care indicate that crimes such as child labor, parental abuse, and sexual abuse often remain unreported, as children frequently lack the ability to articulate their silent experiences.

Ritwik's interactions with his friend reminds him of his painful childhood memories. But he can do nothing to get rid of his painful past. In order to find relief from his past memories, he gets involved with some bad persons and becomes a homosexual. He violates every rule. Maria, in her scholarly paper writes; "Ritwik represents as a male Moll Flanders and Roxana in this novel. They are the characters in Daniel Defoe's novels. Defoe pictures their choice of life. These characters find happiness by becoming a prostitute. Likewise, Ritwik finds the pleasure of becoming a homosexual in England" (Maria 69).

Due to his negative and traumatic experiences of childhood, he has lost his abilities to behave properly. He feels numbness. The narrator explains; "When it had all played out in his febrile imagination up to a point beyond which nothing, no hope, no solace, no consolation, nothing remained, he went one step further. It became a slowly forged shield through which the vagaries and surprises of events could scarcely touch him for he has

already imagined and lived inside the worst” (Mukherjee 8). This clearly reflects that his childhood trauma has severely affected his psyche.

To conclude, Neel Mukherjee has rightly depicted the psyche of a traumatized person by using the technique of flashback, recurring dreams and continuous fear. He also emphasizes the point that child is also the person with rights and adults must behave to maximize the growth of children. Ritwik struggles throughout his life to find relief but the repercussions of childhood trauma hinder his emotional growth. His traumatic past haunts him and makes him emotionally numb. Therefore, Neel Mukherjee successfully demonstrates the traumatic childhood and its aftermath on the life of Ritwik Ghosh.

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