

A Stereotypical Framework of Pressure, Trauma and Relief in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*

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Abstract: This article attempts to analyze the psychic wounds of the protagonists in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*. It also focuses on the diasporic conflicts encountered by them and traces the stereotypic pattern of pressure, trauma and relief in a few short stories in this anthology. Divakaruni's emotional rendering is very powerful and it helps us to understand the stressful moments the characters come across throughout their lives.

Keywords: Diasporic conflicts, Trauma, Relief, Bengali Diaspora.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature is the flute that blows out our unspeakable past memories, fine emotions and feelings into an undetermined domain. It also carries our pains, losses, insults hurled and unbearable traumatic experiences. In Freud's account, trauma is "understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (qtd. in Wolfreys 135). Julian Wolfreys observes that the knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma. Trauma study explores the relationship between wounds and words.

The Unknown Errors of Our Lives, an anthology of short stories by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, exposes the difficult experiences of the Bengali Diasporas in a more poetic style. She captures the traumatic moments of those people caught between past and present, home and abroad, tradition and fresh experience. They find themselves haunted between the transparent emotional strife that occur in their homeland and hostland.

Divakaruni's stories in *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* explore the psychic wounds of the protagonists and the people around them. Her stories are representations of psychic trauma provoked by diasporic conflicts. They unburden their hearts through an articulation of past memories seeking remedies for the traumatic moments that have made their lives stressful. Each story in this collection has a threefold structure. Initially Divakaruni captures the tense moments that create a pressure zone in the psyche of the protagonists, which in turn develop psychic wounds in them. However, in the third part, their traumatic moments come to an end at the choice of a solution that serves a relief mechanism to the main characters. Hence this article aims at tracing the stereotypic pattern of pressure, trauma and relief in a few short stories in this anthology.

2. THE EMOTIONAL EFFECTS OF TRAUMA

In 'Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter,' Divakaruni exposes the emotional effects of trauma developed gradually in the consciousness of Mrs. Dutta who has succumbed to self-sympathy. She feels totally isolated in an alien land in spite of the vicissitudes of her son, daughter-in-law and her grandchildren whom she considers as the flesh and blood of her own. The

American-soft Perma Rest mattress that Sagar and Shyamoli- her son and daughter-in-law- have specially bought for her, the burritos stored in the freezer, much preferred by her grandchildren to the various Indian recipes cooked by her in the American kitchen and the forcible command of her daughter-in-law to store her unclean clothes in the same room where she kept the pictures of her gods are some of the factors that heighten her mental confusion. Shyamoli's habit of bringing the laundry into the family room to fold makes her shudder and Divakaruni puts it thus: "And when, right in front of everyone, Shyamoli pulled out Mrs.Dutta's own crumpled, baggy bras from the clothes heap, she wished the ground would open up and swallow her like the Sita of mythology" (14).

Divakaruni's emotional rendering of the psychic wound that gradually begins to grip Mrs.Dutta adds power to the trauma itself: "Oh, this new country where all the rules are upside down, it's confusing her. Her mind feels muddy like a pond in which too many water buffaloes have been wading" (28).

The retroactive shocks get doubled when Mrs.Dutta's heart is pierced with the harsh words of her son who accepts to his wife that their children already know of the hard time that he has with his mother. Shyamoli's harsh comment against her act of drying out the clothes on the fence and the oily food made by her in her daughter-in-law's kitchen enters as smoking oil into her ears. The psychic wound fully developed in her after the turmoil of thoughts that "whirl faster and faster" (31) isolates her in the land of the young people. The silhouette of a man, wife and children- that was trusted by her as a concrete entity collapses like "imploded stars leaving an image inside her eyes for company" (33).

Divakaruni fixes a relief for Mrs.Dutta's trauma in the form of a letter to ease out her mental agony: She is not sure how long she sits under the glare of the overhead light, how long her hands clench themselves in her lap. When she opens them, nail marks line the soft flesh of her palms, red hieroglyphics – her body's language, telling her what to do. (33)

Mrs.Dutta realizes that the meaning of happiness cannot be found in the flesh and blood of her own but in the acts done with love. Divakaruni ends this story with a new-found relief mechanism for Mrs.Dutta whose trauma is due to the enigma of being 'othered' in the family of her own son and their willingness to be the slaves of an alien culture.

'The Intelligence of Wild Things', another story in this collection hinges upon the idea of encountering trauma while ferrying across the frozen lake of human life, huddled in a woolen coat, towards an undetermined target. It is emotionally woven around a mother's fear of losing her son to the Naxal Movement that had killed many young men in Calcutta. Shocked by the murder of her neighbourhood boy who didn't belong to any party, she has been led to sleepless nights worrying about the future of her son, Tarun. The 'abhimaan' - a mix of love, anger and hurt – reflected upon his face leads to her own psychic wound and the trauma continues as she finds relieved in sending him to America to continue his studies without knowing that she is going to lose him to another great giant- an alien land and its culture. She might have been right in sending him away but "what she hadn't foreseen was how absolute that going would be" (42), as Divakaruni puts it.

Tarun's long silence confuses his mother and it leads to the development of a deep hollow in her. With a wish to die in the house where her husband had died and where her children were born, her mortified heart defines happiness as that which she would get when she sees her children before her death. Through 'The Intelligence of Wild Things', Divakaruni conveys that all wild things are more intelligent than human beings whose memories, fears and desires lead them into a repetitive fashion of events. She cites two of her observations to substantiate this idea: "The fish know to stay away from the boat. They possess the intelligence of wild things" (36). The other observation is that the wind blows through where it is born. But the humans, lacking this kind of intelligence, migrate from their homeland to an alien land to lose their identity severing their umbilical cord connection with their motherland. The long silence from her son creates a total blackout in her in spite of the "pain medication" (52). At last, Divakaruni provides death as a relief from her trauma.

Every event that we pass through constitutes our life. Our illusions become an essential part of life without which it becomes a mundane world. The events expose acute problems associated with fear, agony and anxiety of the partaker, causing a psychic wound in him or her. In "The Lives of Strangers", Divakaruni points out the role of illusion in making our lives vibrant and at the same time its capacity to bring mental derangement. On a pilgrimage to Amarnath to see the real, spiritual India, Leela, accompanied with her aunt Seema, reflects upon all accidents right from her childhood.

Her happiest childhood memories were of aloneness. Her parents themselves are "solitary individuals" (59) who had escaped India to take up research positions in America. When Leela became a computer programmer, got involved with

dexter, another programmer and when that brief affair broke up, she tried to end her life with a bottle of sleeping pills. Her encounter with death, though an aborted one, had altered her life in “unaccountable ways” (60).

On the pilgrimage, as the guide had suggested, her time was spent on reflection and repentance. Leela thought of a childhood accident when she was four years old. In an effort to help her mother, she had pulled a pot of steaming dal. It struck her arm with a slapping sound. She screamed and raced around the kitchen- as though agony could be outrun. Later on, her mother applied Tylenol to reduce the pain. Leela recalls it and realizes that good intentions are no match for the forces of the physical world. Many other accidents “blur together in Leela’s memory like the landscape outside a speeding car’s windows” (66). All the close escapes from the dangerous accidents including her suicide attempt convey that either she must be lucky or her “unlucky star thwarted all this time by some imbalance in the stratosphere, waiting for its opportunity” (66).

‘The Lives of Strangers’ absolutely falls into the stereotypic pattern of pressure, trauma and relief. Every accident or incident that happened in Leela’s childhood appears to be a short story in itself. And this falls within a longer short story that juxtaposes Leela’s psychic wounds with Mrs. Das’s, a co-pilgrim’s, psychic as well as physical wounds. Their lives are concurrent patterns, driven by luck and destiny in spite of their belief in individual responsibility. Both characters require protection from the emotional perception of the others.

During her stay with Mrs.Das at a lodge, she is tormented in her dream. Ice presses against her chest. She opens her mouth to cry for help, and it too fills with ice” (80). On waking up, she realizes that her dream had come true. A gust of wind hit the roof forcing Leela to drag Mrs Das’s body. Her trauma comes to an end after her efforts to pound Mrs.Das’s heart with earnest energy. Divakaruni says: “The thought depresses her and this depression is the last emotion she registers before something hits her head” (81). On her recovery, her light headedness forced upon her by the pain and medication pierces her pragmatic American upbringing with its sharp, knotted root and as a relief mechanism, she throws the chain that was gifted to her by Mrs. Das.

In this story, Leela reflects mood shifts, irritability, fear, anxiety, grief and social isolation. Her cognitive responses to all these problems erupt in the forms of nightmares, flashbacks, poor problem-solving ability and a tendency to blame Mrs.Das when she was in the hospital after the accident due to heavy rains the previous night. Her behavioural responses had been a suicidal attempt after her relationship with Dexter broke up, a withdrawal from the American culture and heightened reactions on her pilgrimage to Amarnath. As a result of all these psychic wounds, she finds it difficult to form intimate relationships. “Literary verbalization, however, is a basis for making the wound perceivable and the silence audible” (2) says Geoffrey H.Hatman. Divakaruni verbalizes the agony, trauma and a temporary relief of Leela in this short story.

In ‘The Love of a Good Man’, Divakaruni depicts the cause and effect of a psychical trauma in Monisha, the narrator of this story. The cause is the hurt that one buries into her body “like shrapnel” (90). The counter mechanism to this cause in her is to ease out with illusions like “a swimmer entering a warm pool” (91), as Divakaruni says.

The hatred welling up in her from the day her father had left his wife and daughter develops into anger. Against her mother’s saying that anger is the great destroyer, Monisha believes that it is her savior. After her mother’s death “anger was the drug that dulled the throbbing” (96) in her head. The psychic wound in her caused by her anger against her father gets expressed as a physical wound when her husband Dilip insists upon inviting her father. Her tight hold on a glass result in a small gash on her palm from which an inordinate amount of blood wells.

The effect of the cause of her welling anger in her is her evolution into “the mansha cactus that grows in the crannies of ruined buildings” with her “thorns pointed inward, a constant stinging” with which she “lashed out at people” (97) whenever she got a chance. That was the only way she knew of consuming pain.

But her traumatic moments cease after the arrival of her father whom she thought she would never forgive. Her mother always used to tell her that sometimes she must learn to forgive. When she removed the glass from her sleeping father’s face, she thought she couldn’t call it forgiveness. Her rumination upon whatever has happened provides a relief for her trauma: “Invisible flowers spread greater fragrance. Home is where you move fluently through the dark” (117).

Divakaruni exposes the repressed consciousness of Ruchira in ‘The Unknown Errors of Our Lives’. She brings out an individual’s internalization of her cultural background in this story. The “cautionary spore released by her grandmother over her cradle” (215) helps her to be untouched by her boy friends in America, she had dated with. But the same

cautionary spore disappears in the presence of Biren, a suitable Bengali guy in America recommended by her aunt as a good match for her. Her elated spirit ebbs down after her meeting with Arlene, Biren's ex-lover who was pregnant in spite of his advice to abort the baby. Thus, Divakaruni creates the pressure zone in her. Her cognitive response to the culture instilled into her through the ideologies of her grandmother heightens her pressure soon after the departure of Arlene. Divakaruni renders it thus:

What would you do, Thakuma? Inside her brain, her grandmother says, why do you ask me/ Can you live your life the way I lived mine? She speaks with some asperity. Or maybe it's sorrow she feels for the confused world her granddaughter has inherited. (231)

Ruchira ruminates upon the unknown errors of people's lives, "the ones they can never put down in a book and are therefore doomed to repeat" (213). She doesn't deny that Biren couldn't be blamed as he had confessed to her everything except that he had paid Arlene to erase the error committed by him. Her irritability grows as she thinks of the disappointment born within her out of her love for Biren. Divakaruni focuses on her behavioural response: "Isn't that why all evening she has been folding and stuffing and tearing strips of paper and printing words on brown cartons in aggressive black ink? (234). Her description of nature reflects the agony of Ruchira: "The wind has dropped. On Ruchira's window sill the shadows lie stunned, as though they've been shot" (234). She is annoyed to know of her ignorance about the drugs that Biren and Arlene would have done together.

After a long traumatic hour of suspicion, promise and disappointment, the relief dawns upon her through an idea of adding "a bird with a boy-face and spiky gold hair, with Biren's square chin and an unsuspected dimple" (235) in February when the baby would be born to Arlene, in the painting of kalpa taru that she wanted to give him as a wedding gift.

It is a concurrent pattern of physical trauma and psychic trauma in 'What the Body Knows.' More than the stereotype of pressure, trauma and relief, Divakaruni's poetic rendering of the pain, anger, desire and disappointment of Aparna has an admirable quality. All problems gain shape in Aparna after her amniotic fluid breaks out making her body react instinctively to the panic that dries her mouth and the legs "clamping together as though by doing so they could prevent loss" (119). "Then terror takes over, sour and atavistic..." (119), flooding her brain. Divakaruni describes Aparna's efforts to bring instinctive relief to every physical trauma: "Panic comes at her in waves, but she makes her body loose, the way a sea swimmer might, and feels it pass beneath her" (121).

In another passage, Divakaruni implies the dissociation of the body from mind. After delivering the baby, Aparna thinks:

Through all the pulling and cutting, her flesh being rent apart, and then stitched together like old leather, there is an amazing absence of pain. But the body knows, she thinks. You can't fool the body. It knows what is being done to it. At the right time, it will take revenge. (122-123)

Aparna resolves to conquer pain by ignoring it. Fear sets in her when she is admitted in the hospital for the second time. Her delirium "spreads around her like a bottomless lake, shining like mercury" (125), as Divakaruni describes. But the delirium continues to grip her as fury swells her organs, "as tangible as all the fluids her body as forgotten how to get rid of" (126).

Divakaruni cleverly projects the idea that there is a perfect correlation between the mind and the body. When the body loses its own control, the mind follows its ways. The moment hatred and fury settled permanently into Aparna, everything in the hospital enrages her. Her physical pain develops into a psychic wound when pain totally defeats her vanquished ego. Trauma speeds up after her intestinal adhesions have been removed successfully. She refuses to answer the questions of the doctors, showing a withdrawal symptom. The nurse affirms this to Umesh, Aparna's husband: "She's lost the will to live" (128). She goes into a period of hallucination as the "enormous, thwarted emotion ballooned inside her chest" (131) forces her to believe that she has lost her baby. When Umesh brings him to the hospital, Aparna can hardly believe he's hers. Divakaruni makes the readers hear her multiple voices: "So they've brought in this...this little impostor. Where's my baby? She wants to ask. What did you do with my baby? Instead, she says, in a gray, toneless voice "Take him away" (130).

Her psychic wound gets healed as she develops a fascination and love for Dr. Byron-Michaels who had operated on her. During her rest of the hospital stay, she waits for him eagerly and fantasizes about touching him. Her infatuation with her doctor speeds up her recovery process and she is once back into the familiar rhythms of her life.

3. CONCLUSION

Mark Micale points out that it is not the physical injury per se, or even the emotional shock, but “rather the mental experiencing of it, the affective and ideational processing of the event, that constitutes the psychological trauma” (qtd. in Douglass 10). Divakaruni’s characters exhibit emotional, behavioural and somatosensory responses to the various problems of their lives without failing to get relieved from the labyrinth of human life. Divakaruni’s powerful language makes one realize the true condition of trauma through the emotional life of her characters, entangled in a stereotypical pattern of pressure, trauma and relief.

In *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*, Divakaruni narrates different kinds of desires that lead to lots of misunderstandings and dysfunctions. In an interview the author comments on the characters as being “in conflict with what the other person wants” (Aldama, 8). In Divakaruni’s view, “Eastern society is so family- and group-oriented” (Aldama, 8) and the individual sacrifices his or her desire for the good of the family and this is just the opposite in the West. According to Divakaruni, this concept becomes the crux of her short story collection *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*.

The traumatized female characters of her short stories reveal Divakaruni’s careful portrayal of the pattern of trauma and a pressure or some kind of a burden in these characters which in fact help them overcome the traumatic moments with a relief mechanism. In ‘Mrs. Dutta Writes a Letter’, Mrs. Dutta who has succumbed to self-sympathy finds a relief mechanism in the form of letters. In ‘The Intelligence of Wild Things’, Divakaruni provides death as a relief mechanism to the development of a deep hollow in the consciousness of Tarun’s mother due to his long silence. In ‘The Lives of Strangers’, Leela’s cognitive responses find a relief mechanism in the forms of nightmares and flashbacks to overcome her mood shifts, irritability, fear, anxiety, grief and social isolation. In ‘The Love of a Good Man’, Monisha’s rumination upon her mother’s advice provides a relief for her trauma. The repressed consciousness of Ruchira in ‘The Unknown Errors of Our Lives’ finds relief in visualizing the birth of a baby to Arlene. In ‘What the Body Knows’ Aparna resolves to conquer pain by ignoring it. Thus, Divakaruni visualizes a therapeutic relief for all her traumatized characters. The fragmented and disrupted memories of her characters yield themselves to all traumatic conditions and find recovery through adopting a pragmatic approach to transgress their desires.

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