

Psychological Trauma, “An Affliction of the Powerless”: A Narrative Study of Sex Trafficking Victims in Amita Trasi’s ‘The Color of Our Sky’

Noreen Zainab, Senior Lecturer, Bahria University Islamabad, PhD Scholar, Foundation University Islamabad, Pakistan

Email: noreen.buic@bahria.edu.pk

Abstract

This paper investigates the representation of psychological trauma in the narrative by Amita Trasi, The Color of Our Sky, while focusing on the experiences of trafficked women through the lens of Judith Herman’s trauma theory. Quite central to this study is Herman’s assertion that “psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless,” which is applied to the selected narrative. This statement is observed to resonate with Mukta’s character portrayed by Trasi i.e. a young girl sold into sexual slavery under the exploitative Devadasi tradition. Mukta’s suffering; characterized by her violation, along with her detachment, and identity loss is presented in the form of complex trauma: helplessness, isolation, and memory fragmentation. Trasi’s use of fragmentation within the narrative structure, the sensory recollections of Mukta’s memories, and dual timelines within the novel reflect the dissociative effects of trauma. This technique further reveals the silencing of victims of gendered violence. The novel presents the systematic disempowerment of women through generations in the form of sexual violence, trauma and manipulation. By situating personal trauma within systemic exploitation, Trasi’s work emphasizes on the psychological costs of trafficking while highlighting the redemptive role of narrative and human connection.

Keywords: Psychological trauma, powerless, The Color of Our Sky, Judith Herman, sex trafficking.

Introduction

“He who opens his heart to the cries of the helpless finds his own soul.”

- Rumi

Sex trafficking is one of the most serious forms of human rights violations in today's age and world. It destroys human lives and leaves deep emotional as well as physical wounds. Every year, there are millions of women and girls who are sold, abused and victimized through sex trafficking. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2022) reports that around 92% of all the victims of sex trafficking are female victims. These statistics show how strongly this crime has its connection to gender inequality. In many of the countries, especially within South Asia, many factors such as poverty, gender-based violence, caste discrimination, and weak legal systems are held responsible for making women and girls more vulnerable to the instances of trafficking.

In India, some even more harmful traditional practices continue to foster gender inequality. One such example is the Devadasi system. In this practice, girls from the lower castes are forcibly “married” to the gods or temples but are later forced and manipulated into sex work. Though it is officially banned, the tradition still exists in some of the parts of India under cultural or religious excuses (Srikant, 2021; Kumar, 2023). Many families continue to exist being trapped within poverty hence they end up following these practices out of desperation or societal pressure. Trafficked girls are not just the victims of individual crimes; rather they suffer because of the failures within social, legal, and cultural systems.

Sex trafficking is not only a crime but also an important feminist issue. Researchers like Doezema (2010) and Vance (2011) have presented within their research, how this form of violence is deeply connected to the patriarchal systems and power structures. Women's bodies

are often observed to be treated as objects to be used and sold. Even in the news, within media and the films, trafficked women are often presented as helpless or broken. These portrayals rarely give them a voice they deserve to portray or show their strength in any form. As a result, the real reasons behind trafficking such as social and cultural inequality, caste, and poverty are kept hidden or ignored (Freedman, 2020; Srikant, 2021).

Literature can offer a more honest and more humane picture of these lives of trafficked women. Through fiction, authors can further explore the emotional as well as psychological impact of trauma in such ways that the facts and statistics are unable to. According to the literary scholar Laurie Vickroy (2002), trauma novels allow the readers to feel the pain, fear, and hope of survivors. They give voice to people who are often silenced. Literature helps readers understand their suffering and build their sense of empathy. Amita Trasi's novel *The Color of Our Sky* (2015) is one example of such a book. It tells the story of two girls-Mukta and Tara-whose lives are quite deeply connected through various phases and parts. Mukta is one of the protagonists of the novel who is born into the Devadasi system and is later sold into sex trafficking to a brothel in Mumbai. On the other hand, Tara comes from a more privileged background but is haunted by her best friend's disappearance ultimately leading her to finally undertake the project of finding her through the darkness of trafficking world. Their journeys show both the pain of trauma while upholding the strength needed for survival.

This paper argues that *The Color of Our Sky* is so much more than just a novel. It is a portrayal of a powerful voice for those who have been trafficked and silenced. For those who are treated as commodities as it does not portray the girls as just the victims, but also as people who are able to think, feel, and fight for the sake of their healing. The novel also presents how family, religion, as well as society often fails to protect the girls such as Mukta. Trasi uses the medium

of fiction to speak about the real issues and to ask some very important moral questions. Her story further helps us see the human face behind the statistics.

To understand both the emotional and the mental suffering within the novel, this paper employs Judith Herman's trauma theory. In her well-known book *Trauma and Recovery* (1992/2015), Herman explain that trauma occurs when people feel powerless and are unable to quite protect themselves. Trafficked women often experience this deep loss of their sense of autonomy and control over their own circumstances and life choices. Herman also describes in her theory that healing from trauma is a long journey and it can be seen in the way Mukta's story unfolds in the novel. Her memories, her fears, and her attempts to rebuild her life reflect on the painful but possible process of healing.

This research explores how people can develop their resilience and reclaim their agency after as well as during the trauma. Resilience is not only about survival, but also about finding the strength to rebuild one's own life after everything is destroyed. Linda Graham (2013) writes about how the brain alters and heals after the experiences of suffering. Her work on resilience shows that people can learn to cope with the pain and are able to find new meaning in life. Similarly, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) talk about "post-traumatic growth," which further means growing stronger after going through a crisis. These ideas also help explain how characters like Mukta do not just survive their trauma but also grow and reclaim their identities. Lastly, this paper shows that *The Color of Our Sky* is a deeply human story of trauma, injustice, and hope. It also challenges the way that the society sees trafficked women-not as helpless or broken, but as strong and complex. The novel uses storytelling to raise awareness about trafficking, caste, gender violence, and the need for change. Through its strong characterization, it invites us to listen, to care, and to act for the betterment of situation.

Literature Review

Sex trafficking is a complex issue that intersects with gender, power, poverty, and trauma. Scholars across disciplines like psychology, literature, women's studies, and human rights have examined the deep and lasting impact of trafficking on the lives of survivors. Much of this research shows that sex trafficking inflicts long-term psychological trauma that does not end with physical rescue. Instead, it leaves behind emotional wounds that affect memory, identity, and relationships (Herman, 2015; Brown, 2022). Literature, particularly trauma fiction, has emerged as a powerful medium to explore and humanize these inner wounds.

Judith Herman's foundational trauma theory has become essential to understanding the psychological effects of violence. In *Trauma and Recovery* (2015), Herman describes trauma as "an affliction of the powerless," highlighting how trauma overwhelms the individual's ability to respond, cope, or even make sense of the experience. Her model identifies three key stages of recovery: establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma narrative, and reconnecting with community. These stages are particularly relevant for sex trafficking survivors, who often suffer from dissociation, shame, and a broken sense of self (Patel & Deshmukh, 2023). Herman's work continues to guide both clinical and literary analysis of trauma in women, especially victims of sexual violence.

In literary trauma studies, researchers have investigated how trauma is communicated through stories that disrupt conventional narrative structures. Cathy Caruth (1996) emphasizes that trauma resists representation; it often returns through flashbacks, silence, or repetition rather than through coherent storytelling. Laurie Vickroy (2002) builds on this, arguing that trauma fiction does not always aim for narrative clarity but instead expresses the survivor's fragmented emotional reality. Such literature invites readers to engage with survivors not through facts, but

through emotional resonance and shared humanity. Caruth and Vickroy's work lays the foundation for interpreting trauma narratives that resist closure or easy resolution.

Baldwin and Power (2020) take this idea further by examining how trauma fiction functions politically, allowing for the "re-humanization" of marginalized voices. They argue that literature enables the restoration of identity by offering a space where survivors can reclaim their stories from social erasure. Narrative storytelling in fiction, therefore, is not merely expressive but it is also an act of resistance against dehumanization and silence (Vance, 2011).

Contemporary South Asian novels have increasingly addressed sex trafficking as both a personal and a political issue. In *The Color of Our Sky* by Amita Trasi, the trauma of being trafficked is not only portrayed through individual pain but also within the wider systems of caste, patriarchy, and poverty. Like *Sold* by Patricia McCormick and *Girls Burn Brighter* by Shobha Rao, Trasi's novel uses fiction to challenge stereotypes of victims as voiceless and passive. Instead, these stories present survivors as complex individuals with memories, dreams, and agency (Roy, 2021; Mehta, 2022; Misra, 2024).

Srikant (2021) and Kumar (2023) explore how caste and social hierarchy contribute to trafficking in India, particularly through practices like the Devadasi system. These authors show how traditional norms and economic marginalization intersect, trapping women and girls in cycles of exploitation. Their work supports the argument that trauma cannot be understood in isolation from structural violence. Instead, fiction that incorporates historical and cultural realities gives a fuller picture of the survivor's world and the forces that shape it.

Doezema (2010) and Freedman (2020) critique mainstream representations of sex trafficking that focus only on victimization and rescue. They caution that such depictions often ignore survivors' voices and reinforce colonial narratives of moral superiority. In contrast, fictional

narratives that center the survivor's perspective can undo these harmful tropes and provide space for complexity, ambiguity, and agency. This is evident in *The Color of Our Sky*, where Mukta's story is told alongside Tara's, allowing readers to witness not just trauma, but also memory, longing, and healing.

Narrative theory offers another layer of understanding. Herman and Vervaeck (2005) propose that stories are not only told but constructed within social and cultural frameworks. In trauma fiction, narrative structures often mirror psychological processes. Fragmentation, flashbacks, and dual timelines reflect how trauma interrupts linear memory. Trasi's use of dual narration and temporal shifts illustrates this point. Tara's search for Mukta and Mukta's own fractured memories moves in parallel, gradually revealing the trauma and allowing for a form of narrative reconstruction.

Recent literary studies highlight how fiction can be a space of testimony. Vickroy (2020) discusses "narrative empathy" as a way for readers to emotionally engage with characters' suffering. Similarly, Brown (2022) revisits Herman's trauma model in literary contexts, arguing that fiction offers a symbolic path to recovery, especially when real-world justice is absent. Patel and Deshmukh (2023) also explore how female subjectivity is redefined through trauma narratives, particularly in postcolonial Indian fiction.

Moreover, while trauma often silences victims, storytelling offers a way to reclaim voice. According to Sahu (2023), post-trafficking narratives in Indian fiction function as both catharsis and social critique. They expose societal complicity while validating survivors' lived experiences. Sahu's study aligns with Mehta (2022), who notes that these stories resist dominant narratives by emphasizing inner resilience, community, and memory.

Trauma theory, particularly Judith Herman's, remains the most consistent framework for understanding sex trafficking narratives. Her focus on memory, disassociation, and recovery resonates across both psychological and literary fields. While other frameworks such as postcolonial theory or intersectional feminism add important context, trauma theory allows us to understand the internal disarray survivors face. It also explains why fiction, more than any other form, can express the unspeakable nature of pain.

In summary, literature offers a powerful way to engage with the emotional and psychological realities of sex trafficking. Herman's trauma model provides a solid foundation for interpreting these narratives, while theorists like Caruth, Vickroy, and Baldwin show how fiction mirrors the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. Scholars from South Asia add crucial insights about caste, gender, and cultural context. Together, these perspectives create a rich field of analysis for texts like *The Color of Our Sky*, which not only portray trauma but also seek justice through storytelling

Methodology

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Judith Herman's theory of psychological trauma, particularly as presented in her most significant work *Trauma and Recovery* (2015). Herman's ideology on psychological trauma is deeply rooted within her clinical work with survivors of sexual violence, domestic abuse, and of political terror. She argued that "*trauma is an experience that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope*", and further disrupts the inner world of memory, identity, and the ability of an individual to trust. According to Herman, "*trauma occurs when a person is helpless in the face of terror*", the form of terror that renders them psychologically powerless. This framing is specifically relevant to the experiences of trafficked women, who

are further subjected to ongoing violations of their autonomy, their bodily integrity, as well as social identity.

Herman defined the term psychological trauma as “*the result of a sudden or repeated exposure to extreme stress, typically involving threats to life, bodily harm, or dignity*”, which is then further combined with an inability to escape or to resist. The traumatic event becomes imprinted within the body and the mind “*in fragmented, non-verbal forms, nightmares, flashbacks, and emotional dysregulation*”. Over the time, these symptoms may also develop into what Herman terms as *complex PTSD*, a condition that is common among the individuals who endure “*prolonged and repeated abuse*”, such as those who are trapped in the systems of trafficking.

Judith Herman’s foundational work *Trauma and Recovery* (1992; rev. 2015) redefined psychological trauma as a deeply political and a gendered experience. Rather than the viewing of trauma solely through the clinical lens, Herman frames it as a “*disruption of narrative, identity, and power*”, especially within the contexts of interpersonal violence, sexual exploitation, and in the form of political oppression. At the heart of Herman’s theory is the understanding that “*trauma is not only about the event itself but the overwhelming of the individual’s capacity to respond*”. She further writes that: “*Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. As it is quite observed that now of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force.*” (Herman, 2015, p. 33)

Herman further describes trauma as a shattering of the self, further disrupting the normal memory processing and leaving the survivors with fragmented, intrusive, or suppressed recollections. Survivors may experience the effects such as hyperarousal, emotional numbing, dissociation, as well as repetition compulsion. These are the symptoms that reflect the ongoing struggle to integrate the trauma into a coherent narrative. As Herman claims that the Traumatic

memories lack the verbal narrative and context; rather, “they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images.” *Herman, 2015, p. 37*. Thus, psychological trauma theory offers an extensively powerful framework for the analysis of characters such as Mukta in *The Color of Our Sky*, whose lives are shaped by the events of structural violence, as they face cultural silencing, and forced dissociation. Herman’s model helps explaining the answer of why trauma victims struggle to tell their stories and how their fragmented memories further reflect both the internal psychological rupture alongside the external sociocultural repression.

Analytical Framework

Narrative analysis as a framework provides a critical lens for the examination of how the stories are told, structured, and experienced especially with in the contexts of trauma and marginalization. In the study and analysis of *The Color of Our Sky*, narrative analysis as a method offers a deeper exploration of the complex psychological landscapes of trafficked women through the presentation of their fragmented, nonlinear, and emotionally charged storytelling techniques and methods. Drawing on to the narrative frameworks developed by Herman and Vervaeck (2005), this analysis emphasizes how literary texts construct meaning not just through the plot, but with the help of voice, temporality, memory, and focalization.

Narratology as a method of research is particularly useful within the framework of trauma studies because trauma disrupts the normal sequencing of memory and self-narration. According to Judith Herman (2015), trauma survivors often struggle with the integration of the traumatic events into coherent personal narratives. This disintegration is further mirrored in literary trauma narratives, which frequently employ the temporal shifts, the silences, repetitions, and internal monologues. Through an indepth analysis of these narrative features, the present study can reveal how Trasi’s characters especially Mukta and Tara attempt to reclaim their lost agency. With this they can rebuild their identity in the form of storytelling.

In *The Color of Our Sky*, storytelling as a narrative technique serves both as a survival tool as well as a political act. Narrative analysis also allows for a reading of the text that highlights the dialectic between silence and voice, disempowerment and resistance. The framework further helps unpack the various ethical dimension of representation of trauma and the responsibility borne by the narrator, both within the text as well as outside it. Through a detailed narrative analysis, this study foregrounds the emotional truths that are embedded within the works of fiction and expose the ways in which stories of trafficked women are shaped, suppressed, or reclaimed within the patriarchal societies.

Narrative Analysis of ‘*The Color of Our Sky*’

When it comes to psychological trauma, as it is defined by Herman, it's the feeling of powerlessness. Lack of control, autonomy not only on your own body but also onto the circumstances of your life which is found to exist at the very core of the experiences of people who face human trafficking. As Herman pointed out in her framework of psychological trauma (2015), “*Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless.*” At such instances of trauma, “*the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force.*” (Herman, 2015, p.33). this powerlessness is one of the major causes of psychological trauma, the lack of resistance and victims inability to leave. While it is established that the victims of sex trafficking are kept in captivity for long intervals of time, as long as years and decades which arises a very significant question to why they do not leave as it is not possible for them, to never find a chance to run away.

While the motivational articles may claim an easy 10 step manual guidelines which can easily help the victims to get out of trauma it might not be as simple. The helplessness, and lack of power that causes psychological trauma is presented in the lives of many victims of sex trafficking at a very early age, long before they are trafficked. Such was the case of Mukta, the

protagonist of Trasi's novel, *'the color of our sky'*. As a daughter of temple prostitute, she was introduced to this feeling of powerlessness at a very young age as when her mother was visited by men she was forced to stay outside the house. As she recollected *"I wasn't allowed to enter the house. I was to sit in the backyard on the cold, concrete slab that would become my bed for the night. I would eat my food there and sleep there"* (p.18).

The lack of power was not only for Mukta a cause of psychological trauma since her early childhood but also for her mother who was a prostitute, by force and wanted a different life for her daughter, Mukta. While psychological trauma is defined as lack of agency, it is clearly observed in one of the instances at the very beginning of the narrative that both Mukta as well as her mother lacked agency and a right to their own selves. It was when they were visited by a lady from Mumbai. While she had a great deal of interest in Mukta, both Mukta as well as her mother resisted to which *"she signalled to the man who left his place in the doorway, strode toward Amma, and held her hand behind her, Amma struggled and yelled at him. 'Let me go' she said"* (p.26). while her mother struggled and shouted, Mukta pounded on him, *"trying to assail him with blows."* It was all futile as he looked at her as if she were *"a mere fly to be swatted away."* The way both mukta and her mother were treated is a true example of powerlessness when it comes to sex trafficking victims and their psychological trauma.

Afterwards, *"he picked up amma like she was one of my cloth dolls and carried her inside, tied her hands with rope, and heft her bound there."* Mukta didn't see it coming, she didn't expect any of this to happen to her and her mother, while she was still processing what was happening *"madam had uprooted me and placed me before her"* there, standing before her in the stare of complete powerlessness she was examined, first her face and her head and then her body, after all her clothes were removed. While she was violated, she *"looked at Sakubai through tears, waiting for a sign, any signal that would let her know what to do"* (p.27). as herman defines psychological trauma as an event when a person's capacity to protect

themselves is overwhelmed. Here in this instance, Mukta was completely overwhelmed by this forced intrusion of a stranger towards her body, and her mother's inability to protect herself as well as her daughter. For daughters such as Mukta psychological trauma is inevitable for, they are born in the system that takes away their right to themselves, their physical beings, at a very early stage in their lives, teaching them that resistance is futile.

While this incident happened in a brief space of time, it effected Mukta in ways that could never be reversed. While she wanted to think of it as a "*nightmare*" and wanted to move on, she had changed. Now she "begun to understand the pull of fear" as she questioned the changes she observed within herself after that incident that "how my heart beat fast for no apparent reason, how the heaviness of my chest never went away, and how I could hardly breathe in the open space of my beautiful forest" the condition of her mother was no different, despite of the fact that her mother was a grown woman, and she was a mere twelve years old girl, both had

"a distant look in our eyes. We were afraid that if our eyes met even for a second the bitter memory of that day would come spilling out... silence crept into our lives allowing us to keep our nightmares and our thoughts to ourselves. We simply carried on, pretending it had never happened. (p.29).

As Herman points out in her work that "Trauma occurs when a person's capacity to protect themselves is overwhelmed" either due to physical violence, any other form of abuse, disaster, or due to coercion. It was at a very early stage of her life that Mukta had a first hand traumatic experience where not only was she physically violated, stripped and forced to obey but she also saw her mother getting abused in front of her eyes. As a daughter to single mother, she had never met her father, hence the only person she had to rely on for her safety, her protection and well being was her mother. In this instance she learned that her mother had no power, had no

agency in front of the ones they were stuck with. They could have their way with her any time, even if it meant violating her daughter in front of her, she was completely powerless.

As her mother fails to protect her, she tried to find her refuge in her father, the one who never acknowledged her. This time both Mukta and her mother went to his house, a big palace where they were stopped at the gate, mocked by the guards when they requested to meet sahib of the house. *“Go away before sahib comes out and shouts at us for allowing a lower caste whore to come close to this property. If you want to wait you cannot come within ten feet of the door.”* (Trasi, 2017, p.47). sensing the certain desperation they were ‘allowed’ to wait outside as long as they were not quite visible to the honourable guests. However, they were rejected and left with hopelessness as Mukta’s father refused to acknowledge her existence. Hence the helplessness which Herman characterized as one of the key features of psychological trauma was not only retained rather multiplied in Mukta as well as her mother as their only chance of refuge was also denied. They had no one to rely on, no one to look at since they were both vulnerable and were aware of their helplessness in the face of threat.

At a very young age of ten, Mukta was able to internalize the systematic helplessness with which she was raised as she accepted the fact that she did not have any father. Father, who might be a symbol of love and affection in various cultures however in South Asian culture, father is the head of the family, a person who takes up the role of “provider, protector, teacher and a moral guardian” within the family system (Krishan, 1998). Her hope to find someone to rely on, for her protection died alongside her mother’s hope for finding a way to save her daughter from the horrors of the life she was helplessly forced to live as temple prostitute. Mukta recorded that *“Amma had resigned herself to the fact that my father would never return... she never spoke of him, and her eyes never recovered from the loss of hope.”* (Trasi, 2017, p.63). a woman who was able to survive through years of physical abuse, rape and unwanted sexual encounters lost the light of her eyes, her hope, her life after finding out that

she will be helpless in the face of violence that will soon find its way to her daughter. The incoming danger, and her potential helplessness crushed her soul as something broke inside her, quite permanently.

Psychological trauma is beyond the disruption of one's body, it's beyond the violence inflicted upon you in various forms it is the "*disruption of narrative, identity, and power*" (Herman, 2015). However scary it might be, when someone is beaten until they become unconscious it can in no way compete with the fright of an individual losing consciousness due to a broken soul. Mukta's mother lost the light of her eyes, her soul died the day she discovered she will be a bystander among many others while her daughter will be undressed against her will, while she will be touched inappropriately, sold and raped. The thought of that time, only an imagination was enough to make her sick, sick enough to lose herself. So, it was not a surprise when 'one evening' she 'fell down in the kitchen'. As Mukta ran to her, trying to wake her up, shaking her up as hard as she could all she saw was the "*tears streaming from her closed eyes*" (Trasi, 2017, p.64). How do one go on living a life, breathing and eating when they become hopeless, when they find out that their darkest nightmare will soon become their reality. How do their body function when they find themselves in utter helplessness, bound by the norms choking on their own fate which they have no power to change.

Quite like her mother, Mukta felt the similar inability to take charge of her circumstances. Since her early childhood, she saw her mother suffer, inconsolable, slowly dying of hopelessness in front of her eyes. As she slowly disappeared to her illness, mostly cause by heart ache, Mukta was equally helpless. She didn't know how to help her dying mother, so she "*sat there sobbing, wiping her tears*" (Herman, 2017, p.64). she had no choice but to take charge and save her mother, so she tried to call a doctor. The powerlessness and lack of social value added to her experience of trauma growing up as a daughter of village prostitute as she was refused by the doctor who after making her wait for a long time told her without any hesitation that he is not

willing to give treatment to his dying mother. As he says “*Don’t be so sure that I will come to your house after my dinner. I might want to sleep after.*” (Herman, 2017, p.65). He took away the ray of hope from Mukta who counted each second waiting dutifully for the doctor so he could help her mother.

As her mother’s health declined, she was unable to entertain the men who visited her. As they lost their interest in her the way for them to earn their living also faded. They had no food to eat and nothing to fill their bellies with. Belonging to a lower caste, facing the discrimination they had to survive with hunger for days and days, selling the household items for survival. Mukta at a young age of eight years was facing these tough circumstances while she had to face the emotional pain of watching her mother suffer endlessly. A naive girl, with no experience of the world and lack of understanding of the workings of the world she decided to sacrifice herself.

Not knowing fully what she was getting into, she decided to take the place of her mother and become the temple prostitute. The decision to become a prostitute without fully knowing the meaning of the term and what it entails was also motivated by her helplessness as she could no longer tolerate the continuous nagging of Sakubai about how they were unable to afford food and her amma’s sickness. Although it may appear in the narrative that it was a choice that was made by Mukta, her own decision. However, it must also be noted that she was only eight at the time and was pressurized by an adult without being informed about what she was about to experience or endure. Another important factor is the visit from the brothel owner who completely dismissed her autonomy, her right on her body as she said to Mukta when she spoke to her in a clear manner “*if you hadn’t agreed you would still have to do it. Nobody was going to wait for you to make up your mind. You are born to do this*” (Trasi, 2017, p.68). here it was clearly indicated by her that Mukta had no role to play in her own destiny, her own life and

what she wanted to be. She was helpless in this regard as she had to do what her mother warned her against i.e. to become a village prostitute.

After the rituals she was taken to a place where a man came and bargained for her price. Unaware of the proceedings and how they are related to her she whispered to sakubai that she wanted to leave as her mother must be waiting for her. However, the brothel owner had already received a handsome sum of money in exchange of her virginity hence she had no chance of escape. At the age of eight, Mukta who was completely uninformed about what it meant to become a prostitute and serve men, was forcefully sent to a room where soon she was accompanied by the old man who had purchased her. As he entered, Mukta's nervous system alarmed her, nothing felt right. she was overwhelmed by the force with which she was dealt with in this brothel, she was scared and the fact that nobody was ready to listen to her, fuelled her helplessness even further.

As Herman points out "Traumatic reactions occur when action is of no avail" (Herman, 2015, p. 34). As in this scenario, where Mukta is forced against her will within the brothel, with lack of support and unavailability of any help from adult she was bound to face sexual and psychological trauma resulting from her helplessness. As she sat in the room, blankly, not knowing how to save herself the man who had purchased her entered the room and "*Without another word the man began unbuttoning his shirt and loosening his belt, shedding his clothes one by one and flinging them onto the chair.*" (Trasi, 2017, p.76). in this whole scenario her willingness or consent was not taken into consideration even for a brief second. Young Mukta knew no better as she tried to hide by sliding herself under the bed. Which depicts her immature thought process and child like innocence.

As an eight year girl, practically only a child, she should have been enjoying her childhood, but here she was, stuck in a brothel against her and her mother's will "*trying unsuccessfully not*

to cry.” But it was of no use. As she recalled a “large hairy hand” grabbing her soon before she was dumped on the bed (Trasi, 2017, p.76). for Mukta resistance was not viable, she had no chance against this old man who was way more powerful than her, both physically as well as figuratively. He had authority and power, not to mention the money and resources to rape an underage girl with complete use of his force. As Herman talks about the psychological trauma of victim, she claims that “*When neither resistance nor escape is possible, the human system of self defence becomes overwhelmed and disorganized.*” (Harman, 2015, p.34). in the narrative, Mukta faced such circumstances of overwhelmed and disorganized nervous system. She had no chance winning this situation.

No matter how much she screamed or cried her voice fell on the deaf ears as she recorded in the narrative that “*I screamed for Sakubai, but he cupped his hand over my mouth. I whimpered under his firm grip*” (Trasi, 2017, p.77). no matter how much she resisted or shouted she was not rescued as she was in such a space where perpetrator was protected. Herman in the context of psychological trauma refers to the concept of ‘Traumatic Transference’ as she claims that it is more than an experience of terror. She defines this term as an “*experience of helplessness*” and refers to that exact moment of trauma when the victim “*utterly helpless unable to defend herself*” and as she cries for help, she faces disappointment as no one bothers to come to her help hence “*She feels totally abandoned*” (Herman, 2015, p.52).

While Mukta was overwhelmed, she still tried her best to clearly articulate her unwillingness for the procession of events around her sexual abuse. As she tried to run once again and this time, she went to one of the corners of the room for safety she hid beneath a table. Hoping against all the odds she still tried one last time to convince this man to leave her alone. she told him that she didn’t want to be there and begged him for mercy, so he might let her go back. In reaction to all her pleadings he laughed and grabbed her wrist, saying ‘*you will get used to this*’

(Trasi, 2017, p.77). this is how she became the victim of sexual and psychological trauma at such tender age when she was supposed to go to school and dream of her bright future.

The event of Mukta's rape caused her severe physical and mental trauma as she recalled "*I did not know how long I had cried, how long the pain had lasted... most of what I remember was my face wet with tears*" (Trasi, 2017, p.78). in this state of pain and trauma she was left unattended, with no shoulder to cry on all her appeals for mercy were rejected. Judith Herman talks in her book about psychological trauma and its indicators. As she claimed in her book that when traumatic events happen people often cry for help and support and in case "*this cry is not answered, the sense of basic trust is shattered*" (Herman, 2015, p. 56) with no one to rely on Mukta internalized her trauma which then became a part of her personality, to trouble her for the rest of her life. No matter what happens after facing such a brutal sexual trauma it is impossible for the victim to develop healthy attachments and live a normal life.

Within this equation Mukta was not the only one who was helpless, her mother was equally a victim as she had failed to protect her daughter. All her efforts to keep her daughter from becoming a prostitute and face sexual abuse went in vain as she saw her daughter who had been through the most severe form of trauma. Unable to contain her frustration and overwhelmed by her sense of helplessness she started screaming. She was abusing everyone who was part of the village alongside the goddess who they were dedicated to. She held everyone responsible for her trauma and her daughter's rape "*All your upper casts are responsible for allowing us to rot... you destroyed my daughter too. It was Amma. She stood there, her hands trembling from sickness, her agony spread on her tired face*" (p.79). In this moment she had lost everything and she had no more willingness to continue with her life. She understood her isolation as she could not spot a single soul who tried to help her or stood with her daughter including her own mother.

As Herman claimed that “Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life.” (Herman, 1997, p.56). we may observe this helplessness as Mukta’s mother screamed. Her resistance and anger were not taken lightly as the villagers started to call her names. They were angry at her for speaking up her trauma. For people like Mukta and her mother there is no refuge as the villagers did not think she deserved to talk in such tone, coming from such a lowly background, a sex worker. While Mukta’s mother was helpless, they were not and for that they started to beat her up with the lathis. As they all hit her, she laid on the floor “in the pool of blood” (Trasi, 2017, p.80). equally helpless, Mukta laid on the floor next to her mother trying to shield her from the pain of merciless beating.

Her mother died right in front of her eyes as she watched without anything she could do for her she looked at her face, noticing how her mother was smiling through the pain as she held Mukta’s hand. In that moment she knew for sure that she had lost her... forever” (Trasi, 2017, p.80). It was her helplessness in that instance, when she witnessed her mother bleeding to death, getting beaten up by the mob, crying with pain that was imprinted in her mind and affected her in many ways. For instance, one very important transformation observed in Mukta’s character was her inability to speak. She lost her voice, her skill of communication as she saw her mother fade after getting raped mercilessly. Not only did she lose her power to communicate but her subconscious tried to wall her painful memories from her as she tried hard “to piece every hazy bit of memory together”, from the day of her mother’s death.

As Herman claims that psychological trauma is caused by the inability of human subconscious to process the overwhelming incidents. Hence as Mukta tried to piece together the images of her traumatic experience i.e. “ Amma laying on the floor, the pool of blood, the rain” (Trasi, p.81) She lost her ability to speak. Even after trying very hard, she was unable to make any sound. Hence human capacity to tolerate such instances of trauma is completely lost when these

traumatic events are coupled with the feelings of complete powerlessness as observed in the character and circumstances of Mukta. It was her mother's helplessness that led her to the state of acute depression as she lost her will to live knowing she could not do anything for her daughter. It was society's way of systematically disempowering her by snatching away her rights to choose her own life, and make decisions for her daughter. It was her inability to decide the course of her life and the circumstances of her daughter's life.

Conclusion

An indepth narrative study of the selected literary work points out that in the context of sex trafficking psychological trauma is one of the outcomes. For such victims of childhood abuse and underage sexual exploitation most traumatic of the factors is their inability to address base in an informed manner. When the victims of sex trafficking are victimized at such young age it promotes inhumanity and further pushes our society towards destabilization. As observed through the character of Mukta, and her mother the inability of the social structures to provide shelter to such women lead to their continuous suffering and at times proves to be life threatening making justice a questionable institution within that society. Such inhumanity may also lead us towards an apathetic society where human rights and justice have no value.

The development of any nation or country does not only depend on their economic growth and their scientific advancement. According to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) sixteen of the major goals for 2030 include gender equality as SDG 4 and peace and justice as SDG 16. Both these goals indicate that there is need for us to advocate change for the victims of severe gender based sexual trauma and exploitation. Further research addressing sexual violence and trafficking will play a transformative role through an influence on public discourse and encouragement of collaborative solutions to these challenges across sectors.

References

1. Baldwin, J., & Power, C. (2020). Narrative, trauma, and the politics of memory. *Trauma Studies Quarterly*, 8(2), 110–123.
2. Brown, R. (2022). Women, violence, and trauma recovery: Revisiting Judith Herman's model. *Journal of Feminist Psychology*, 34(1), 44–59.
3. Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
4. Doezema, J. (2010). *Sex slaves and discourse masters: The construction of trafficking*. Zed Books.
5. Freedman, J. (2020). *Gender, violence and politics in the Democratic Republic of Congo*. Routledge.
6. Graham, L. (2013). *Bouncing back: Rewiring your brain for maximum resilience and well-being*. New World Library.
7. Herman, L., & Vervaeck, B. (2005). *Handbook of narrative analysis*. University of Nebraska Press.
8. Herman, J. L. (2015). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence-from domestic abuse to political terror* (Rev. ed.). Basic Books.
9. Krishnan, L. "Childrearing: The Indian Perspective." In *Child Development: The Indian Perspective*, edited by A. K. Shrivastava, NCERT Press, 1998, pp. 25–55
10. Kumar, M. (2023). Devadasi practice in contemporary India: Continuities and challenges. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 45(2), 223–240.
11. Mehta, S. (2022). Literary voices against trafficking: A study of women's resistance in contemporary Indian fiction. *Indian Literature Review*, 56(3), 88–97.
12. Misra, A. (2024). Narratives of silence and survival in Indian women's fiction. *Feminist Literary Review*, 18(2), 91–108.

13. Patel, K., & Deshmukh, A. (2023). Trauma and female subjectivity in postcolonial India. *Postcolonial Studies Today*, 10(1), 19–38.
14. Roy, S. (2021). Gendered violence and resistance in Indian novels. *Journal of Feminist Literary Studies*, 29(4), 112–130.
15. Sahu, P. (2023). Testimonial fiction: Narrating post-trafficking trauma in Indian novels. *Journal of Narrative Studies*, 14(1), 66–83.
16. Srikant, S. (2021). Displaced narratives: Representation of women in Indian trafficking discourse. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 27(1), 34–49.
17. Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence. *Psychological Inquiry*, 15(1), 1–18.
18. Rasi, A. (2017). *The color of our sky: A novel*. William Morrow Paperbacks.
19. UNODC. (2022). *Global report on trafficking in persons 2022*. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. <https://www.unodc.org>
20. Vance, C. (2011). Innocence and experience: Melodramatic narratives of sex trafficking and their consequences. *History of the Present*, 1(1), 79–105.
21. Vickroy, L. (2002). *Trauma and survival in contemporary fiction*. University of Virginia Press.
22. Vickroy, L. (2020). Narrative empathy and witnessing in trauma fiction. *Trauma Studies Quarterly*, 10(1), 45–59.