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Intersectionality in Trauma: Understanding Complex Trauma Experiences and Resilience Factors in the Survivor of Intimate Partner Violence, Adoption Revelation and Migration Stress in *Twelve Patients: Life and Death at Bellevue Hospital* by Eric Manheimer

P. C. Shankamithraa

*II MA English, Department of English
PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore*

P. Rajkumar

*Assistant Professor, Department of English
PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore*

Abstract

*This article focuses on the intersectionality of trauma faced by Alicia Rittner in chapter eleven "The Unloved Woman" of Eric Manheimer's *Twelve Patients: Life and Death at Bellevue Hospital*. It talks about the complex dynamics of trauma that Alicia Rittner went through, looking at the way that coping mechanisms, resilience variables, traumatic events, and the healing process interact in many ways. Alicia's story includes event trauma like her partner's physical abuse, adoption and identity disclosure, stress related to relocation, and financial difficulties, using the prism of trauma theory. The study delves into the ways in which these intertwined traumas impact complex trauma, attachment and developmental trauma, and the emergence of symptoms including anxiety, sadness, and post-traumatic stress disorder. It also emphasizes Alicia's resiliency, coping skills, and the critical role trauma-informed care played in her recovery by shedding light on the complexity of trauma experiences and the importance of comprehensive interventions. This study provides insights into supporting individuals like Alicia in their recovery and resilience-building efforts.*

Keywords: Complex Trauma, Physical Abuse, Adoption Revelation, Anxiety, Trauma Theory.

Introduction

Ever since the existence of humans on earth, they have been subjected to various hardships like terror, war, natural calamities, diseases, health issues and sexual abuse. The past century has witnessed various health scares like the plague, HIV, the Spanish flu and the Covid 19 recently. Though they may cause damage to physical health, they also leave a huge impact on the mental health of people by causing a huge psychological impact causing people to suffer trauma.

It was in 1693, the word trauma surfaced for the first time. It originated from the Greek word *titrōskein*, meaning ‘wound’. Initially, it meant any physical injuries but gradually it has developed to move beyond the physical sphere. In the present-day world trauma means internal wounds or the wounds of an individual’s psyche.

Twelve Patients: Life and Death at Bellevue Hospital is a non-fiction book written by Eric Manheimer, the former medical director of Bellevue Hospital in New York City. The book follows Manheimer’s experiences and stories of twelve different patients he encountered during his time at the hospital. Bellevue Hospital is one of the oldest public hospitals in the United States, known for its history of providing healthcare to underserved populations. The book takes readers into the heart of this renowned institution, shedding light on the challenges faced by both patients and medical staff.

From 1997 to 2012, Dr. Eric Manheimer served as the medical director of Bellevue Hospital. Later he became a clinical professor at the School of Medicine at New York University. The book was released on July 10, 2012. Dr. Eric Manheimer wrote this book as a dedication to the patients and the hard-working medical professionals, nurses, and social workers, he worked with at Bellevue Hospital Centre for 15 years. This book served as an inspiration for the NBC medical drama *New Amsterdam*.

A Glimpse of Chapter Eleven “The Unloved Woman”

Chapter Eleven “The Unloved Woman” of the book shows how intimate partner violence causes trauma. This chapter talks about the traumatic life of Alicia Rittner. She is brought into Bellevue Hospital years after her last visit. This time it’s an emergency as she was physically assaulted by her common-law husband at 29 weeks pregnant. Both her child and Alicia were in critical condition. The doctors had to perform an emergency c-section to save her premature baby. She had a lacerated lung and they had operated on her. Alicia was born in Argentina and soon after her birth, her biological parents were killed. She was adopted by an upper-middle military family. She didn’t know she was adopted until she was a teenager. Soon after knowing the truth, she left her family and stayed with her friend. When she was 15 years old, she fell in love with a North American hippie, got pregnant, left Argentina and moved to the US. Her son Issac was born in the US, where she led a poor life. It was in her late twenties that she first visited Bellevue for severe migraine. However, there was nothing wrong with her body physically and the doctors confirmed it after a series of tests. She later became involved with Gregory Annas, who was very loving at first but soon he became very controlling and started hitting her. He even put Alicia and their unborn child in danger. He was arrested by the police and taken to prison. Alicia was slowly recovering from surgery. But soon another obstacle hit her where she had to prove in front of the social services that she was mentally fit to take care of her newborn daughter or her daughter would be put in foster care. Alicia now has a long road of therapies like behavioural therapy, dialectal therapy and so on.

Intersectionality in Trauma

Alicia Rittner’s story reveals the complex interactions between many traumatic experiences, coping strategies, resilience variables, and the healing process when examined through the prism of trauma theory. Using trauma theory, the following analysis is done on Alicia’s story:

Event Trauma refers to a psychological condition that occurs in response to a highly stressful or traumatic event. Alicia suffers from event trauma as a result of her common-law husband’s physical abuse throughout her pregnancy, which puts her and her unborn child in danger. Her physical safety and well-being are seriously threatened by this traumatic occurrence, which has left her feeling extremely vulnerable, afraid, and hurt. This could be seen from her son’s statement in

the book, “He had made slow cuts, little ones, almost not noticeable, but persistent, and he stole her from herself, until he owned her” (Manheimer 304).

She experienced event trauma related to identity disruption, and loss of a sense of belonging when she learned about her adoption as a teenager and learned that her biological parents had passed away soon after her birth in Argentina. This realization influences Alicia’s view of herself and adds to her past pain.

Alicia’s experiences with trauma were compounded by her teenage move to the US, her poverty-stricken upbringing, and her struggles as a single mother. These events are linked to trauma connected to displacement, socioeconomic pressures, and acclimating to new environments.

Complex Trauma refers to prolonged and repetitive exposure to traumatic events. Though this concept was developed by many researchers, one of the key figures in shaping complex trauma is Dr. Judith Herman. Alicia’s story exemplifies complex trauma that arises from the fusion of several traumatic occurrences, such as intimate partner abuse, adoption disclosure, stress related to migration, and financial difficulties. Alicia’s mental health and well-being are impacted by a complex web of emotional, psychological, and social issues that result from these intersecting traumas. Complex trauma is ubiquitous in Alicia’s life, as seen by the cumulative impact of multiple traumas that lead to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, sadness, and difficulty coping with day-to-day pressures. This could be seen from her son’s statement in the book, “The worst part for me was seeing my mother grovel for the guy. I mean she lost her self-respect. To not provoke that guy, she would try to be perfect” (Manheimer 304).

Attachment and Developmental Trauma are interconnected. They relate to disruptions or challenges in early relationships and experiences in childhood. Alicia’s experiences with adoption, identity discovery, and broken familial bonds during her early years have all contributed to her attachment and developmental trauma, which has an impact on her ability to feel safe, trusting, and in control of her emotions. Her coping mechanisms, interpersonal interactions, and reactions to stress and misfortune are all influenced by these early experiences. Alicia’s attachment trauma is made worse by the trauma of intimate partner violence, which makes her feel helpless, betrayed, and afraid in relationships, especially with romantic partners and caregivers.

Alicia exhibits resilience in the face of severe trauma and adversity by using adaptive coping mechanisms like getting medical attention after an attack, ending abusive relationships, and participating in therapeutic interventions for mental health support. Alicia’s will to demonstrate her mental preparedness for motherhood, participate in therapeutic modalities such as dialectical and behavioural therapy, and stand up for her own and her child’s rights despite institutional obstacles are more examples of her resilience. This is seen in her statement in the book, “I deserve the punishment I got” (Manheimer 297).

To effectively address the varied needs of people with trauma histories, Alicia’s story emphasises the significance of trauma-informed care principles. Crucial to Alicia’s recovery process is knowledge of the effects of trauma on mental health, trauma-specific interventions, safety and empowerment, and resilience-building techniques.

This chapter could be analysed through the lens of Social Context and Intersectionality. Alicia’s story emphasizes how trauma is influenced by a variety of variables, including poverty, stigma associated with mental illness, stress related to migration, and gender-based violence. The impact of these socioeconomic determinants of health on Alicia’s trauma experiences, her ability to access resources, and her obstacles to recovery highlights the importance of providing comprehensive care that is culturally aware.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the examination of Alicia Rittner's story via the prism of trauma theory offers a profound comprehension of the intricacies entailed in her recovery process. A number of important insights are revealed by looking at event trauma, complex trauma, attachment and developmental trauma, coping strategies, resilience, trauma-informed care, and intersectionality.

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