

# Memory as a Conduit for Trauma and Healing: A Psychoanalytic Study in Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth*

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## Abstract

*Trauma memories often have a powerful impact in causing psychological and emotional distress, recollection of those haunting events is unlike usual remembrances, they are more intrusive, fragmented and vivid to process for an individual. Those preserved memories in the unconscious mind can profoundly get triggered when an individual encounters a similar traumatic environment or event even after a long period. The purpose of the study is to explore how memories can be both a source of grief and a lane towards healing in Anuradha Roy's novel The Folded Earth. The study uses a qualitative textual analysis, a close reading method and the trauma theory of Cathy Caruth as a theoretical framework. Anuradha Roy, an Indian writer whose narrative often delves into the themes of trauma, memory and identity crises that occur due to the psychological and emotional suffering of her characters. In the novel The Folded Earth, the protagonist Maya's memories of her deceased husband Michael and her past life are often interwoven with her present psyche which causes distress in her present life. This paper brings out the complex interplay between trauma and memory, where memories play dual roles as a conduit of trauma and healing in the process of bereavement for an affected individual.*

**Keywords:** Trauma, Memory, Loss, Grief, Reminiscence, Psychological and Emotional Well-being

Literature is a work of art which unfolds the stories of individuals within a social structure and also lends its hands to exploring and expressing ideas, emotions and experiences of an individual or a community. It has played a significant role in human ethos; among many dynamic elements, the most prominent feature explored by literature is trauma. The significant relationship between literature and trauma grounds a crucial role, as literary works operate as a medium through which an individual or a community can understand, process or coherent their physical, psychological and emotional sufferings and recovery or healing. Trauma in literature can be diverse into personal, historical, cultural, and intergenerational. Trauma studies

in Indian literature have offered valuable perceptions into the various types of traumas that have a strong impact on influencing people in Indian society. Literary works like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* depict the trauma of political upheaval whereas Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* lights out the trauma of repression and Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* represents the trauma of the Naxalite movement. Omprakash Valmiki's *Joothan* explores the floating caste-based trauma transmission across generations. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusion* and Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* bring out gender-based trauma such as patriarchy and sexual violence against women. Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Yasmin Khan's *In the Name of God* probe cultural trauma such as communal violence. Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* and *Mother of 1084* depicts the migrant labour's trauma and their sufferings.

The narrative technique of Memory plays a significant role in trauma literature. The characteristic features of memory including flashbacks, non-linear memories, stream of consciousness and retrospection are widely used by psychic writers to develop the depth of the current behaviour or the psyche, unresolved conflicts, concealed motivations and crucial moments of the past undergone by the characters. These narratives effectively help the readers to engage with the character's ethereal horrific memories of the past causing traumatic dilemmas in present existence. The implementation of cognitive memory narrative in literature mirrors the complex human reality and allows the readers to analyse themes such as identity, trauma and loss. The globally recognized authors like Harper Lee, Toni Morrison, Emily Bronte and Gabriel Garcia Marquez have used retrospective narratives in their celebrated works such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Beloved*, *Wuthering Heights* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* to explore childhood memories, traumatic memories of former slaves and familial histories.

Anuradha Roy is an Indian writer who often employs a non-linear narrative style to examine interwoven timelines, parallel narratives, flashbacks and memories to build emotional depth in her novels. Her first novel *An Atlas of Impossible Longing* has been deciphered into 15 languages. Her novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* made her achieve the honourable Sahitya Akademi Award. Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* delves into the themes of love, memory, loss and resilience. It illustrates the plight of a woman named Maya who lost her husband at a very young age battling to rebuild her life. The novel set in the Himalayan region Ranikhet provides a psychological space for Maya to heal and recover from her desolate traumatic past. The novel explores not only the personal trauma of Maya but also deals with the collective trauma of social and political environment upheaval of Ranikhet town.

Cathy Caruth, a critic and a prominent theorist in trauma studies explains trauma in her authentic work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narratives and History* as an emotionally drowning experience caused by disastrous events or shocking accidents that ultimately result in persistent uncontrollable hallucinations. Her analytical vision of trauma and hallucination is evident through the central character Maya in *The Folded Earth*. Maya's husband Michael encounters a terrible death due to a sudden environmental hazard while he treks in Roopkund. This disastrous occurrence deeply disturbs Maya's inner psyche which results in the provocation of her subconscious mind to hallucinate. After her husband's tragic death, Maya experiences terrible nightmares in the unsettled atmosphere that triggers her to move to the place where Michael desires to reside. Maya decides to seek help from a well-known priest of her husband to leave Hyderabad. On her way, she happens to come across a pool where she hallucinates her husband's dead in the pool.

Memories are an active and constructive process that stores incidents of the frequent phenomena of habitual events in the subconscious mind. Memories are sorted into different classifications mainly short-term, long-term, sensory, autobiographical, emotional, flashbulb, prospective and working. Memories that appear in an episodic form are a kind of long-term memory that

is preserved in the hippocampus, an area located in the temporal lobe of the brain that helps to recollect a particular episode, event or experience of an individual including specific facts such as time, place, emotion and other sensory experiences. When those episodic memories get prompted negatively it carries a pathological psychic impact on an individual. In the psychological literature, the term pathology refers to thoughts or behaviours that create ill health and abnormal activities. Pathological memories are the recollection of episodic memory due to some sensory experience that grounds a negative effect on an individual.

The pathological sensible psyche influence of episodic memory is powerfully explored by Roy through Maya's response to Michael's death. After acknowledging the devastating incident, Maya endures restless anxiety that forces her to exhaustively seek answers for her living in the void human ethos until she reaches Golconda Fort, a place where Maya shares happiness with her husband. The episodic memory activates when Maya remembers the words of her husband.

The process of memory plays a crucial part in understanding the impact of trauma. When a certain trauma affects an individual, he or she might look healthy over a passage of time but the traumatic memories continue to haunt their current existence. Here in the novel *The Folded Earth*, Maya seems to overcome the grief of her husband's death after the passage of several years but in reality, she struggles to get a better sleep because of the haunted nightmares. When Veer, nephew of Diwan Sahib who is the owner of the cottage where Maya stays once shows her a photograph of a woman who almost slipped and fell into the freezing water over 16,000 feet. The scene in the photograph triggers her pathological memory of her husband's death. Though the years have fluidly progressed, Maya feels unease about it "I thought I would cry out in pain and fear" (82).

In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy states that the consequences of post-traumatic memories do not affect the individuals over a temporal progression but disturb the vulnerable traumatic individual through recurring nightmares without alteration. In the novel *The Folded Earth*, the photograph shown by Veer to Maya acts as a catalyst for recollecting the core traumatic memory of Maya and brings pathological effects such as tormenting nightmares and horrors can be evident when she says "That night, I had a vivid dream... I felt myself falling too, flailing, unmoored, weightless, helpless, until I woke up sweating under my blankets." (88)

Positive memories are intensely different from traumatic memories. Positive memories help individuals to heal from their distressing experiences. Recollection of pleasant or comforting memories offers emotional balance with the penetrating emotions linked with trauma. Positive reminiscent memories can emerge from neighbourhood people who often function as a healing power to the traumatic people. In *The Folded Earth* Maya finds solace by being in the crowded neighbourhood environment rather than being confined within the suffocating atmosphere. The noisy and active environment helps her to transverse the distressing experiences and fosters a speedy healing process. She comments,

"I would be held back by a memory: that's the chipped blue ceramic bowl Michael and I bought when we set up house, that patched and darned sweater I never wear is the one my mother knitted for me, and that's the toaster Diwan Sahib gave me during my first month in Ranikhet." (101-102)

Maya not only underwent pathological trauma rather she finds comfort in the positive memory of her husband. The euphoric memories of Michael operate as a catalyst to heal the wounded spirit of Maya. Roy parallelly connects the healing transformation of Maya through the comparison of a stream, as the endless flow of water which provokes the positive memories of Maya that she shares with her husband occupies all her emptiness and offers her a yearning of mediate solitude, "I had not thought of it for years, but the air, the trees, the aquarium-green light all around, took me back to a forest near Hyderabad where I had once gone with Michael." (103) This positive memory serves as a comfort for her isolated life.

This paper brings out Roy's narrative technique of memory in the novel *The Folded Earth* and how it acts as a source of trauma and healing for existential beings. Memories of the traumatic death of Michael function as a pathological psychic memory in the unconscious mind of Maya. These memories affect her present life by creating nightmares of her husband's death. However, other positive memories of Michael and her relationship with her neighbours in the new town operate as a source of solace and help her discover meaning for her survival amidst traumatic chaos. The novel powerfully distinguishes the impact of positive and negative memories and significantly illustrates the contribution of positive memories in the human mind which offers comfort and resilience to the traumatic individual's psyche.

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