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TRAUMA AND RECOVERY: A STUDY OF PTSD MOTIFS IN KISHWAR DESAI'S NOVEL SEA OF INNOCENCE

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Abstract

In light of a renewed understanding of trauma studies, PTSD-affected characters in fiction are a fairly intriguing topic. As a conclusion to the Simran Singh series, The Sea of Innocence revolves around her confronting the drug mafia and sexual trafficking on the unassuming beaches of Goa. The paper elucidates the mental agony of the protagonist, mourning family members, as well as those of the key suspects. Scrutinising each of them under the lens of depression, specifically, PTSD, is the purpose of this paper. It hopes to connect the link between post-traumatic studies and popular fiction, highlighting a social evil. The lasting effects of a crime on the mental imprints of those concerned, particularly young adults, are labelled in the paper. Their coping symptoms to alleviate the wide range of PTSD symptoms for each character in Desai's novel are discussed.

Keywords Sea of Innocence, Kishwar Desai, PTSD.

INTRODUCTION

A well-known name in present-day popular fiction, Kishwar Desai (1956-) is COSTA's first novel award winner for her Witness the Night. The middle-aged Simran Sigh is the unconventional detective in the crime series- Witness the Night (2010), Origins of Love (2012), and The Sea of Innocence (2013). The Sea of Innocence is very similar to the search for the missing in Lisa Jewel's Then She Was Gone(2017). The characters in the novels are victims of crime and corruption who develop depression. This paper contributes to the existing PTSD perspectives of modern fiction. This article aims to provide supporting literature

regarding the natural ability of PTSD- affected characters to overcome their depressive states. Some background on PTSD is necessary before diving into the analysis.

The Oxford Dictionary defines 'trauma' thus: "1. a deeply distressing event; 2. Med. Physical injury; 3. Emotional shock following a stressful event." (Compact Oxford Reference Dictionary). However, the word trauma is also sometimes associated with the altered behaviour of a person after a major injury or life-threatening situation. The American Psychiatric Association has described PTSD as "a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who

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have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event, series of events or set of circumstances...Examples include natural disasters, serious accidents, terrorist acts, war/combat, rape/sexual assault, historical trauma, intimate partner violence, and bullying."(APA, pg. 1) The term PTSD or Post Traumatic Stress Disordergained popularity in the 1980s (Ehlers and Clark, 2008), with increasing evidence mounting on the aftereffects of trauma. The diagnostic criteria for PTSD is a person suffering from either one or multiple PTSD symptoms lasting for more than a month. In some cases, PTSD characteristics in a person are delayed; thus characterised as delayed-onset PTSD (DSM-Vol. 5, pg. 276). Initially, it was widely assumed that PTSD affected war veterans after their harrowing experiences in the war.

Recent critical literature studies have provided necessary insight that supports the view that psychoanalytical thinkers combine with literary critiques to reach a collaborative approach. Trauma-inducing stress means serious long-term negative consequences, with the past haunting the mental state of the characters, leading to confusion (Heidarizadeh, pg. 789). According to DSM, a diagnosis of PTSD should be considered "when personality changes emerge and persist after an individual has been exposed to extreme stress" (DSM-5, pg. 649)

Substance Abuse and Addiction in the Novel

In the past few days, I realised that the naivety that once existed on Goa's beaches had disappeared. There was an uncomfortable and very apparent dichotomy between life on the beach and the rest of Goa... Even though the beaches looked serenely cosmopolitan on the surface and offered a variety of sea sports and other innocent pleasures, there was a looming darkness around the edges. (pg. 8)

According to DSM (fifth edition), ten different types of drugs can activate the "brain reward system", inducing behavioural changes and addiction. Gambling disorder is also put on the same pedestal as substance abuse disorder due to the similar activation of the reward system. Simran Singh receives information from her forlorn police friend Amarjith that her case could be more than just a missing person; "Once upon a time, Goa was the place for drug consumption. Now it's become a big transit hub for sending drugs to other places, as well" (pg. 175) Corpses of foreign nationals were stuffed with drugs like heroin and cocaine in order to ship them overseas safely: "It sounded like the dead made perfect drug mules... with the complicity of the police and the politicians, the international drug smugglers who operate from Goa have perfected each aspect of sending these corpses back, right down to the death certificate."(pg. 189) As Amarjith pointed out, the Goan police are always at the mercy of local people to trace the thugs involved in the drug racket. The Anti-Narcotic Cell (ANC) are trying to ensure that the tourism industry in Goa is unharmed by the frequent deaths associated with drug overdose. In North Goa's Morjim, a foreign national was arrested for the possession of hydroponic weed, charas and LSD. (The Indian Express: December 16, 2023) Goa, being a popular tourist destination, has been prone to drug-related activities; thus, keeping a continued vigilance is a priority to the ANC. Street vendors like Veeramma were "the eyes and ears of this beach." (pg. 53).

Vulnerable young adults who are leered under the guise of a well-paid job in the Casinos are introduced to drugs; as Vicky2 points out, once they become addicts, they show behavioural changes. Some, like Simran in the novel, are drugged without their knowledge: "With every step, the rocks in front of me expanded and contracted, the spaces between them becoming impossibly far and wide." (pg. 70) Being a feminist, Kishwar Desai has expressed her disgust of young drug addicts raped and mutilated: "Yet there was nothing funny about the implication of young men

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snaring women like fish and then selling them or slicing them up" (pg. 7).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Keus and Harde (2022) traced how children's novels encourage young readers' cognitive development, predominantly how they enable the ability to interpret the actions of people coping with PTSD and encourage engagement with characters' thoughts, emotions, and goals. Their analysis focused on Bardugo's accurate portrayals of PTSD through her characters. Through a resisting imagination, children who Burdugo's book cannot become empathetic towards people with mental illnesses and even stigmatise them. Briedik (2021), in his article, 'Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in The Sun Also Rises', investigates if Jake Barnes, the protagonist in Hemingway's novel, suffers from PTSD symptoms. Using The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders as the benchmark for diagnostic criteria, the study has elucidated several references from the novel to prove the theory. Barnes's depression is present in the novel, and it is well-represented in the article.

Regehr and Regehr (2012) have reviewed the societal, cultural, and physiological impact of rape from Shakespearean times to the present. They have studied Shakepreare's Titus Andronicus and considered the rape and consequent inhuman mutilation of Lavinia. Although an Elizabethan drama, the depiction of rape and subsequent trauma has made it relatable in modern times, especially with the renewed understanding of trauma studies. Ding and Zheng (2006): Trauma can impact emotion, cognition, and body, leading to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This study aims to introduce the concept, classification, diagnosis standard, measurement, and symptoms of trauma and PTSD. It also analyses their relationship by collecting 58 articles and reviewing 15 related articles. PTSD is the fourth most common psychiatric disease, consisting of acute, chronic, and delayed forms. The American Psychiatric Association has six symptom criteria for diagnosis. Studying psychological responses after trauma and symptoms of PTSD is crucial for clinical traumatic patients. Sameer Jauhar & Allan H. Young (2021) remind us of how the concept and treatments for depression have changed since the publication of Robert Burton's The Anatomy of Melancholy in 1621. They have referred to recent literature to neatly summarise the most popular treatments available for PTSD and other cognitive There has been a disorders. significant improvement in the medical treatments available due to scientific intervention and research. They have suggested a few first-line therapies, which seem to have aided in the treatment methods. This article concludes that only science can help overcome psychiatric disorders such as PTSD. Ehlers and Clark(2008) give insight into the difference between Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and Cognitive therapy (CT) by identifying the key variations. They add that psychologists have developed an adaptation of the treatment program that is suitable for children and adolescents. They have pronounced how a combination of phenomenological, experimental, and treatment development studies has helped in the formulation of CBT and CT.

Miller (2019), in her thesis, has delved into modern teen fiction to illustrate how most of the protagonists suffer from PTSD. She is astounded by the subtle portrayal and acceptance of adolescents suffering from depression. The novels considered for study include the Hunger Games trilogy and the Harry Potter series. She examined the trauma-to-reaction-to-recovery process. She commends the inclusion of PTSD and trauma-induced characters in popular fiction as a source of communication. Sulaiman (2014), in his thesis, has analysed the two main characters, Elsa and Marin, in Wendy Corsi Staub's novel Scared to Death. The author has

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used a psychological approach related to the psychological aspect of characters in the novels. Marin learned to overcome her grief by not focusing on "everything that can make her feel helpless and start moving to the good things." (Sulaeman, pg. 49). The characters learn to cope with PTSD successfully.

Major Characters Simran Singh

The middle-aged spinster and social worker, Simran Singh, is seen for the last time in Kishwar Desai's three-part detective series. According to DSM (fifth edition), "craving or a strong desire or urge to use alcohol" is one of the diagnostic criteria for Alcohol Use Disorder (DSM, pg. 491). "When one is staring into an abyss, there is nothing like alcohol to help you jump over it." (pg. 175) Under the development and course of this disorder, DSM has labelled alcoholic adults as being more susceptible to the depressant effects of alcohol upon the brain reward system (DSM, pg. 494). Another example of Simran's addiction to alcohol is understood through these lines from the novel: "I poured a stiff shot into a glass and then knocked it back. As the familiar heat ran down my throat, my mind began to function again." (pg. 57)

As a confessed drinker, Simran feels "drinking, smoking and flirtatious relationships" have added "quality" to her life. Eminent by her resilience to control gambling desires: "I would hate to exchange them for nights in cold card rooms or overheated casinos."(pg. 120) Her perceived traumatic intensity of Liza's rape makes her dysfunctional in everyday life. She adds, "What was the point of a romantic evening when my mind would be engaged with the story of Liza?"(Pg.122) during her date with Dennis. PTSD symptoms of withdrawal and flashbacks are apparent in the novel. Simran sees Liza in every blonde young girl she sees in Goa, thus becoming anxious immediately: "I felt my stomach knot in tension. She reminded me far too much of the girl I had seen

in the video less than an hour ago." (pg. 6) Yet again she has said; "But the video had an unsettling effect. Its very visible sexual overtones and the vulnerability of the girl upset me more than I had thought. I was also puzzled and angry..." (pg. 2)

From the second novel, it can be inferred that Simran is afraid of flying. Although she overcame that fear to save an orphaned baby in dire condition in Origins of Love, she says: "My fear of flying kept me from catching a quick flight back...Feeling depressed and helpless, I pondered whether to send Amarjit a message about the hurdles suddenly in front of me. I nibbled at the remainder of the fish and chips and finished the beer which was tasting rather odd and flat." (pg. 54-6)

After a breakup with her previous beau in Origins of Love because of her fear of commitment, Simran is once again smitten by love in this novel: "But as time flew by, to her disappointment, though there were quite a few very special men, none of them had grabbed my hand permanently." (pg. 77-8) She clearly suffers from commitment issues due to her fear of losing them. However, her endearing love for Durga and her teenage daughter has made her anxious. "Again, I felt under personal attack as the psychological pressure built up on me. After the stress of those earlier videos, I now had to deal with this innocuous-looking image that had far too many implications for me." (pg. 98) Empathising with the missing Liza was second nature to Simran, who was mothering a sexually traumatised teenager. Thus, the videos of sexual assault affected her deeply: "Yesterday's video kept playing in my mind over and over again. I heard Liza's voice in a non-stop loop in my head, begging the man to stop, and wished I could erase the sound from my thoughts, but it just got louder and louder."(pg. 60) Transferring the traumatised effect from the victim to herself is yet another PTSD symptom:

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My head began to pound. Who could have sent this to me? It was a much more frightening video than the first. The first one, though sinister, might have been a bunch of delinquent kids just fooling around. This footage was extremely brutal and explicit. The phone slipped through my hand onto the rug as I fell back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. I felt sick and nauseous, as though it was I who had been molested. (pg. 56)

The Christmas festivities in the night markets of Goan regions could not lift Simran's spirits. She was "still aloof, uncertain and unhappy." (pg. 81). The usual scenery also failed to help her recover from her depression: "The sound of the crickets and the birds seemed to get louder and louder. I told myself to stop imagining things...somebody would wake up from a drug haze and stumble out of the jungle, wondering at the noise. But even that thought didn't make me laugh." (pg. 148) Another expert where she feels completely alienated from her surroundings due to her PTSD: "Had I been less tense and worried, in another time and space, and despite the sweaty bodies around me, I would have been charmed by the atmosphere, too. But right now, there was too much on my mind" (pg. 92).

Simran developed a low sense of security, and she was far from uncovering the truth behind the mystery. She was unsure about her realities and questioned her sanity:"...the triumphant look on Veramma's face: It was gone so quickly I wondered if I had imagined it. My mind was already ravaged by hundreds of conspiracy theories..." (pg. 156) After the news of Marian's possible death broke out, Simran was very traumatised: "I knew I was hyperventilating and sounding high-pitched and hysterical, but I didn't care. Nor could I help it." (pg. 157) Constantly, Simran slips into delirium and imagines the possibility of Liza being alive:

Feeling a little sick, I stared out of the window. The sea was as calm as ever. I could see the bright orange sun diving slowly into the water. The pink-

tinged clouds formed a perfect backdrop. None of it seemed real...And that made me think, for just a fleeting moment, that perhaps Liza had not been killed (pg. 177-182).

Due to a harrowing detective experience in Goa, Simran seeks reconciliation: "Calling home made me yearn for some normalcy in my life again. Compared to my Delhi life, my Goan experience seemed increasingly strange, and I longed for the few peaceful days..." (pg. 78) Solace in steady individuals is often sort out in case of a traumatised person: "I wished Dennis was with me because even though the 'jungle' looked harmless in the morning, I was still preoccupied with thoughts of so many young women being raped every day." (147) Towards the end of the novel, Simran "did not want to focus on the pain" because she had experienced "enough" already (pg. 197). Vacationing in another part of Goa was Simran's method of healing from trauma: "So last week Dennis and I shifted to South Goa to spend some time with his family and get over the evil that we had just confronted." (pg. 196)

Mariam

Mariam, Liza's elder sister, with whom she came to Goa for a vacation, "was barely twenty- four, but seemed much older. Her sister's disappearance really seemed to be taking a toll."(pg. 62) Simran was furious with Marian and everyone else who was related to Liza due to their apparent indifference towards her disappearance. Marian was secretly searching for her sister, who "at first seemed helpful but turned out to be uncaring and duplicitous."(pg. 80) Marian was showing signs of behavioural changes after the trauma of her sister being lost, so "a safe distance" (pg. 88) was maintained between herself and others. The development of PTSD in Marian can be attributed to many things: the trauma of losing her passport; being falsely accused of possession of drugs; finding out that her father is a drug addict; and the

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secretive rape of the police personnel. PTSD symptoms of avoidance of stressors related to the trauma can be attributed to Mariam's behavioural changes. In addition to physical changes such as slimming down and shaggy look, Mariam displayed diagnostic criteria related to 'Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder'. Major depressive disorder is one of the differential diagnoses of this disorder, which results in "restricted food intake, usually in relation to overall energy intake and often [is] associated with weight loss" (DSM- 5, pg. 338)

According to DSM, recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive memories are diagnostic criteria for PTSD. (DSM- 5, pg. 271) In Mariam's own words: "Look, I can tell you how wonderful Goa can be when things are going well, and how one bad experience can make everything turn to ashes." (pg. 115) The readers can infer that the dual personality of Mariam is a coping mechanism to hide her real trauma:

She probably kept quiet about it all, too ashamed to even tell her mother about her troubles and Liza's disappearance, posting emails instead about the wonderful time she was having in Goa, her career in astrology and Liza's mythical travels. Like many other women, over time, she learnt to deal with her sexual exploitation, knowing she would get very little sympathy or justice. In her case, she also covered it all up by inventing another persona, 'Astrologer Anne'. (pg. 186)

Minor Characters Liza Kay

Simran alludes to Scarlet Keeling's case (in the novel) to Lisa's due to their apparent similar lives: "It was the story of a young girl leading an artificial and very adult life, where she was seemingly pushed frenetically into one disturbing situation after another" (pg. 61). To Simran the missing fifteen-year-old Liza "sounded just like any other young girl. Like Durga." (pg. 109-10) Another instance where Simran sympathises with the naivety of the girl is her reflection on Liza thus:

"Apart from the indifference she had faced from Marian and Stanley in Goa, she'd had other things to worry about: she was a young pretty girl, left more or less to her own devices, on a beach that was far from safe." (pg. 145) In the diagnostic features enlisted as essential to being considered as PTSD, Liza comes under "threatened or actual sexual violence category". The criteria includes, "forced sexual penetration, alcohol/drugfacilitated sexual penetration, abusive sexual contact. non-conduct sexual abuse. sexual trafficking" (DSM-5, pg. 274).

Stanley Kay is the head of the drug addicts in Goa: "On the cement platform under the banyan tree sat a man with a long red beard and flowing locks...I was probably in the presence of some of the early flower children who had stayed behind and made Goa their home." (pg. 89). Hosting ecstasy parties along the shady beaches at night made him a cult figure. To the protagonist, he resembled "sanyasis who often trekked around the Himalayas, looking for spiritual succour" who has found his salvation "at the end of a reefer" (pg. 149). Stanley exhibits signs of PTSD due to his "socially withdrawn behaviour, marked diminished interest or participation in significant activities." (DSM- 5, pg. 273) Having no real company and no one but his daughter Mariam beside him, he was aloof: "That despite having lived his entire life in this part of Goa, when the vultures gathered and stole his daughter – he found he was still an alien." (pg. 187)

Simran finds Stanley's depression surfacing during her casual inquiry about Liza: 'She went back to London, of course'...He seemed to have suddenly sobered up. The hysteria had gone" (pg. 153). Stanley has no grip on his life and wants to escape; "But first he would have to get over the trauma of losing his younger daughter – a grief he had never spoken about or discussed" (pg. 195). Moving back to England would help him recover from PTSD, as revealed in the novel.

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Vicky: Another manipulated young mistress of Vinay Gupta who gets homesick in Goa is Vicky. Desai portrays her as the "friendly hostess" of the casino, with the ability to turn into "an ice maiden" when Simran enquires about Liza. Having been affected by PTSD, Vicky sees her mother in Simran: "I really don't know why I'm telling you all this. You remind me of my mother, I think.' She stopped and then blushed, thinking she might have offended me..." (pg. 83) Vicky is brave to have "broken the code of silence" (pg. 196) and helped out the investigators in the case:

...the only reason I'm speaking to you is because, after this incident with Marian, I feel I've had enough...I've tried to quit many times, but I am always forced into returning because he says he needs me. For people like me, like Liza, there can only be one way to escape. You know what I mean. Because he will hunt me down, she seemed harassed and anxious, much older than her years, her hands clasped nervously. (pg. 176)

Unfortunately, her erratic behaviour ultimately leads to her death. DSM, fifth edition, has elucidated that "PTSD is associated with suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, and presence of the disorder may indicate which individuals with ideation eventually make a suicide plan or actually attempt suicide" (DSM- 5, pg. 278) Vicky's sad demise towards the end of the novel evokes one's empathy: 'I realise that no one can ever understand what Vinay Gupta [her boss] did to her and how much she regretted giving up her life and her youth to a man who trapped her with unfulfilled promises." (pg. 196)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study reveals through DSM's diagnostic criteria the prevalence of PTSD in the traumatised characters in A Sea of Innocence. Kishwar Desai, as a novelist, has grasped beyond the trauma to speculate how characters heal to reach "their greater clarity, knowledge and insight"

(Heidarizadeh, pg. 5). By collecting data in the form of quotations, statements in the novel, and relevant facts about the theory of PTSD, the study exposes that the characters can be diagnosed with this specific disorder. From the beginning of the novel, Simran Singh is traumatised by the revelations of the Goan underworld: "One side is very visible and very loud. This is the world where you can be a simple tourist, have fun, indulge in water sports, eat, drink and go home. The other side is where you and I seem to be trapped" (pg. 112-13).

Stephanie Miller has rightly noted that mental illnesses can go unrecognised in fiction: "Seeing a character deal with trauma symptoms without seeking help can show readers how common it is for people to experience mental illness and not seek treatment". (Miller, pg. 62) The Anatomy of Melancholy, first published in 1621, argues the Renaissance science that merely being considered as a chemical imbalance or a hereditary disorder, depression can be a sign of some signal that life is undesired. (Garson, 2023) "The idea of depression as a message, rather than a malfunction, stretches back to the Renaissance." Garson (2023) suggests that recent evidence suggests the powerful effects of therapy prescribed by Robert Burton. However, Jauhar and Young (2023) have reconciled that only scientific intervention and medication can help overcome PTSD. The diagnostic classification systems encompass a heterogeneous group of disorders, and so do the treatments (Jauhar and Young, 2023). APA has strongly recommended four interventions for the treatment of PTSD, all of which are variations of cognitive behavioural (CBT). therapy The categories of recommended by cognitive behavioural therapists, like Cognitive Processing Therapy, Cognitive Therapy, and Prolonged Exposure, all focus on particular aspects of CBT intervention treatments. (APA, PTSD Treatments) The resilience of the characters to aid in the investigation process in spite of the danger posed is a sign of mental

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strength. The characters learn to overcome and recover from the PTSD symptoms once Liza's case is resolved.

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