

**Violence, Child Sexual Abuse and Trauma in Rituparna Chatterjee's *The Water Phoenix***

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**Abstract** The present research paper aims to explore Rituparna Chatterjee's memoir, *The Water Phoenix* (2020). *The Water Phoenix* (2020) is a candid memoir revolving around bullying and child sexual abuse the author suffered from. It also focuses on her attempts to heal from the trauma. The present paper tries to analyse how traumatic events and suffering are portrayed in the memoir. The analysis shows that the author can describe traumatic events but not the traumatic effects. It is observed that the author has given much importance to place while revising the memory of traumatic events. It is also seen that the disruption caused by traumatic events is the primary factor for the reorientation of perception and meaning related to the places mentioned in the memoir. It depicts the author's continuous metaphoric journey from Eden to Hell. As she cannot express the traumatic effects, she uses the characters and settings from children's literature as images. It shows that she was stuck at the age of six when she underwent violence and sexual abuse. Moreover, she is making use of the exposure she has got by reading very few children's stories at a young age.

When it comes to life narratives, most of the research is done to analyse trauma caused by violence, partition and caste/race injustice in the Indian context. Indian memoirs dealing with sexual abuse, and especially those dealing with child sexual abuse, have hardly received the same kind of attention. Thus, the present research is a modest attempt to fill this research gap.

**Keywords:** Violence, Child Sexual Abuse, Trauma, Memoir, Memory

The biggest thing I did to overcome the trauma was to write.

—Rituparna Chatterjee

## Introduction

Expressing trauma helps people heal. Many choose writing as a way to recollect and express their past, and they witness change after writing. Authors try to abreact and come to terms with their experiences, often using fictional narratives, while fewer people give the world a bold and honest account of their suffering through memoirs. In a memoir, the author narrates his/her personal experiences and memories. Memoirs talking about the vices in society make the readers aware of the harsh reality of society. In recent times, many victims of child sexual abuse have started to give an account of the abuse and trauma through memoirs. Earlier, this abuse and trauma were either suppressed or expressed fictionally. Nevertheless, even so, the study of child sexual abuse memoirs is not paid the attention it deserves.

The mention of violence and child sexual abuse in Bengali memoirs or life narratives leads us to the very beginning of the Bengali life narrative. Rassundari Devi is regarded as the pioneer of Bengali autobiography because of her work, *Aamar Jiban* (My Life) (1876). It is the first full-length autobiography in the Bengali language and also the first autobiography written by an Indian woman. It talks about Indian women's status, her longing for education and a new identity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a child bride, she was exposed to sexual encounters quite early in life. That her consent was not required in this brings into focus the reality that she had no right over her body and its functions as her body was being used for reproduction. Another critical autobiography by a Bengali woman writer is *Aamar Kathaa* (1913). This is the memoir of Binodini Das, a Bengali actress. It gives an account of her personal and professional life with a faint shade of trauma caused by a broken love affair and the loss of loved ones around her. Dr. Haimabati Sen recalls her life as a child bride in *Dr. Haimabati Sen: From a Child Widow to a Lady Doctor* (2000). She had to bear indecent exposure to her drunk husband having sex with prostitutes, and later, she was sexually abused by her husband. There are many such Bengali women's life narratives that either give incidental references or show themes of

violence and child sexual abuse. The partition of India greatly affected Bengali literature as people started writing memoirs and autobiographies narrating how the partition affected their lives. We find accounts of women's suffering and trauma caused by molestation, rape, abduction, etc., in partition memoirs like Sunanda Sikdar's *Dayamoyeer Katha* (2012). A few anthologies of interviews and accounts of such women are also available, such as *The Other Side of Silence* (2017) by Urvashi Butalia, *No Woman's Land: Women from Pakistan, India & Bangladesh Write on The Partition of India* (2004) by Ritu Menon, etc. In the contemporary era, Rituparna Chatterjee's memoir *The Water Phoenix* (2020) stands out because it is completely centred on different forms of violence and the trauma caused by it.

The present paper aims to study the representation of traumatic events and effects in Rituparna Chatterjee's memoir, *The Water Phoenix: A Memoir of Childhood Abuse, Healing and Forgiveness* (2020), the winner of the national LAADLI Media and Advertising Award for gender sensitivity (non-fiction). The memoir portrays how the author's life altered after losing her mother when she was around five years old. Then she got transferred from one place to another, seeking home and affection, trying to belong somewhere. As a motherless child, in her search for a safe place to live, she got trapped in the labyrinth of bullying, sexual abuse and physical violence and suffered from the uninvited and invisible scar of trauma. The memoir is a spontaneous and conscious recall of the traumatic events the author faced and the trauma that accompanied her throughout her life until she courageously decided to put an end to it.

### **The Plot of *The Water Phoenix* (2020)**

Rituparna Chatterjee's memoir, *The Water Phoenix*, is based on a series of acts of violence, child sexual abuse and trauma, which the author suffered from at a very young age. The narration begins with the description of the author's home, family and the Peepul tree in her garden at Nandurbar, where her family is posted through her father's railway job. Soon, she discovers that no one informed her of her mother's illness and death and her own medical condition of having a hole in her heart. Her father's inability to look after her amidst his job makes the author take shelter in her aunt's home,

where her two male cousins severely bully her. She becomes subject to scolding and physical violence by her aunt and is raped by her uncle at the age of six. Unable to complain anything to her father after seeing him neglect the bullying account, she has no choice but to endure everything quietly. When finally rescued from this hellish house, she spends some time at Nandurbar and Vapi. There, too, she is not safe as she is abused by her sports teacher, Sir, and her father's friends-cum-visitors at home as well as on trains. She is finally sent to a hostel and then to a boarding school at Vapi from 4<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade, where she feels at ease around women, even if she is emotionally abused and bullied by fellow hostel mates, teachers and caretakers.

Meanwhile, she confronts the same uncle at their ancestral house in Calcutta during her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday and is sexually abused yet again. She tries her best to protect herself from possible abuse, especially during her college days. Later in life, some four years after college, she finally finds love, family and a world of her own. However, she keeps feeling guilty for not being able to give enough in any relationship as the trauma continues to haunt her. Then, with the help of meditation, Reiki, etc., she finally realised that trauma was something that she had brought upon herself. She finally comes to terms with her traumatic past and decides to love herself fully. In the end, she forgives her uncle, gets over it ultimately, and starts a new life with her family.

### **Discussion: Portrayal of Traumatic Events**

It is hard to represent traumatic events and their effects, but Chatterjee has tried her best to give a bold account of bullying, violence and child sexual abuse. That is rare as Indian society considers child sexual abuse a taboo topic. She uses graphic and sensory details to describe traumatic events, which help the readers connect with the narrator and visualise the scenes easily. She tries to recount and put in words what her senses feel whenever she faces physical violence. For instance, at the age of six, her cousins lock her in the bathroom with her 'worst terror ever—a big fat gecko'. She describes her immediate responses as screaming, feeling breathless, and her face feeling hot. In another incident, when Uncle P, the bullies' father, takes her and the boys to a public swimming pool every Sunday, the bullies are busy enjoying swimming, and she finally gets some freedom from them. After

a few Sunday visits to the swimming pool, things change. Her uncle takes her to bathe after swimming and rapes her, which she describes in the following words:

I cried softly, with the soap burning my eyes and the pain tearing through me. I focused on watching with my eyes closed, tracing the pain through to the source. Without my realising it, my hand intuitively followed, touching the source of the pain. It turned out to be something soft, yet hard. A fleshy cylinder-like object had entered where I would normally pee from and never touch otherwise. Instinctively, I hit it, trying to remove it like a weak magnet from a metal door and unknowingly pinched it in the process. An even harder slap on my burning, wet cheek. That's when I realised it was P. (25)

The author chooses to tell the readers about her experience with graphic description rather than withholding it or leaving it to the imagination of the readers.

Similarly, she describes the traumatic accounts of physical violence by her cousins and her aunt, emotional violence by her hostel-mates in Vapi and sexual assault by Uncle P twice, once at his home and again during her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday at the Ancestral House in Calcutta. After returning to Nandurbar, she is abused by one of her father's railway friends, Gandhi Gandhidham's Uncle and in her home at Vapi, by her sports teacher, S sir, who comes to visit her father as his friend and some other friends of her father during their stay when she was a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader. She was also abused during her train journeys and then in the boarding school in 6<sup>th</sup> grade by a blind guitar teacher. Later, she is abused by Roadside Romeos on Bombay streets at night during her college days. Here, it is important to note that her father remains uninvolved, unconcerned, and ignorant towards his daughter's life. He is equally responsible for her traumatic life, as neglect is yet another form of violence.

### **The Role of Place**

Almost ten places from Nandurbar, Calcutta, Central India, Valsad, Vapi, Mumbai, and San Fransisco become settings for the memoir. These places are given much importance in narrative recall. Two of the five parts of the memoir: 'Part II: Boarding School' and 'Part III: Bombay' and five chapters: 'The Swimming Pool', 'In the Bardo', 'Up the Ridge', 'Hostel Days' and 'La La Land' are named

after places. The author has capitalised the common names of places like ‘House of Fears’ (for the aunt’s home) and ‘Ancestral House’ (at Calcutta) to highlight the importance of different places where the traumatic events occur. The traumatic events change her perspective towards the places that once held greater socio-cultural and emotional value for her as most of these places become the site for the traumatic events.

This is observed constantly in the memoir. When sent to her aunt’s house, she is excited to be at a new place where she thinks she will be treated as royalty. The motherly affection she seeks from her aunt and her longing to consider it ‘home’ hint that she has positive emotional values attached to the people and place. Soon enough, ironically, she is treated as a powerless person, a prey that can be bullied and abused without the fear of being discovered by the world as she is taking shelter under their roof. Her Sunday visits to the swimming pool serve as a break from being bullied, so she starts considering the swimming pool her safe zone. She mentions; “I was delightfully left alone... being completely and absolutely 100 per cent, 500 per cent sure that I was safe and indeed forgotten... I remembered a freedom I had not felt in so long that I had forgotten existed. From then onwards, I loved the pool” (23).

However, soon, she is almost dragged to death in water by an unknown hand and is later raped by Uncle P, and her perception of her safe zone turns into a horror place. She does not step into the swimming pool for the next 22 years because of the traumatic memories. There is another thing to be taken into consideration here: objects like soap, used by P to bathe her, make her anxious in the future, but she somehow manages to come to terms with those objects by repeatedly telling herself that it was not the soap’s fault. She is not able to do so with the swimming pool as it was a meaningful place for her that soon turned into a place where she was raped.

The same is observed in the case of Nandurbar. At the beginning of the story, Nandurbar is portrayed as Eden as she recounts her childhood memories like any other toddler. But later, when she comes back from her aunt’s house, she feels; “Nandurbar didn't feel like home anymore. My peepul felt aloof, and the Homeless Peacock/Water Phoenix had disappeared” (41).

Sense of loss is conveyed through these lines as her psychological condition is reflected through her changed perception towards the same things that made her happy. The same happens when she often travels by train, enjoying the ‘Comfort Food’ provided by Indian Railways, a sense of relief from trauma. It, too, becomes a danger zone as unknown ‘Hands’ try to touch her improperly to add to her trauma. At one point, she realises, having lived in both Eden and Hell, I had now learned that:

1. Heaven never lasted.

2. Hell was always around the corner. (53)

This remains the core theme throughout the memoir. The continuous metaphoric journey from Eden to Hell constructs the storyline of memories, giving utmost importance to the places and the value they hold for her. It can be seen at almost all the places mentioned in the memoir, such as Nandurbar, aunt’s house, the Swimming Pool, the hostel where she first finds comfort but later wants to run away from, the Ancestral House which is described as the epitome of their family history, affection, tradition and culture and with her emotional attachment towards her relatives and her family history and tradition which turns out to be another setting for her sexual abuse by P on her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday. Thus, the ‘Eden to Hell’ journey or the repetitive designation technique used by the author conveys the shift in perception and reorientation caused by traumatic events.

### **Portrayal of Traumatic Suffering: Use of Imagery**

It is observed that while an attempt is made to recreate the physical traumatic events through sharp language using imagism and graphic description, there seems to be a lack of ability to express her mental suffering. Thus, the author uses different narrative techniques, especially imagery to portray mental suffering. There are multiple responses to the trauma she is suffering from, which seems to become more and more severe and worse as the plot advances. At first, the effect of being bullied by her cousins makes her live in constant terror, as if she is being watched. Soon, this powerlessness turns into hatred towards the bullies. Her trauma worsens after being raped by Uncle P, as she mentions; “Unknown to me and even to himself, P planted a Tentacle in me. Over the years, this

foreign Tentacle would branch out, slowly revealing its alien tentacular characteristics in places completely unrelated, swallowing me whole, alive from my own insides” (26).

The author puts forward ‘the Tentacle’ image using anthropomorphism technique and by describing the various roles the Tentacle performs throughout her life. Like trauma, it brings her anxiety and panic attacks, vulnerability and powerlessness, rejection and abandonment at times, like the amygdala, it warns her and sends signals to the brain for defence movement against similar dangers she had been through before. It grows bigger and moves through her body the next two times the same uncle abuses her again. And so does it activate when ‘S sir’ and more strange hands (the personified hands as she does not know who the abusers were) sexually abuse her. This brings forth the function of trauma as unpredictable and uncontrollable. Animal imagery is not limited to ‘Tentacle’ inserted by P. She mentions Gandhi’s Uncle’s ‘porcupine kiss’, which is prickly and can hurt and the ‘octopus kiss’ of S Sir that almost gags her to death. However, Tentacle is extensively treated as the significant imagery. The tentacle, thus, symbolises a feeling of powerlessness, an unseen force that influences the mind of the girl, creating a feeling of being trapped, controlled and strangled by trauma.

There is also a mention of a gecko as her worst fear since childhood and also as a symbol that foreshadows the sexual abuse on her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday. Another important image is of an imaginary panther she sees when she is alone in the dark in her 6<sup>th</sup> grade. It is one of her hallucinations:

The unforgettable brightness of the big panther's eyes had been tattooed into my memory. In a flash, I knew why. If you took away their brilliance, they were similar to P's cruel, dull, snot-coloured eyes. It was why I hated cats and all things feline-eyed. The beast I had somehow miraculously escaped wasn't so horrific itself as its eyes were. (169)

Here, she makes it clear that she was not afraid of the panther but was frightened by its eyes, which resembled the eyes of her abuser. This tells us that the animals that resemble the perpetrators or their actions are seen to be portrayed in a negative light.



This animal imagery stands in contrast to the mention of the other animals in the memoir, which are depicted in a more positive light. In an incident after her schooling, she witnessed a two-foot white owl that visited her on and off in the middle of Bombay city. This imaginary owl is contrasted with the imagery of the panther. She feels that the owl is there to comfort her and has the ability to heal her and bring positive changes like:

It passed on something which turned my hair curly, my mind calm, my colour different. It took away the need to dress for Saudi Arabia. It returned what a panther had once taken my ability to eat animals. Everybody noticed the effects. Nobody noticed the god that had caused them. (220)

She sees these changes in a positive light, like being able to wear any kind of dress instead of adding layers of clothes covering her whole body and being able to eat meat. It was something that she was unable to do before. The hallucination of the owl is optimistic, which shows her attempt to heal through positive imagination.

She finds it divine to be around animals. First, she has a pet puppy at home, and then during her boarding days, a toad almost becomes her pet. There is also a rat she helps to get out of a small puddle, pigs whom she secretly feeds, and her witnessing the familial bond between langurs during a langur birth in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. Such animals are seen in a positive light as they are lonely, helpless or craving affection, just like her. Thus, she is trying to give them everything that she needs from others for herself.

Moreover, the most essential image in the memoir is that of the Water Phoenix, whom she first recognises as a homeless peacock living at the topmost part of her Peepul. The Water Phoenix makes her see the world through its eyes in her dream, and in the end, she realises that the Water Phoenix is no one else but her future self. It is revealed only at the end of the memoir to give a dramatic effect to the text. As the concluding remark signifies, she has helped herself to heal from her trauma. Thus, the water phoenix that visited experiencing—I is the narrator—I. Traumatic effects

are hard to express, even for adults. The author had bottled up her suffering inside since the age of six when she was exposed to only a couple of fictional stories from children's literature.

Thus, to try to express herself, she uses animal imagery concerning the fictional stories of *Alice in the Borderland* and *Gulliver's Travels*. The author mentions that *Alice in the Borderland* has been her favourite book; she read it around 64 times in her childhood. She feels that her life after being bullied and raped becomes like Alice, who is stuck in a strange world. Just like Alice, the author also sees an imaginary world. She uses animal imagery in positive and negative senses. Thus, her opinions, choices and imaginations have become binary, good or bad, positive or negative. This hints that the author is emotionally stuck throughout her life, even at the age of six, even when she has grown up. This can be because she has never shared her suffering and its cause with anyone else. As she has no other way of expressing herself or no one else to listen to her, she is only making use of whatever literary world of imagination she was exposed to as a six-year-old girl. It led her to create an imaginary world around her, out of loneliness, in which she can try to express herself.

Like imagery, the use of magic realism is also signalled by the mention of animals and birds from fantasy worlds like the panther, the white owl, the Cheshire Cat from *Alice in Wonderland*, the Water Phoenix, etc., and the places like Lilliput and other places from *Gulliver's Travels*. The whole chapter, 'Grown-up hood', portrays her hallucinations causing anxiety attacks and panic attacks that become so severe and often lead to making her see an entirely parallel universe of fantasy after getting married and settling abroad in San Francisco:

I was driving to Stanford at rush hour, for an interview. Without warning, like an accident, the road turned into an infinite cobweb of white roots, invincible veins of time sticking out of a floor they had rendered invisible. Everything-fellow rush-hour passengers in their metal boxes, buildings, natural trees-transformed into giant glistening trees with skirts of mysteriously glittery fluff in a shade of white I could not place. I walked around, dressed in a skirt of the same mysterious glittery fluff in a shade of white I could not place, happy as the teddy bear clouds in the Mountain View sky above my car. There were two of me! In

two places! At the same time! I looked at Me. Me looked at I... One was the physical world, the other a magical world which defied all the laws of time and space. (245-247)

The use of magic realism can also be the result of Chatterjee being a big fan of Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie's writings, which are associated with magic realism. It is observed that the literary influence on the author has played an essential role in helping her express her feelings.

One of the major responses to child sexual abuse trauma is suicidal ideation, which is reflected in the memoir. It is the willingness and attempts to commit suicide to end the suffering of the traumatic events. The author seems to consider herself dead, living in bardo (as she mentions it often) after being sexually abused. Bardo is a Buddhist concept meaning a threshold between death and rebirth. She finds herself separated from her own body when 'S sir' is abusing her. It shows the disintegration of mind, body and identity and the soul's homelessness as one of the traumagenic constructs put forth by Lev-Wiesel (Lev-Wiesel, 2015). The two chapters, 'The Obsidian Fishbowl' and '*Seppuku*', lead us closer to her suicidal ideation. 'The Obsidian Fishbowl' begins in Bombay as she departs from the boarding. She suffers from the effects of trauma as she puts on weight and puts on layers of clothes even in summer to make herself look as flat as possible not to attract attention. She lives without growth and hope, without knowing where the liquid darkness would end in an obsidian bowl. She finds herself being a magnet to the stories of other people's sexual abuse that she overhears, which adds to her unstable psychological condition. It leads us to the next chapter, '*Seppuku*', where she lists down ways of committing suicide and the possible outcomes of each. She is attracted to Japanese words like 'Kamikazee', 'Harikiri' and 'Seppuku' (her favourite one), which are different terms for different kinds of suicides that are considered honourable. She once tried to commit suicide after her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday by consuming Baygon Spray, which she throws up, saying, "but my body chose its poison, spitting out this insecticide, choosing tentacle poison instead, the 100 per cent guaranteed killer of childhood, over insect poison" (194).

The other effects of trauma are portrayed using flash-forward and flashback techniques as the story goes back and forth in time, making the readers compare her comfort zone at Peepul tree in the

repetitive flashback of her memories with the experiencing-I's present and also with her future self as there are fleeting references like, 'Decades later, I'd discover...', 'Years later, I'd discover...'. It gives the readers access to realise how the traumatic incident changed her life and how her life is after healing. The irony is applied while showing the effects of traumatic events on the author's life, choices and behavioural aspects. What is expected from a typical child's behaviour, a girl's craving for affection, and many other things can hardly be seen throughout the recollection. A six-year-old kid could have complained, made excuses or thrown a tantrum and obstinately left the aunt's home that brought her suffering. However, this girl does not do so. She chooses to suffer in silence. When living at the boarding school, during holidays, everybody else would leave with their parents. Only a few would stay because of some issues, but Chatterjee was one of them who constantly stayed back. At first, she was saddened because of it, but later, she preferred staying at the hostel, as it meant staying safe. She either wanted to stay alone or with a bunch of women around her. She wanted to stay safe once she realised that violence and abuse could take place again.

The author has made a substantial use of imagery in the memoir. After being bullied by her cousins, she describes her life as a prey getting attacked by her predators every now and then. In 'The Obsidian Fishbowl', she describes herself as a goldfish in an obsidian fishbowl as she tries to keep herself safe within the walls. She guards herself well by not staying out late, hanging out with at least a half-dozen girls around, and wearing oversized clothes covering the entire body to make herself look as flat as possible in all seasons. She makes sure not to attract anyone's attention. Then, the mysterious water phoenix whom she met where everything, the story or the recollection of her memory started. It is revealed only at the end of the memoir to give dramatic effect to the concluding remark and signify that she had helped herself to heal from her trauma.

As it is a memoir written after being healed from the trauma, it is the plain sight that the author is revising her memories. The remembrance is highly constructed based on socio-cultural and emotional narratives. The traumatic incident of violence, abuse, etc., had ended years ago. However,

the remembrance and recall of it were unconscious and continuous throughout the author's life, which she finally realises as she comes to terms with her trauma.

### **Conclusion**

After closely reading and analysing *The Water Phoenix* by Rituparna Chatterjee under the lens of Trauma Studies, the researchers conclude that writing about trauma is therapeutic to come to terms with the trauma. The author has tried to express or portray traumatic events like violence and child sexual abuse explicitly using graphical details, which is an achievement in itself, being an Indian memoir. Although the traumatic incidents are portrayed in detail, the author is unable to do the same to portray mental suffering. She has expressed the mental suffering and the traumatic effects on the psyche by employing various narrative techniques like landscape imagery, sensory details, imagery, symbolism, anthropomorphism, flashback and flash-forward, irony, magic realism, etc. The author makes use of imagery in positive as well as negative senses. The imagery brings us closer to concluding that the author is stuck at the age of six as she mentions different images from children's literature that she had read. It is the age when she went through the traumatic events. Place is an important contextual factor. It is given the highest importance in narrative recall as the setting becomes a key factor in the memoir. The continuous metaphoric journey from Eden to Hell constructs the storyline of memories. We can see the recurrent examples of such journey at her aunt's home, the swimming pool, her own homes at Nandurbar and Vapi, the hostel and the boarding, Ancestral House in Calcutta, at almost all the places that are there in the memoir. Social, cultural and emotional values are attributed to each place, and the concretion of such values shapes the memory and the value of traumatic events. Such attributed values become a reason for the importance of each place and the traumatic event it foregrounds. It leads to a reorientation of perception, one of the effects of trauma, because of the meaning related to a place before and after the traumatic event.

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