

Exploring traumatic memory and emotional recovery in preeti shenoy's the one you cannot have



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Abstract Preeti Shenoy is a prominent contemporary Indian author known for her emotionally nuanced and relatable narratives, which have significantly contributed to the development of Indian literature in English. Her novel *The One You Cannot Have* (2013) delves into complex interpersonal relationships while focusing on themes of love, loss, and psychological growth. The story intricately intertwines the lives of four central characters—Shruti, Rishabh, Anjali, and Aman—each of whom grapples with unresolved emotional experiences that prevent them from fully engaging with the present. Among them, Shruti and Aman stand out as psychologically complex characters who struggle with inner turmoil, depression, anxiety, and emotional instability, all of which are rooted in unprocessed traumatic memories. This paper explores Shenoy's portrayal of psychological trauma through the theoretical frameworks of Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory and Judith Herman's Trauma and Recovery. While Caruth conceptualizes trauma as an incomprehensible and delayed experience, Herman's model of recovery, which emphasizes safety, remembrance, and reconnection, offers a complementary perspective for evaluating the psychological dimensions of the novel's protagonists. The study illustrates how Shenoy depicts trauma not as a mere past event but as an ongoing process that shapes identity, relationships, and emotional well-being. Through accessible prose and compassionate character development, Shenoy renders psychological suffering both visible and resonant, inviting readers to engage profoundly with the intricate emotional realities of her protagonists. This analysis argues that *The One You Cannot Have* serves as a pivotal text in the discourse of trauma within Indian English fiction, offering valuable insights into the enduring impacts of emotional turmoil and the potential for psychological recovery. The novel thus cements Shenoy's reputation as a writer adept at portraying modern relational dynamics while significantly enhancing literary depictions of trauma and recovery.

Keywords: trauma, memory, inner conflict, retraumatization, recovery, anxiety, depression

1. Introduction

"In Greek, the term *Trauma* means 'wound', and for centuries it referred exclusively to physical injury. Trauma as an emotional and psychological phenomenon did not emerge until the mid-nineteenth century" (Trimarco, 2023). Cathy Caruth (1995) states that "Trauma was predominantly viewed in Western discussions of the 20th century as psychiatric, pathological, and therefore, due to the unspeakable nature of trauma, un-representable, its very nature elusive and mysterious" (p.169). The concept of trauma goes beyond physical injuries; it also encompasses emotional effects that can be overwhelming and uncontrollable. These emotional responses can significantly influence an individual's personal life, often stemming from social dynamics and environmental factors. "Freud's theories on traumatic experience and memory define the psychological concepts that guide the field. Psychoanalytic theories regarding the origins and effects of trauma arose in the nineteenth-century study of shock and hysteria by researchers who, in addition to Freud, include Joseph Breuer, Pierre Janet, Jean-Martin Charcot, Hermann Oppenheim, Abram Kardiner, and Morton Prince" (Balaev, 2018, p. 361). This article discusses the role of Freud and other influential figures in establishing trauma theory as a key component of modern psychology, emphasizing its complexities and enduring effects on individuals. Although past events shape the traumatic experiences and memories, Molino (2012) asserts that "individual traumatic memory replete with dissociations, uncertainties, and blind spots which contains moments when recollections are integrated into a larger cultural memory." Based on this statement, it is discussed that trauma is an experience encountered by every individual, yet it is often dissociated and disconnected from experience or cultural memory. Dang Hoang Oanh (2021) in "Mixing Memory and Desire: Psychoanalysis, Psychology, and Trauma Theory" indicates that trauma is essentially multidisciplinary, and if anyone wants to promote trauma to a high level, it is necessary to replace the old model, joining in forming new characteristics of the culture" (p.98). This underscores the need for trauma theory to adopt a multidisciplinary approach, making it more accessible to contemporary readers. It calls for moving beyond outdated models

and creating new frameworks that evolve in response to the dynamics of culture and psychology. Furthermore, trauma is expressed through language, as Michelle Balaev (2018) states, Trauma creates a dual paradox in both awareness and language: there's a conflicting desire to understand the past, yet a struggle to truly grasp it. It also leads to opposing challenges in the traumatic story, where themes of death and survival collide. Trauma is conveyed through narrative language to illustrate how men and women experience profound emotions. Thus, literary language reveals the inner conflicts of individuals and shows how these struggles emerge from cultural constraints. Paola Trimarco (2023) states that "memories are integral to any discussion of trauma" (p.199). Shenoy explores the impetus of past trauma and reminiscences as the emotional bonds of romantic relationships. Particularly, she explores a character's behaviour and cognitive expressions. Her narrative style incorporates psychological techniques with the character's lives shaped by recurring elements such as intrusive thoughts, detachment, anxiety, and mood swings. These aspects are influenced by socio-cultural forces that confine human life to certain boundaries. Her narrative techniques highlight the enduring consequences of love and loss. Shenoy portrays the relationship between Shruti and Aman, who fall in love during their college years. However, due to her mother's deteriorating health, Shruti conceals the relationship and marries Rishabh to fulfill her mother's wish. This marriage ends her bond with Aman, which leads to emotional turmoil that forces both Shruti and Aman to experience mood swings, shaped by unresolved emotions and lingering trauma from their past, and continue to struggle with the lasting impact of their emotional wounds. This study draws on the psychological framework and traces the trajectory of narrative recovery through Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. Moreover, the study also offers insights into Judith Herman's stages of recovery and reconnections.

2. The Portrayal of Traumatic Memories in *The One You Cannot Have*

Preeti Shenoy's novel *The One You Cannot Have* (2013) explores the themes of traumatic memories and the intricate dynamics of personal relationships. The plot revolves around the young adult lifestyle of the central characters, such as Aman, Shruti, Rishabh, and Anjali, as well as some minor characters, including Asha, Mark, and Mr. Sanjeev Adani. The protagonist Shruti is in love with Aman. Shruti's mother, who suffers from cancer, insists that Shruti marry Rishabh and disapproves of her relationship with Aman because Aman belongs to a different community background. Although Aman and Shruti experience an emotional conflict intensified by unresolved memories, making it difficult for them to embrace their present lives, they struggle to move forward. Even after two years of separation, Aman and Shruti continue to grapple with the lingering effects of their past and the difficulty of moving forward in life. One day, while Rishabh and Shruti were watching a movie, Rishabh's phone unexpectedly rang. As he spoke on the phone, Shruti listened intently to the conversation and overheard the name 'Aman' being mentioned. She feels like "Hundred thousand memories associated with Aman. Indelible memories. After all, four years of one's life is considerable time to spend with someone, and even today, after nearly two years of my marriage to Rishabh, it takes little to trigger memories of our time together" (Shenoy, 2013, pp.9-10). Shenoy shows that Shruti's memory of her past love for Aman, filled with vivid and indelible emotions, continues to affect her after marriage. Whenever Shruti hears the name 'Aman,' she is reminded of her past. These recollections profoundly influence her present life, underscoring the enduring emotional impact of her experiences. According to Van Der Kolk (2008), DSM-IV criteria describe traumatic memory as the recollection of a personal distressing event where the individual experiences death, physical or emotional threats, and harm to themselves or others. A defining feature of traumatic memory is its re-experienced, where the event and its associated sensory, cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses feel as though they are happening all over again" (p.11). The quote highlights how traumatic memories can have a significant impact on an individual's life, often manifesting as emotional and physical threats. Shruti's life, shaped by cultural trauma, leaves her unable to escape her circumstances, as she remains trapped in the inner world of her memories. Similarly, Aman's life is deeply affected, with the trauma shaping his present reality in significant ways. Although Aman moves to Norwich to forget his past, he gets a job and develops a good relationship with Mark, who later becomes his friend. However, after two years, Aman found a suitcase in the loft. When he tried to open it, he realized "After two years the wounds have opened up again and made him realize that what has healed was just the surface. Underneath it is still raw, it is still painful" (Shenoy, 2013, p.15). It seems that Aman is struggling with repressed trauma, which represents unhealed wounds. This highlights how he suffered deep wounds from intrusive experiences. The memories of the past, he shared with Mark, reveal that Aman was unable to forget Shruti. As Aman attempts to convey his intrusive emotions to Shruti, she also feels the same way. Both are trapped in the past, struggling to move forward and embrace their present lives. Wojciech Drag (2014) argues that the extent and lasting nature of the narrator's trauma only become apparent when he/she revisits that site of the traumatic experience (p.146). Though Drag highlights the idea that the emotional and psychological impacts of trauma remain concealed or suppressed until an individual is compelled to confront the root of their distress, this encounter with the past represents a pivotal moment in trauma narratives, as it has the potential to unleash the full emotional burden of the prior traumatic experience.

2.1. The Detrimental Effects of Cultural Trauma

Shenoy explains that Shruti's marriage is not truly happy, even though she attempts to convince herself that everything is fine. However, her family and neighbors constantly ask her about having a child, which adds to her stress. She asks herself

why, in Indian culture, individuals are not allowed to choose their future partner and are expected to have children after marriage. Shruti states, "Isn't it enough that I got married to someone they chose? Now they want me to produce a baby too? Why does Indian society put this huge pressure on couples to produce children soon after marriage? I wonder what joy elders get in seeing their adult married child pregnant. How can they interfere so shamelessly?" (Shenoy, 2013). The quote vividly explains Shruti's frustration and umbrage of feeling trapped by the societal and familial expectations of her marriage.

Meanwhile, Shruti's parents insult Aman and his mother. Shruti's father questioned "her property, her caste, and her family. He then went on to elaborate on our wealth and reach and prestige" (Shenoy, 2013, p.74). On hearing it, Shruti finds it deplorable. Even after a few days, her parents keep insulting Aman's family. Anaya Jahanara Kabir (2005) states "Psychological or physical trauma, involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual, and cultural trauma [which] refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people has achieved some degree of cohesion" (p.180). This quote suggests that cultural trauma profoundly affects individuals by inflicting emotional wounds that disrupt their sense of self and identity, stemming from a broader social context where cultural norms or catastrophic events fracture the social fabric that provides meaning and cohesion. According to Aarelaid-Tart (2006), cultural trauma has a direct impact on individual experiences, highlighting a significant tension between societal structure and personal agency (p. 19). Aarelaid-Tart also points out that many individuals are malleable and susceptible to altering their lives due to their marginal social positions. This vulnerability can lead them into a traumatic vortex. Similarly, Shruti undergoes this struggle, embodying emotional wounds that leave lasting psychological scars. The cultural pressures often hinder her ability to navigate her present life, as she remains burdened by traumatic memories.

Boussaaha Selma (2022) states that "cultural factors play a major role in determining the value of a traumatic experience, and later this argues that social and cultural aspects govern traumatic memories" (p.23). This seems to explain how the cultural context, which is framed by societal norms and expectations, shapes Shruti's interpretation of life experiences and her confrontation with traumatic memories. This frustration overwhelms Shruti, prompting her to go out and sit on the beach in an attempt to escape intrusive pain and release her bottled-up emotions. While she is at the beach, Shruti receives missed calls from her husband and her friend, Asha. This makes her feel embarrassed, especially because she does not understand how Rishabh knows Asha's number. She called Rishabh to ask him to pick her up near the beach. Once they arrive home, Rishabh asks "Who is this Aman, and what was your relationship with him?" (Shenoy, 2013, p.71). Hearing this, Shruti becomes upset and questions him, "How did you get Asha's number and find out about Aman? Aman then explains that he collected the information from the mail. Shruti feels exposed and violated, thinking, "I feel naked. I feel stripped. I feel robbed. I feel violated. I feel like a criminal being paraded to be identified" (Shenoy, 2013, p.72). This statement reveals that Shruti was lost in thought, as if daydreaming, but when Rishabh asked the question, she felt exposed and guilty for hiding her past relationship with Aman before their marriage. Cathy Caruth (1995) explains that the function of the memory system is to capture, arrange, and retain new experiences, which facilitates better processing of future internal or external information (p.169). This suggests that memory storage involves internal sensations, while external stimuli influence inner emotions and behavior. Similarly, Shruti experiences inner conflict and often lives in a daydream-like state. However, when Rishabh asks her a question, she becomes momentarily stunned as both internal and external stimuli overwhelm her thoughts. Shenoy illustrates how Shruti and Aman lives are overwhelmed by emotion, transforming their characters as they seek change and personal growth.

2.2. Deleterious Impact of Retraumatization

Shenoy illustrates how retraumatization leads to the transformation of Shruti and Aman. "The term Retraumatization (or reactivation) is used to describe traumatic stress reactions occurring in the aftermath of subsequent traumatic events after an initial experienced trauma. (Linden & Rutkowski, 2013). This quote indicates that retraumatization affects Aman and Shruti, as their memories are reactivated in their present lives. They struggle to accept their current reality and feel disconnected from normal life. Shenoy illustrates how traumatic memories can overpower an individual's behavior by inundating their mind with a torrent of past experiences and thoughts like a balloon inflating until it bursts. Likewise, the characters' unresolved memories cause emotional rupture, which is intense and disruptive, and eventually pave the way for healing and transformation. Shruti explains to Asha that Rishabh had never spoken to her before; his behavior had changed after reading the email in which he learned about her past relationship with Aman. She did not like Rishabh's new behavior, as it disrupted the strong bond they shared. As Shruti shares her feelings with Asha, Asha responds by revealing her own life story to Shruti. Asha said that, "I had this relationship with a senior from my college. But we broke up, much like you and your Aman....He too got married like me, and he had a daughter. He settled down in New Zealand and still keeps in touch through mail and phone calls. We're good friends now, and we're happy with our respective families... maybe even feel a bit guilty. But now I gained a good friend and so did he" (Shenoy, 2013). It seems that Asha has also gone through a breakup, but has positively transformed this experience. She and her boyfriend are now good friends. Asha encourages Shruti to move past painful memories and to transform her life in a positive direction, despite the challenges she faces. Asha's story highlights the possibility of growth and healing after emotional turmoil.

Shenoy explains that before Aman arrived in India, he closely followed Shruti's life and realized from her profile picture that she was happy with her husband. Unable to bear the pangs, Aman resorted to drinking and became an alcoholic. He then

thought that he need not worry about Shruti. Judith Herman (2015) states that “When trust is lost, traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living” (p.52). Therefore, Herman declares that when trust is lost, individuals break apart like dry seaweed, cry out, and seek to make changes in their lives.

Aman decided to return to India from Norwich. Before reaching India, he received an email from Anjali, his close friend. Anjali is a journalist and an attractive woman. After arriving in India, Aman reveals to her the story of his past love life. They begin to form a close friendship, and Anjali uses Aman’s past as an impetus to write her article titled “How to Get Over the One You Cannot Have”. She describes it in five steps. The first being ‘Acceptance’, where one must decide whether to move forward. If one cannot continue the relationship with that person, one must leave and move on. The second step is ‘Axe the sentimentalism’. He/She should reclaim their life by discarding all the reminders of the past because those memories of the person make it harder to move forward in life. The third step is to ‘Distract Yourself’. When the memories try to be disturbed, one should distract oneself by engaging in some physical activities like going for a walk, going to a gym, etc. The fourth step is to constantly remind yourself that someone loves you. The final step is to engage in a hobby or a passion (Shenoy, 2013, pp. 137-139).

Shenoy employed a narrative technique through the character of Anjali, illustrating how individuals often develop emotional attachments to those they cannot have. Through Anjali, Shenoy reinforces the role of self-acceptance and emotional boundaries as tools for rebuilding identity after loss. Hollingsworth (2024) highlights that a character who is healing from trauma may begin to exhibit actions, abilities, and behaviors that reflects a more balanced connection between their mind, body, and spirit. However, she points out that “while indicating progress, markers like playfulness, creativity, and imagination do not signify that all effects of trauma have been overcome.” Instead, the character represents a transition from survival mode, in which energy is focused on the present, to a state of ease, in which the brain may function more freely, indicating a path toward recovery” (pp. 339-340). Although a similar quote states that individuals may harm themselves, they are dragged to overcome the situation. Hollingsworth’s ideology is also reflected in the novel through Anjali’s perspective. She wrote a column that makes it easy for readers to understand how to move forward and overcome their difficulties. She titled it as “Five Things You Should (or Should Not) Do If the Guy Doesn’t Get Back to You”. She describes five steps, namely “Do Not Stalk Him Online, Exhibit Supreme Patience, Leave him alone, Talk to your Buddies,” and finally “Talk to you later (TTYL) or Vanish.” (Shenoy, 2013, pp. 173-175). Based on this column, Anjali outlined strategies for handling situations. If the person fails to acknowledge you or consider your response, she advises the affected person to approach the situation with composure and adopt a casual tone.

One day, Shruti planned a trip with her in-laws to visit a temple and a beach. During the trip, a rushing passenger accidentally collided with her father-in-law, causing him to fall and hit a cement block. At that moment, a kind stranger stepped in to help. He assisted Shruti’s father-in-law and escorted him to an ambulance. The man was wearing a helmet, but when he removed it, Shruti noticed something surprising about him. He was Mr. Sanjeev Adani, founder of Sneha Kutir, an NGO. This NGO works for the betterment of society “by improving the quality of life, empowering street children, helping destitute women and many such things” (Shenoy, 2013, p.180). He was awarded Padmashri. He came as a keynote speaker for an event, where Shruti serves as a corporate representative of the college (Shenoy, 2013, p. 180). It appears that Shruti is already acquainted with Mr.Adani, as she invites him to reflect on his time at STC College. They swap life stories over coffee in the hospital canteen, and Mr. Adani reveals a personal experience. Although Shruti and Mr. Adani went for a coffee break in the hospital, they shared their life stories. Mr. Adani shares this traumatic experience with Shruti. “Many years back, I underwent treatment for depression. I had to undergo counselling for more than two years...I didn’t think I would either, till my wife eloped with my best friend. I lost two people who meant the most to me.’ He states it without a trace of emotion in his voice...” (Shenoy, 2013, p.234). Shenoy describes love relationships as an endless struggle in a person’s life, emphasizing that they are inherently complex and challenging, regardless of an individual’s social or economic status. Even someone like Mr. Adani experiences the emotional ups and downs that accompany intimate connections.

In the novel *The One You Cannot Have*, the transition from retraumatization is explored through the lives of characters such as Asha, Mr. Adani, and Anjali. Shenoy, through the character of Anjali, shows how writing a journal illustrates that each individual has their own way of overcoming challenges, with transformation serving as the key to finding solution.

3. Recovery through Reconnection

“Survivors whose personality has been shaped in the traumatic environment often feel at this stage of recovery as though they are refugees entering a new country” (Herman, 2015).

This study also examines how individuals cope with and recover from trauma. Judith Herman’s three stages of recovery —Safety, Remembrance and Mourning, and Reconnection are used to overcome traumatic experiences and facilitate transformation, ultimately finding a new way to survive. In the third stage, Herman discusses several dimensions, including learning to fight, reconciling with oneself, reconnecting with others, and finding a survivor's mission. Shenoy portrays her characters as adopting the third stage of Herman’s Reconnection. Through this stage, the characters learn to fight for their lives and find reconciliation, reconnect with their friends and find a solution to their problems.

Finally, Shruti meets Aman and explains the situation, telling him that her husband is not speaking to her properly because Rishabh saw the email. She apologizes to Aman. In return, Aman reveals that he was in love with Anjali. He tells Shruti that the suitcase is filled with memories, including greeting cards and mementos from their time together. Shruti collects the things and throws them in the dustbin. Judith Herman (2015) emphasizes that the self-discipline acquired in the initial phases of recovery can merge with the survivor's ability for creativity and play. This stage involves experimentation, allowing for mistakes, and appreciating unexpected achievements. It's essential for individuals to embrace both the lessons of failure and the triumphs of success as they navigate their unique paths to recovery. These experiences should be balanced by discipline, creativity, and self-compassion. Similarly, Shenoy states that, "Shruti finally feels ready for a baby, and she intends to surprise Rishabh as well as her parents and in-laws with good news" (Shenoy, 2013, p. 265). On the other hand, Aman let go of his past and married Anjali. They begin a happy life together. "At this point also the survivor can sometimes identify positive aspects of the self that were forged in the traumatic experience, even while recognizing that any gain was achieved at far too great a price" (Herman, 2015, p. 204). However, the individual also recognizes that these gains came at a tremendous cost- the pain, suffering, and challenges they endured due to the trauma. In essence, while they may appreciate the personal growth that emerged, they are fully aware that it came from a devastating and undesirable experience.

4. Conclusions

Preeti Shenoy's novel *The One You Cannot Have* delves deeply into the struggles of human relationships, portraying how they are shaped and constrained by societal and cultural boundaries. Shenoy sheds light on the emotional turbulence her characters face as they navigate breakups and the complex process of returning to a sense of normalcy amidst traditional expectations. Through characters like Shruti and Aman, the novel explores the lingering impact of traumatic memories that prevent individuals from fully engaging with the present or advancing in their personal and professional lives. Shenoy utilizes these narratives to highlight the transformative potential inherent in every individual's journey, demonstrating how moments of pain and struggle can lead to profound personal growth. A closer examination of characters such as Asha and Mr. Adani highlights the importance of supportive relationships and therapy in addressing emotional challenges, enabling them to make significant changes and rediscover their will to survive. To provoke an understanding of how individuals navigate and either escape or become trapped in difficult situations, Shenoy uses the character of Anjali, a journalist. While the paper is rooted in the rich tapestry of Indian literature, the novel delves into universal themes of personal growth, resilience, and self-discovery. It transcends its cultural context to engage in a broader global discourse on the psychological dimensions of the human mind, exploring intersections of gender, culture, and identity. Shenoy also illustrates pathways for overcoming emotional turmoil through self-reflection, repentance, forgiveness, and understanding, offering a hopeful perspective on healing and reconciliation.

5. Declarations

5.1. Ethical considerations

Not applicable.

5.2. Use of artificial intelligence (AI)

The authors declare that the generative artificial intelligence (AI) tool [Chat GPT, Grammarly] was used exclusively for language editing and/or grammatical improvement. The use of AI did not influence the scientific content, study design, data analysis, data interpretation, results, or conclusions of the manuscript. Full responsibility for the content remains with the authors.

5.3. Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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