



INADVERTENT ROLE OF PARENTS IN CHILDHOOD TRAUMA: A LITERARY OUTLOOK

FIRDAUS SHAHNAZ¹, NIRAJ DANG²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Vinoba Bhave University, Hazaribag.

Email: Firdausshahnaz1@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor, Vinoba Bhave University, Hazaribag

Email: dang.niraj75@gmail.com



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Abstract

Decades of research have shown that exposure to violence in childhood (e. g. emotional, physical, sexual, or psychological) collectively known as adverse childhood experiences, usually has profound and lasting effects on health and social outcomes. The long-term effects of bad parenting are not just a personal matter but they can impact their society as well. Poor parenting is one of the biggest causes of criminal tendencies among juveniles. Even with the best intentions, parents make mistakes that don't necessarily mean they are bad parents. But often parents ignore the psychological scars they have left on their children, which causes many learning problems and trust issues. They may also experience severe long-term physical and mental problems. Literature assists people to understand more about humans. It gives voice to the voiceless. It helps to grasp the depth of trauma and how an individual feels and reacts in a certain circumstance. It acts like a cleanser to a soul. Such stories break notions about sparkling childhoods and the misconceptions about sacred parenthood.

Keywords: Child, Trauma, Parenting, PTSD, Adverse Childhood, Poor Parenting, ACE, Literature.

Introduction

According to American Psychological Association (APA), trauma is "an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster." ⁴The meaning of the term - "trauma" has been taken from a "stress or blow that may produce disordered feelings or behaviour" to a "state or condition produced by such a stress or blow." ⁵ However, a person may experience trauma as a response to any event they find physically or emotionally threatening or harmful. Trauma results in long-term effects on the person's well-being. If symptoms persist and do not decrease in severity, it can indicate that the trauma has developed into a mental health disorder called Post Traumatic Stress

Disorder (PTSD) or commonly known as lingering trauma. Trauma including one-time, multiple, or long-lasting repetitive events affects everyone differently. The impact of trauma can be subtle, insidious, or outright destructive. How an event affects an individual depends on many factors, including the characteristics of the event, the developmental process, the meaning of the trauma, and socio-cultural factors. A person who has experienced trauma may feel denial, fear, confusion, anxiety, guilt, hopelessness, numbness, depression, etc. They may have emotional outbursts and find it difficult to cope with how they feel. Moreover, a significant connection exists between trauma, including adverse childhood experiences (ACE), and chronic health conditions. Common physical

disorders and symptoms include somatic complaints, sleep disturbances, insomnia, and gastrointestinal, cardiovascular, neurological, musculoskeletal, respiratory, and dermatological disorders. It also includes urological and substance use disorders.

Literature Review

The impact of child traumatic stress can last well beyond childhood. In an interview with *The Hindu*, Stanford psychiatrist Shalini Jain explained:

“Traumatic thoughts and memories that remain “unspeakable” or “unthinkable” for too long often impede our brain’s natural process of recovery after trauma”.¹

At least five of the ten leading causes of death have been associated with exposure to adverse childhood experiences, including several contributors to declines in life expectancy.² A report by World Health Organisation in 2022 estimated that globally, up to 1 billion children aged 2-17 years, have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional neglect in a single year 2021.³

Poor parenting practices or lack of emotional bonding between children and parents or caregivers are consciously or unconsciously listed among people's top reasons for traumatic tendencies.

Trauma Studies and Literature:

Trauma Studies explore the impact of trauma in literature and society by analysing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance. The relationship between trauma and mental illness was investigated by a French neurologist and physician Jean-Martin Charcot. During the late nineteenth century, a major focus of Charcot’s study was hysteria, a disorder commonly diagnosed in women. At that time symptoms of hysteria were thought to originate in the uterus. Charcot was the first to understand that the origin of hysterical symptoms was not physiological but rather psychological in nature. Pierre Janet, a student of Charcot, continued to study dissociative phenomena and traumatic memories. Freud’s early theories in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) written with Joseph

Breuer and later in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) defines his collected views on traumatic experiences and memory through psychological concepts that guide the field.

Literature has the power to capture pictures of life through an empowered language that displays the inner world of humans. The present era is the age of changing attitudes and sensibilities. It demands the production of plots dealing with the anxiety of the modern world. The role of memory in shaping individual and cultural identities is the central concern of Trauma Studies. Writers collect the data from the current emphasis on trauma, inter-subjectivity, mentalization, association, dissociation, and non-linear dynamic theory. It also deals with post-structural, socio-structural, and postcolonial theories. They discuss their views as psychoanalytic, of how the stormy life, difficult relationship with family, friends and not speaking cause the wound in the character’s mind. “They have, indeed, driven out of consciousness and out of memory, and apparently saved themselves a great amount of psychic pain, but in unconscious the suppressed wish still exists, only waiting for its chance to become active, and finally succeeds in sending into consciousness.”⁶

Trauma literature deals with adverse experiences, feelings, and emotions. Moreover, psychoanalysis trauma engages serious long-term negative consequences. Typical causes of trauma are- sexual abuse, discrimination, brutality, bullying, domestic violence, and particularly adverse childhood experiences. Significantly, childhood trauma can lead to violent behaviour and somehow it is the main reason why people react differently to similar events. Not all people who experience the same traumatic events will become traumatized.

Childhood Trauma and the Role of Parenting:

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) states, “Child traumatic stress occurs when children and adolescents are exposed to traumatic events or traumatic situations that overwhelm their ability to cope.”⁷ According to the National Institute of Mental Health, childhood trauma is defined as: “The experience of an event by a child that is

emotionally painful or distressful, which often results in lasting mental and physical effects.”⁸

Not all overwhelming or life-threatening experiences are considered traumatic. Children interpret their unique experiences differently. A traumatic life experience for one child might not be traumatic for another. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), is a term coined by Drs Vincent Felitti, Robert Anda, and their colleagues in their seminal study which refers to a scary, dangerous, violent, or life-threatening event that happens to a child (0-18 years of age).⁹ Abuse, neglect, and household challenges are some major factors behind such experiences. Childhood Trauma is a complex issue, and several factors can contribute to its prevalence. It is a widespread issue that affects millions of people worldwide. Though it is not limited to any specific country or region yet some countries may have a higher prevalence of childhood trauma due to some socio-economic factors like poverty, war, social inequality, and lack of mental health services.

It would be an injustice to say that everyone considers their childhood as a golden period of their life. It is wrong to keep everyone on the same pedestal. The mainstream imagery of a carefree and idyllic childhood where caregivers meet their every need is a frame that is not fit for every picture. Growing up with abuse, neglect, wars, and violence destroys innocence and contributes to a traumatic childhood. Parents play a vital role in a child's development and they are greatly responsible for developing the child's character. Biological anthropologist Helen Fisher in her work *This Will Make You Smarter: New Scientific Concepts to Improve Your Thinking* said:

“Your character traits stem from your experiences. Your childhood games; your family's interests and values, how people in your community express love and hate; what relatives and friends regard as courteous and perilous; how those around you worship; what they sing; when they laugh; how they make a living and relax: innumerable cultural forces build your unique set of character traits.”¹⁰

Wordsworth said: “The child is father of the Man.”¹¹ Children are one of the best creations of nature and being a parent is one of the hardest jobs in the world. Every single decision they make goes into shaping the human being that child becomes. Just like any other job parenting should be learned with practice and patience. A dialogue in the movie *Detachment* (2011) states:

“There should be a prerequisite, a curriculum for being a parent before people attempt.”¹²

Parents are the doorway through which a child enters the world and if they are raised in a dysfunctional home, their parents become their first real source of trauma and pain. “People raised on love see things differently than those raised on survival.”¹³ Parenting styles can vary within different regions, communities, and families in any culture. Children observe how family members interact with each other and arguments are getting settled. It is very important for parents to help children accept failures and learn how to overcome them. If a parent had a traumatic childhood and that trauma was also unresolved then there are fair chances that from the unconscious mind, it will pass down from parent to child. Children come to their trauma through parents who haven't broken cycles for themselves.¹⁴ Numerous psychologists have found in decades since that our early limbic contact with our parents profoundly shape our character. It paves the way and designs our emotional habits and patterns of connecting that heavily influence how we react in certain situations and how we adapt ourselves to subsequent relationships in life. How we behave, interact, and cope with others, highly depends on how nurturing or toxic our relationship is with our parents.

Some injuries can never be entirely forgiven; some elements of injury revive at times of anger and disappointment. As Joy Marino says, “Every time I judge someone else, I reveal an unhealed part of myself.”¹⁵ Franz Kafka, Charles Dickens, G.B. Shaw, D.H. Lawrence, George Eliot, Maya Angelou, Ernest Hemingway, and many more writers tried to illustrate their mental trauma through the production of plots dealing with anxiety and emotional wounds. Dickens's works are marked for

portraying his adverse childhood experiences. Due to poverty, he was abused, neglected, and forced to work at the age of 12 in a blackening factory. Through the lens of the most celebrated child protagonists of Dickens, we can witness the adversities faced by them and how their traumatic experiences shape their adulthood. They are still a prisoner of their childhood and even now they doing good in their life, they doubt their decisions and their past overpower their present and haunts them on several occasions.

Franz Kafka's posthumous published work *Dearest Father* (1953) can be seen as an outburst of anguish, and disappointment, the record of his adverse childhood and chronic traumatic experiences. He depicts how impactful they are that being a full-grown man now, he still fears those moments. It became an inevitable part of his personality which resulted in making him a person with low self-esteem who has no self-worth. He recounts a particularly traumatic incident when he was a young boy, one night he kept crying for water – "I was whining persistently for water one night, certainly not because I was thirsty, but in all probability partly to be annoying, partly to amuse myself." ¹⁶ Until his father grew so angry that he yanked little Franz out of bed, carried him out onto the balcony, and left him nothing but his nightshirt, shutting the door. He writes:

"This incident almost certainly made me obedient for a time, but it damaged me on the inside. I was by nature unable to reconcile the simple act (as it seemed to me) of casually asking for water with the utter horror of being carried outside." ¹⁷

Such corporal punishments may have long-term effects on a child's personality and they may develop misconceptions about themselves and their parents. It also creates emotional barriers between child and their parents. "Getting angry and yelling at kids for making mistakes doesn't teach them not to make mistakes – it teaches them to hide their mistakes." ¹⁸ Such tendencies of over-controlling parents cause deep impacts and sometimes children develop wrong habits like lying and stealing because it keeps them temporarily secure from beatings and

punishments. Such habits sometimes develop as a life-long tendency that they fail to resolve. The yelling and threatening nature of parents sometimes give more pain to children than the actual harm they promised but rarely delivered. It may seem that a child is living upon their mercy and they are a burden to their parents. As Kafka confessed:

"Years later it still tormented me that this giant man, my father, the ultimate authority, could enter my room at any time and, almost unprovoked, carry me from my bed out onto the pavlatche, and that I meant so little to him." ¹⁹

Children view themselves through the lens of their parents and caregivers. It hugely depends on how beautiful and ugly they portray them. Parents are the source through which children recognise their genius and talents. Lack of parental support and encouragement limits the growth of a child. Parents' encouragement is one of the contextual factors associated with children's higher performance and emotional fulfillment. Kafka bemoans his father's attitude towards his academic and creative endeavours;

"What I needed was a little encouragement, a little friendliness, a little help to keep my future open, instead you obstructed it, admittedly with the good intention of persuading me to go down a different path. But I was not fit for the path you chose." ²⁰

Narcissistic and self-righteous parents who believe and trust only their version of reality, oppress children from their intellectual domination and spare no room for child's own opinions. They demand children to always be obedient and disciplined and they are never allowed to learn from their mistakes. They never accept the real version of their child and with such circumstances, children lose their originality. "Behind every young child who believes in himself is a parent who believed first." ²¹ Those who live according to the rulebooks lose their spark of uniqueness and they fail to meet their true version of self. "Parents don't make mistakes because they don't care, but because they care so deeply." ²² In such environments, the child grows

utterly confused about right and wrong because rules are different for them and their parents. They fail to develop their own opinion on philosophy or morality, imaginative freedom, justice, and subjectivity of good and evil. Constantly justifying the act by depending on who the doer is maintains to internalize the notion that a child is always at fault which causes them to live a guilt-ridden childhood. About such tendencies, G.B. Shaw said:

“The best bought-up children are those who have seen their parents as they are. Hypocrisy is not the first duty of a parent.”

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Conclusion

The impact of childhood trauma can be severe and long-lasting. It is important to accept that parents play a crucial role in the trauma a child experiences. It is not always necessary that they caused it directly. It can pass genetically in conscious or unconscious ways. Parents may also experience trauma themselves, which can affect their parenting behaviours. Research has shown that a parenting style that is supportive, loving, and responsive is associated with positive outcomes for children, regardless of cultural and societal factors. In the words of Bethany Bridges, “Parents are not perfect, nor they are saints. Dads and Moms make mistakes all the time. How you handle these situations will be an important life lesson for your children.”²⁴ Acknowledging this can help to heal some wounded souls and build a better future with happier families.

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