

The 'Red-Light' Community: Collective Trauma and Identity in Tracey Hoffmann's *Valley of Chaya*

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Abstract

This study examines the shared trauma and memories of children and women involved in prostitution by viewing them as a community through analysing Tracey Hoffmann's *Valley of Chaya*. The novel explores the collective identity of prostitutes (trafficked victims), shaped by the trauma they collectively experience, their mutual support, and resilience, while also highlighting internal conflicts and external pressures that reinforce their trauma. Collective trauma emerges when individuals believe they have been subject to identical horrific events. This study offers a nuanced understanding of how shared traumatic experiences foster a community among marginalised individuals, especially those who are trafficked and end up in brothels. Collective trauma, which affects a group with definable membership, is necessarily associated with that group's shared identity. Trauma brings people together through shared experiences, creating a sense of belonging and a common identity. This paper analyses if children and women working as prostitutes could be seen as having a collective identity, as they share a similar kind of space and atrocity. The paper consults theorists to establish the arguments and to analyse the discussions around collective identity, trauma, and the stigmatised community of sex workers. Through decoding the language of trauma and Hoffmann's depiction of child and young adult prostitutes, it takes a step further to the aspects of cultural trauma.

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Introduction

“Globally, over 4 million people are trapped in forced sexual exploitation, a reality that turns trauma into a shared experience for countless victims.” – International Labour Organisation (ILO)

Tracey Hoffmann, an Australian author and a counsellor for individuals in crisis and trauma, wrote a trilogy titled *Valley of Chaya*. The first book in the series with the same title, *Valley of Chaya*, was published in 2011. The novel discusses the abduction of street children and young girls and the dark world of child sex trafficking. The narrative begins with a 10-year-old Ashok and his little sister Shanti, who used to collect garbage in the slums of Mumbai. One day, Shanti is abducted by some men, leaving both her and Ashok's lives in ruins. The abductors take Shanti to a brothel. She is unknown to such places as brothels and the horrendous reality of sexual slavery. Subsequently, she faces abuse and sexual violence. The continuous mental and sexual violation leads to Shanti being traumatised, and at the end of the novel, she is murdered by one of her customers.

While Shanti's harrowing journey unfolds in the dark corners of the Mumbai brothels, a new character is introduced. Charlotte Turner, a 17-year-old Australian teenager from a wealthy family, visits India for tourism to fulfil her dream against her parents' will. Her parents think visiting another country alone is not safe for her, but she sneaks away from home. Then she comes in contact with an NGO, Hope Mumbai, which reaches out to street children to help them. Also, she works with street kids for a few days with a volunteer, Dr. Philip Mangan, with whom she later falls in love. On her way to the hotel room, she is followed by a man who kidnaps her from the room, and she ends up in the same brothel in which Shanti is destined to live.

Eli, Charlotte's brother, learns that her sister had gone missing and travels to Mumbai to rescue her. He comes in contact with Philip to get information about Charlotte's whereabouts, and they meet Ashok, who is also searching for Shanti. The narrative features a parallel where two brothers from different continents keep searching for their missing sister in the brothels of Mumbai. Despite their separate backgrounds, their journeys reveal striking parallels, highlighting the shared struggle and resilience in their quest to find and rescue their sisters. The experiences of a little street girl and a teenage Australian

girl, along with other sex trafficking victims, highlight their shared trauma and collective identity. Their stories reveal how sexual abuse shapes their emotions and community, offering insights into coping mechanisms within trauma narratives. With all of its inherent evils and consequences, the horrendous realities of sex trafficking are followed by a ray of hope, a message of redemption, and possible recovery from trauma. The paper analyses collective experiences and emotions, aiming to highlight how sex trafficking victims in red-light districts endure shared atrocities. By examining the individual experiences of the victims, the paper seeks to uncover the broader collective trauma experienced by this voiceless community.

To understand the collective identity and shared trauma through Shanti's and Charlotte's intersecting stories and experiences, it is crucial to comprehend the notion of trauma. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as a mental or psychological injury, a physical or emotional assault that amplifies the senses and requires the body and mind to protect themselves (3). In such cases, mechanisms like amnesia, numbness, and repressing inhibition³ temporarily block the sensation of pain to manage the overwhelming impact. These are the mind's defence mechanisms against such an intrusion of traumatic events, and the sufferer merely loses track of events or insists nothing happened. An emotional upheaval of sexual abuse is so strong that it ruptures the mind's perspective of time, one's identity, and the surroundings, leaving a trauma that later shows itself in nightmares and flashbacks. Literary trauma studies offer insight into collective trauma, revealing hidden dimensions of shared suffering within a community. Thus, the trauma that affects individuals also reflects and amplifies the crises experienced by the entire group (Habermas). Crises, such as kidnapping and sexual harassment at brothels, are unforeseen events that take place and lead to a person's emotional and mental collapse.

The experience of sexual violence traumatises individuals while also challenging ideals such as easily trusting the unknown who lures them for good jobs and wealth, which they have often taken for granted. In this sense, such atrocities may make the collective identity of prostitutes, which can be named the 'red-light community' on the basis of their common plight. According to Susan Brison, sexual abuse and violence is a disastrous problem that impacts all women, not just the victims (17-18). This idea aligns with feminist views that challenge the myth of a binary self-society separation, asserting that the self is deeply intertwined with social and cultural surroundings, which in turn influence

³ Repressing inhibition is a defence mechanism that unconsciously blocks unpleasant thoughts, impulses, memories, and emotions from reaching the conscious mind.

behaviour, motivation, and the formation of self-narratives (Takseva and Rajiva 412). The accounts of rape and sexual violence survivors underscore how their suffering is linked to the actual circumstances of the crime, such as the widespread reluctance to provide assistance; and the violence faced by individuals in their immediate social circle (421). Shame is experienced by sexually abused survivors who are silenced because of societal and familial norms. However, being conscious of their common experiences recalls personal stories of sexual trauma and produces an emotional economy of suffering (Ahmed 8). The phrase emotional economy of suffering refers to how shared experiences of trauma, like sexual abuse, create a collective emotional landscape where survivors relate to and understand each other's pain. This economy involves the exchange and recognition of emotions such as grief, anger, and shame within a community. It highlights how individual suffering is not isolated but is interconnected with the suffering of others, creating a network of shared feelings and mutual understanding. This concept emphasises the communal aspect of trauma, where personal stories contribute to a larger, collective experience of suffering.

The collective acknowledgment of pain is crucial because the idea of recovery and redemption comes into existence after the victim has survived. Prior to that, the victims go through a series of traumatic breakdowns while being sexually abused. After being introduced to a world of dangers, experiencing abuse, and breaking into explosive rages, they start reacting to everyday sights and sounds. In addition to despair and helplessness, signs of trauma frequently include nervous breakdowns and restless behaviours that shut down the spirit and working of the psyche in an effort to shield it from more injury (Lifton). As addressed in contemporary discourse, trauma is the ongoing reliving of original events through hallucinations, nightmares, flashbacks, and searching for conditions similar to those experienced.

Shanti has never experienced the phase of recovery as she was murdered by one of her customers, but she has gone through a series of sexual violence, which were enough to make her feel dead before she actually died. She is a street garbage picker, entirely dependent on her brother Ashok, who is the centre of her world. Shanti's life is traumatic as she had to live without food, clothes, and a roof over her head. She is struggling to survive without her parents. While she was going through horrible childhood experiences, she gets abducted and ends up in a brothel where she is abused at all levels, which leads her to lose all hope of survival. She is tortured, terrorised, beaten, raped, and eventually murdered. By the time she is murdered, Charlotte convinces her to escape the brothel, implying Shanti's impending phase of redemption.

Charlotte's experience is a bit different from Shanti's as she is a teenager and aware of sex and sexuality. Prior to her visit to India for tourism, she had a fulfilling life at her home in Australia. She is also abducted like Shanti and faces violence, but she does not lose hope for herself and for her peers as well. Apart from Shanti and Charlotte, there are many other children and young women who were abducted and forced to be sex workers. The forced prostitution and abuse traumatise their lives, and eventually, they accept it as their fate. Prostitution is organised violence against children and young women. Through Hoffmann's depiction of Shanti's and Charlotte's traumatic journeys, this paper focuses on how children and young women living in red-light areas create their communities based on the trauma, pain, and emotions they experience individually. It also traces the indelible marks upon the psyche of children and young adult women, overwhelmed by the memories that profoundly and irreversibly alter their future shared identities.

Shared trauma of sexual abuse in brothels

Kai Erikson posits the idea of a community built on the trauma the victims of similar atrocities collectively experience, which is usually unrecognised. The victims become homeless and exilic when they are abandoned or separated from their families and loved ones. In terms of trauma, this creates an urge to congregate the victims in a designated section of the voiceless, from where the roots of a community begin (Erikson 459). The victims of sexual abuse who experience trauma find difficulty in relating and connecting with other victims of sexual abuse. While atrocities are similar, it is difficult for the victims to share their feelings and emotions with the unknown (victims). The bodily emotions and reactions, such as numbing and stammering, stop them from communicating their experiences with other victims. Nevertheless, as common dialects and cultural settings foster a sense of community, shared trauma also develops a feeling of similar belonging, which leads to a community of the voiceless. Even when emotions of sympathy are repressed, and the ability to care is dimmed among the victims, there is still a psychological connection and a sense of common understanding (Erikson 459).

The relationship between Shanti and Charlotte grows very slowly as Shanti loses all hope for survival. For Shanti, it is heavy and complicated to live in a place surrounded by prostitutes and customers; she hides by hugging her knees to avoid the crowd and chatter with other prostitutes. Her words vanish along with her smile as she struggles to avoid thinking about Ashok. She misses him deeply but is uncertain if she wants him to find her, ashamed of what she has become. No longer his innocent little sister, she harbours a growing hatred

for life. She identifies Charlotte as a white lady but does not care to know much about her. As hope dwindles, she understands that no one is genuinely happy; each person deals with their captivity in their own way. For them, fighting becomes the only escape, a means to distract themselves from the harsh reality of their prison. After seeing Charlotte's horrible condition when the boss of the brothel rapes her and makes her walk naked in front of him, Shanti empathises with her pathetic situation. This is the time when Shanti can feel what Charlotte is going through and how Charlotte's experiences are similar to hers.

Gargi, another victim of sexual slavery, is a bit nasty as she is the oldest prostitute there. She indulges in heated arguments with Charlotte, afraid that the boss could snatch her perks of being the top girl in the brothel. Charlotte is scared of the abusive environment, and her eyes meet with Shanti's, and they exchange non-verbal sympathy. After Gargi slaps Charlotte, Shanti is initially frightened, but Charlotte's smile and wink catch her off guard. Shanti lets out a giggle – a sound she has not heard since entering the house – which brings tears to her eyes, deepening their silent connection. So, rather than having an abrupt realisation that is typically associated with trauma, the collective trauma dawns slowly, even subtly, into the consciousness of individuals who are affected (Erikson 154). The fundamental social settings are dissolved by collective trauma, which weakens the ties that bind people together and undermines the general feeling of community. Thus, fostering a feeling of community and exchanging experiences among victims of sexual violence at brothels takes a bit of time. Erikson emphasises that collective trauma disrupts existing social bonds, gradually replacing them with new connections rooted in shared experiences of suffering. The slow development of Shanti's and Charlotte's relationship illustrates this process, as their growing empathy for one another reflects the emergence of a new sense of community among the victims.

It is possible to characterise the community as the hub for activities that are typically thought of as belonging to specific individuals. The community is the one that eases suffering, offers a setting for closeness, and acts as a storehouse for ties that bond. When a social setting or community is damaged, it can be identified as a wounded human body (Erikson 460). Victims from different backgrounds who have gone through similar violence might come together and build a community by sharing their traumas. They eventually get intimately acquainted and have a deep knowledge of one another's trauma (461). Therefore, trauma becomes an experience for the sexually abused victims that is so extensively shared within the group. The atrocities of individuals set the tone and overall perception of the group, control its identity, and determine how the victims relate to each other. It is not the act of sexual abuse that makes the victims

understand one another's trauma but the sharing of emotions and experiences as dialogues or making conversation has a therapeutic nature. It is almost the same as having a common language or culture or an affinity among individuals who have learned to view themselves as distinct.

Charlotte has empathy for the underprivileged little children as she came to India to work for the welfare of street kids. She is shocked for Shanti as she gets to know that a girl around six years old is continuously taken to the customers and abused by Scarface, the brothel owner. A shared trauma develops between Charlotte and Shanti when Charlotte tries to converse with Shanti by playing knuckle bones, and in time Shanti starts sharing her fear and pain. Shanti asks Charlotte not to leave her ever and shares her dreams that her brother Ashok is going to leave her or does not recognise her. In these dreams, she feels a dark, heavy *chaya* (Hindi term for 'shadow;' here, it symbolises 'danger') looming over her, causing a deep pain in her stomach that makes her feel like she is being torn apart. Shanti sees Charlotte as an assurance to get her out of the brothel when she looks after her by caressing the cuts on her inner thighs and thanks God for Charlotte being her friend. Despite the heated argument with Gargi, Charlotte understands the pain that Gargi is hiding beneath her rude behaviour. All the members of the brothel are hiding the truth of Gargi's pregnancy because, eventually, the owner will kill her baby before the birth. Charlotte tries to lessen Gargi's agony and calm her down by giving a foot massage, aftermath her deep-seated emotions surface uncontrollably.

Padma, the brothel owner's wife, maintains a strict and decomposed demeanour. She uses this behaviour to endure the filth and harsh environment around her. She is helpless and scared inside but has to escort the girls to the customers. After being raped by three men, Charlotte realises how difficult it is for Padma to be the wife of the brothel owner and tries to comprehend her harsh and controlling behaviour towards the girls. Thus, victims who have experienced the trauma of living in red-light areas and sexual abuse measure their odds of survival differently and have a distinct perspective on the outside world. In this regard, it is possible to argue that they had undergone a shift in their sense of self and interpersonal relationships. The sexually distraught women and children at the brothels who experience trauma frequently start to believe that they are extremely vulnerable since they no longer have a significant amount of control over their own bodies and situations. Their vulnerability causes them to believe that something terrible is certain to occur and that they no longer have the ability to resist.

Extensive sexual violence and rape in the commercial sex trade can have both immediate and long-term effects, eliciting emotions including shock, fury,

grief, and denial (Veerman and Ganzevoort 3). The combination of an individual's abilities, expectations, and traits with external factors determines the trauma they feel. A lack of adequate care leads to a deeply traumatic event. This leads to changes in the victim's identity and damages her sense of self. Therefore, a crucial component of trauma is the context in which it occurs (4). Judith Herman asserts that trauma has an impact on the victims' relationships with one another, in addition to their personal traumatic experiences. Due to the damage that violence does to the socialised, culturally constructed links of trustworthiness that are founded on moral standards and social expectations, victims of brutal violence such as sexual abuse frequently struggle to relate to others (4).

Collective trauma harms a community's structures in the same way as individual trauma hurts the victim's inner being. As discussed above, Kai Erikson suggests that a community's social system can sustain damage in manners akin to those inflicted upon its mental and physical components, leading to ruptured ties and undermined communality, and this entails the potential for emerging new communities. Collective trauma impacts the common frame of reference, core values, and the community's understanding of itself and the outside world, much as individual trauma questions fundamental beliefs and selfhood (Veerman and Ganzevoort 6). Collective trauma arises when a community is exposed to traumatic events, either directly or indirectly, leading to widespread emotional and psychological suffering. Even if only a few individuals experience trauma firsthand, the impact reverberates throughout the community, affecting its members and potentially stabilising the group's overall structure and sense of unity (9).

Shanti, Charlotte, Gargi, and Padma come from diverse social and cultural backgrounds – slum areas, foreign countries, urban settings, and conservative environments – yet they are united by the shared trauma of rape and sexual violence in the brothel. Despite their differences, their common experience of suffering creates a bond that transcends their individual origins, highlighting the pervasive and universal impact of sexual exploitation in the brothel. The trauma of sexual abuse and violence is quite personal, and victims have their own emotions and feelings that they perceive as insecure to share. Subsequently, the victims begin to understand that the atrocities are similar and that they are one collective group suffering from the trauma of sexual assault and forced prostitution. Thus, the victims living in red-light areas form a community that further strengthens their collective identity as prostitutes.

Sexual violence, collective trauma, and identity of prostitutes

In order to prevent abuse from being seen, survivors frequently isolate themselves – not just by the offenders, communities, and the government. The term collective trauma was first used in marginalised discourse such as black, postcolonial, and indigenous analyses to describe the consequences of common experiences with rape, sexual enslavement, and systemic violence (Pain 1789). The symptoms of collective trauma are spread throughout time, location, and generations, showing up at both the individual and collective levels (Yellow Horse Brave Heart; Schwab). There is consistency between past and present violence because it is a reaction to systemic violence directed at oppressed and vulnerable groups and regions (Akbar; Eyerman; Hooks). The very first experience of Shanti getting into forced sexual intercourse (rape) cloaks her mind and slips into a void. This first forced encounter left severe wounds and bleeding in her private parts. Padma has to do stitches between Shanti's legs and keeps her in a private room to keep her alive and prevent her from being abused again as she is almost in a dying condition. She is disheartened after seeing Shanti's terrible state, and she feels hammering in her heart. Charlotte also hides herself when Scarface makes her walk naked in front of him. When Gargi is rescued by Eli and Dr. Philip, she also stays in a room to avoid people. Shame and physical abuse are stuck in their psyche, which is personal to each of them but common to all, that is, collective experience.

The shared sense of shame and physical abuse forms a bond among the victims, uniting their personal experiences into collective suffering. Collective traumas are largely caused by mental and emotional abuses such as deceit, denial, and silence. These abuses are reinforced by societal or political norms that downplay or ignore violent crimes, failing to recognise the extent of the injury or provide sufficient compensation. Personal accounts of sexual enslavement and abuse have the potential to impact and include others, therefore becoming shared and collective experiences. Furthermore, there are social factors that contribute to the isolation of survivors of sexual abuse, including perceptions held by society about how survivors should act, share their experiences, and ask for assistance – regardless of whether they are validated or not (Burstow; Tamas). Thus, in addition to the extent and severity of the damage, collective trauma is characterised by a shared feeling of suffering generally caused by social ostracisation (Pain 1795).

Contrary to being a shared experience among all sexually abused children and women, trauma is more frequently a continuous and lifelong experience for some, one that is frequently exacerbated and less evident (Pain 1796). Charlotte understands Padma's trauma of abusing girls at the brothel, of how she is a nice

woman inside and afraid of Scarface. Padma also cares for the girls and wants to escape with them, but her fear of getting beaten and abused by her husband stops her. The reason for Gargi's sternness is her anxiety regarding what would happen if she gets replaced and loses all the perks of being a top girl, and if she is beaten and abused more like others. She is also pregnant and does not want to get her baby killed. Charlotte recognises her agony and makes her comfortable by sharing her emotions. There are moments where Padma is seen as caring for Shanti while cleaning her and getting her ready for customers. When she slaps Shanti for crying and sees that Shanti is curled up into a ball due to fear, she says, "I'm sorry I hit you, Shanti. You need to learn fast here if you're going to survive" (Hoffmann 80). It is not always how the brothel owner or customers sexually abuse the girls, but also the abusive language and treatment they have to face in a place like a brothel. So, Charlotte, Gargi, Padma, and other prostitutes share their wounds and pain and understand how they are interconnected with each other, which leads to a sense of a group who are fearing and experiencing similar violence. Their individual traumas conflate, making the shared suffering a collective trauma.

Trust is a multilayered construct that surrounds humans and radiates outward in a circular motion, much like pond ripples. In its most severe form, going through a traumatic event can lead to a lack of trust not just in oneself but also in the workings of human life, the basic logics that guide human existence, and the structural setting of family and community (Erikson 470). The act of abduction, rape, and forced prostitution usually breaks the conviction of believing either in human beings or society. For children, trauma could permanently harm basic trust, causing the most difficulty in their delicate development. Child victims of sexual abuse are mostly unaware of the basics of violence; they can only feel bodily harm. The knowledge of sexual abuse and the emotions around it damage their lifelong thought process, and trusting the surroundings becomes challenging and complicated. The process of fostering trust within the community is analogous to that of constructing a collective identity. The concept of history as a collective trauma or victory supersedes the inherent ties between individual humans and forges them into a collective identity, which establishes the framework for the continuation and unity of individual existence (Giesen 113). To be precise, collective trauma does not surface until the victims begin to recognise their shared suffering and see how their circumstances are comparable to those of others (Sztompka 160).

The victims of sexual abuse, such as, prostitutes, begin discussing the atrocities and their terrible experiences, chattering about the rumours and formulating myths, seeking intrigue and finding ways to escape the brothels.

Gargi's pregnancy becomes a problem for the brothel owner, whom Charlotte named Saul. He wants to kill the baby, but Gargi comes up with a plan to escape the place and asks Charlotte to help. A kind of warmth runs in Charlotte's eyes, learning that she will be able to see her parents. But there is tension among the girls at the brothel, and everyone seems to avoid any conversation. Charlotte becomes worried and begins to search for Gargi; she sees Saul, the Scarface abusing Padma while gripping her arms. He also abuses Charlotte by striding over her and asking her to do overtime and take care of Gargi as well. Charlotte does not understand and, with a sob, asks Padma what happened to Gargi, "The baby?" and Padma, with a broken heart, said, "Gone. Do not talk of it again. Come, I will take you to her." (Hoffmann 221). The fundamental relationship that these victims share – such as tending to one another's wounds and suffering – is a result of the similar sexual violence and trauma they endure, which constitutes their collective identity, regardless of whether they have separate identities based on their cultural and societal distinctions.

Individual suffering and experiences frequently serve as a propellant for the formation of collective trauma. What distinguishes the type of pain at risk is not individual identity but rather the threat to collective identity (Alexander and Breese xii). When psychological barriers are removed and pain is brought into consciousness, enabling the individual victim to grieve, they experience relief from the suppression and denial that characterise their reaction to traumatic harm. It is a subject of *symbolic creation for collectivities*, of structuring a tale and proceeding from there instead of disowning, resisting, and moving forward. It takes countless conversations, social affairs, emotional expressions, and various forms of storytelling for the prostitutes to collate individual suffering and loss into a collective trauma (xiii). There may have been thousands of casualties in the brothels, and many individuals who were previously in tremendous agony and suffering due to continuous sexual abuse and violence have lost their lives. To combat the fear of rape, the prostitutes need to create a collective identity for themselves as 'we' – a group of women and children living in red-light areas – by telling stories and expressing their feelings to one another.

Shanti's trauma of being sexually abused not only comes from her personal experiences but also from what she believes that society thinks about her being raped. Her personal trauma makes her believe that her life has become dirty and her blood turned black. She thinks that even the worms would not want to live on her body. The repeated sexual abuse has caused Shanti to shut down emotionally and mentally, which makes her feel numb and disconnected from reality. Shanti tries to distract herself by controlling her breathing and counting – something that she has learned from her brother, Ashok. She becomes more

traumatised when other prostitutes of the group make hateful faces at her, which leads to her having no language. Shanti sees other prostitutes escaping their identity by arguing and fighting among themselves as people argue in a community to survive and exist.

Red-light community and cultural trauma

Hoffmann's depiction of girl children and young women at the brothel points towards both personal and collective trauma, which further indicates the collective identity of the prostitutes living in red-light areas. She presents a nuanced depiction of the collective identity of prostitutes, exploring their experiences, challenges, and aspirations with complexity and depth. Rather than presenting a monolithic view of sex workers, Hoffmann delves into the individual stories and backgrounds of Shanti, Charlotte, Gargi, Padma, and others involved in the trade. She highlights the diversity within this community, showing how the victims come from various backgrounds and face similar kinds of abuse and violence. Through the characters of Shanti and Gargi, Hoffmann sheds light on the socio-economic factors, such as poverty, lack of education, and limited employment opportunities, which become the reason for their sexual slavery and trauma. She also explores the emotional and psychological toll that sexual abuse violence takes on an Australian teenager, including issues of social stigma such as shame, isolation, and the fear of being judged or ostracised by society. The characteristics of victims in narratives are shown as helpless and dead inside who eventually overcome obstacles in their path with courage and will. Within the red-light districts, they create a bond of sisterhood and support, finding strength and companionship to face challenges. So, the most crucial thing is how victims react to their emotional state. The heightened aural awareness in narratives conveys the feeling of pessimism. Thus, reading a text as a trauma narrative of sexual abuse and violence at brothels displays a fractured sense of understanding and identity, which is experienced at a personal level but has a collective significance.

Trauma, whether individual or collective, arising from shock are individual and social wounds reinforcing each other, causing even greater tremor and loss. The trauma would only become more severe as a result of the cumulative effect, shattering both individual and collective identities and a feeling of belonging. Within red-light areas, victims' individual and collective identities are manipulated by the component of cultural trauma, which is associated with more abstract and mediated ideas of identity, such as national or religious. Cultural trauma is typically linked to traumatic incidents, affecting both individuals and collectivities, but its occurrence is influenced by various factors (Eyerman, Alexander, and Breese). It is said that cultural trauma is an intrusive

and overbearing occurrence that weakens or completely destroys one or more fundamental aspects of a culture or the culture in general (Smelser 38). In contrast, a compelling naturalist or lay trauma narrative would contend that certain occurrences are traumatising in and of themselves; that is to say, they are the root cause of traumatic affect (Alexander).

Cultural traumas are complex processes of meaning-making and affiliating where individuals and groups grapple with defining and managing situations. In his *The Longest Shadow*, Geoffrey Hartman comments that we always have a choice to be silent or not regarding speaking of trauma (3). He argues that victims have to choose when to speak about traumatic experiences and when it would be best to keep things to themselves. As incorporating violence into our conception of human nature, the narrative of sexual violence entails giving up on both language and humanity (4). Traumatic responses are often experienced within a culture that assigns different values to the experience and the individual's feelings. To the extent that the self is understood as a creation of culture and distinct inclinations and practices, the meaning of trauma is a subject between an individual and society (Balaev 155). The protagonist in fiction successfully depicts trauma by emphasising how trauma is shaped by a particular culture and region (56). Tracey Hoffmann depicts the exploitation and violence that the women and children in the red-light zones endure while delving into many facets of cultural trauma. The narrative emphasises how power disparities and structural oppression foster violent and traumatic repetitions. In addition to psychological trauma added to their experiences, the prostitute characters – Charlotte, Shanti, Gargi, and others – fight with the shame and social exclusion that accompany their occupation and are ingrained in the social and cultural fabric.

Cultural trauma is a complex emotional conflict involving the identification of victims and abusers and the rewriting of collective memory from the past (Eyerman 48). For crimes like abduction, prostitution, and sexual violence, literature plays a central role in constructing the meaning of collective identity for the victims at the brothel. As it is experienced first-hand, personal trauma and the significance of traumatic events are hard to comprehend and articulate in words (Eyerman 49). At brothels, it is only when the victims start to converse and decipher a real understanding and interpretation of the violence and their experience that a narration is possible. In the framework of creating collective identity, it is crucial to recognise the basic fear of violence and personal traumas in order to understand the social theory as a trauma expression. The traumas that cause abrupt pauses, lapses, and absences in the argumentation interrupt the breakthrough of experiences (Eyerman 50).

It is difficult to articulate the various types of torture and violence; the narratives affect people differently because of the presumptive relationship between collective and individual experiences (Balaev 154). The authenticity of personal trauma, which is frequently linked to underlying social issues and cultural beliefs, is made evident by the trauma victim in fiction. The trauma novel portrays the individual suffering, suggesting that the protagonist is a universal figure, for example, representative of every victim of sexual violence. The main character, for example, the victim in the narrative, frequently makes parallels to a time in history when a certain race, gender, or group of people had severe trauma (155).

Charlotte is sexually tortured by the same man who assaulted Shanti. The trauma of walking naked in front of an unknown man makes Charlotte feel alien to her own body. However, Charlotte's experience of trauma is compounded by the fact that she is a foreigner in India and struggles with a sense of cultural disconnection. In addition to attempting to survive in a setting where she is subjected to abuse and exploitation, she negotiates the difficulties of being an outsider in an unfamiliar culture. As a child, Shanti is robbed of her innocence due to the brutality at the brothel. She suffers long-lasting psychological damage as a result of being exposed to violence, abuse, and exploitation at a vulnerable age. She internalises the trauma she experienced and battles emotions of worthlessness, humiliation, and self-blame. Her initial encounters at the brothel have a significant impact on her body, psyche, and self-worth. Shanti has no power over her own body and surroundings, as she is just a child. She is subject to the whims of the brothel owners and clients and is denied basic human rights and autonomy. Her sense of helplessness is increased by this lack of agency, which further exacerbates her trauma. Shanti, despite her trauma, exhibits remarkable resilience and survival instincts, forming bonds with Charlotte and developing strategies to navigate her dangers. Even Gargi finds serenity in Charlotte's company. All of them create a group in terms of their experiences which provides authenticity to their emotions and trauma. Therefore, a community narrative of the brothel prostitutes is necessary in order to find meaning in the exaggeration, fragmentation, and inconsistency in the victim's narrative about sexual abuse.

Conclusion

Rape and sexual violence deeply affect how survivors see themselves. These acts are not only abusive but also have serious moral and psychological impacts on the victims (Herman). The narratives illustrate the interconnectedness of both personal and societal psychological systems that contribute to the perception,

expression, and, occasionally, resolution of trauma. The crux of the conflict lies in the experiences, feelings, and perceptions of the victims as they are not only individual tales (Bhutalia 77). In their social, political, and cultural settings, victims of sexual abuse have experienced violence and psychological trauma that has shaped their ongoing experiences and cross-cultural interactions. When many stressful events and traumatic experiences are combined and occur recurrently, such as repetitive rapes or forced sexual intercourse at brothels, these acts frequently become more severe over time. The victims at brothels start to realise that their suffering is not unique to them; rather, all of the victims experience comparable forms of abuse and violence. This involves realising that trauma on an individual level happens in a communal setting, where the collective suffers when too many people are injured, and the individual suffers because they are perceived as a member of a certain group.

Since sexual violence has so many repercussions, it is difficult to disentangle individual trauma from communal trauma during and after acts of violence. This highlights the interconnectedness between individual and collective components. Sexual abuse and violence in brothels are frequently the result of systemic exploitation, in which vulnerable children and women – such as those experiencing financial difficulties or human trafficking – are forced into prostitution. This perpetuates cycles of abuse and trauma, leading victims to bond with each other. Thus, the aspects of the collective trauma of sexual abuse experienced by individual victims in brothels are deeply troubling because they highlight the ongoing, inescapable suffering of those trapped in such environments and the failure of society to protect its most vulnerable members.

Shanti, Charlotte, Gargi, and Padma are not only the characters who are experiencing sexual violence at the brothels in India, they also represent every child and young woman who is suffering from forced prostitution. Sexual abuse in brothels can cause victims to feel dread, humiliation, remorse, and diminished self-worth, among other severe and persistent psychological impacts. In addition to experiencing various mental health issues, survivors of sexual abuse may also exhibit signs of sadness, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. In the sex trade, as much as outside of it, survivors of sexual assault in brothels frequently experience severe stigma and social rejection. Feelings of alienation and loneliness, as well as a hesitation to ask for assistance or support, might result from this stigma. Thus, these victims, for example, prostitutes, often create a group both within and outside of the context of their work based on the experiences and trauma they share. This formed community provides support and camaraderie and shares experiences among individuals who face similar challenges and circumstances.

Even in the phase of suffering, those working in brothels can collectively show incredible fortitude and bravery. Within the brothel, the victims, Charlotte, Shanti, Gargi, and even Padma, establish an empathetic community, supporting and empowering one another while sharing their personal emotions. By the end of the novel, despite Shanti's death just before her rescue and Padma's betrayal, the bond of mutual support and understanding among the characters becomes evident, underscoring their collective resilience. So, the victims of forced sexual slavery or prostitution form close bonds with one another based on shared experiences of stigma, discrimination, and exploitation, creating a community of their own, which further establishes the notion of collective trauma. These bonds of solidarity can provide emotional support and a sense of belonging in environments where they may face social ostracism or marginalisation. However, in their networks, the victims also frequently participate in mutual aid and assistance, providing useful support, including resource sharing and information about safe working conditions.

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