



Blurring Boundaries Through Anguish: Exploring Shared Pains Of Childhood Trauma And Miniature Adulthood In South Asian Novels

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This research is an exploration through the eyes of the wounded. Pain, like hunger, has no religion, country, or creed. This world is woven with numerous visible and invisible boundaries; some are drawn on maps and others on our minds. Among many woven tapestries, South Asia is one of those territories widely known for its rich culture and diversity. It has the longest history of civilisation but has also witnessed its adverse effects. The prolonged history of war, genocide, famine, and other factors impacted this area of the world vividly. Countries in this region have enjoyed a glorious past and have been burdened with some of the most sorrowful memories. Ultimately, the people who are most affected are those who are unable to grasp what is happening around them and why. Consequently, such experiences, whether consciously or unconsciously, shape them into completely different human beings. This article aims to study novels from the South Asian

region that depict incidents from a child's perspective and their impact on personality and life, how these situations compel them to become an 'adult-child' or children who should behave like an adult demanding pre-maturity from them. Turning them into miniature adults by snatching their innocence and childhood is the gravest crime against humanity. Novels offer a platform for exploration and scope to analyse incidents from multiple aspects. Authors expressing themselves through this genre are offering fresh perspectives to restore faith in humanity. This research article is an exploration of such explorations done by the novelists who are penning the unsaid words.

Keywords: Childhood, Childhood- Trauma, Miniature Adult, Adult- child, South Asian Novels.

Introduction:

“Somewhere deep within the marrow of our marrow, we were the same”¹

– Shamsie

South Asia is a combination of territories, wearing eight flags under its wings. It gave shelter to some of the greatest monarchs and this soil has gifted many legends and genii to this world.

Apart from geographical, political, and linguistic boundaries, this piece of land has many things in common. It is a landscape woven with vivid threads that create a dazzling appearance, yet hides patches of wounds and scratched memories. Children are a reflection of their country, for a country they are blank slates on which the lines of ideology, religion, and customs are drawn; but children's minds are a blank canvas on which they draw their own interpretations, free from any preconceived notions. It depends on what life has thrown at them. Some paint their picture with love and happiness, some with smiles, some with tears, and some with blood. Rousseau strongly believed that “Childhood has its own way of seeing, thinking, and feeling, and nothing is more foolish than to try to substitute ours for theirs.”² 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.³

South Asia is home to about 627 million children under 18 years of age.⁴ Over 21 million children between 5-17 years of age are engaged in child labour in South Asia alone.⁵ According to the Violence in Childhood Index, South Asia is the third highest region for violence against children.⁶ Violence can be physical, sexual, and emotional and also manifest itself as neglect. South Asia is home to the largest number of out-of-school children and youths at 31.8 million with 8.2 million at the primary level (6 to 9 years) and 23.6 million at the

secondary level (10 to 14 years).⁷ Nowhere else in the world is the incidence of child marriage as high as it is in South Asia.⁸ A study found that South Asians experience high rates of mental health issues, but often don't seek treatment. According to the study, a prominent reason people don't seek mental help because of their cultural belief that seeking help outside the family is viewed as a failure of the family.⁹

Adult Child or Miniature Adulthood:

The term "adult child" was first used by the organisation Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACA). ACA defines an adult child as "someone whose actions and decisions as an adult are guided by childhood experiences grounded in self-doubt or fear."¹⁰ As described within the context of mental health; an adult child is someone who grew up in a dysfunctional family environment that prevented them from fully maturing emotionally. Adult child syndrome is characterised by an inability to navigate adult decisions and relationships due to the long-term impact of childhood trauma. Adult child is supposed to suppress their needs (emotional, economic, physical, mental) because they are accustomed to placing themselves in the least priority. Even doing something for themselves makes them feel guilty and selfish. Adult children feel they are a burden to their family and whatever their parents have given to them they should be thankful for it. They should grow and fulfil the needs of their family as soon as possible. They even leave their passion and interests because their parents want them to become something else, and even some who follow their interests they are labelled as selfish and self-centred. Even after being adults those who choose their career and marriage partner according to their parents' choice are glorified as obedient and caring, but those who didn't their parents are ashamed of it. "Parenting tended to focus on obedience as the gold standard of children's development"¹¹ It is not only about a particular family; it is a cultural trait in many South Asian countries. 'Children being seen but not heard.'¹² Such criteria often lead to unsuccessful careers and marriages. Adult child syndrome can be seen very commonly among the eldest children of the family. They are deliberately trained to become submissive and people pleasers. They are expected to sacrifice their voice and priorities for their younger siblings.

French historian Philippe Aries states in his book *Centuries of Childhood*, that before the 17th century, childhood was not a recognised concept. He argued that “childhood” as a concept was created by modern society. He found before the 17th century, children were represented as mini-adults¹³ Children were thought to be merely small adults, possessing the same qualities and natures as grownups. In popular and media discourses majority of world children who work from an early age: 'burdened with adult-like duties and responsibilities'¹⁴ tend to be conceptualised as miniature adults.¹⁵ Countries struggling with war, poverty, and political disruptions successfully rob the innocence and compel children to leave their childhood behind. Every child begins the world anew, but some children are forced to begin it from a place of pain and sorrow. In South Asia, nearly every country has experienced some of the most tragic events in human history. While these incidents may now be a part of the past, their aftermath and repercussions persist as trauma. This trauma has been passed down through generations, becoming an unconscious part of the collective cultural experience. Correctly what Ruskin Bond says, “The past is always with us, for it feeds the present.”¹⁶ Many children in South Asia are exposed to traumatic situations that force them to play ‘adult-like’ roles prematurely. Exposure to trauma traps them into difficult choices, causing early economic responsibilities, emotional burdens, cultural expectations, and family obligations. Narratives coming from these countries are connecting the dots by sifting through patches of traumatic memories depicting the shared pains of children across the political borders of South Asia.

Depiction of miniature adulthood as a form of trauma in South Asian novels:

Rousseau pleaded. "Why fill with bitterness the fleeting early days of childhood, days which will no more return for them than for you?"¹⁷

The prominence of trauma in South Asian literature, particularly in Novels is evident in partition and war scriptures. The idealised image of carefree childhood and families as safe havens has evolved its appearance by showing the dark sides of it. Pains of family dysfunctions and neglect found a platform in the novels written by South Asian writers. Their contribution to understanding and reproducing the human psyche is immense. They wonderfully portrayed and gave voices to the children to understand their ways and beings.

In *Ice-Candy-Man* or *Cracking India*, Sidhwa's representation of the character Lenny can be seen as an ‘adult-child’. The Partition of India inflicted wounds that left people emotionally scarred. Divided India is filled with a generation of torn, scattered, and unconsolated souls. Children who witnessed the Partition are

among those profoundly impacted in ways beyond our imagination. Lenny embodies one of those children who actively observed and witnessed the Partition, inadvertently becoming a part of it, which resulted in lifelong guilt and transformed her into a completely different person. A fundamental trait of adult children is their pervasive sense of guilt; they blame themselves without fully comprehending the core aspects of the situation. When Ice Candy Man came with a mob to capture Ayah, Lenny failed to see him as part of the mob. “The most primitive parts of our brain tell us that safety lies in familiarity.”¹⁸ Her innocence and familiarity with him clouded her ability to grasp his intentions. She did what every child is taught to do: speak the truth, unaware of the repercussions. The family expected her to act with the sensibility of an adult. The moment Lenny witnessed Ayah being captured, she realised her blunder, and guilt overwhelmed her. She speaks in the novel:

For three days I stand in front of the bathroom mirror staring at my tongue. I hold the vile, truth-infected thing between my fingers and try to wench it out: but slippery and slick as a fish it slips from my fingers and mocks me with its sharp rapier tip darting as poisonous as a snake. I punish it with rigorous scourings from my prickling toothbrush until it is sore and bleeding.¹⁹

She kept on punishing herself and she started hating the presence of her body part which became the cause of Ayah’s pain: “I’m so conscious of its unwelcome presence at all times that it swells uncomfortably in my mouth and gags and chokes me.”²⁰ The character of Lenny is fully aware of her age and willing to grow as a woman yet she feels irritated about her emotional growth. After witnessing Ayah being captured by the mob, Lenny’s consciousness evolved, leaving a scar on her mind. When her Godmother says no one will marry her as it is difficult to find someone for her, it upsets Lenny. She remarks, “When something upsets me this much I find it impossible to talk. It used not to be so.”²¹ She even protested in her mind, “This idiocy of bottled-up emotions can’t be a symptom of growing up, surely! More likely I’m reverting to infancy the way old people do. I feel so sorry for myself.”²² This signifies how incidents of violence and guilt changed her personality.

A sense of guilt can be seen in Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*, Amir is an outcome of a dysfunctional family. A motherless child whose father is emotionally absent for him. He struggles to get his father’s attention and to get that he even did something that haunted his entire life. He witnessed the rape of his half-brother Hassan, to win the prize in the kite contest that will grab his father’s attention and for some days at least his father

will be proud of him. Hassan was the result of Amir's father's illicit affair, and Amir's father couldn't accept Hassan as his son in front of society. To maintain a semblance of justice, he made both of them suffer: he showed less attention and love to Amir than a son deserves, while showing more care and affection to Hassan than a Hazara boy typically received in Afghan society. Lines drawn in the mind of Amir about their cultural superiority caused him to become a tyrant towards Hassan, even after his rape Amir tries to suppress his real self and let the social hierarchy win by uttering the words, "Nothing was free in this world. Maybe Hassan was the price I had to pay, the lamb I had to slay, to win Baba."²³ After battling his conscience, he concluded, "He was just a Hazara, wasn't he?"²⁴ What made Amir become this way was his struggle to gain his father's attention and the cultural expectations that demanded him to behave in a superior manner. The cause behind his guilt-ridden childhood and his tyrannical behaviour towards his half-brother was the expectation from his surroundings that he should understand everything on his own. On the other side, it was Hassan; an exceptionally submissive child and a victim of his broken destiny. His dominant traits of being an adult child were his excessively submissive nature and his low self-esteem. He accepted his inferior position in society without any protest. He accepted being raped and abandoned for Amir's victory because he promised Amir that he would do anything for Amir "For you a thousand times over."²⁵ He believed they were friends yet knew they were not equal. It is known to him what justice and equality look like, he fought for the sake of Amir but he could never raise his voice for himself. Like Hassan said to Assef when he refused to give the kite, "Amir agha won the tournament and I ran this kite for him. I ran it fairly. This is his kite."²⁶ On which Assef reminds his place in Amir's eyes:

But before you sacrifice yourself for him, think about this: Would he do the same for you? Have you ever wondered why he never includes you in games when he has guests? Why he only plays with you when no one else is around? I'll tell you why, Hazara. Because to him, you're nothing but an ugly pet. Something he can play with when he's bored, something he can kick when he's angry. Don't ever fool yourself and think you're something more.²⁷

Even after his rape and being abandoned by Amir, Hassan tried to bring normality between them. Even though he was sick and tired, he felt it was his duty to keep everything in order and believed it was his mistake that Amir was no longer playing with him. He pleaded to know why they were not playing anymore and promised that whatever was bothering Amir, he would stop doing it. Hassan never felt that he, too, was

a child whose wants and needs should be listened to; he deserved to be pampered. Like many adult children, he unquestionably accepted whatever was thrown at him.

The God of Small Things by Arundhati Roy is a saga of two 'adult- children' in a dysfunctional family. Rahel and Estha never experienced what is called family. Fear of abandonment is a common trait among adult children, and these two adolescents lived in constant fear of being abandoned, even by their mother—the only person they felt truly loved them. Their mother's words always haunted them, "When you hurt people, they begin to love you less. That's what careless words do. They make people love you a little less."²⁸ This fear of abandonment and their feelings of unworthiness filled their lives with trauma and resentment. They never felt loved or valued and grew up as confused adults who struggled to understand their own worth and their place in the world. "A lack of resonant empathy suggests a lack of self-development. For parents to accurately imagine what their children are feeling, they need to have enough self-development to be aware of their own emotions. If they haven't developed their own emotional self-awareness, they can't resonate with how others, including their own children, might feel inside ²⁹ emotionally immature parents, are "uncomfortable with their own emotional needs and therefore have no idea how to offer support at an emotional level. Such parents may even become nervous and angry if their children get upset, punishing them instead of comforting them. These reactions shut down children's instinctive urge to reach out, closing the door to emotional contact."³⁰ Ammu herself is a victim of a dysfunctional family. She never felt loved and appreciated in any of her relationships. She is even guilty that she killed Velutha. Though trauma enters unconsciously too, these two children were themselves witnessing everything that was happening to her mother. "Ammu loved her children (of course), but their wide-eyed vulnerability and their willingness to love people who didn't really love them exasperated her and sometimes made her want to hurt them—just as an education, a protection."³¹ She not only faced the trauma of being a child of a tyrannical father and a submissive mother but also bore the consequences of breaking the laws of being a girl child. Being a woman she had no "Locust Stand I",³² so her fatherless children too don't have any locus standi; children of failed marriage and divorce. They cannot complain, they cannot protest whatever they are being provided they should be thankful for it. They have to learn to control their hopes. For Ammu, Rahel and Estha family became the first source of trauma, because families, "like invidious doctors, they knew just where it hurt."³³ Rahel described this pattern of trauma as 'Pappachi's Moth.' A symbol of fear and unhappiness. Whenever

something bad happens, Rahel wonders: “How Pappachi’s Moth whispered in his children’s veins!.”³⁴ Such incidents can be traced as a lingering or generational trauma that passes from generation to generation in the whole family and controls their behaviour and pattern of living.

Conclusion:

“Trauma robs you of the feeling that you are in charge of yourself.”³⁵ People universally feel ashamed about the traumas they have experienced. South Asian novels exceptionally express the voices of the unheard by portraying children burdened with unnecessary struggles and how their lives are filled with sorrow. The ultimate purpose of both individuals and society is to be happy. It is important to address the past to live fully in the present. If we deny the wounds inflicted on us, we will inflict those same wounds on the next generation. The shared pains of collective trauma help the countries of South Asia to understand their past, present, and future more clearly.

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