

The Echoes of Loss and Absence : Exploring Developmental Trauma in Anuradha Roy's *All the Lives We Never Lived*

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Abstract

This article examines the notion of developmental trauma through the character of Myshkin in All the Lives We Never Lived. Developmental trauma occurs when a child goes through serious difficulties during their growing years. At the age of nine, Myshkin experiences significant distress when his mother leaves him to seek personal freedom, which profoundly impacts his emotional development. Three main types of trauma emerge from this event: attachment trauma, characterized by emotional disconnection and difficulty in trusting others; separation trauma, leading to feelings of isolation and confusion about his identity; and grief and loss trauma, as he longs for his mother throughout his life and struggles with life's challenges. By analyzing these traumas, the article highlights how they shape Myshkin's psychological growth and continue to influence him as he reflects on his childhood in later years.

Keywords: Developmental Trauma, attachment Trauma, separation, Grief, Loss, Psychological Growth

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The novel *All the Lives We Never Lived* by Anuradha Roy tells the story of Myshkin and how his emotional struggles are tied to the trauma he experienced while growing up. Roy engages readers with her insightful thoughts and powerful emotions. Her writing often focuses on how self-awareness influences a person's life. The title, *All the Lives We Never Lived*, reflects Myshkin's longing for his mother during different stages of his life. She left him when he was nine, and even at the age of 60, he revisits the painful experiences from his past. Her abandonment left a deep emotional scar that stayed with him throughout his life. The novel explores Myshkin's suffering due to this traumatic event. His memories play a crucial role in shaping his life, constantly reminding him of the fears and pain from his childhood. Over time, these memories shift and take different forms, but they continue to bring him emotional pain, leading to ongoing trauma. "Our memories come to us as an image, feelings, glimpses, sometimes fleshed out, sometimes in outline" (Roy 22).

The primary objective of this research article is to explore the psychological and emotional effects of childhood trauma as portrayed through the character of Myshkin in Anuradha Roy's novel *All the Lives We Never Lived*. The focus is on understanding how early abandonment and emotional neglect, particularly from a maternal figure, shape Myshkin's sense of identity, emotional responses, and mental health throughout his life. This study aims to connect literary elements with psychological theories on trauma, memory, and attachment, demonstrating how unresolved grief and disrupted caregiving relationships in childhood can have long-term consequences. By examining Myshkin's recurring memories, emotional detachment, and struggles with connection, the analysis seeks to highlight the importance of secure attachments in early development and the lingering impact of unresolved trauma on adult behavior and emotional resilience.

Early childhood trauma happens when a child faces a disturbing event that causes real or perceived harm, making them feel unsafe or in danger. This kind of trauma often leads to emotional imbalances, disrupting the child's sense of security and well-being (Cruz 5). In this novel, the protagonist's mother abandoned him at a young age to pursue her personal freedom, leading to a series of traumatic events in his life. Whenever he recalls the day she left, he vividly remembers the words spoken by others to describe him. "I was known as the boy whose mother had run-off with an Englishman" (Roy 9). There is a persistent sense of confusion whenever he tries to understand what made her to leave him. Each time he revisits that day, he yearns for the affection that any loving mother would naturally offer her child. It can influence how a child grows and develops, affecting how they see themselves, and the world around them (Knight 19).

The traumatic memory comes back to the person, whether they are awake or asleep, and they relive the event through flashbacks or nightmares (Chen 1). The protagonist is frequently haunted by nightmares whenever he spends too much time thinking about his mother. As a child, he would wake up in deep fear, constantly replaying the day she left him, and the pain he experienced was severe. Anxiety and depression are common problems that can develop in a child after they go through

a traumatic experience (Hovens et al. 66). Adults who went through trauma as children often feel a lot of distress (Lindert et. al. 359). Children who experience complex trauma often have difficulties forming healthy relationships. This can lead to other problems, such as unhealthy habits, impatience that causes family issues, and serious mental health problems (Cook et. al. 2). Drugs can also be used as a way to escape or avoid thinking about difficult experiences from childhood. Myshkin smokes to forget the constant memories of his mother, even though she's not there. He feels disconnected, and the only time he feels better is when he lets out his anger whenever he thinks of her.

There was a time in my life long ago - I was thirteen and had just started smoking - when you thought that if I had a picture of her Infront of me, I would press the glowing end of a cigarette into the circles of her eyes... I would blind her. I would kill the spell cast by her absent present. (Roy 15)

Children are especially vulnerable when they rely on parents who are not only abusive or threatening but also neglectful or fail to care for them properly (Farina 4). Myshkin was too young to fully understand that his mother would no longer visit or be with him. Her absence left him feeling weak, unable to keep up with his daily activities, and struggling to complete even simple tasks. He felt deeply saddened by the separation from his mother, and at times, he was angry with her for not being the caring mother he needed. Despite his anger over her leaving, he often wondered, "I wish he had taken me too" (Roy 188).

Parents bond affects a child's memory (Milojevich 14). His mother's departure not only leaves Myshkin with emotional scars and trust issues but also affects his memory, making him hold on to certain painful moments while struggling with unresolved feelings. Despite the hurt, he continues to love her, which adds complexity to his memories of abandonment. Traumatic memories are often remembered with a lot of detail (Howe 158), as they can stand out more vividly compared to ordinary events. These memories may feel sharper and clearer because of the strong emotional impact associated with the trauma. He experiences brief flashes of emotion, moments of love or pain, that come to him suddenly but are wrapped in a strong feeling of loss. According to him memories of his mother are like bursts of light, showing the moments he shared with his mother. However, they are surrounded by darkness, which represents the emotional emptiness and unanswered questions caused by her leaving Images pass through my mind like flashes of light enveloped (Roy 21).

The early system works on its own, without us having to think about it or actively control it (Myers 413). Even at 60, Myshkin clearly remembers the day his mother left him. He thinks of the moment he came home, soaked and upset, calling for her, which shows how vulnerable he feels. Her absence makes him feel abandoned and lonely. This memory highlights his deep longing for her and the painful truth that she is no longer in his life, leaving him feeling isolated and lost. This is evident when he says "I entered the house soaked to the bone, yelling Ma! Ma

...My mother was not at home...” (Roy 138). When his father returned home with his second wife, Myshkin found it hard to accept that another woman had taken his mother’s place. He felt a strong emotional barrier, making it difficult for him to connect with them. This situation created a sense of distrust between him and his new family. “She was not pretty, like my mother, nor anything as stylish”.

Young children who are deprived of a mother’s care, or a mother figure, may experience temporary distress, and in some cases, this can lead to long-term effects (Bowlby 211). In *All the Lives We Never Lived*, Myshkin is deeply affected by his mother Gayatri’s absence, feeling abandoned and emotionally distressed. Her departure causes him lasting emotional pain that follows him into adulthood. This reflects how the loss of a mother’s care can lead to long-term effects on a child’s well-being. He feels disconnected from his own life, as if it’s happening without him, because his heart and mind are consumed by thoughts of her. Myshkin wishes to be with Gayatri, sharing in her experiences, rather than being left behind. This reflects his emotional struggle and the sense of abandonment he feels, as though his life lost its meaning when she chose to leave.

In the time that has past my sense of her physical existence had dwindled. From being a real person, she was turning into the concentration of all that I longed for in my life and did not have. I wanted to be where she was, I wanted to do what she was doing my life was going on elsewhere without me. (Roy 188)

Abandonment refers to the deliberate act of a parent leaving a child, with no plans or intention to return (Marici 2). Myshkin’s experience of abandonment is central to his emotional development. When his mother, Gayatri, chooses to leave him behind, she not only disrupts his childhood but also instills a deep sense of insecurity and longing within him. He perceives her departure as a rejection, leading him to feel unwanted and alone. Adolescents are more inclined to seek mental health support when they have a loving and involved father figure. A strong bond with a father can make them feel more at ease in asking for help (Rice 14). His father, while physically present, is distant and uninvolved, which leaves Myshkin without the guidance and support he needs during his formative years. This lack of a nurturing paternal figure contributes to his feelings of isolation and struggle, making it harder for him to seek help or express his emotional needs.

Children with absent parents often struggle to meet their developmental needs, which can harm their physical and mental health, weaken their attachment as they grow more independent, and lead to lasting negative effects (Rice 02). Myshkin’s emotional turmoil reflects his unmet developmental needs due to his mother’s absence. Lacking essential nurturing and guidance, he struggles to process his conflicting feelings about Gayatri. His thoughts, bouncing like ping-pong balls, symbolize his inability to find clarity or closure. This unresolved conflict results in profound pain that affects his overall mental growth. “Life is full of regrets & thoughts going back & forth - mine are like ping-pong balls... I am in pain - terrible

pain that hurts my body as well as soul....” (Roy 220).

A traumatic stress reaction can occur after a person goes through a very scary or upsetting experience. This reaction includes feelings of fear, helplessness, and horror. People may try to stay away from anything that reminds them of the event, and they might also have repeated, unwanted thoughts or memories about it (Tolstikova 294). My childhood nightmare - what if everyone died and I was left alone? (Roy 157). This fear of everyone dying and being left alone mirrors his feelings of loss and the deep longing for connection that he experiences throughout his life. Myshkin's grief is not just about losing his mother; it extends to the loss of stability, love, and security that a nurturing parent provides. The nightmare encapsulates his struggle with the emotional aftermath of her absence, highlighting how his unresolved grief contributes to his feelings of vulnerability and helplessness.

Childhood traumatic grief is a condition where symptoms related to trauma disrupt a child's ability to properly grieve the loss of a loved one. (Cohen 307). Myshkin exhibits trauma symptoms that hinder his ability to comprehend and express his grief. As a result, he feels isolated and disconnected from those around him, struggling to share his pain or seek help. His experiences illustrate how childhood traumatic grief can complicate a young person's relationship with loss, making it challenging for them to heal and progress. “It has become my lifelong habit to live unnoticed” (Roy 193). Myshkin distances himself from others to avoid vulnerability and disappointment, as he grapples with complex feelings of grief and a longing for connection that he struggles to articulate. This behaviour illustrates his internal conflict and the difficulty he faces in navigating relationships after his childhood trauma. In the first few years of life, after experiencing trauma, children undergo changes in their relationships, which can impact their mental health (Scheeringa 52). Myshkin seeks solace in the idea of a protective presence, reflecting his longing for safety and reassurance in a world that feels unstable, “The first few weeks after my mother left, when I thought she had died and nobody had told me, I lay at night talking to whoever looked after the starts beyond my mosquito net, and Rikki and me, all of us” (Roy 148).

When someone goes through both trauma and loss, their intense feelings can make it difficult to cope with grief, connect with others, and process their emotions, leading to a sense of disconnection from those around them. (Nader 17). Myshkin feels lonely because of the emotional pain from his mother's abandonment and his sense of betrayal by people. He finds comfort in nature and animals, which provide him with a connection that he lacks with other humans. Others often view his choice to be alone as strange or a sign of failure, but for Myshkin, being isolated is a way to protect himself from the pain of human relationships. “People think of my solitude as an eccentricity or a symptom of failure, as I am closer to animals and trees because human beings betrayed me or I found nobody to love” (Roy 63).

In conclusion, Myshkin shows how childhood trauma can greatly affect a person's emotions and mental health. His experiences with attachment trauma

highlight the importance of nurturing relationships in childhood and how the lack of a caring mother can lead to feelings of insecurity and longing. When his mother leaves, it deepens his fear of being abandoned and causes him to feel isolated throughout his life. Myshkin's challenges with grief and loss also show how unresolved emotional pain can have lasting effects, shaping who he is. Ultimately, Myshkin's journey examines the critical importance of addressing and understanding developmental trauma, as it profoundly affects one's capacity for connection, healing, and personal growth.

Myshkin's life in *All the Lives We Never Lived* is a moving portrayal of how early emotional trauma, particularly abandonment by a parent, can leave a lifelong imprint on a person's mental and emotional well-being. The loss of his mother at such a young age disrupts his sense of stability and security, creating a deep emotional void that follows him into adulthood. His memories, often vivid and painful, are not just recollections but emotional flashbacks that shape his worldview and relationships. This lasting trauma leads to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and unresolved grief, which manifest in his behaviors and emotional responses throughout the novel. Roy skillfully shows how trauma doesn't fade with time. Trauma has the ability to change its form and continues to affect identity, and demands recognition and healing.

Through Myshkin's internal struggles, Anuradha Roy emphasizes the importance of nurturing, emotionally responsive caregiving in a child's development. The absence of such care, both maternal and paternal, leaves Myshkin vulnerable, confused, and desperate for connection. His journey highlights the silent burden many carry due to childhood trauma, and the ways in which unresolved emotional wounds shape their present.

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