

Pandemics Memory and Trauma in Amulya Malladi's

A Breath of Fresh Air

Shunmugapriya S.

Research Scholar (Reg.No.2421315022010),

Department of English, S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil – 629002.

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli-627012.)

Dr. M. Mahesh

Associate Professor & Research Supervisor,

Department of English, S.T. Hindu College, Nagercoil – 629002.

(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli-627012.)

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the complex interplay between pandemic experiences, memory, and psychological trauma as depicted in Amulya Malladi's *A Breath of Fresh Air*. Adopting a literary-critical approach, the research traces how the narrative engages with the emotional residues of a historical pandemic, mapping the protagonist's internal landscape shaped by personal grief and collective upheaval. The analysis foregrounds the dual role of memory as both a sanctuary and a site of turmoil, influencing the protagonist's emotional evolution and coping mechanisms. Central to this examination is the novel's structure and character development, which reflects the far-reaching consequences of pandemic trauma on individual lives and interpersonal dynamics. Placed within the framework of pandemic fiction, the novel is read as a commentary on the repetitive cycles of human suffering and the process of emotional

reconstruction. The study also focuses on Malladi's use of literary strategies that intensify the narrative's engagement with loss, migration, and psychological endurance. Ultimately, the research demonstrates that *A Breath of Fresh Air* offers a profound exploration of the emotional aftershocks of pandemics, marking it as a vital contribution to trauma narratives in contemporary literature. It underscores fiction's potential to express human strength, memory, and healing in the aftermath of epidemiological and historical adversity.

Keywords: Psychological Resilience, Emotional Recovery, Displacement, Epidemiology, Post-pandemic, Cyclical Trauma

Introduction

Amulya Malladi, a well-known Indian American novelist, frequently addresses the conflicts between tradition and change heritage and adaptation in her works. Malladi who was raised in India and subsequently received her education in the US and Denmark applies a transnational perspective to her fiction adding nuanced cultural insights to her tales. Her narrative structure is precise and clear due to her engineering background and corporate experience, but her storytelling is still intensely emotional and introspective. Identity crisis, the psychological effects of migration and the diverse roles that women play in families and society are some of the themes that frequently appear in Malladi's literary works. Her famous works such as *A House for Happy Mothers*, *The Sound of Language*, *Serving Crazy with Curry*, *The Mango Season*, and *The Copenhagen Affair* provide vivid depictions of people torn between two different worlds. The psychological subtleties of characters trying to balance their own goals with obligations to their families and to society are explored in these books. Malladi creates stories that cut across cultural boundaries with a style that combines striking imagery and genuine realism. Her fiction's emotional immediacy is increased by her use of intimate narrative perspectives which allow readers to enter the inner lives of characters who have been impacted by resilience, adaptation and displacement. Additionally, her works integrate elements

of feminist discourse, shedding light on the emotional and professional challenges faced by women in different cultural contexts.

A Breath of Fresh Air (2002) is one of her most profound novels, delving into the repercussions of the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy. The novel follows Anjali, a woman who survives the disaster but faces enduring consequences in her personal life. Through Anjali's journey, the novel examines themes of trauma, resilience, marital discord, and societal expectations of women in India. Malladi constructs a poignant narrative that juxtaposes past suffering with the pursuit of self-reclamation (Ranaweera 2022). The novel's richly layered prose and nuanced character portrayals highlight the long-lasting impact of historical tragedies on individual lives. With its strong emotional resonance and socio-political undercurrents, *A Breath of Fresh Air* stands as a testament to Malladi's ability to intertwine personal stories with broader historical and cultural realities.

Memory as a Dual Mechanism

The intricate workings of memory often serve a paradoxical role, offering solace while simultaneously reviving past wounds. In *A Breath of Fresh Air*, this duality becomes a defining force in Anjali's journey, shaping her experiences as both a sanctuary and a burden. Amulya Malladi crafts a narrative where recollections provide comfort yet remain inescapable triggers of distress. The novel captures how past experiences shape identity, influence emotional resilience, and, at times, impose an inescapable burden. Memory serves as a refuge when it offers solace, continuity, and a means of self-preservation amid adversity. Anjali frequently reminisces about the moments that provided comfort and a sense of belonging, especially in contrast to the traumatic events she endured. She recalls her love for her son, Amar, as an anchor that stabilizes her life: "Amar was my light, the one thing that made my life worth living" (ABOFA, 112). This attachment to the past grants her strength and a sense of purpose. Similarly,

nostalgia for the few positive aspects of her first marriage allows her to find closure and distance herself from the pain it caused. Memory, in this sense, becomes a psychological sanctuary, a means of survival that enables her to reclaim agency over her life.

However, memory simultaneously functions as a source of distress, haunting Anjali and making it impossible for her to fully escape the trauma of her past. The Bhopal gas tragedy, which serves as the backdrop of the novel, remains an ever-present reminder of suffering, shaping her fears and perceptions of the present. Her failed marriage with Prakash further exacerbates this turmoil, as moments of betrayal and neglect continue to intrude upon her current life. Past trauma resurfaces, causing internal conflicts that keep her from completely embracing peace even when she finds happiness with Sandeep (Radia 2023). She is bound to the trauma, and psychological scars are reinforced by memory which in this instance acts as an oppressive force.

Anjali's journey is a testament to how the past can serve as both a foundation for strength and a source of deep anguish (Verma, 2023). The novel highlights how individuals must navigate this paradox, finding ways to coexist with painful recollections while cherishing those that provide solace. Anjali's reflection on her own struggles encapsulates this theme:

We do not forget pain; instead, we learn to navigate our lives around it. It becomes a part of us, shaping our thoughts and actions in ways we may not always realize. Over time, we adapt, finding ways to coexist with the wounds that never fully heal. Pain lingers in the background, silent but persistent, influencing our journey. Though we move forward, its presence remains, reminding us of what we have endured. (ABOFA,176).

Her ability to balance the comforting and tormenting aspects of memory ultimately defines her growth, demonstrating that while memory can imprison, it also has the capacity to heal. The narrative structure reinforces this interplay, shifting between the past and the present to emphasize how Anjali's past

experiences shape her present realities. Through this exploration, *A Breath of Fresh Air* presents memory not as a singular entity but as a dual mechanism—both a sanctuary and a battleground of the mind.

Psychological and Emotional Scars

This section intricately explores the enduring psychological and emotional scars inflicted by personal trauma, loss, and betrayal. The novel, set against the backdrop of the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy, delves into the inner turmoil of Anjali, who suffers both physical and emotional wounds. Her first marriage to Prakash, an indifferent and self-centered army officer, leaves her emotionally fragmented. Prakash's neglect during the gas tragedy, abandoning her to the toxic air while he sought safety for himself, becomes a defining moment in her life. The psychological scars from this betrayal manifest in her perpetual struggle to trust and form meaningful relationships. She carries an unspoken resentment, shaped by the knowledge that she was left behind in a life-threatening situation by someone she once loved. "I had dreamed of love once, foolishly thinking it would be enough. But love doesn't shelter you from indifference, and indifference is a sharper wound than hatred" (ABOFA 112). This deeply personal anguish underscores how emotional scars, unlike physical ones, remain embedded in one's psyche, dictating future choices and relationships.

Beyond Anjali, the novel also portrays the inherited trauma experienced by her son, Amar. The gas tragedy, which affected him even before birth, not only weakens him physically but also serves as a constant reminder of an event that shaped his mother's suffering. Anjali's guilt over Amar's fragile health becomes another source of her psychological wounds, forcing her into a life of ceaseless self-recrimination. Her remarriage to Sandeep offers her stability, yet she struggles with past fears resurfacing. The emotional scars from Prakash's betrayal make her hesitant to fully embrace happiness, always anticipating abandonment. Malladi masterfully articulates Anjali's inner conflict when she reflects,

I had always believed that forming relationships with strangers was the hardest, while family bonds were the easiest to maintain. But in my experience, the opposite proved to be true. The family I

was born into no longer felt like my own, as distance and time had changed everything. Instead, the people I met along the way, once strangers, became the true family I chose. In them, I found belonging, love, and the connections that my own blood ties could not provide (ABOFA 178).

This quote highlights how unresolved trauma conditions the mind to reject joy, making individuals prisoners of their past wounds. Anjali's fear of impermanence reflects the reality of those who have been deeply hurt—they carry their pain forward, affecting their present and future.

Prakash himself serves as a case study of how emotional scars manifest in different forms. His inability to acknowledge his past mistakes reveals his own psychological damage. He justifies his actions, refusing to admit that his selfishness caused irreparable harm. His attempts to reconnect with Anjali and Amar are driven more by guilt than genuine affection. However, his emotional detachment remains, reinforcing how some individuals cope with trauma by suppressing accountability. When confronted by Anjali, he states, "People make mistakes, Anju. You can't punish me forever for one night's error" (ABOFA 214). This dismissal of her suffering encapsulates the insidious nature of unresolved emotional wounds—while the victim continues to live with the pain, the perpetrator may evade its weight entirely. The novel exposes the complexity of human emotions, showing how trauma shapes individual identities in irreversible ways. Through Anjali, Amar, and Prakash, *A Breath of Fresh Air* presents a profound exploration of how scars, both psychological and emotional, shape lives long after the wounds have been inflicted.

Displacement and Survival

The experience of displacement is not merely about being uprooted from a physical space; it is an enduring condition that reshapes identity, relationships, and survival strategies. In *A Breath of Fresh Air*, Amulya Malladi explores how forced separation from one's past and familiar surroundings creates an unsettling permanence of loss, forcing individuals to adapt to circumstances beyond their control (Subhashini 2023). The protagonist, Anjali, embodies this struggle, navigating the aftermath of the Bhopal

gas tragedy while also confronting personal displacement within rigid societal structures. Her survival is not marked by a single moment of resilience but by a continuous process of rebuilding. She says:

I had learned to move forward and rebuild my life, but the remnants of my past never truly disappeared. They remained like silent ruins, always present, though hidden beneath new beginnings. No matter how much I tried to move on, their shadows lingered. The past was quiet, yet its echoes never ceased. (ABOFA 134).

This acknowledgment of an ever-present past highlights how survival is not about forgetting or starting anew but about carrying the weight of what has been lost while forging ahead in an altered reality.

Survival, as depicted in the novel, is not a linear journey but an intricate negotiation between agency and constraint. Anjali does not merely endure her displacement; she is forced to redefine herself in the face of emotional, societal, and systemic pressures. Her remarriage, while taking a step toward reclaiming her life, exposes her to new forms of alienation and judgment, illustrating how survival often comes at a cost. The novel captures this duality of the necessity of moving forward alongside the difficulty of truly leaving the past behind. Anjali exposes that:

There were days when I felt like a ghost, caught between two worlds that no longer felt like mine. The past held memories that haunted me, while the present felt unfamiliar and distant. I drifted through time, unseen and unanchored, searching for a place to truly belong. Neither the past nor the present welcomed me, leaving me suspended in an in-between existence. In that loneliness, I wondered if I would ever feel whole again (ABOFA 89).

The dissonance of displacement is highlighted by this eerie metaphor in which people live in a state of flux between being totally anchored in the past and completely settled in the present. A world that provides neither a total escape nor a smooth reintegration, Anjali's struggle is representative of the greater experience of displaced people who must balance memory with survival.

Beyond the personal, *A Breath of Fresh Air* situates displacement and survival within a broader socio-political framework, emphasizing how systemic forces shape individual fates. The novel draws a parallel between the Bhopal disaster's lingering consequences and the long-term scars of personal displacement, illustrating survival as a process shaped by external forces as much as by internal strength. Anjali's journey is marked by compromises, resilience, and an ongoing negotiation with trauma. Malladi does not present survival as an act of heroism but as a lived reality fraught with wounds—some healing, others permanent. "Strength wasn't about forgetting. Carrying the burden of memories without allowing them to overwhelm you was the goal (ABOFA176). This description of resilience captures the main idea of the book: endurance not erasure is the key to survival (Hooda 2024). The novel depicts displacement as an irreversible transformation that forces people to live between what was and what must be, permanently carrying the echoes of the past into an uncertain future through Anjali's fractured but tenacious existence.

Conclusion

The intricate interplay between trauma, memory, and survival in *A Breath of Fresh Air* underscores the enduring impact of past tragedies on individual and collective identities. The novel's portrayal of Anjali's journey effectively illustrates how trauma is not a single isolated event but rather a lingering force that affects her emotional reactions and relationships with others, and a sense of self. Memory serves a dual purpose providing momentary solace while also bringing back hurt demonstrating how the past persists as a burden and a source of resilience. Systemic neglect, betrayals and lasting psychological effects highlight the severe emotional cost of abandonment and the multifaceted challenges of healing. Anjali's struggle with displacement on both physical and emotional levels highlights the fact that survival requires constant identity renegotiation in the face of instability going beyond simple endurance. Rather than drawing tidy conclusions Malladi crafts a story that reflects the intricacy of human suffering and a flawed healing

process. The book confirms that healing is more about accepting the coexistence of strength and pain. It is a changing process of coexisting with the reminders of one's past—than it is about erasing them.

Works Cited

- Ranaweera, Nipuni. "The Maternal Presence in Diasporic Women's Lives in the Works of Amulya Malladi and Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni: A Focus on Gender, Identity, and Place." In *Gender, place, and identity of South Asian women*, pp. 89-108. IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2022.
- Verma, Shekar. "Depiction of Women and their condition in Amulya Malladi's Novels." *Revista Review Index Journal of Multidisciplinary* 3, no. 1, 2023.
- Subhashini, S. "The Language of Literature and Culture as portrayed in the novels of Amulya Malladi." *Journal of English Language and Literature* 5: 26-29, 2023.
- Hooda, Ms. Chetana. "Food, Tea, and Transformation: Anjali's Path to Resilience in Malladi's 'A Breath of Fresh Air'." *Journal of International English Research Studies (JIERS)*, ISSN: 3048-5231 2, no. 3, 2024.
- Radia, Pavlina. "Reorienting the Afghan woman in Denmark: Negotiating gender and xenophobia in Amulya Malladi's *The Sound of Language*." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 49, no. 3, 2013.