

The Rhetoric of Dalit Psychological Suffering in Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014)

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Abstract

This article attempts to demonstrate that somatic trauma caused by caste-based oppression does not stop in the bone but has the ability to penetrate the inner psyche of Dalits in multiple and unexpected ways. The novel *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) serves as a comprehensive repository of wronged and misinterpreted historical events, but also lays bare the impact that systemic forms of oppression can have on people's mental health. While mainstream trauma theory has been the model used by many scholars for decades to address trauma, uncritically universalising this generalised concept of 'Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder' (PTSD) (American Psychiatric Association, 1980) risks rendering the specificity of long-term pain suffered by oppressed groups, such as Dalits, invisible and unknowable. Thus, many are the scholars who have called for an expansion of the scope and a revision of the dominant conceptions of trauma and recovery. Therefore, in order to examine the impact of casteism from a psychological dimension, this article discusses trauma as 'a spectrum of conditions' rather than a single response (Herman 1992), considering the cumulative degradation and subtle effects of 'insidious trauma' (Root 1989; 1992), the generational transmissibility of trauma and its pre-traumatic stress (PreTss) reactions (Bond & Craps 2017). Drawing on the omnipresent connection between the individual and the collective in *The Gypsy Goddess*, the 'founding' nature (LaCapra 2014) of Dalit trauma and the combination of ubiquitous exposure to historical loss and endless structural absence of basic human rights are also key aspects.

Keywords

Caste, Dalit, Trauma, Psychology, PTSD Multidirectional Suffering

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Introduction

As William Faulkner once wrote, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past” (1996: 85). In fact, the legacies of the past continue to resonate in complex and controversial ways, especially those connected to violent episodes. Somatic trauma, for instance, does not stop at the bones, but has the ability to transition from physical to internal scarring. The pain and agony that have afflicted the body of Dalits for generations have permeated their inner selves to such an extent that one of the most recurrent themes in Dalit literature is the mental anguish and emotional terror that result from experiencing and witnessing suffering.

Meena Kandasamy’s debut novel, *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014), recounts the culmination of a conflict in Kilvenmani, a village in the Nagapattinam district of southern Tamil Nadu, between Dalit agricultural labourers and their oppressive upper caste landlords.¹ The narrative revolves around the village landlords’ refusal to provide fair wages to the lower caste workers, leading to a retaliatory response from the Dalits, organised under the Communist Party of India. The consequences of this clash are tragic. On the night of December 25, 1968, the landlords dispatched rowdies to attack the rebellious workers. Although most of the men were able to escape and save themselves, the majority of women, children, and elderly individuals remained in the village. They sought refuge in a hut, but the attackers trapped them inside and set the hut ablaze, resulting in the death of 44 people. In the subsequent weeks, most of the culprits were declared innocent, and all evidence of the crime was destroyed. Meanwhile, the victims of the massacre were falsely accused of murder and armed rebellion, and they were imprisoned.

While this is not the first time an author has been inspired by or tried to do the historic event justice, very few have written so vividly about the first-hand experiences of people left voiceless and without agency.² Kandasamy felt the need to counteract vague and biased research papers and newspaper articles on the tragedy through a “domestic dramatic-traumatic tale” (2014: 13) through which the victims could somehow speak their truths.³ Apart from physical and sexual abuse, forms of emotional and psychological violence against marginalised communities have pervaded for

¹One of the concerns raised by critics like Kavita Bhanot (2014) is the novel’s ambiguous and overall evasive portrayal of the intricate connection between caste and class in the Dalit struggle. While the novel acknowledges this problem, it merely highlights its existence without thoroughly examining its implications. The analysis in this article will primarily concentrate on the caste-related themes presented in the novel.

²Seven years after the event, Tamil writer Indira Parthasarathy released the first novel about the massacre, *Kuruthipunal* (River of Blood) building on the moral and existential dilemmas of characters belonging to different social strata, which is why the novel is said to have digressed from the original issue and betrayed the cause. In 2000, writer Solai Sundara Perumal published *Sennel* (The Red Grain), presenting the event as a class uprising. In 2007, the writer Paataali wrote *Keezhai Thee* (The Fire from the East) as an account of how the judiciary failed the marginalised.

³Describing herself as a “first-generation woman novelist [...] working in a second language from that third-world country”, Kandasamy acknowledges the expectations placed upon her.

centuries in India, with little to no legal, social or political support for the victims. In her attempt at representation, Kandasamy strives to expose the impact that systemic forms of oppression have on mental health and the array of psychological problems that stem from physical violence and abuse.

In the subsequent lines, this article aims to illustrate that the somatic trauma resulting from caste-based oppression extends beyond mere physical manifestation, delving into the inner psyche of Dalits through various, often unforeseen, avenues. Using *The Gypsy Goddess* as a repository of historically distorted events, the article aims to showcase how the repercussions of such trauma are intricately woven into the fabric of Dalit experiences and how relying solely on the conventional trauma theory and its symptomatic framework overlooks the distinct and enduring pain endured by marginalised communities like the Dalits.

Trauma Paradigm

‘Trauma’ was officially acknowledged by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in the 1980s under the title ‘Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder’ (PTSD),⁴ and included the symptoms of what had previously been called shell shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome and traumatic neurosis as a response to both human and natural catastrophes (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). Taking as a basis APA’s definition, Cathy Caruth defined PTSD as,

a response [...] to an overwhelming event or events, which take the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event. (1995: 4–5)

Caruth clarifies that it is not the event itself—which may or may not be catastrophic, and may not traumatise everyone equally—that defines trauma or the distortion of that event; rather, it is its reception and, more specifically, its belated or failed integration into one’s psyche that defines trauma (p. 6). Furthermore, the fact that the victim is possessed by the event through insistent ‘reenactments’ not only serves as testimony,

Many would anticipate nothing more than a simplistic and unrefined narrative lacking depth or sophistication (2014: 13).

⁴The word ‘trauma’ comes from the Greek word for ‘wound’ and it was not until the late nineteenth century that the notion of ‘psychological trauma’ began to take root, thus connecting the origins of the trauma paradigm with the onset of Western modernity and the ‘shocks’ of modern life (Luckhurst 2008: 19). In January 1978, ‘catastrophic stress disorder’—eventually renamed ‘post-traumatic stress disorder’(PTSD)—was added to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-III-R). PTSD was first established as a reaction to a catalysing event “outside the range of usual human experience” and a re-experience of that event which could include recurrent and distressful memories, dreams, sudden acting, numbing or hyperalertness, sleep disturbance, survival guilt, memory impairment, and avoidance of activities that arouse the recollection of the event (American Psychiatric Association 1980: 236–238).

but also bears witness to the force of an experience that was never fully registered as it occurred (p. 151). Roger Luckhurst attributes these ‘reenactments’ to an involuntary repression of the traumatic memories, making them inaccessible to conscious recall, but recurring later in the form of hallucinations, flashbacks, or nightmares (2008: 3). The resistance of these memories to reworking and recategorisation could lead to their fixation, what Pierre Janet has called *idée fixes* (1895).

While the academic discourse in India has largely overlooked the trauma experienced by victims of caste discrimination,⁵ the personal and subjective accounts of these individuals are gradually surfacing in poetic and autobiographical narratives, frequently reflecting several symptoms associated with trauma (Ganguly 2009; Heering 2013; Nayar 2011). *The Gypsy Goddess* portrays a variety of responses to the traumatic event, including distressing nightmares (2014: 203), cases of schizophrenia (p. 201), moments where characters vividly relive the burning sensation “all over again” (p. 220), and hallucinations. One of the victims, Letchumi, was left with a peculiar ‘strangeness’ in her head that would not fade away, however much she tried to fight it: “She had become so dizzy that police battalions and hired rowdies and armed landlords kept running away [...] and the dead chased them through her, ear to ear, in unceasing weaves” (p. 199). On a particular day, Letchumi could not bear the mental agony any longer and confided in a neighbour, expressing that she felt “a hundred fights inside her body and nobody retired to take rest and their madness made her fly” (p. 199). The impact extended beyond her mental state, leading her to harm herself occasionally (p. 199). She firmly believed that the spectres possessing her mind were her deceased mother and friends, fighting to break free: “Her complaints varied, but the relentless throbbing never stopped [...] Again and again, she collapsed in the chaos” (p. 199).

Expressions of psychological impact such as these represent the continuation of the traumatic process, which can give rise to other affective and cognitive sequelae such as hypervigilance, anhedonia and alexithymia—the reduced capacity for pleasure and happiness (Krystal 1978)—anxiety, panic and numbing—or ‘affective anaesthesia’ (Minkowski 1946). Thus, as Caruth concluded, it is not just the moment of the event but “the passing out of it that is traumatic; that survival itself [...] can be a crisis” (1995: 9). One of the victims affected by the severe consequences in *The Gypsy Goddess* was left without speech due to the profound impact: “Death had driven a dagger through him, muting him [...] his voice trapped in his head and his words stuck in stranger corners” (2014: 206), exposing once more how trauma can penetrate both the mind and body. Kandasamy ponders how those who live in dire conditions and are subjected to inhuman treatment can be expected to find any semblance of “satisfaction, contentment, pleasure or the pursuit of happiness” (p. 78).

However, studies on people who have experienced frequent traumatic events have shown that their psychophysical problems are much more complex than those described in the diagnostic criteria for PTSD. The diagnostic concept of Disorders of

⁵Some exceptions to this are Cháirez-Garza (2018), Guru (2009), Jodhka (2015), and Jogdand (2023).

Extreme Stress Not Otherwise Specified (DESNOS), for instance, describes the more subtle and characterologically imprinted effects of long-term, chronic trauma (van der Kolk et al., 1996). This category recognises that survivors of prolonged abuse may undergo somatic, dissociative and affective sequelae, such as personality changes and vulnerability to repeated harm. Through dissociation, voluntary thought suppression, minimisation and, sometimes, outright denial, victims of prolonged violence may even learn to alter an unbearable reality by developing paralysis of initiative, apathy and helplessness (Herman 1992: 381). As Kandasamy puts it simply,

The living in Kilvenmani lack life. Everyone is something else: there are the ones who do not eat, the ones who do not talk, the ones who do not bathe, the ones who do not step outside their homes, the ones who do not step inside their homes. It is strange the way in which the village has exchanged its sorrow for insanity. (2014: 211)

The impact of continuous depreciation and the lack of core identities can lead one to assimilate impotence, to internalise a ‘learned helplessness’ (Seligman 1975). Regardless of what they say or do, Dalits are at risk of being abused, discriminated against or singled out because of their caste. This has undoubtedly led to a perpetual state of anxiety, fear, disrupted sense of oneself, and dissociation, to name but a few effects. Most of the victims in the novel suffer from a blockage that prevents them from reacting to, and even acknowledging, what has happened to them, and it is the very unassimilated nature of the event that comes back to haunt them. One of them is “caught between his fear and her lack of any idea of what happened. The terror talks to her body in strange ways. She shivers when she is alone” (Kandasamy 2014: 201).

On the other hand, there are also victims who do not experience traumatic pathologies in the way proposed by mainstream scholars such as Caruth (1995). An example of this is the fact that traumatic amnesia does not seem to occur in the case of Dalits. Not only do they have their suffering imprinted on their bodies as a constant and inescapable reminder, but manifesting and talking about their suffering seems to be a necessary process. However, instead of being used as evidence of the massacre, the rupture and incoherence of the statements in court lead the commission to question the victims and ultimately dismiss their testimonies for lack of consistency. As one of the victims complains, “They found everything we said to be faulty, unreliable, contradictory, smacking of falsehood, lacking in credibility and an afterthought, so they refused to accept any of it” (p. 254). Kandasamy denounces that “A story told in many voices is seen as unreliable” (p. 234). She adds:

Perhaps [they] wanted a single story: uniform, end to end to end. The ‘Once upon a time, there lived an old lady in a tiny village’ story. Sadly, we are not able to tell such a story... [...] We were bound to lose. Because we do not know how to tell our story. Because we do not rehearse. Because some of us are tongue-tied. Because all of us are afraid and the fear in our hearts slurs the truth in our voice. (pp. 234–35)

Thus, many scholars have pointed out the limitations of this paradigm when trying to account for the injustices and inequalities suffered by oppressed groups whose misrecognition and misinterpretation have been overlooked and normalised. It is increasingly imperative to review the supposed universal validity of Western definitions of trauma and recovery and broaden the focus to accommodate and recognise other responses.

Multidirectional Suffering

Lucy Bond and Stef Craps are two of the scholars who have signalled significant blind spots in Caruth and APA's categorisation of PTSD. They consider the definition as biased and unmindful of psychodynamic perspectives, and restricting the kinds of experiences that can be recognised as traumatic, thus legitimising the suffering of certain subjects—generally Western—over others—peripheral individuals and communities (Bond & Craps 2017: 37–38). They find two aspects particularly problematic: one is its exclusive focus on sudden and unexpected catastrophic events which ignores the chronic psychic suffering caused by structural violence such as racism, classism and other forms of structural oppression. As they explain, “The cumulative impact of the often subtle everyday discriminations and humiliations inflicted on the victims of such forms of oppression can be as profound as that of spectacular and instantaneous acts of violence” (pp. 108–109). What they are asking for is an understanding of the long-term consequences of traumatic experiences stemming from institutionalised oppression that can remain unresolved for decades, and even generations, in the socially othered. The other limitation they point out, attributable to its rootedness in Western conceptions of personhood, is the tendency to consider trauma as an individual phenomenon. This not only complicates approaches to collectivist societies, but also dodges supra-individual conditions that enable traumatic abuse, such as political oppression, social exclusion, and economic deprivation (pp. 108–109).

Feminist psychotherapist Laura Brown also disagrees with APA's definition of trauma, particularly regarding the nature of traumatic events as “outside the range of usual human experience” (American Psychiatric Association 1980: 236–238). Brown argues that the human experience referred to in diagnostic manuals often means male human experience and, consequently, the range of human experience becomes the range of what is normal and usual in the lives of white, young, healthy, educated, middle-class, Christian men. In such a setting, trauma is “that which disrupts these particular human lives” (Brown 1991: 121). But the reality is that many traumatic experiences are “well within the range of human experience” (p. 121), as traumatic ‘potentials’ to which victims accommodate.

Kandasamy exposes the undeniable impact of caste-based trauma on women, particularly due to their vulnerability as potential victims of rape and gender violence, contributing to the establishment of a specific space for their experiences. Yet rather than solely emphasising their victimhood, *The Gypsy Goddess* brings to light the pivotal role played by Dalit women in their village's pursuit of dignity and liberation.

These women fearlessly confront their oppressors and willingly jeopardise their lives to safeguard their humanity and strive for a better future. This is evident not only through the novel's title, which pays homage to the revered female figure, but also in its portrayal of the Dalit woman within the larger community:

When women take to protest, there is no looking back. [...] Sometimes their demands are related to women alone [...]. Most of the time, they fight for everybody. [...] The jails are full of fighting Madonnas. They are not afraid. They are not afraid of arrests. They are not afraid of hurt. [...] The landlords punish these shrill-voiced women by stripping them almost naked and tying them to trees and whipping them in front of the whole village. The police punish them by making them kneel and walk a few miles on their knees until they have no choice but to crawl. These blows do not break them. They are bold beyond the bruised skin and the bleeding knee. (2014: 75–76)

A related strand of criticism spearheaded by Michael Rothberg's influential work on 'multidirectional memory' (2009) has called for a comparative approach to memory that explores historical violence through a cross-cultural framework. Rothberg offers an alternative to the 'competitive memory' model according to which the capacity to remember historical tragedies is limited, and any attention to one tragedy inevitably diminishes our capacity to remember another. He suggests that we consider memory as multidirectional, that is, "as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing" (p. 3). In line with this alternative conceptualisation, Judith Herman proposed capturing the normative and everyday aspects of trauma as 'complex PTSD' (1992). As she comments, complex PTSD understands responses to trauma as 'a spectrum of conditions' rather than as a single disorder, ranging "from a brief stress reaction that gets better by itself and never qualifies for a diagnosis, to classic or simple post-traumatic stress disorder, to the complex syndrome of prolonged, repeated trauma" (p. 119).

Subjection to continuous and systematic coercive control certainly produces profound alterations in the identity of the victim. Psychotherapist Maria Root coined the term 'insidious trauma' (1989, 1992) for the cumulative degradation and effects of oppression that are not always blatant or overtly violent, but nonetheless threaten the victims' basic well-being. She also acknowledged the power of post-traumatic symptoms to filter through generations when belonging to that group means a constant lifetime risk of exposure to certain trauma; those for whom insidious trauma is 'a way of life' (1989, 1992).

Many scholars agree with trauma's potential to pass down through generations, especially among socially oppressed groups, making a case for the intergenerational nature of trauma. Bond and Craps, for instance, argue that children of survivors inherit memories of catastrophic events that they themselves did not experience, which they call 'transgenerational legacies' (2017: 85).⁶

⁶Recent research in epigenetics has suggested that trauma may travel across generations in a much more literal way. They argue that trauma can leave a chemical mark on a person's genes

In *The Gypsy Goddess*, Kandasamy primarily focuses on specific instances of violence rooted in caste discrimination, leading up to or culminating in the massacre. However, the author emphasises the importance of going beyond this trauma and recognising the pervasive oppression endured by Dalits (2014: 19). She shifts perspectives and combines first-, second-, and third-person narrations to add to the polyphonic nature of the novel but, more significantly, to demonstrate the pervasiveness of trauma on a daily basis. We read about the rape of a fourteen-year-old girl at the hands of the landlords (p. 34), the kidnapping and murder of a labourer at the hands of caste-Hindus for religious reasons (p. 35), the mass arrest and rampaging of labourers and the whipping and stripping of their wives for daring to protest (pp. 72, 76, 77), among many other cases. Thus, characters either endure a multi-layered, continuous traumatic life filled with overwhelming and violent events or have inherited their ancestors' fear, alertness and submissiveness. Either way, it is a 'trauma-continuum' (Nayar 2018: 332) with an 'endless impact' on their lives.

Given this generational burden of traumatic memory, Bond and Craps have proposed the concept of 'trauma of the future' or pre-traumatic stress (PreTss) reactions. They argue that past-related PTSD symptoms are found to be mirrored by similar future-related PTSD symptoms, what Paul Saint-Amour has called the "traumatizing power of anticipation" (2015a: 17).⁷ This can include intrusive images and nightmares about future negative events, avoidance behaviour and increased arousal to stimuli associated with traumatic events (Bond & Craps 2017: 126).

The Gypsy Goddess illustrates the power of casteist oppression to create anticipated suffering on Dalits, revealing how fear of a potentially impending disaster can be as traumatic as a real one. The "ripple effect of terror" (2014: 111) made the victims foresee their fate and silently wait for death (p. 217). As one of them declares, "The future had been tied to the past, so we hear our history over and over again. We always ended up hearing this history wherever we started" (p. 218).

Collective Victimhood

The individual suffering embodied in *The Gypsy Goddess*, as in most Dalit texts, is closely related to the individual's social position, thus linking the individual plight of a Dalit to the scars on the Dalit social body. Trauma, as Bond and Craps put it, not only blurs the boundaries between mind and body, memory and forgetting, speech and silence, but cuts across the internal and the external, the private and the public, the individual and the collective (2017: 5).

that is passed on to the next generation. Although this trace does not cause any direct genetic mutation, supporters of this theory argue that it can alter the mechanism whereby the gene is converted into functioning proteins (Carey 2018). According to Benedict Carey, if these studies are validated, it would imply that we inherit a certain imprint of our parents' and grandparents' experiences, particularly their hardships, which subsequently affects our own daily well-being and potentially that of our children as well (2018). Nevertheless, the scientific community has not reached a consensus on such claims.

⁷Sigmund Freud also considered anxiety as a shield against traumatising, instead of a source of it (as cited in Saint-Amour 2015b).

There is no doubt that the collective consciousness does not work in the same way as an individual psyche. Kai Erikson (1976) distinguishes between the psychological nature of individual trauma and the social nature of the collective one. On the one hand, he understands individual trauma as “a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defences so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively” (pp. 153–54), while collective trauma is “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community” (p. 154). The main difference, therefore, is that collective trauma works its way insidiously into the consciousness of the group members, thus lacking “the quality of suddenness” (p. 154) normally associated with trauma.

Although they are different, there is still a powerful connection between the individual experience of trauma and the collective one (p. 101).⁸ Jeffrey C. Alexander (2012) suggests that the constant exposure to violence and oppressive discourse marks a group’s memories and consciousness forever and changes its cultural identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways, leading to the formation of a collective type of trauma (p. 3). In line with this, Cathy Caruth concedes that just as there is a damaged body, one can speak of a damaged social organism (1995: 188). She also highlights the centripetal and centrifugal tendencies of trauma (p. 186) arguing that communal trauma may give victims the feeling that they have been set apart and made special, creating a spiritual kinship, a source of communality or a sense of new identity. Martha Wolfenstein called this the ‘post-disaster utopia’ (1957), as if survivors, digging beneath the masses of debris, discover a communal body and use its remaining resources to recover and consolidate.

Hence, despite the potential disorientation and harm inflicted upon a collective by a crisis or catastrophe, there exists a transformative capacity to convert it into a cultural ‘big bang’ or a ‘founding trauma’ (LaCapra 2014: xii). This phenomenon is evident within the Dalit community, where individual trauma paradoxically strengthens their sense of collective identity and solidarity, enabling them to attribute their suffering to a common adversary. In *The Gypsy Goddess*, the Dalit ‘body’ extends beyond the individual’s biological body; the surviving or traumatised body becomes embedded within the social body to such an extent that the suffering transcends the individual and assumes a systemic nature that impacts the community’s social fabric. Another factor contributing to the collective memory of Dalits in the novel is the deliberate absence of main characters, whether good or bad,⁹ even when specific incidents of oppression are elaborated upon. This strategy serves the purpose of attributing oppressors with a broader, more universal embodiment and invoking wider solidarities (Kumar 2010: 233) but also to blur any clear-cut distinction between the particular and the general, adding to the universal dichotomy of ‘them’ versus ‘us’ on issues such as casteism.

⁸Freud also affirmed this concordance between the individual and the mass in *Moses and Monotheism* (2010). He assumed that “The masses, too, retain an impression of the past in unconscious memory traces” (151).

⁹Gopalkrishna Naidu, a caste-Hindu and the leader of the Paddy Producers’ Association, stands out from the rest as he is ultimately assigned the blame for the massacre. This occurs after he drafts a petition to the government, pleading for action against the ‘communist agitators’.

In the same way that a collective experience of suffering can result in a feeling of collective victimhood (Bar-Tal et al. 2009), which can be self-perpetuating and operate as cognitive schema, the shared suffering of Dalits can create a sense of ‘Dalit victimhood’ and an ontological corporeal and spiritual crisis. However, Dalit victimhood is being reinterpreted and deconstructed in the novel through a process of ‘becoming’, a social repositioning of identity that involves recognising, deconstructing and reinterpreting the sense of imposed victimhood. ‘Becoming’ occurs, in the words of William Connolly, “when a culturally marked constituency, suffering under its current social constitution, strives to reconfigure itself by moving the cultural constellation of identity/difference then in place” (1996: 255–256). It is a paradoxical politics whereby “new cultural identities are formed out of old energies, injuries and differences” (p. 261).

The novel is not only a blunt denunciation of casteist brutality, but a ‘vehicle of emancipation’ and an instrument of revolt and transformation that encourages turning anguish into anger. The author writes with an awareness of anger, which she talks about in a constructive way, as an important piece of Dalit struggle and survival, connecting it with the identity of the characters in the book. Anger not only informs the novel but is used as an empowering tool for both the writer and the characters. Anger prevents the village from “disorienting itself”, it “keeps the people together, injects them with life, provides them a reason to live, pushes them into action” (2014: 202), but it also helps them to “conceal unknown fears” (p. 115) of what the future holds for them and their families.

Loss, Absence and Recovery

Despite the creation of a collective identity of fellow sufferers who can aspire to join forces and speak with a common voice, collective and cultural trauma can be problematic.¹⁰ While some theorists assume that trauma affects communities in a similar way to individuals, others have questioned the indiscriminate extension to larger entities and have suggested considering collective and cultural trauma as social rather than psychological constructs. One of these scholars is Dominick LaCapra, who highlights the importance of distinguishing between historical loss and structural absence (2014).

LaCapra considers loss as the product of discrete memory-bound historical events resulting from the removal or destruction of a person, place, or thing, which he calls ‘historical trauma’. Structural absence or ‘structural trauma’, on the other hand, is not

¹⁰Cultural trauma and collective trauma both involve the impact of traumatic events on social groups or communities. Cultural trauma focuses on the enduring psychological and social effects of trauma on a specific culture or society, disrupting their values and collective identity. It may be expressed through collective memory, narratives, symbols, and rituals. In contrast, collective trauma refers to the psychological and emotional impact on a collective entity, such as a community or nation, leading to shared distress, loss, and disorientation. It can have long-term effects on social cohesion, trust, and individual well-being within the affected group (Alexander 2004).

an event but the absence of foundations—be they referential, ideological, theological, or some other structural component that has never existed. As LaCapra puts it simply, “one cannot lose what one never had. Absence is the missing of an absolute” (2014: 50). Although the two concepts interact in complex ways, history and memory remain different modes of inscription (p. xx).¹¹

For LaCapra, failure to narrow down the traumatic source and exposure to this easy conflation can lead to an unhealthy elevation of victimhood, to obscure the status of historical victims, and to ‘unreflexive’ processes of overidentification with the suffering of others—what he calls ‘vicarious victimhood’ (p. 116). Furthermore, since traumatic experiences engender a potentially endless crisis of survival, the entanglement of discrete instances of historical loss with the foundational problem of structural absence may also thwart the process of recovery. However, the blurring of absence and loss bears witness to the impact of trauma and the post-traumatic mental state, with disorientation, agitation, or even confusion as clear markers (p. 46). It precisely attests to the way in which one remains possessed or haunted by the past and finds it difficult to distinguish between the two.

Dalit texts tackle endless exposure to suffering, which contains an underlying feeling of loss: loss of home, land, family members and culture. However, the fact that this suffering has lasted over time through several generations and has sprung from different sources makes it difficult to reduce it to particular events.¹² The crisis of humanity that they have endured—and continue to do so—is generally attributable to being the ‘other’. Along the same lines, although there is a specific historical fact of rupture that has caused the loss of homes and family members, the victims in *The Gypsy Goddess* suffer a structural absence of human rights, dignity and equal opportunities.

There is, thus, a tension between the idea that Dalits actually become Dalits through the experience of oppression—in other words, that casteism and its oppression forged their identity—and the need to recover a sense of cultural selfhood that somehow ‘predates’, ontologically, historically and ethically, this identity of suffering. If we base human rights on the principle of human dignity, this narrative highlights situations where certain individuals, due to their caste background, are clearly disenfranchised. The suffering experienced by Dalits is deeply rooted in history, evident in the countless instances of oppression, discrimination, and violence they have endured over time. Additionally, the enduring effects of historical trauma on subsequent generations represent transhistorical suffering. This recognises that the

¹¹According to LaCapra, the conversion of absence into loss can manifest as a ‘misplaced nostalgia’ that prompts a quest for a utopian politics of some original unity, wholeness, security, or identity that others have ruined or polluted (2014: 58). This can lead to anxiety, melancholic paralysis, or manic agitation and may raise hope that this state may be eliminated or overcome. Conversely, when loss is mistaken for absence, endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia can emerge.

¹²Untouchability has an intricate origin that is difficult to pinpoint in a straightforward manner or attribute to a single event or cause. Therefore, it would be inappropriate and reductive to completely dismiss historical trauma in the Dalits’ case and ascribe their suffering to simple cumulative absence.

consequences of past injustices can persist across generations, impacting the social, psychological, and economic well-being of Dalits in the present. Therefore, it may be appropriate to view Dalit trauma as a combination of both historical and transhistorical suffering, considering the interplay and contribution of these factors to the current state of Dalits.

One of the reasons behind LaCapra's insistence on discerning loss from absence is the importance of not dwelling on trauma and working towards recovery. He proposes two seemingly opposite responses to trauma: acting-out and working-through. As discussed before, after an overwhelming and shattering event that escapes normal registration in the victim's memory, the event may somehow register in the traumatic memory and be relived in the present in an uncontrolled, unconscious and, at times, compulsively repetitive manner, breaking temporal distinctions and inhibiting action—a phenomenon denominated by LaCapra as the symptomatic 'acting-out' of trauma (2014: 88–89).

The phenomenon of acting-out is repeatedly illustrated in *The Gypsy Goddess*, especially in Chapter 10, titled "Mischief by Fire", in which the fire that charred the lives of forty-four Dalits is agonisingly described. The lack of punctuation turns the entire chapter into a single sentence, mirroring the shattered, convoluted, and distorted memory of the survivors:

and in desperation a mother throws her one-year-old son out of the burning hut but the boy is caught by the leering mobsters and chopped into pieces and thrown back in and in that precise yet fleeting moment of loss and rage everyone realizes that they would die if their death meant saving a loved one and that they would die if their death meant staying together and that they would die anyway because it would not be as disastrous as living long enough to share this sight and so alone and together they prepare to resign themselves to the fact that they have mounted their collective funeral pyre (Kandasamy 2014: 164)

LaCapra posits that trauma victims should embark on an effort to "articulate and rearticulate affect and representation in a manner that may never transcend, but may to some viable extent counteract [...] that disabling disassociation" caused by trauma (2014: 42). It involves a process of gaining critical distance on traumatic experiences and recontextualising them, a working over trauma that LaCapra calls 'working-through' (p. 90). But while this is the desirable outcome, he advises against completely discrediting the process of acting-out, stating that it is not only inevitable in some cases, but even necessary. He argues that most trauma victims display an unavoidable "tendency to repeat which, if not confronted, tends to take place in a blind and unchecked manner to return as the repressed or to recur as the dissociated" (p. 143). Likewise, working-through does not mean a complete avoidance of suffering or a direct harmonisation between past and present; rather, it implies "coming to terms

with trauma, including its details, and critically engaging the tendency to act out the past” (p. 144).¹³

Locked in compulsive repetition and possessed by the past, the victims in *The Gypsy Goddess* seem trapped within the traumatic event. But the repetition itself may also be a homeopathic process that allows, to some extent, some critical distance and resumption of life if the victim can relinquish his/her attachment to the past. A male eyewitness named Ramalingam, who had to testify before a commissioner, worked-out through his traumatic memories page after page in run-on sentences (2014: 167–182). He narrates: “that day dangles in front of my eyes all the time, I know it scene by scene, it is more clear to me than this moment, it is more real to me than the two of us here, talking” (p. 174). But, as painful as it might be, putting his memories into words helps him not only to claim a wrong, but also to put the pieces together.

Jacques Derrida developed the idea that there is no point of time of pure origin, but only an always-already absent present that he called ‘hauntology’ (1987), like spectres that cannot be ontologised and, consequently, will continue to problematise or haunt historical discourses. In such scenarios, Derrida proposes an interminable mourning—or mid-mourning—that implies working over and through traumatic experiences through a constant reenactment of the traumatic event, potentially leading to its understanding and inclusion in one’s conscious psyche (p. 335). This approach may be considered when addressing trauma in communities whose oppression is problematic to trace and pigeonhole, such as Dalits. It could serve as a productive form of partial mourning in the negotiation of unsettled experiences and as an acknowledgement that trauma may never be fully resolved.

Against the assumption that “the impossible, aporetic or melancholic response is the only appropriately ethical condition” for a post-traumatic ‘afterwardsness’, Roger Luckhurst has proposed ‘resilience’ as a “positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (2008: 210). Along the same lines, the concept of ‘post-traumatic growth’ encompasses the positive change that the individual might experience as a consequence of facing a traumatic event (Calhoun & Tedeschi 1999: 11). Due to changes in self-perception, interpersonal relationships and life philosophy, traumatic experiences can take the form of a greater appreciation for life, closer relationships with others, the visualisation of new opportunities, a sense of increased personal strength, or spiritual change. *The Gypsy Goddess* celebrates resilience through quotes like the following: “Life, weighed down by death, weary of destruction, goes on” (2014: 195). But what is more interesting is the idea that those who have been wounded or hurt physically are lucky insofar as their pain grounds them and “prevents them from hurtling down into the worlds, from disappearing into the abyss” (p. 202).

However, while resilience and post-traumatic growth serve as a reminder of the plurality of responses to trauma, they should be approached with a sceptical eye to

¹³LaCapra based his formulation of ‘acting-out’ and ‘working-through’ on Freud’s psychoanalytical concepts of ‘melancholia’ and ‘mourning’. Contrary to LaCapra’s approach, however, Freud (1917) recognised melancholia (*Melancholie*) and mourning (*Trauer*) as mutually exclusive reactions to loss.

the extent that they can generate a 'negative sublimity' or fidelity to trauma (LaCapra 2014: 22). Victims of traumatising events may resist the process of working through due to the perception that by doing so, one is betraying those who were overwhelmed and consumed by that traumatic past. The unbearable thought of having survived the dead "when the mourning village fed its dead ancestors, placated their tormented souls and told them to rest in peace" (Kandasamy 2014: 206) tempts one of the survivors to contemplate the idea of taking his own life. Dalits' burden is such at times that it is beyond them to "try and make meaning out of the randomness of death" (p. 196) to which they are still too often exposed.

Conclusion

As this article has attempted to demonstrate, somatic trauma caused by caste-based oppression does not stop in the bone, but has the ability to penetrate the inner psyche of Dalits in multiple and unexpected ways. *The Gypsy Goddess* serves as a comprehensive repository of wronged and misinterpreted historical events, but also of the impact that systemic forms of oppression can have on people's mental health.

Mainstream trauma theory has been the model used by many scholars for decades to address trauma, identifying symptoms as intrusive reenactments, hallucinations, flashbacks, nightmares (Caruth 1995; American Psychiatric Association 1980), or affective and cognitive disturbances such as anhedonia and alexithymia (Krystal 1978) or numbing (Minkowski 1946). This paradigm has also come to recognise the more subtle effects of prolonged abuse, including somatic, dissociative and affective sequelae (van der Kolk et al. 1996). Although to different degrees, this symptomatology of trauma is revealed in *The Gypsy Goddess*, proving that Dalits can indeed be called trauma victims.

However, uncritically universalising this generalised concept of PTSD risks rendering the specificity of long-term pain suffered by oppressed groups invisible and unknowable. Not all victims experience traumatic pathologies in the way proposed by mainstream scholars. For instance, traumatic amnesia does not seem to occur in the case of Dalits. The victims in *The Gypsy Goddess* not only have their suffering imprinted on their bodies as a constant and inescapable reminder, but talking about their suffering seems to be a necessary and cathartic process.

Many are the scholars who call for an expansion of the scope and a revision of the dominant conceptions of trauma and recovery. Some of the most significant points made are that trauma does not arise only from sudden and unexpected catastrophic events nor is it just an individual phenomenon (Bond & Craps 2017), that there is 'a spectrum of conditions' rather than a single response to trauma (Herman 1992), that the cumulative degradation and subtle effects of oppression are 'insidious trauma' (Root 1989, 1992), and that trauma has a generational transmissibility, meaning that there is a 'trauma of the future' or pre-traumatic stress (PreTss) reactions (Bond & Craps 2017).

The connection between the individual experience of trauma and the collective one (Alexander 2012) is omnipresent in *The Gypsy Goddess*. As the distinction between private and public breaks down, descriptions of localised individual corporeal suffering are extrapolated to broader contexts of collective pain. As such, the pain is shifted towards the community, thus universalising the singular and implying that any Dalit would have had the same experience. And, while a crisis or catastrophe might damage the community, it may also transform into a ‘founding trauma’ (LaCapra 2014), or a trauma that paradoxically becomes the valued or intensely cathected basis of an individual or a group’s identity. Repeated subjection to disempowerment and denial of autonomy has undoubtedly caused socially mistreated and alienated Dalits to develop and internalise a destructive psychological system of self-hatred and communal insecurity. But, in addition to the dramatic loss of identity or the tearing of the social fabric, their collective trauma has paradoxically also led to a process of identity consolidation, as Kandasamy demonstrates.

But collective or cultural trauma can be problematic as it can blur the difference between historical loss and structural absence (LaCapra 2014) which, among other consequences, can frustrate the process of recovery from trauma. In this case, while *The Gypsy Goddess* seems to focus on a ubiquitous exposure to loss, it also sheds light on an endless structural absence of basic human rights. *The Gypsy Goddess* portrays an in-between category of acting-out and working-through, a mid-mourning (Derrida 1987). By remembering and talking about the pervasiveness and harassment of their traumatic experiences, Dalits not only compulsively and uncontrollably relive them, but also process them to some extent. Therefore, in the case of communities whose oppression is difficult to track and pin down, partial mourning and acknowledgement that the trauma may never be fully resolved are valid and necessary approaches.

Kandasamy reminds readers that her community is defined not only by their traumas, but also by the irrepressible desire to survive, thrive, and have their stories told. Still, as the cultural foundations of the community are called into question and the ‘we’ is reconstructed from sheer victimhood to resistance and assertion, Kandasamy makes it painfully clear that no amount of research, awareness and empathy can replace lived experience. The consequences of caste-based oppression need to be addressed and more conversations need to be had about the particular psychological needs of Dalits, along with urgent pathways to bridge the inequalities in access to mental healthcare for such communities.

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