

**Loss And Grief In Natasha Trethewey's Memorial Drive A Daughter's Memoir -
Payosmi Mishra & Subismita Lenka**

Payosmi Mishra

Department of HSS,
ITER, S 'O' A Deemed to be University,
Jagamara, Khandagiri
Bhubaneswar-751030,
Odisha, India
E-mail Id- payosmi1mishra@gmail.com

Dr. Subismita Lenka

Assistant Professor of English,
Department of HSS,
ITER, S 'O' A Deemed to be University,
Jagamara, Khandagiri
Bhubaneswar-751030,
Odisha, India
E-mail Id- subismitalenka@soa.ac.in

ABSTRACT

The paper proposes a critical reading of the themes of grief and loss reflected in the memoir *Memorial Drive A Daughter's Memoir* by Natasha Trethewey. Loss of a beloved one overturns the cyclic routine of a person. It disrupts the normalcy of life. The memoir is set in 1960s in the town of Mississippi where racial conflicts dominated the cultural scenario of America. The study is conducted with a view on racism and domestic violence that is perpetuated in society till date. History is replete with such instances of voices being subdued by the patriarchy. However, Trethewey gives voice to her mother's suffering through dedication of this memoir. The article attempts to explain how the racial prejudices in America had formed an impression upon the mind of Trethewey. It attempts to evaluate how a sense of isolation pervades into the Trethewey's world following the brutal murder of her mother when Trethewey was nineteen. Trethewey was severed from her mother which deepened her emotional wounds. Instead of absolutely being devastated from within, the author beautifully purges her emotions of sorrow and suffering in the form of this memoir. The study seeks to analyze the idea that intense mourning can lead to catharsis or relief from the burden of sadness. This memoir is the outcome of the intense grief she experienced and involves a close textual analysis along with a brief study of the history of racism in America.

Keywords: *Grief, Loss, Racial prejudice, Isolation, Domestic Violence*

INTRODUCTION

Emotions constitute the essence of human character. They shape our behaviour and attitude. Life would be barren without feelings like joy and sorrow, excitement and disappointment, hope and dismay. Emotions make life colourful. When they take the shape of extreme forms, they are characterized by physiological and cognitive elements that influence our personality. Happiness makes a person stand on cloud nine and intense grief disrupts the normal schedule of a person. Usually, a person who is grief-stricken develops a sense of detachment from this world and is confined to himself.

Grief refers to the intense pain coupled with loss of a bereaved family. Since it is a reflection of what we love, it can be all-encompassing. Grief is the range of feelings from deep agony to anger. Psychologists have found that the process of adapting to a loss varies from one person to another. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, in 1969 discovered five stages of grief viz., denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Writers make productive use of this stagnant phase of their life by penning down their thoughts in their masterpieces.

Insurmountable grief and irrevocable loss turn the world of a person upside down. The sad demise of a loved one wreaks havoc in the person's life. Life becomes meaningless eventually shattering the order and chronology of language. Natasha Trethewey, the Poet Laureate of the United States, unveils the racial and historical inequities of the nation in her poetry and prose. Her groundbreaking memoir *Memorial Drive A Daughter's Memoir*, is a saga of loss and separation, following the death of Trethewey's mother, Gwendolyn.

In this study, a close textual analysis of the memoir is taken into consideration. The various racial terms that are employed in the conversation of white people are evaluated and discussed in detail. The text is compared to Adichie's *Notes on Grief*. Various articles are studied and discussed in the sections given below.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of research articles and books are available pertaining to the title: "Grief and Loss" in Natasha Trethewey's *Memorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir*. While analyzing the topic, relevant works are taken. The following works are taken into analysis:

Adichie, Chimamanda. 2021. "*Notes on Grief*." This memoir is dedicated to the author's beloved father James Nwoye Adiche.

Dziamka, Monika. 2021. "Natasha Trethewey on Myths, Grief and Joy." It is an interview in which Trethewey explains about the various areas and literary allusions of her memoir.

Giorgis, Hannah. 2020. "How Poetry Can Guide Us Through Trauma." The article is from *The Atlantic*. It focuses on the loss that Trethewey experienced.

Trethewey, Natasha. 2021. *Memorial Drive A Daughter's Memoir*. The memoir focuses on Trethewey's irreparable loss of her mother's death.

Trethewey's *Memorial Drive A Daughter's Memoir* beautifully portrays the intense grief of her mother's death and the excessive guilt in not being able to save her mother.

METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a qualitative analysis of the texts. It takes up a close textual analysis of the books and employs historical study. It makes references to another work entitled *Notes on Grief* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche. The study makes use of the conceptual framework of psychological approach which helps to analyse the texts. Both the memoirs are dedicated to their parents – Trethewey

pays tribute to her mother and Adiche's affection is portrayed to her father. The deaths of their beloved ones have fueled their emotions enabling them to produce such beautiful pieces of art. The memoirs are projection of the authors' emotional wounds present deep down their psyche.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, in 1969 discovered five stages of grief viz., denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. *On Death and Dying*, published in 1969, is a seminal book where Kubler-Ross depicts her five phases of grief. Denial is an act of refusing to accept facts, information, reality consciously or unconsciously, relevant to the situation concerned. Anger is manifested either with themselves or with people close to them. The bargaining stage for people facing death can involve attempting to bargain with whatever God the person believes in. Depression refers to the acceptance with emotional attachment which is associated with sadness, regret, fear and uncertainty reflecting that the person has at least begun to accept reality. Acceptance denotes emotional detachment and objectivity. People lying in death bed experience the stage of acceptance long time preceding the people they leave behind, who must necessarily pass through own individual stages of dealing with the grief.

For the analysis of the study, Monica Dziamka's article is evaluated which contains the interview between Trethewey and the critic, Monica. Hannah Giorgis has depicted how the expression of one's trauma can take one out of the suffering.

DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The memoir traces the tragic course of Gwendolyn's life and the manner in which the author's own life has been shaped by a combination of fierce love and resilience. The memoir focuses on young Trethewey whose life revolves around her mother and her entire world; the emotional void that she experiences after her mother's murder at the hands of her stepfather, Joel.

The two epigrams, at the onset of the memoir, set the stage for the narrative to build on. "The past beats inside me like a second heart", is excerpted from John Banville's *The Sea*. Banville, here, implies that the past lives on in the character. Memory shapes the reality. At times, to overcome the burden of grief, one has to return to the trauma that is undergone through. Apparently, memory was waiting for her to unearth the unsavoury past and give meaning to it. The second epigram "All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveller is unaware", (36) is taken from Martin Buber. (*The Legend of Baal-Shem*) They convey the message that certain incidents registered in memory, mold us in developing who we truly are. The riveting memoir ushers in a sense of intense sadness with the death of Trethewey's mother. A lapse of three weeks after her mother's brutal murder, Trethewey dreams of Gwendolyn walking with her on a "rutted path":

Three weeks after my mother is dead I dream of her: We walk a rutted path, an oval track around which we are making our slow revolution: side by side, so close our shoulders nearly touch, neither of us speaking, both of us in trances. Though I know she is dead I have a sense of contentment, as if she's only gone someplace else to which I've journeyed to meet her ... (3)

Joel's appearance on the path does not make Natasha tremble; instead, she greets him following which a radiant light emanates from Gwendolyn's forehead so that Trethewey suffers from "momentary blindness." Gwendolyn's question, "Do you know what it means to have a wound that never heals?" compels the reader to delve deep into the mystery behind her murder. It implies the injury has inflicted an irreparable loss to her for which there is no compensation, no return. She cannot return to her daughter any more. Even when Joel points a gun at Gwendolyn, Trethewey hopes to save her mother. This piece of vision that the author sees in her dream shows her utter helplessness in not being able to save her

mother from the hands of her stepfather. It indicates the daughter's desire to make a rewind to the situation so that she can get back her mother.

Prologue provides a platform for the author to outline what is to follow briefly, states the intention and what is attempted in course of the work or text. In the Prologue to the memoir, taken prior to a few months of the brutal murder, the description of "a strange corner of light just behind her head, perhaps the photographer's mistake, appearing as though a doorway has opened, a passage through turning she might soon depart," forebodes Gwendolyn's impending death early on in the memoir. Trethewey throws light on the background of the photo: "... she is in fact part of that darkness, emerging from it as from the depths of the memory." (7) The photograph itself symbolizes that Gwendolyn's past life has been full of darkness, humiliation and torments.

The memoir is replete with imageries which associated with grief and sadness. Trethewey employs an imagery of *dieffenbachia*, in the Prologue, which her mother spoke of as "dumb cane", "struck dumb" and "dumb grief" that signified the apprehensive danger lurking in one corner of her mother's heart about her death. "Dumb cane" refers to a temporary failure in speech, "struck dumb" is a situation when a state of shock, fear or astonishment renders us mute and "dumb grief" indicates the fact when grief becomes inexpressible. Gwendolyn's words, "Be careful when you handle it" (8) suggests metaphorically the relationship between the author and her mother – what it would be to survive without Gwendolyn in the near future.

Trethewey was born "in the spring of 1966", a significant day in the history of America as it was the celebration of the Confederate Memorial Day. She calls herself "a child of miscegenation" – born out of the marriage between a Canadian father and a Black mother emphasizing the fact that racial conflict was embedded into the social fabric of Mississippi. Different responses from people due to the racial issue were experienced by the author when she was with her parents. She received the polite greetings from white people when she travelled with her father. Conversely, her mother would be called a "Gal", never "Miss" or "Ma'am". Her biracial identity becomes the reason for her dislocated and disorienting self. A sense of hostility was experienced by Trethewey and her parents wherever they went. Trethewey's father was often being asked why he was living among the "niggers." (20)

I could see it on the faces of the white people we encountered – how even the nicer ones just shook their heads, whispering, "Such a cute little thing; too bad she's black"; how others stared at us, sucking their teeth... 'What's wrong with you? Why you living among the niggers?'" (34) This shows the American society's racial streak and how racial prejudice operates in America, the biases of which were experienced by Trethewey and her mother. They left an indelible mark on the mind of Young Trethewey, making her stand on the precipice of two different worlds.

The change in the ambience is brought out when the family settled in Atlanta, the city that "epitomized the emergence of the New South" with its embrace of the Civil Rights Movement. Gwendolyn's new life began with Joel after divorcing Trethewey's father. Trethewey's meeting with Joel foreshadows the upcoming events that will turn her life upside down. Her initial encounter with him disturbed her state of mind as he addressed her sarcastically – "You can call me whatever you like," he said, grinning, his smile uneven, a twitch in his upper lip when he fixed his mouth to say *you*." (69) A sense of alienation surrounded Natasha whenever she found herself in the company of "Big Joe" as she used to call him.

Trethewey is psychologically abused by her stepfather, Joel. In the chapter entitled "Loop", the method of punishment become a regular pattern for Joel to correct Natasha. Joel knew how to "fix" her. At times, he would ask her to pack her suitcase, made her sit in the car and turn her around home. The

mention of the instance of “sleep paralysis”, evokes the image of a struggling young Natasha, who is absolutely rendered helpless for not being able to speak the truth to her mother. The mind and body are temporarily divided. This division is employed as a metaphor to suggest her struggle all these years of living with her stepfather. Her mind propels her to share her sorrow, but her body overcomes her mind. The body is interspersed with the trauma that she is going through.

The heaviness of the heart needs to be channelized, the words of pain have to be articulated to ease the agony and the heart had to be opened out to lighten the burden. The diary that her mother had gifted her on her twelfth birthday, proved to be an outlet for her to vent her emotions. She started to pen down her emotions and bitter experiences she had with Joel. Joel's invasion into the territory of Natasha is exemplified in his act of breaking the lock and reading it. Young Natasha's sole companion was breached upon. The silent companion of Natasha was snatched away.

Not only did Joel's misdemeanour with Natasha deeply affect her, but Gwendolyn fell prey to domestic violence inflicted by Joel. Mire in male chauvinism makes up the second half of the memoir. Gwendolyn is physically abused by Joel – there are black eyes, bruised kidneys, a sprained arm, a fractured jaw. Divorce follows, along with restraining orders and relief. Trethewey's mother had been liberated as a free bird from the cage, though, for a brief period.

The short tenure of relief concluded on June 5, 1985 which wreaked havoc in the author's life when her mother was brutally murdered by Joel. The incident turned Trethewey's life upside down. The irreparable loss nearly destroys her: “all my adult life I have lived with the guilt that I am implicated in my mother's death ---- or more precisely that she is dead because I am not.” (210) A sense of isolation pervaded into her life after her mother's death, yet she did not give up. To overcome the grief that she underwent, she poured out her emotions in the form of this memoir.

The memoir concludes with the line “To survive trauma, one must be able to tell a story about it.” Writing refers to a safe therapeutic space whose function is to heal the survivor. The process of writing acts as a balm on the deepest emotional wound in the mind of the person. In other words writing about trauma may “heal the fissure in the fabric of selfhood.” (105) It helps in the process of catharsis, the purging of emotions and providing relief to the writer's burdened heart.

Memorial Drive is metaphorical in that it takes the author on a ride into the past. Besides, it is a road in Atlanta, a major east-west artery. *Memorial Drive* unveils that which has been deliberately hidden, whether by history or by oneself. Eventually, Trethewey's grief took the shape of writing. “Three decades is a long time to get to know the contours of loss, to become intimate with one's own bereavement,” (205) are engraved in the final pages of the memoir. Time played a pivotal role in Trethewey's life as it helped her to nurture the innate trait of a writer, who can by her continual intimacy with the demise, give shape to her trauma in the form of language.

An analogy of the memoir can be drawn with her poem “Articulation,” published in *Monument*, 2018 book of poetry, in which she depicts a dream where Gwendolyn appears with a gunshot wound three weeks subsequent to her murder. The final quatrain embodies the task of preserving her mother's memory:

How, then, could I not answer her life
with mine, she who saved me with hers?
And how could I not, bathed in the light

of her wound, find my calling there? (183)

Approaching the same dream through different medium of writing, be it memoir or poetry helped her develop diverse insights.

NOTES ON GRIEF BY CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

The theme of grief resonates in the memoir of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Notes on Grief*, which is an eloquent meditation on loss, grief and death. The memoir pays tribute to Adiche's dear father, James Nwoye Adiche who dies of kidney failure during the pandemic on June 10, 2020.

James Nwoye Adiche was professor of Statistics in Nigeria and his daughter describes him a peaceful, kind and honorable, known for his honesty. Her anguish is expressed in the memoir as a form of question of how his death could have been prevented. Indeed, a feeling persists in the first few weeks of the loss that he should have remained in her life, as an eternal protector. Adiche, a staunch feminist, addresses herself unabashedly "Daddy's girl". She mentions the fact that she not only revered him, she "liked" him so much: he stands as a model of manhood – "his grace, his wisdom and his simplicity...his luminous, moderate wit..." She nicknamed him "original dada": like the primal ancestor. Her father is an embodiment of her patriarch, her history, her identity, her world. (29)

The trend of communication during the pandemic – the Zoom call – is present throughout in *Notes on Grief*. The memoir starts off with a weekly family Zoom meet, with siblings interacting with each other from England, the United States and Lagos and their parents connecting from their home in Abba in southeastern Nigeria: "Move your phone a bit, Daddy." Her father was not keeping well and not experiencing sound sleep, however, he implored them not to worry. He passed away three days later. Their next Zoom call "beyond surreal, all of us weeping and weeping and weeping, in different parts of the world, looking in disbelief at the father we adore now lying still on a hospital bed." (4) Subsequent Zoom calls were done to broach the arrangements for funeral and religious services.

June 10, 2020 was the most pathetic day for Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche for she lost her father, James Nwoye Adiche, at a time when the world was in the clutches of the deadly coronavirus. James was in Nigeria, the writer far away in America. He was suffering from kidney ailment which was not serious. Adiche wondered: "How is it that the world keeps going, breathing in and out unchanged, while in my soul there is a permanent scattering?" (12) She detests the indifferent attitude of the world regarding her father's sad demise. Since her world is devastated, she wishes that the people across should also mourn her loss.

In *Notes on Grief*, a heartbreaking account of loss and mortality, Adiche pens down that "grief is a cruel kind of education." "You learn how ungentle mourning can be, how full of anger. You learn how glib condolences can feel." She says mourning and condolences cannot offer her consolation. These people, instead of mitigating the suffering, aggravate it by using words like "demise, ... a favourite word of the Nigerians." It is impossible on the part of Adiche to think or speak about her father in the past tense – he *was* not; he *is*. She backs away from condolences, is deeply vexed by the mention of age for "age is irrelevant in grief." (24)

Though the memoir is slim, yet it is searingly personal. Adiche's memories of her father are simultaneously comforting and agonizing. The memoir concludes with a wonderful remembrance of their strong bond, characterized by mutual love, pride of culture and academic appreciation.

Death is certain. It is a part of life. Each of the individuals have suffered great loss and pain with courage and strength. Bereavement of a loved one makes us lose our heart and we find ourselves

nowhere in this planet. The works that have been analyzed consist of the pattern of life that have evolved. Death does not prevent a person from moving on in life, but the person carries the memories of the deceased with them to derive power and energy.

Both the memoirs of Trethewey and Adichie are devoted to their beloved parents. They are an expression of their reverence, gratitude, intense love articulated in the form of the literary works. The memoirs show project the fact that the authors' entire world revolved around their dear parents – Trethewey's universe focused on her mother and Adichie's life revolved around her father. Though in both the works, a feeling of admiration pervades, yet it can be observed that Trethewey's mother, Gwendolyn was brutally murdered by Joel. She was a victim of domestic violence. Whereas, Adichie's father James lived his life till the age of eighty-six. His kidney failure and lack of treatment owing to the pandemic killed him.

CONCLUSION

Trethewey's memoir portrays the strong bond that exists between a mother and a daughter. Throughout her life Trethewey has been blaming herself for not being able to save her mother's life. A sense of guilt haunts her. Domestic violence, brutal murder and racial conflict pervade the entire memoir. The dream sequence in the beginning of the memoir itself indicates the fact the trauma that Trethewey underwent is deeply embedded in her psyche. An analogy is drawn with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Notes on Grief*, where she depicts her intense love, reverence towards her beloved father. Though her father had lived life up to its fullest, yet she utters the words tinged with tears that age is irrelevant in grief.

Even if grief makes a person inarticulate, the memoirs of Natasha Trethewey and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie exemplify the fortitude of the authors derived from opening out their hearts. These works reflect how grief and loss aid the writers in expressing their sentiments and purge out their emotions, eventually, relieving them of the stress that they were burdened with.

The creative outputs help in channelizing the emotions of the authors. Grief is a universal theme. Not only do the authors feel relieved, but the readers are united when they experience such sentiments. The Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, composed most well-known songs of personal tragedy. In 1903, a year later when his wife Mrinalini Debi breathed her last, Tagore penned these lines, "there is sorrow (*dukkho*), there is death (*mrityu*), yet there is peace (*shanti*), there is joy (*ananda*)..."

WORKS CITED

- Adiche, Chimamanda Ngozi. *Notes on Grief*. Harper Collins, Great Britain, 2021.
- Banville, John. *The Sea*. United Kingdom, Vintage Books, 2006.
- Buber, Martin. *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*. N.p., Taylor & Francis, 2013.
- Dziamka, Monika. *Natasha Trethewey on Myths, Grief and Joy*, 2021
- Gay, Roxane. *Bad Feminist*. Harper Perennial, New York, 2014.
- Giorgis, Hannah. *How Poetry Can Guide Us Through Trauma*, 2020.
- Jr Gates, Henry Louis. *The Signifying Monkey*, Oxford University Press, USA, 2014.
- Trethewey, Natasha. *Memorial Drive A Daughter's Memoir*, Bloomsbury Publisher, Great Britain, 2020.
- <https://www.thehindu.com/books/books-reviews/notes-on-grief-review-grief-and-sorrow-as-a-celebration-of-love-and-relationships/article35231757.ece>
- <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&url=https://www.businessballs.com/health-and-wellbeing/five-stages-of-grief-elisabeth-kubler->

[ross/&ved=2ahUKEwjT9ai9LLzAhV54HMBHTIXAYsQFnoECDkQAQ&usg=AOvVaw23nr5SMK
KYXF8bL7dHnFN](#)