

Trauma and Trouble in Sonia Faleiro AIDS SUTRA: Untold Stories from India

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Abstract

Healthy mind and soundbody are the outmost elixir of life. With the increasing of HIV/AIDS epidemic in the global circle, it has created an atmosphere of tightness. The transmission of the virus in the body is most likely due to unprotected sex, donating blood in improper institutions, using unsterilized syringe for injections and so on. The anthological book *AIDS SUTRA: Untold Stories from India* (2008) by Sonia Faleiro gives actual accounts of the forsaken predicament of the sex workers community who are infected with the life-threatening disease. They are treated as the marginalized group, often choosing aloofness for their misery. Many a times they are accepting untimely death committing suicide in a way to end their agony. The inhibition of the virus in them inculcates a sense of psychic instability. The psychic imbalance marks an impression of emotional trauma in their mind. The paper attempts an understanding of psychic traumain *AIDS SUTRA: Untold Stories from India*. It depicts the painful plight of the Aids victim who are treated as subalterns, a mere marginalized section who are abhorred for their disease.

Key words: Psychic trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, Sex workers, HIV/AIDS.

The picture of AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) creates an aura of tension amongst the humankind. People who are infected by the virus HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) in their bodies are easily prone to AIDS, which is the last stage of the life-threatening virus. If HIV/AIDS remain untreated through various advance curative methods such as antiretroviral therapy or ART can result to horrendous symptoms including drastic weight loss, countless blisters on the body, extreme high fever and ultimately lose their life. According to the 2019 report of the Global HIV and AIDS statistics, there are approximately 38 million people living with HIV globally and 3 million people in India.

Initially, HIV/AIDS was concentrated in three areas: Mumbai (formerly Bombay) and Pune (formerly Poona), in the western region; Chennai (formerly Madras) and the union territory of Pondicherry, in the south; and the state of Manipur, in the east (Ghosh 115).

The HIV/AIDS spreads through bodily fluids, unprotected sex in brothels, blood donation and the repetitive use of injection syringe for multiple uses.

...multipartner sexual activity (both male and female partner) without use of condoms or any other safety device; sharing of unsterilized needles or disposable syringes by intravenous drug users (IVDUs); professional blood donors (PBDs) who sell blood in many non-licensed blood-donating clinics(Pandey59).

The people who come in contact with the virus prefer to aloof themselves. Many people stigmatized the disease AIDS and also those who are contaminated by it. It uncovers the traumatic psyche of the victim.They are treated as the subjugated section of the society barely having a voice of their own. The forsaken plight of the HIV/AIDS victim remains unheard. In the book *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990)by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that in the arena of sexuality, it is the binary opposition which always limits the freedom of the individual. It produces a sense of arousal among the queer to secludethemselves from the outer scenario, likewise the AIDS victim too feels tormented and chooses to hidethemselves in a closet, away from the irksome outside world.

The anthological book *AIDS SUTRA: Untold Stories from India*(2008) is a book by the Indian author Sonia Faleiro, edited by NegarAkhavi. Her works as- *The Girl* (2006), *Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay's Dance Bars* (2010)and so on are successful in claiming recognition from the readers all around. She with her witty style touches on themes which are socially challenging. The enriching collection shares sixteen stories across India with the twisting tales of varied authors. The book includes the disgustful narratives of the HIV/AIDS victimized, who are more diseased due to the emotional trauma they face rather than the physical harm on them by the virus. As Cathy Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experiences*(1996) explores that the psychological pain is as painful as the physical pain. The fear of HIV/AIDS impregnates in the mind of the people a sense of abhorrence; they treat the AIDS inflicted as a taboo. The social stigma allows boycotting the AIDS infected and ultimately reducing them to the status of 'untouchables' or impoverished lower caste. In the novel *Untouchable*(1934) by Mulk Raj Anand it discloses the forsaken plight of Bakha, the young sweeper boy. Bakha is adhered to no individual rights. The AIDS infected people also possess no individual rights of their own. They feel trapped and traumatized; the fear of the virus distorts their emotional consciousness.

The research paper attempts to highlight the predicament of the abandoned AIDS infected souls. They are not able to recover from the trauma. The essence of the emotional trauma is so strong on the victimized that it creates multiple objects of the same trauma which stagnates their past, present and their future. They are unable to unleash themselves from the traumatic events.

The awe-inspiring book *AIDS SUTRA: Untold Stories from India* (2008) gives vivid descriptions about the plight of the sex workers with HIV/AIDS. The writers from the impressive book namely Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Nalini Jones, Kiran Desai, Sunil Gangopadhyay and many others have travelled across India to talk to homosexuals, sex workers, housewives, police etc. creating a mystic picture of the AIDS affected. They are considered as the 'other', a mere subaltern with a muffled voice. Gayatri Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1985) narrates that women folk are forced to remain under shadow, similarly women who work for little money selling their flesh are undoubtedly under the dark curtain of shadow. The author quotes "...the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant." (Spivak 28)

The paper attempts to analyze two stories from the collection *AIDS SUTRA: Untold Stories from India* (2008) namely- *RETURN TO SONAGACHI* by Sunil Gangopadhyay and *THE HALF-WOMAN GOD* by Salman Rushdie. These two stories are about sex workers including both female and transgender. The trauma inflicted on them and their families upon realization of being HIV/AIDS sufferer. How the horrid pain of trauma disturbs their everyday linearity. They lose meaning of their life and their moments (time) freezes.

In the short story *RETURN TO SONAGACHI*, the author Sunil Gangopadhyay provides an unusual narration of his own life experiences at Sonagachi, Asia's largest red light district, in North Kolkata. "Sex workers are creatures of the dark. They existed in every society but are kept invisible. They are to be used but not talked about." (Faleiro 291). On his visits to the Sonagachi, he learned the ethics of the sex workers. A mother and her daughter would not entertain the same client. Some among them cherished writing creative works which they know would not get recognition. The story of a sex worker and her writings "...eight notebooks full of poetry..." (Faleiro 274). The author accounts the sad destiny of Renu, who went into the profession of selling flesh to serve her ill husband and impoverished children. The bad fate strikes her allowing herself to get lured in the hands of traders and losing herself into the land of no return, the Arab countries. "She had fallen victim to recruiters who lured woman with hopes of better wages, then sold them to brothels in the Arab countries. Thus, Renu was lost to her family." (Faleiro 308). The author narrates about the sex workers' painstaking life at Sonagachi. They involve in hurried unprotected sex for cash, and thus remain infected by the virus. They often infect many others in the course. Along with HIV/AIDS many other sexually transmitted diseases get hold of their body such as "...syphilis and gonorrhoea" (Faleiro 279). These poor sections of people are traumatized, once they are diagnosed with the ailment. They are now no longer suitable into the institution of flesh trade, as their body deteriorates in strength and luster. Their families also do not accept them. These traumatic events of seclusion and getting diagnosed with an incurable ailment completely distort their lives. They are fixated to trauma AIDS. It impregnates in their mind a sense of fear, and the time is stretched to the diagram of traumatic event. They are unable to release themselves from those painful recurring of events.

In the other story by Salman Rushdie *THE HALF-WOMAN GOD* we observe the similar phenomenology of trauma in mind. Rushdie spent a day among the transgender and tries to encapsulate a tale of their world. In the Hindu mythology we worship Ardhanarishvara where Ardha means Half, Nari means Woman and Ishvara means God, the unison of Lord Shiva and Parvati. In Greek mythology the passionate love story between Hermaphroditus and a nymph Salmacis share the story of being blessed into a single body by almighty Zeus. The reality of the contemporary world reveals a bitter vision. We visualize the unification of male and the female body as odd, an unearthly product of the natural enigma. We often signify them with derogatory terms as hijras. "...hijras have always been, and still are, treated with a mixture of fascination, revulsion, and fear." (Faleiro113). They are the marginalized set in the community, who are often treated as aliens. The transgenders are threateningly falling prey to the increasing danger of HIV/AIDS infection. The queer plight often depicts the sickening life of the transgender. They are allotted with no work, no educational institutions admit them, and merely begging will not serve their empty stomachs or destitute families. With greater risk they step into the world of prostitution. "The pressure to earn the daily requirement forces hijras into agreeing to five or six sex acts daily, often hurried and careless" (Faleiro118). Deliberately, it increases their risk of sexually transmitted diseases. Likewise any other sex workers, the cloud of trauma prevails in their lives once they are diagnosed with any such diseases. A sense of double trauma is inflicted, they are already traumatized by the society for their body and also the infliction of the disease traumatizes their emotional self.

In the selected two stories, it depicts the painstaking predicament of the sex workers who are diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. A sense of trauma prevails in their consciousness. The virus when infects the body it equally infects the consciousness. Cathy Caruth explores that the psychological pain has the ability in it to affect the mind as well as the body. The LGBTQ section always bears a sense of seclusion. The gentle folk of the society do not consider them equal and discriminates them. They are the troubled gender. Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*(1990) gives an insight into the reality of how the gender is constructed. They are assigned with specific gender roles by the society to perform. The two stories share such dilemma of people where it reflects the dystopian reality of no light. As in the dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*(1985), Margaret Atwood reflects how the body of the victim is used without her consent in Gilead, future New England. Similarly, into the flesh trade, we observe varied sex workers selling sex without their wish. And the spread of the virus HIV into their body adds to their distortion. Their mind is not free and they feel as a caged bird, no one to hear their mournful songs. In *Seeing Like a Feminist* (2012), a book by Nivedita Menon, she highlights how a woman is treated in the society through the lens of constructed gender. Their voice is suppressed. The disturbing group of the sex workers remains muffled. They remain voiceless in regards of the physical turbulences and the emotional instability. Traumatized AIDS victims often choose to commit suicide as a solution to end their trauma. In another essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) by Sigmund Freud can be drawn parallel to the HIV/AIDS positives sex workers. Their condition is similar to the soldiers who

return from wars, and are victims of 'shellshock', the post-traumatic events of after war affects them. The HIV/AIDS sufferer are also victims of post-traumatic stress disorders, they are inflicted with pain, and the fear of the disease often traumatizes them even after.

In the conclusion, it can be analyzed that the AIDS victimized sections of the sex workers are often haunted by emotional trauma. They face trauma due to the cruel eyes of the society for being into the profession of flesh sell. Moreover, they completely break down due to the attack of the virus in their body. The haunt of the slow tracking disease disturbs their mental state. They are affected with immense emotional pain. The sex workers are unable to concentrate on other activity to overcome the trauma. It is fixated to AIDS. These fixations disallow in creating new memories. Their past activity haunts them until the end of their lives. Trauma focuses little less on other events, rather it mainly focuses on the HIV/AIDS element of the victimized. The poor sex workers from the short stories are unable to release themselves from the tight bonds of trauma. They are mere 'second sex' as cited by Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* (1949), where the poor faith of the women are destined to be the second in gender division, whereas the male sections are of outmost priority, thus creating the binaries of gender inequality. They are later reduced to the state of begging often lying beside the roadside. The AIDS epidemic is almost spreading vividly and is yet without a full cure to health. Sonia Faleiro's book *AIDS SUTRA: Untold Stories from India* (2008) includes picture portrayal of the different HIV/AIDS victim from India. The AIDS victimized class goes through psychic trauma which lacks their interest in the present circumstances.

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