

THE RESILIENCE OF INDIAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN COPING WITH THE DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SEEN IN SEJAL BADANI'S *A TRAIL OF BROKEN WINGS*: A STUDY OF FEMINIST PSYCHOLOGY

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Abstract

This study aims to discuss the resilience of Indian American women in coping with the domestic violence as seen in Sejal Badani's *A Trail of Broken Wings* as one of a study of feminist psychology. It begins with the issue of patriarchy in first-generation Indian immigrants' family in United States. This paper tries to bring out the issue of how Indian-American women can cope with the trauma healing and finally were able to reconcile with their past and successfully made resilience with their trauma. Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. It is the analysis of the novel which applying the feminist theory, focusing more on feminist psychology to explore the resilience of four Indian-American female characters toward the patriarchy norms

Keywords: domestic violence, first-generation, Indian immigrant, patriarchy, resilience

Introduction

A Trail of Broken Wings is an example of writing by an Asian American female writer, Sejal Badani that was published in 2015 and depicts the process of resiliance of four Indian American women in coping with the trauma healing happened because of the domestic violence that they suffered from the male figure in the family. Sejal Badani is a former lawyer who gives up his career to pursue writing full time. She lives in United States with her husband and her two children. *A Trail of Broken wings* is her first debut in her writing life that has chosen as Best Fiction in the final round of the 2015 *Goodreads Choice Awards*. It is the story of three sisters and their mother who are reconnected after their father develops a serious illness. A fascinating insight into the way families try to hide, bury, deny, suppress and control abuse and trauma healing as part of Indian-American women which reveals the burden of shame and secrets. Those women try to heal their trauma in their own way and style as a first generation immigrant though somehow the traumas have already haunted their life. *A Trail of Broken wings* depicts a story about four women; Raneer and her grown-up daughters, Marin, Trisha, and Sonya. When her father falls into a coma, an Indian American photographer, Sonya, reluctantly returns to the family she had fled years before. Since she left home, Sonya has lived on the run, free of any ties, while her soft-spoken sister, Trisha, has created a perfect suburban life, and her ambitious sister, Marin, has built her own successful career. As these women come together, their various methods of coping with a terrifying history can no longer hold their memories at bay. Buried secrets rise to the surface as their father, the victim of humiliating racism and perpetrator of horrible violence, remains unconscious. As his condition worsens, the daughters and their mother wrestle with private hopes for his survival or death, as well as their own demon and buried secrets.

This research aims to bring out the issue of how Indian-American women can cope with the trauma healing and finally able to reconcile with their past and successfully make resilience with their trauma. Resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. It means "bouncing back" from difficult experiences. The capability of an individu to heal from the hard phase of his/her life and to be able to go back to normal life can also be said as resilience.

Nowadays it has become common view to see women become the victim of domestic violence in their own family from the person that they knew well, such as father, husband, or even son. This research tries to offer a solution on how to handle and deal with the problem of domestic violence through the perspective of Indian American women seen in Sejal Badani's novel as the main object of analysis. Four female characters which will be analyzed in this research are the victim of domestic violence from the only male figure in their

life; figure of husband in Raneer characters, and figure of father in Marin, Trisha and Sonya's character. Raneer is a mother with three grown-up daughters who still embrace her Indian culture in United States. She is a loyal and submissive wife for her husband as she remains silent when her husband beat her and their daughters, but at some point her heart rebels and fight, therefore when her husband, Brent, falls into coma she unconsciously hopes for his death more than his health. The same case also goes to the other three female characters, Marin, Trisha, and Sonya who got trauma due to their father's bad behaviour to them during their childhood in United States.

Indonesia also known as a country who embraced Eastern culture where patriarchy is still strongly rooted in. Nowadays the violence from the male figure in the family for some people still considered normal and accepted in some societies. Wives or daughters tend to act passively toward the abusive treatment that they got from the male figure due to their recklessness and submissiveness. It is time for all women to be aware of every violence they got from all men including their own father, husband, or son to fight back or at least resist and reconcile with the violence. Those women out there need to know that they have their own rights to live happily and gain their own freedom in their own way without being frightened, dominated or abused. There are a lot of help to be used as a tool to fight back and not to be passive with the bad treatment they received from the man they know well. This research hopefully can be one of the motivations to enlighten those women to be able to gain back their dignity and face their new life and made resilience.

Method

The method used in this research is qualitative method in which the collected data is in the form of words instead of numbers and the result of the discussion contains quotations to strengthen the analysis on the novel. Basically, this method consists of an investigation that seeks answer to the question, collects evidence and produces findings. The analysis of *A Trail of Broken Wings* as the main object will be conducted based on some statements;

1. the problem as the first-generation Indian immigrants in America
2. the domestic violence suffered by the women
3. the resilience of the women to cope with the trauma

The first scope, it will mainly discuss the problem that the characters faced as the first generation Indian Immigrants in America, the acceptance and the refusal from each character due to their coming to the new country. As mentioned above, the main characters narrated in the novel are originally from India, and moved to United States due to the economical problem to pursue a better and more prosperous life in the new country. Those characters face many obstacles in term of the acceptance from the society and also themselves. As for the second scope, the analysis will go further to the psychological problem, in this case is domestic violence faced by the women characters (the Indian-American women) that resulted as a trauma that haunted their life unconsciously. The word trauma here refers to the domestic violence suffered by the female characters from the male character in the story. The Female characters which are represented by Raneer, Marin, Trisha and Sonya suffer from physical and mentally abused from their father and husband (for Rani's). In the last scope, it will discuss the process of resilience of those female characters to cope with the trauma in their past life.

This research aims to analyze the problem of first-generation Indian immigrants in America, the acceptance and the refusal and depicts the women's resilience in coping with the domestic violence as Indian-American women and also to enrich the knowledge in the field of multicultural literature, feminism and psychological issue in the term of resilience.

Sejal Badani as the author of this novel is widely known as an Indian-American female writer whose writing can be categorized as a multicultural literature whereas she depicts some problems related with the issue of patriarchy along with its effect to the female characters. As a multicultural writer, Sejal Badani offers his feminist thought in the direction of both recognizing women's diversity and acknowledge the challenges it presents. Those kind of multicultural feminist focus on the basic insight which is all women are not created or constructed equal. Depending on her race and ethnicity but also on her sexual identity, gender identity, age, religion, level of education, occupation or profession, marital status, and so on, each U.S woman will experience her identity and status as a woman differently. Tong in her book mention that to appreciate the significance of U.S multicultural feminism, it is important to understand the reason for its emergence and rapid ascendancy. They focused mainly on the gender differences between men and women. Most of them stressed the degree to which qualities such as autonomy, rationality, physical strength, and fairness or justice are associated with 'masculinity' whereas qualities such as connectedness to others, emotionality, physical weakness, and caring were associated with 'femininity'. According to historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.. in Tong *Feminist Thought*, early immigrants to the United States wanted to become new

people. For the most part, they did not want to maintain their ethnic identities. On the contrary, they expected to become Americans. Their goals were escape, deliverance, assimilation. They saw America as a transforming nation, banishing old loyalties and forging a new national identity based on common political ideas. On the other hand, defenders of multiculturalism claimed that “we should learn to think of our society as consisting not of a majority and minorities, but of a plurality of cultural groups. We do not have to look, act, speak, and think alike to be American, they said, instead, we need to cultivate mutual tolerance, respect, and knowledge of each other’s culture.

Meanwhile, on the relation with the multicultural writing, Najmeh Nouri wrote an article in *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences* entitled “Floating world: Re-imagining Rhizomatic identities in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*”, (vol 3(1) January 2012). In her article, Nouri discusses about the paradigm of diaspora in United States that has shifted from the moved-to-here immigrants to born-here immigrants in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* from the framework of transnationalism characterized by migration, transculturation, and hybridity in both first generation and second generation of immigrants. Nouri revealed that Lahiri attempts to construct transnational identity for immigrants, while locating and stabilizing them in the United States. A formation of transnational identity does not negate the notion of nation or national borders, rather it means making a connection between different nations and their people by crossing boundaries in a rhizomatic process. This process constitutes the notion of identity as always evolving, owing to the fact that it becomes what it is in the context of constantly changing and mobile relationship between human beings and globalized world. This article gives contribution to the future research in the part of the multicultural writing in United States and also to the part of first and second generation Indian immigrants.

Results and Discussions

The article divides the analysis into three problems which will be discussed one by one.

1. *Problem found as the first-generation Indian immigrants in America*

United States has always been a center for immigrants. Many people of different walks of life are migrating to this powerful country from around the world with the intention to get a better life than the previous one in their homeland. Writing as a cultural production has become an important site for exploring the consequences of migration and the place of minorities in United States, as well as for the articulation of new forms of identity. First-generation settlers display identities formed by their country of origin which may shift to varying degrees through the changed and changing social relations of gender, class, and race in America. Immigrants from India first arrived in the United States in small numbers during the early 19th century, primarily as low-skilled farm laborers (<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/indian-immigrants-united-states#Diaspora>).

Brent is a male character narrated in the story as Ranees husband and a father of Marin, Trisha, and Sonya. During their first year in America, Brent has to work hard to be able to support his family and faced some mockery of racial discrimination from his American colleagues. “He was afraid of the new world that even after decades still felt foreign to him. Working every day among strangers and colleagues who asked why he smelled like garlic and onion, staples of Indian cooking. Demanded to know why his lips held a sheen of yellow around their rim. When he explained he started his morning with turmeric milk, they laughed and said milk was for kids. In America, a man took his coffee black. They brought him a cup and insisted him to drink the bitter liquid. Brent yearned for the familiarity of India, of living among those who looked like he did and spoke the same language. He had lost his life in hopes of making it better”(39). Brent’s family moves to America in the hope of pursuing a better life. Brent and Ranees are facing a hard life during their first year in California, United States. Ranees has to work in a small factory to help her husband financially, as mentioned in the quotation “Once born, Sonya became Marin’s responsibility while their mother worked in the local factory making children’s underwear” (25). For some Indian it considers humiliating if a wife has to help her husband to support the family’s finance and that is what Brent feels. At some point there is also regret of deciding to leave their homeland in India only to achieve a better life in United States, as seen in the quotation “Brent yearned for the familiarity of India, of living among those who looked like he did and spoke the same language. He had lost his life in hopes of making it better. It was a gamble he regretted always” (39). This regret is also felt by Ranees that sometimes she imagines changing their destiny. “Saying no when the green cards came in from America. She could have spoken up and said the land of dreams and opportunity might hold neither for them. That their small village in India was all the happiness they would ever find” (32). The ‘acceptance’ from the American people and the regret felt by both Brent and Ranees are the typical problem faced by some immigrants in America especially Indian immigrants.

2. *Domestic violence suffered by the female characters*

Those treatment of discrimination that Brent got from his colleagues made him an emotional man that he chose to release his anger and disappointment to his wife and daughters. Not only his wife, Brent also abused his daughters by beating and yelling at them everytime he thinks they made mistakes and did something beyond his reason. Brent who also experience some racial discrimination from his working fields releases his anger and disappointment to his wife by beating her continuously. Ranees is a traditional Indian women who is submissive and loyal to her husband. She considers the violence that she suffered from her husband as a normal treatment that a wife should accept from her husband. Not only Rani that suffered from the violence but also their two daughters including Sonya, the youngest one whose born is unwanted as mentioned in the novel that –Sonya was born after their arrivaal in America. Their parents had made plans to abort her – she was an accident after all. But Brent was desperate for a son.. at the birth, fury filled Brent’s face when the doctor announced he had another daughter”(25).

Marin, the oldest daughter is a smart girl who always achieved the best rank at school but still she could not escaped from her father’s anger and there was a time when she prayed for her father to die that he would not be able to hit her again, as quoted from the novel –It had been a particularly bad beating, and Marin could not take any more. One more incident and she was sure she would die. In fact, she had begun to prefer the idea of death over continuing to live under his roof. She begged for her father to be taken that night. For him to fall asleep and never wake up. Marin imagined the life they would live without him. The freedom she could barely remember from her time in India”(97). Among the three daughters, Trisha, the second born, is Brent’s favorite that she hardly experienced beating or slapping from her father as quoted from the novel –spoken from the girl who was never hit. How fortunate for you. The rest of us didn’t have that luxury, did we?”(150) but nevertheless in her adult life it is revealed that Trisha had been raped by her own father when he was drunk. Ranees told her that –he came to you late at night, after Marin’s wedding. He started drinking after the guests left”(272). Suddenly it comes to her mind consciously and she can see and knew exactly how she felt the time when her father raped her, as seen from the following quotation, –*Why I never beat you,* were the unspoken words . the ones he didn’t utter but made sure I understood. As he lifted my nightgown, the thought reverberated in my head. I was the lucky one. The special one. That’s why he wasn’t beating me. And when he finally bore down on me, I was grateful that I was still safe from his fists. If this was the cost of being protected, then it was a small price to pay”(272) The youngest, Sonya, is the one who gain revenge of her father’s treatment to her. Born as an unwanted child, Sonya had already gained hatred from Brent. When Brent hit her daughters, Ranees do nothing but crying. Promising his wife that he will give them a world, Ranees always wanted to say –if you could stop hitting us, that would be enough.” But she never did, and he never stopped (33). The beating, the hitting, the violence that they got from Brent lead them to unhappy and traumatic women in their adolescence. As said by Sonya in the following quotation that showed her hatred to her mother for not trying to stop her father everytime he hit them. –Now I realize I hated her for not trying to stop him. At least she had attempted to do something. I would have known that the sight of us being hit hurt her more than us. That as our mother, she would rather bear any pain than watch ours”(49) The three daughters tend to blame their mother, Ranees, for not being able to protect them from their father. They thought it supposed to be her responsibility to save them from the hitting and the abusive treatment of their father, Brent. So the trauma is not only coming from their hatred toward their father but also from their dissatisfaction and rage toward their mother, Ranees.

3. *Resilience of the women to cope with the trauma*

Psychologically, the word Resilience refers to the great phase or quality that allows some people to be knocked down by life and come back stronger than ever. Rather than letting failure overcome them and drain their resolve, they find a way to rise from the ashes (www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/resilience). Psychologists have identified some of the factors that make someone resilient, among them a positive attitude, optimism, the ability to regulate emotions, and the ability to see failure as a form of helpful feedback. Even after misfortune, resilient people are blessed with such an outlook that they are able to change course. According to Jave Wald, Ph.D. in his book *Literature review of Concept. Psychological Resiliency*. Toronto: 2006, p 15, The individual, environmental, and interacting factors shown to contribute to resiliency. Empirical studies on individual factors (or within-person resources) have identified the following contributing factors to resiliency: (1) personality traits of adaptability, flexibility, agreeableness, extraversion, openness to experience (2)self-esteem (3)self-mastery (4)intelligence (5)problem focused coping strategies (6)internal locus of control (7)being achievement and goal-oriented (8)higher intellectual functioning (9)ego-resiliency and ego-control (10)cognitive appraisals about threat, safety, and adversity, such as benefit-finding cognitions. According to the research of leading psychologist, Susan Kobasa, there are three elements that are essential to resilience:

- a. Challenge – Resilient people view a difficulty as a challenge, not as a paralyzing event. They look at their failures and mistakes as lessons to be learned from, and as opportunities for growth. They don't view them as a negative reflection on their abilities or self-worth.
- b. Commitment – Resilient people are committed to their lives and their goals, and they have a compelling reason to get out of bed in the morning. Commitment isn't just restricted to their work – they commit to their relationships, their friendships, the causes they care about, and their religious or spiritual beliefs.
- c. Personal Control – Resilient people spend their time and energy focusing on situations and events that they have control over. Because they put their efforts where they can have the most impact, they feel empowered and confident. Those who spend time worrying about uncontrollable events can often feel lost, helpless, and powerless to take action. (www.mindtools.com/pages/article/resilience.htm)

In this research the writer found those elements within the female characters' trait. How they deal with the trauma they faced during their childhood life which unconsciously haunted their present life is affected by their way of life as an India American women. The value of being American somehow affected their way of thinking and their attitude toward others. *A Trail of Broken Wings* depicts the idea of how Indian American women managed to escape the haunted childhood life through the happy-ending life in their adult phase which represented by four female characters; Ranee, Marin, Trisha, and Sonya. The Challenge element is actually the weakest one to be reconsidered since Ranee keep regretting her incapability of protecting her children from her husband's anger but nonetheless manages to control herself by making peace with her past life. At the same time Ranee challenges her own life since she looks at her mistakes as lesson and opportunity for her to survive. Meanwhile the other three characters; Marin, Trisha, and Sonya manages to fulfill the elements of resilience with their own way. Intelligence, problem focused coping strategies, internal locus of control, being achievement and goal-oriented, higher intellectual functioning, ego-resiliency and ego-control, cognitive appraisals about threat, safety, and adversity, such as benefit-finding cognitions are some factors that can be fulfilled by the female characters to be able to cope with the traumatic childhood experience which lead them to resilience.

Ranee who comes out with her shocking confession that it is her who poisoned Brent continuously until he is in comma. Due to her biggest hatred toward him, Ranee tries to end his husband's lives slowly and thought that it will end her and her children's sorrow. The action of doing so can be included as factor of problem focused on coping strategies and ego-resiliency. By the time she reveals the truth to David, Sonya's boyfriend and also Brent's doctor she is fully aware that her action is a crime but it reliefs her feeling that she finally can do something to protect her daughters, especially Sonya that leaves her due to her hatred to Brent, her father. This following quotation support the analysis. –Ranee turns away, accepting what she has done and the consequences that will follow. She knows David will have to report her, that the world will soon know her crime. She has left one prison only to be headed for another. But it is the only way she knows how to free Sonya. The only gift she has to give to the daughter she has previously given nothing”(342).

As for Marin, she unconsciously becomes an authoritative mother who control her only daughter's life just the way her father used to control her during her childhood life. Her almost ended marriage make her realized that she needs to change and control her life again as a faithful wife and loving mother for her husband and her daughter, Gia. Her daughter sees her as a selfish and authoritative mother. She nearly lost Raj's and Gia's love due to her obsessive and authoritative characters. –Marin thinks about the steps she need to take, her own recovery. It may take her a lifetime, and she may not ever fully heal, but she needs to go on the journey, if for no other reason than to hold out her hand to her daughter and help her along the way. To model the right behaviour. I won't push you or criticize. Their priority is being there for Gia. In time, things will fall into place. No matter what, Marin will always be grateful to Raj for giving her the greatest joy of her life – their daughter ”(352) In this phase, Marin managed to view view her problem in the past life as a challenge, not as a paralyzing event. She looks at her failures and mistakes as lessons to be learned from, and as opportunities for growth. She does not view them as a negative reflection on her abilities or self-worth.

Trisha, is a married woman whose husband is an American man. She has a happy marriage life without children as she unconsciously is afraid to have one. This leads her marriage to a divorce as her husband finally reveal that she used an anti pregnant medication to avoid pregnancy. After knowing that her beloved father raped her during childhood, she realized that her unwanted feeling of having a child is caused by that traumatic incident which unconsciously become the first reason for her not to be pregnant. Her marriage ended with a divorce and yet she and Eric, her ex husband managed to get along and seek for a better treatment to heal her trauma not as husband and wife anymore but as friends. It is mentioned in one of the quotation –I have a lifetime to try to understand what my father did to me and, in contrast, the love he surrounded me with. I may never find a reason or know why I chose to forget his actions. But what I do know, and what I will never forget, is that I still have me and the right to make my own choice. I vow to find

myself, to learn who I am, never again to be the daughter my father needs or the wife I convinced myself I should be. For as long as the journey takes, I will walk alone, fearless, discovering the woman I can be”(358) Trisha managed to achieve the third element, Personal control, where she prefers to spend her time and energy focusing on situations and events that she has control over. Because she put her efforts where she can have the most impact, she feels empowered and confident but also promised herself never to forget her past life as she redefine her future.

As for Sonya, she is the one who suffer the most at the beginning but in the end, she is also the one who successfully achieve to resilience and negotiate with her trauma as she finally stay and find the man of her life, David. According to the three elements that essential to resilience, Sonya also managed to have her own commitment and personal control over the traumatic life. The following quotation shows how Sonya did her commitment and have her personal control, “Even after a wound heals, the skin has to rebuild, and even then the scar will always remain and the only thing between us will be the knowledge that today is not defined by yesterday and tomorrow is truly another day. Energy doesn’t stand still; it moves, shifts with time. I think maybe we are meant to do the same, to see the world not as we fear it is but as we hope for it to be – kinder, gentler, each lesson not meant to destroy but to enable. Our hurts and our joys are meant to be shared, the burden easier when another holds your hand”(364). The quotation shows how Sonya is finally willing to heal her wound and finally accept the love offered by David.

Conclusions

Having analyzed *A Trail of Broken Wings* by Sejal Badani, we can see how The Resilience of the female characters are achieved by following some stages and elements of resilience. The four characters show different kind of way in achieving the resilience and healing their trauma with their own problem differently but one thing to be concluded that those women are able to reconcile and coping with the childhood trauma due to the domestic violence that they experienced, Raneer, a traditional Indian woman who finally find her solution to resist and fight against the domestic violence from her husband, Brent. She prefers to be happy with her four daughters instead of regretting her past decision on living together with her abusive husband, and she finally chooses her own path. Marin, the oldest daughter, the one who experience the most anger of her father by being submissive and faithful only to be able to gain respect and praise from him. Unconsciously it caused her to be an authoritative wife and mother to her own husband and daughter, yet it finally can be reconcile and overcome by following some elements to resilience which finally make her life happier than before. On the other hand, Trisha, the second born whose described as the most loving daughter by their father, Brent, reveals a shocking fact about her childhood life. The trauma begins in her almost-ended marriage life. Yet, she managed to reconcile and resilience with the shocking fact and start all over again with her ownself. The youngest daughter, Sonya, who runs away from home as she grows hatred to her father which caused her trauma in starting a relationship with a man is finally succeed in healing her trauma, reconcile and manage to resilience. Lastly, as quoted from www.mindtools.com/pages/article/resilience.htm, Those who spend time worrying about uncontrollable events can often feel lost, helpless, and powerless to take action. Finally, this research is not totally finished and ended. There are still many things to be explored and discussed throughout this novel, be it is in the same topic or with another different topic and approach, hopefully this research can be continued and analyzed with an extended topic.

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