

Trauma and Recovery in Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth*: A Psychoanalytic Study

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Abstract

This paper applies Judith Herman's theory of Trauma and Recovery to the novel *The Folded Earth* by Anuradha Roy in order to understand how the protagonist, Maya, deals with her traumatic experience. Maya loses her husband, Michael, in a mountain accident, and she is left alone to deal with the trauma of loss. Herman's theory, a triad framework comprising the three stages of safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection as part of the process of recovery from trauma, offers a viable platform for a scholarly examination from a psychoanalytic perspective. The novel is structured around Maya's retreat to the Himalayan hill town of Ranikhet. This structure is reflective of Herman's roadmap to recovery from trauma. Maya's relocation and emotional withdrawal represent the first phase. Her gradual engagement with new relationships, particularly with Diwan Sahib and Veer, and her internal

confrontation with Michael's memory reflect the second phase. Betrayal and the reactivation of grief through her discovery of Veer's complicity in Michael's death becomes the third phase, which also complicates the recovery process. The analysis conducted in this paper shows that the novel *The Folded Earth* emerges as a narrative that focuses on trauma's lingering aftershocks and the fragile, often non-linear, paths toward healing in both personal and socio-historical contexts.

Key words: Anuradha Roy, *The Folded Earth*, Judith Herman, Theory of Trauma and Recovery

Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* (2011) is about a newly widowed woman named Maya who retreats to the Himalayan town of Ranikhet to recover from the traumatic experience of losing someone dear. The setting is postcolonial India, and the author presents it as a multilayered sociocultural landscape filled with fraught. Personal grief, historical memory, and female subjectivity become the thematic concerns of the novel. As Bhatnagar and Zaidi observe, "Anuradha Roy, in her novel *The Folded Earth*, has raised the social as well as psychological concerns related to loneliness that arises owing to the death of a loved one" (5723). Maya's trauma arises from the loss of her husband, Michael, who dies in a mountaineering accident. The narrative is quiet and intimate, yet it presents a profound psychological exploration of the effects of trauma on the identity, relationships, and spatial and temporal orientation of an individual. This provides a fertile ground for psychoanalysis, and this paper aims to understand the phenomena of trauma and recovery in an individual as presented in Anuradha Roy's novel *The Folded Earth*. As the theoretical framework, the paper uses Judith Herman's theory of trauma and recovery outlined in her seminal work, *Trauma and Recovery* (1992).

Herman's theory of trauma is founded on feminist psychiatry and clinical practice, and it proposes a three-stage roadmap towards recovery from trauma. She constructs this roadmap based on her view of trauma, which she states as follows:

Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless. At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. When the force is that of nature, we speak of disasters. When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning (33).

The three sequential stages involved in trauma and recovery that she outlines include establishing safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection with ordinary life. This structure serves as a conceptual roadmap for both clinical intervention and literary interpretation. "Herman's stages of recovery—establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring connections—are not linear but often require survivors to revisit earlier phases" (Wilson and Thomas 112).

Herman's theory was originally applied to support survivors of domestic abuse, political terror, and sexual violence. In later years, it has been extrapolated to include issues such as emotional dislocation, mourning, and psychic fragmentation. In the case of *The Folded Earth*, Herman's model provides a powerful interpretive structure for analyzing how Roy constructs Maya's psychological journey not as a linear process of "moving on," but as a complicated negotiation with the past, in which healing is neither guaranteed nor complete, but always in motion and always precarious.

In the novel, Maya's self has been fractured because of loss. Her psychological landscape is filled with grief and silence. She has to navigate it in order to recover from her loss. Herman terms this as 'the survival self'. The story presents the death of Michael as physically remote, as it takes place on a mountainside which is not accessible to anyone. At

the same time, it is a cataclysmic event to Maya in terms of her emotional state. Maya becomes affectively numb. She descends into disorientation. She detaches herself from society. Therefore, it becomes paradoxical when she relocates to the mountain town, closer to the place where Michael lost his life. In order to escape her trauma, Maya goes closer to the place where the cause for her trauma lay. The physical landscape of the novel, the unstable mountain region, also becomes a symbolic one, representing Maya's inner self which is also unstable and folded, and is full of invisible fault lines. Maya loved Michael so much that she abandoned her whole family in order to marry him: As Devanesam and Manimozhi note, "She forgoes her caring parents, a luxurious comforting life for her love" (234), and after his death, she abandons her entire known life and ventures into the unknown, simply to be in the place where he died.

In the novel, Maya's narrative is not an isolated one that tells of trauma. While Maya's psychological journey is towards recovery, the parallel story of Charu and her traumatic experience with family and society unfolds but ends without any clarity. The novel presents how Charu falls in love with Kundan, a lower-class hotel worker, resulting in familial violence, public shaming, and eventual disappearance. This subplot becomes significant because it functions as a social mirror to Maya's inner conflict. It also highlights how trauma goes beyond the individual affliction and becomes a social phenomenon in societies characterised by patriarchy and class/caste discrimination. It shows how such trauma to women becomes a culturally mediated process of erasure, containment, and silencing. Charu, unlike Maya, is denied the possibility of recovery, safety, or reconnection, and her vanishing from the narrative signifies the devastating consequences of trauma when unacknowledged or unaddressed. Through Charu's fate, Roy illustrates what Herman articulates as the structural dimensions of trauma, those rooted not merely in personal histories but in institutionalized patterns of domination and neglect.

The novel *The Folded Earth* is not merely about personal loss, but about the complex nature of trauma and how it is both a psychological and a socio-historical phenomenon. The novel has a layered narrative structure and an elegiac style of presentation. This is reflective of the dissociative logic of trauma itself: there is temporal disjunction; it is fragmented; and it has repetition. The novel also echoes Herman's insistence that trauma alters the structures of consciousness, as well as identity and memory, as the narrative shifts from the present to past memories, and from the visible to the unsaid. The character of Diwan Sahib and his story as another subplot in the novel also add significance to the trauma portrayal, as this character represents the fading princely lineage and betrayal during India's transition to independence. Diwan Sahib's fragmented recollections of historical upheaval function as an allegorical counterpoint to Maya's personal mourning, thus extending Herman's framework into the domain of collective memory and national disillusionment.

Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) is a unique perspective on trauma and the process of recovery in that it does not approach the phenomenon as an individual experience. It looks at trauma as a socially and politically embedded experience. In a way, Herman's theory has reconceptualised the psychological understanding of trauma. Her theory primarily focuses on recovery from trauma, and she proposes a three-stage process. The first stage is establishing safety; the second stage comprises remembrance and mourning; and the third stage involves the reconnection with everyday life. Each stage, while sequential in theory, is fluid in practice, often requiring survivors to oscillate between phases as they navigate their own unique pathways toward healing. As mentioned earlier, Herman says that trauma becomes unmanageable because of the sense of powerlessness that the victim experiences. This central emphasis on powerlessness underscores the dynamics of domination inherent in both personal and political trauma.

According to Herman, trauma causes the fragmentation of memory. It also creates an identity crisis and collapses trust in relationships. Any survivor of trauma must first emotionally settle down. They must regain a certain degree of control physically and become aware of their environment. This settling down becomes the first stage in trauma recovery. The second stage then begins, where the survivor is expected to narrate the traumatic event. They should speak about their trauma. They should bring together all the fragmented memories related to the traumatic event and should face the emotional pain associated with those memories. The third stage is to re-establish normalcy in their lives. They should create new relationships and claim agency in the world.

The unique aspect of Herman's Trauma and Recovery theory is that she places trauma within the systemic realm. She opines that trauma is largely caused because of domestic violence, war, and political terror, in the context of systemic structures of power. "Herman's work insists that trauma cannot be divorced from its social context; oppression (e.g., gender-based violence) exacerbates psychological wounds" (Brown 45). She shifts the focus from the pathologising of the individual towards the sociocultural factors that cause the systemic condition. Thus, Herman not only proposes a three-stage model for the process of trauma and recovery, but she also projects trauma as a systemic phenomenon.

In the novel *The Folded Earth*, Maya's retreat to the Himalayan mountainside is the first step towards recovery. It is the first stage where she tries to regain a certain control over her life, physically and emotionally. "The first task of recovery is to establish physical and emotional safety, without which mourning is impossible" (Van der Kolk 203). Maya's world is fractured by grief, and her moving to the Himalayas is both a literal and symbolic withdrawal from the world. This relocation of Maya is a typical 'flight' reaction from any trauma survivor. The instinctive urge is to flee from the place which is, at that time, filled with memory and emotional peril. Maya says, "I was going to be two thousand kilometres

from anything I knew, but that was just numbers. In truth the distance was beyond measurement” (Roy 16).

Ranikhet becomes an ideal place for Maya to begin her recovery. It is sparsely populated, has a pleasant climate, and is full of quiet and serenity. The place is perfect for Maya to re-establish the emotional rhythm of her life and regulate it. Father Joseph helps her to take up residence in a modest house and also take up the job of a teacher in a local school. This introduces structure and routine into Maya’s otherwise chaotic life. Herman considers this establishment of routine as a key step towards recovery. In the beginning, the mountains appear to contain the terror of loss to Maya, but gradually they become the site of containment and calm. This relocation and re-establishment of routine is the first stage in Maya’s life towards her recovery from trauma. In this stage, Maya is not seeking resolution but insulation; her isolation is not pathological withdrawal but a strategy of survival. She is able to reach this stage as she calls the hill her home, and the neighbours her family:

I was at home. I had got used to thinking of Charu, her grandmother, her half-witted uncle Sanki Puran, and my landlord Diwan Sahib as my family now. I could no longer imagine living anywhere else. Though I cannot know precisely when it happened, a time had come when I became a hill-person who was only at peace where the earth rose and fell in waves like the sea (Roy 21).

In the first stage, Maya is able to create a physical sanctuary in her life. However, her emotional condition is tenuous and fragile. She begins to make contact with people gradually, with characters like Charu and Veer. The impact of Veer’s relationship with Maya is reflected in the following words from Maya: “The rhythm of my life changed whenever Veer returned. My days became changeable” (Roy 77). But her interaction with characters like Veer begins with circumspection and is cautiously hopeful, yet remains restrained. This is the right approach for a trauma survivor, says Herman, who states that survivors must avoid

premature intimacy. The presence of other stable figures, such as Diwan Sahib and Charu, further anchors her, yet Maya's world is still defined by quiet vigilance and emotional reserve. Maya's journey in this stage exemplifies Herman's first phase: the careful reconstruction of a secure world, however fragile, within which the deeper work of mourning and memory may eventually unfold.

In Judith Herman's trauma recovery model, as mentioned earlier, the second stage requires survivors to reconstruct the traumatic narrative by integrating it into their consciousness. They are to grieve the emotional losses it entails. However, this process is neither linear nor devoid of pain; rather, it is marked by oscillation between confrontation and avoidance, presence and dissociation. In *The Folded Earth*, Maya enters this phase gradually as the psychological walls she has built around Michael's memory begin to disappear under the weight of emotional support, social interaction, and environmental factors.

In the novel, the act of remembrance is catalyzed by Maya's deepening relationship with Veer, whose quiet companionship and shared silences invite a reconsideration of her emotional closure. It is reflected in the following lines: "I could talk to him in a way I could with no-one else. I knew I would be understood, and knew exactly the conversation we might have" (Roy 78). As their bond strengthens, Maya begins to experience flashes of memory. It is indicative of recollection. "Trauma must be 're-membered'—integrated into the survivor's narrative—to transform frozen grief into bearable memory" (Herman 177). Dreams of Michael's death, guilt over his final journey, and renewed reflections on their marriage haunts Maya.

That night, I had a vivid dream in which skulls rolled down white slopes and fell into pools of green water. I saw a woman hooded in an anorak, clawing her way up a snowslope. Someone was photographing her as she struggled, saying Smile, say

cheese? The voice was Veer's. Then the woman's face turned into Michael's and suddenly he was falling, toppling over the edge of the slope (Roy 89).

These recollections are not romanticized; they are painful, contradictory, and emotionally charged. They reflect Herman's assertion that trauma stories often emerge in fragmented, non-linear forms. "Those preserved memories in the unconscious mind can profoundly get triggered when an individual encounters a similar traumatic environment or event even after a long period" (Megha and Selvi 97). In parallel, her work with Diwan Sahib's memoirs acts as a surrogate form of mourning, through his fragmented recollections of political betrayal and personal loss, Maya is subtly taught how to witness, record, and process history, including her own life's tragic events.

The mourning Maya undertakes is not only for Michael, but for the version of herself that perished with him. "Recollection of those haunting events is unlike usual remembrances; they are more intrusive, fragmented, and vivid to process for an individual" (Megha and Selvi 97). Grief, in this context, becomes an act of identity reconstruction. Herman notes that mourning must eventually give meaning to loss; in Maya's case, this takes the form of measured re-engagement, with people, with language, and with memory. Her emotional evolution, though hesitant, signifies a crucial movement beyond mere survival, toward the possibility of reinhabiting a world no longer structured solely by absence.

The third and final stage in Judith Herman's trauma recovery model is reconnection. It entails the survivor's re-engagement with life. "The final stage of recovery involves reclaiming agency through new relationships, though betrayal can destabilize this process" (Saakvitne et al. 89). The beginning of the reconstruction of a meaningful future is expected to happen in the third stage. The reintegration of identity beyond the trauma is also expected to begin during the third stage. In *The Folded Earth*, Maya's tentative steps toward emotional intimacy with Veer is a step towards this goal. There is also her growing sense of stability

during this stage. It is evident in Maya's thoughts: "I would not look into the future. My life had been too cruelly overturned once before for me to think of anything but the present moment. I would negotiate each day as if I were riding a leaf in a flowing stream: enough to stay afloat. I would not ask for more" (Roy 153). This initially suggests the beginning of the third phase. However, Herman cautions that reconnection is rarely linear; it is often challenged by unexpected revelations and emotional ruptures that test the survivor's capacity for trust and agency. This also occurs in the novel in the form of Veer's betrayal.

Veer's companionship helps Maya to emerge from emotional exile gradually, but it becomes detrimental when she realises that Veer is, in fact, the man who accompanied Michael on his fatal trek, and it is his negligence that had caused her husband's death. This marks a devastating rupture in Maya's process of recovery. This revelation not only reactivates her trauma but destabilizes her newly formed sense of self.

Everyone had marvelled at the way I had made myself a new life in a faraway town after my husband's death. What unnatural composure, what a swift recovery, they had said. Today it was as if I had torn off a dried-up scab with my fingernails and exposed the wound oozing for years beneath (Roy 246).

This shows the process of recovery is delicate and there are chances of regression at any point of time. Herman emphasizes: "trauma recovery is cyclical, with triggers causing regression even after progress" (155).

Herman emphasizes that reconnection involves not forgetting trauma, but reclaiming power in its aftermath. Maya's response, though filled with anguish, is ultimately self-determined: her symbolic act of tearing up Diwan Sahib's will, which names Veer as heir, affirms her refusal to perpetuate systems of betrayal and silence. This moment of moral clarity does not negate Maya's pain, but it signals her psychological autonomy.

Reconnection, for Maya, does not imply a return to her former self but an embrace of a

redefined selfhood, one that can coexist with memory, grief, and betrayal without being consumed by them. In choosing not to retaliate or collapse, Maya asserts a new identity forged through resilience and ethical consciousness.

While Maya's journey in *The Folded Earth* aligns with the phases of trauma recovery outlined by Judith Herman, the narrative also presents a counterpoint through the character of Charu, a young village girl whose trajectory reveals what happens when the conditions for recovery are denied. Charu's experience illustrates Herman's argument that trauma is not only psychological but also deeply political and structural, rooted in systems of gender, caste, and class that enforce silence and suppress agency.

Charu's romantic relationship with Kundan, initially tender and full of hope, becomes a site of public scrutiny and private punishment. When her secret is discovered, she is physically assaulted, confined, and socially shamed by her grandmother Ama and the patriarchal village order. Herman emphasizes that trauma becomes compounded when the survivor is not only powerless during the traumatic event but is also silenced afterward. Charu's muteness, her psychological withdrawal and physical absence following her abuse, mirrors this enforced erasure.

Unlike Maya, Charu has no access to stabilizing structures: no safe refuge, no community of support, no legitimate space for her voice. Her trauma is unacknowledged, her suffering dismissed as dishonor. Herman writes that recovery requires "a social context that affirms and protects the victim." In Charu's case, the absence of such affirmation results in emotional annihilation. She disappears from the narrative, not as a resolved plotline, but as a haunting absence that critiques societal complicity.

Charu's unresolved trauma serves as a powerful reminder of trauma's unequal impact. Roy contrasts her fate with Maya's to underscore the importance of structural support, relational empathy, and narrative justice. Through Charu, the novel reveals how patriarchal

violence continues to silence women and how unspoken trauma festers when left unacknowledged and unsupported. "Herman's model reveals how marginalized individuals (e.g., lower-caste women) face 'double trauma'—violence followed by societal silence" (Das 231).

Roy's narrative affirms Herman's proposition that recovery is not about erasing the past, but about reclaiming one's place in the present. Maya's emotional stance at the novel's close, poised between sorrow and renewal, embodies the fragile, yet profound, essence of reconnection.

The analysis presented in this paper thus far reveals that Anuradha Roy's *The Folded Earth* offers a profoundly layered exploration of trauma, memory, and recovery. The presentation also fits within the framework of Herman's trauma recovery process. Through the character of Maya, Roy traces the three essential stages of healing, namely, safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. However, keeping true to the realistic perspective of trauma and the recovery process, the author narrates the journey of her protagonist towards recovery as a painful and complex process fraught with its own complexities and emotional reversals. The novel is all about Maya's journey from withdrawal after the trauma to tentative re-engagement with the world. As such, the narrative becomes an illustration for Herman's theoretical proposal. It reinstates Herman's proposition that trauma recovery is a recursive and non-linear process. It also shows how recovery is shaped as much by internal resolve as by the availability of relational and social support.

At the same time, the novel simultaneously resists offering a universalized or redemptive model of healing. The novel also critiques the socio-political conditions that obstruct recovery for those without access to privilege, education, or safe community. The narrative also substantiates Herman's contention that trauma recovery cannot occur in isolation, and that survivors require an affirming social context in order to reclaim agency and voice. The

narrative, much like Herman's theory, acknowledges the endurance of pain while affirming the possibility of survival, meaning-making, and renewal. *The Folded Earth* not only dramatizes the psychological textures of trauma but also demands a deeper recognition of the socio-political frameworks that shape who is allowed to heal, and who is left unheard.

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