



# Unpacking the Psychological Wounds in Avni Doshi's *Girl in White Cotton*

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## **Abstract:**

The implicit thoughts of human mind and behavior are well expressed in literature through exploratory stories. Literature expresses the disturbing and dark side of human existence, tainted by trauma and pain. The term "trauma" comes from the Greek word meaning "wound" or "infiltration." Trauma serves as a metaphor for life's struggles and difficult situations in a society of the late 20th century that is trapped in suffering and victimhood. Literature plays a vital role in portraying human experiences, emotions, and the expression of traditional trauma stories. Motherhood is the most important and sacred duty in a woman's life. During childhood, a child is constantly exposed to the environment from which he learns his first lessons. Therefore, the relationship between the mother and the child during childhood has a great influence on the child's future behavior. Trauma is a psychological wound that scars the heart and causes long-term harm. Childhood trauma can represent a variety of situations, such as neglect or abuse. In a previous reincarnation, a child had a bitter experience that lasted a lifetime. Avni Doshi's *The White Cotton Girl* portrays the inner trauma and mother-daughter relationship of the protagonists Tara and Antara. Avni Doshi describes Antara's experience of growing up without any affection, care or love from her mother Tara, who left her husband to follow Baba at the ashram. Tara is unable to provide Antara with even the most basic support and security a mother can provide. The novel depicts the impact of childhood trauma and Antara's struggle to reconcile with her past, which relentlessly follows her. Trauma exacerbates a person's feelings of alienation and isolation, both of which are unpleasant and painful parts of life. Antara's trauma is compounded by Tara's memory loss and misfortune, leaving her struggling with the sense of alienation that was part of her childhood. This essay explores the inner trauma of the protagonists Tara and Antara as they attempt to reconcile their present realities with the haunting memories of their past.

Keywords: trauma, postpartum depression, shared history, intergenerational trauma.

## **Introduction**

Throughout history, humanity has been haunted by memories of horror, fear of weakness, loathing, revenge, and the pain of irreplaceable loss. According to Cathy Caruth, "trauma can be understood as a wound inflicted on the mind, not on the body" (3). *Girl in White Cotton* depicts a toxic mother-daughter relationship between two contrasting characters: Antara, a failed artist, and her mother Tara, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease. In the novel, Antara's childhood is depicted as one in which she is neglected and deprived of her mother's affection, passion, care, and pampering. Her mother Tara has left a loveless and unhappy marriage to live in a monastery that she loved since childhood and become a follower of a guru, which has completely deprived her of happiness in life. Avni Doshi highlights the impact of childhood trauma with the example of Antara being a victim of a painful past. Antara is an artist whose main job is to collect data and information and detect

anomalies. Her mother's deteriorating health and misery takes her on a journey through the memories of her painful past. Antara's mother Tara starts forgetting everything even the everyday events and is unable to recognise her only daughter. Both Tara and Antara are haunted by distorted memories of alienation, isolation and abandonment experienced in their past. Antara searches for meaning in her existence and tries to break out of her mother's life. Meanwhile, she becomes increasingly forgetful and is forced to take care of her mother. Antara works as an artist in Bombay, but when Tara's health suddenly deteriorates, she is forced to take care of her mother, who had completely ignored her daughter during her childhood.

Trauma is generally defined as an extremely painful experience that deeply affects one's view of oneself and the external reality. It consumes its unfortunate victims, plunging them into a raging ocean of pain, helplessness and depression. Antara falls into a state of loneliness as she has no one to share the painful memories of the past with. She is at a loss as to how to care for her mother who does not return her affections. Antara struggles to find meaning within herself and feels disconnected from her surroundings. Memories of the past cut them like sharp knives, destroying their mind and existence. When she sincerely attends to the enchanting memories of the past, sleep turns into her enemy and life becomes monotonous. Trauma shakes the mind, muddles the mind, and freezes the body. Antara is torn between painful memories of the past and feelings of hatred, love, and pity for the mother who once betrayed her. Antara is trapped in a world that no longer gives her any hope. As Sigmund Freud explains, a traumatic state is "tied to a specific point in the past, from which one does not know how to escape, and as a result is alienated from both the present and the future" (284).

"Developmental trauma refers primarily to psychological problems that result from inadequate care and guidance during the critical developmental periods of early childhood" (Levine and Frederick 21). Antara was severely abused by her mother as a child. As a result, she developed a sense of loathing and disgust towards her mother's existence. Her attitude towards Tara's condition becomes clear in the first lines of the novel: "I would be lying if I said that my mother's misery did not give me joy" (1). Antara is helpless in the face of her mother's situation. She cannot find a way to remind her mother of what she has done in the past, nor can she blame her mother. Antara feels annoyed by the pity that Tara evokes in others because of her condition. Despite her insanity, Tara tries to humiliate her daughter and drags Antara into a world of darkness and pain.

During the first few years of her marriage, Tara dedicated her life to waiting for her husband. Not a word was spoken for days as her husband only thought about excelling in his studies to go to America. Tara's life ended in darkness and her mother's failure to acknowledge her worries and grievances made her feel alienated from her own life, which further compounded her pain and loneliness. As a result, as part of her redesign, she became accustomed to white cotton and embarked on a search for her own identity. The same white cotton has alienated her from her family and turned Antara's life into a prison. Tara does not want to remember what she did in the past, so Antara believes forgetting is a practical tool for her mother. Though Tara is still haunted by unpleasant memories of the past, forgetting has allowed her to escape the harsh realities of life. Antara feels separated and estranged from her mother. Tara decides to cut ties with her family and dedicate her life to the ashram. She frees herself from the prison of loneliness and dullness she felt in her husband's house and reaches a climax with Baba.

For example, according to Cathy Caruth, "trauma can only be recognized when it re-troubles a person many years after the initial event" (48). Antara's time at the monastery had a profound impact on her psyche, leaving a mark on her behavior and life. Kali Mata was a comfort to Antara and gave her the maternal love she craved from her own mother. Antara shared a strong emotional bond with Kali Mata, who lived in her room with her. Tara ignored her family's advice to leave the ashram, which they considered a hangout for "foreigners and prostitutes." Against her family's wishes, she accepted the ashram as her home and Baba as Antara's father. Antara suffered even more as a caregiver as her spirit was further shattered by her mother. Tara suddenly appeared in front of Antara, whom she had not seen for weeks. She even thought that her mother had forgotten about her and had died. She is upset that no one allowed her to see her mother when Baba could have seen her. Antara was living in a strange place, crying and miserable with no sleep, water or food. Even she was being tortured by the sannyasins at the ashram. She was forced to live a life of constant abuse from them because of her mother and Baba.

As she grew older, she took up duties to distract herself from the harsh realities of life. She helped in the kitchen and was able to meet the daily needs of her family. She finds comfort and warmth in Kali Mata's compassion and care. Her mind was filled with questions about her mother, but she could not find answers.

The memories of the past remained like deep wounds in Antara's psyche. The trauma triggers a series of reactions in Antara, including nightmares. McCurdy suggests that "when accompanied by other factors such as social isolation, repeated trauma, and frightening images, this can lead to delayed and uncontrollable recurrent intrusive phenomena such as nightmares and flashbacks" (16). Antara's identity is destroyed and she is inseparably tied to her past. Despite her total disregard for life, Antara tries to cope with the difficult situation she was in. She suffers from nightmares. "I woke up in the morning with blood on my pillow and scratches on my face" (103). Antara never told her mother about her longing for a fulfilling life. She was dissatisfied with her current life because she could not understand her mother's decision that pushed Antara into a world of despair. Antara is at war with her surroundings, which are indifferent to her. "I grew up in a place where I was always fighting with myself, used to my own inner turmoil" (107). She is estranged from her husband, Dilip, who knows too much about his mother-in-law. Dilip even uses his mother as a weapon against Antara. She is stuck in her thoughts, expressing desires she could not confess to him, wishing for him as if he were a stranger to her. Dilip's thoughts on Antara's relationship with his mother:

Do you think she should live with us? We can't stand each other for more than a minute. "Sometimes it's difficult to understand your relationship with her," he says. "Being near her is very stressful for you and vice versa." Frankly, I wonder if this will make your life worse or better (111-112).

Antara is in a dilemma, she doesn't know how to take care of her mother who previously neglected her. Avni Doshi portrays Antara's complete helplessness in taking care of her mother who showed no love or care for her only daughter who craved the security that only a mother could give. For example:

How will I love my mother when she is gone? How will I take care of the woman I thought was my mother when she no longer lives in my body? When she no longer fully understands who she is and who I am, will I be able to take care of her as I do now or will I become neglectful as I do with children who are not my own or who are mute? If we are not afraid of being criticised, then what is the point in thinking that politeness towards animals, mute, blind and deaf people is something we practice in public and therefore cannot be punished? (117).

Tara tries to humiliate Antara by commenting on her job, which is her only solace from the burden of harsh reality. This makes Antara angry and she ends up physically hurting her mother. No one agrees with her opinion and Dilip even tells her to quit her job as it is causing trouble for his mother-in-law. Tara sets Antara's studio on fire, kindling the flames of hatred in Antara's head. Her mother's despair intensifies her fear of harming herself. Antara feels most safe and secure in her married home. Tara is a burden that brings pain and misery to her daughter's psyche.

When Baba found another Golden to take the place of Tara's mother, Tara's life lost meaning. She was forced to leave the ashram without speaking to anyone. Antara did not have the foresight to realize that her mother had no other plans for where to go. Antara calls her mother's decision "utterly disappointing" because "we had no idea where we were going or who would accept us and on what terms" (127). When they left the ashram, their lives were full of disappointment. Tara let her daughter beg, but the people at the club who knew her grandparents were confused and suspicious of her request. She lives a miserable life, but pursues happiness with her pet dog, Candle. Her father helped her and left a lasting impression on her. Unfortunately, her father never invited her back and left her at her grandparents' house. Tara locked herself in her room and pretended that the people around her didn't exist. Antara used to live in the ashram apart from her mother and longed to see her mother. But now they are always near each other. Due to painful memories of the past, she believed that she could live without her mother as her presence was the source of her unhappiness. After Baba took another wife, Tara's life lost its meaning. Tara's eyes were glued to the ceiling as if she was talking to it. She even had a tendency to fall asleep as if she had not slept in years. When Tara constantly tries to contact her husband, with whom she plans to remarry, Antara discovers the source of her mother's alienation and isolation. When she tried to call home with the intention of abusing her husband, she went insane. According to Dejonghe, a traumatic event is "the experience or witnessing of an event that involves fear or physical integrity and that provokes feelings of dread, helplessness, or horror" (Dejonghe et al. 294). Once they leave the ashram, Antara's life at the boarding school gets worse and worse, and she is unaware of the dangers that await her. Antara wants to see her mother turn around and look at her, but Tara disappears without looking back. Mini Meera was her only friend at the boarding school. Antara's life at the boarding school was dangerous, painful and evil from the very beginning. The school's principal, Ms. Maria Teresa, who is called a "terrorist" by the students, locks Antara in the principal's office. Antara was tortured and seriously injured in the classroom when her principal punched her,

pushed her cheek and even shoved a pencil into her palm, forcing it into her hand, leaving a hole in it. She was alienated from the other women and tried to isolate herself from everything by barely eating. As a result, she fainted and was taken to the hospital and then sent home. Everyone in her nanny's house lived in their own world, a different reality. No one cared about the scars on her body. "Omissions and acts of remembering were creative acts that shaped our lives" (Spiegelman 247). The doctor tells Antara that she and her mother share the objective reality of her mother and that it would be better for her to distance herself from Tara. He argues that memories are constantly reconstructed and Tara forgets and remembers the past. For Antara, a deep sense of loneliness is caused by obsessions that haunt her past, each time causing fragments of memory to slip through like particles passing through a sieve. Antara compares a fly trapped within the walls of her own existence to a fly that roams freely within itself, exploring the boundaries of space without any attempt to escape. However, she learns to live within her limitations, as she is bound by the comforts and possessions of life, even if there is a possibility of escape. According to Antara, a person's life is a collection of liabilities that can explode like a gunshot at any time. For Antara, the world of existence was mysterious. Her mother hated her journey into womanhood because there was no one who could unravel the secrets behind the physical changes taking place within her, intellectually or physically. She would sometimes feel another woman rising up within her body and always felt very uncomfortable in her body. Antara was taught that childhood was a time of waiting and she longed for a chance to live. Antara notices Tara's sudden decline after Reza Pine's departure and is shocked as she loved him more than anyone else. Antara's attempts to extract faces and objects from old photographs reflect her desire to forget the memories of her past life. She uses her art to encrypt and decrypt, write and rewrite her stories, choosing the best and discarding the rest.

Antara is afraid of having children because it will help her bond with Dilip and stop him abandoning her. Antara says she sometimes feels like she is becoming more like her mother and hates being married. After the psychologist and Antara discuss her mother's past, she finds that she can no longer remember her parents abandoning her. The therapist's questions make her anxious and she does not get answers. As a result, she has nightmares about questions she cannot answer. "It would be easier, at least in the story, if I just killed her. I'd tell everyone that Mommy is dead" (221). This sentence when everyone asks about Antara shows the disgust Antara has towards her mother. She even hates the word "Pune" because of her mother's influence. At the same time, she feels terrible and sad about it. There is a strong element of revenge in Antara and Reza Pine's relationship, and since Reza was originally Tara's lover, he also symbolizes her mother. As a result, spending time with Reza allows Antara to simultaneously achieve both goals, which were deep subconscious desires. "A lie holds me captive" (224). Antara feels trapped by the lies she hides from her husband, Dilip. About a secret from her past about the man in her painting, Reza Pine. Both Antara and Tara are trapped in the past because their mothers knew about Reza and his picture. The world and her surroundings continue to mock and suffocate Antara, and Antara continues to struggle to escape the cruel shackles of fate and destiny. Tara mocked her daughter Antara for her ugliness, compared herself to her and brought her down as much as she could. Antara constantly wonders why she treats her mother as an enemy. She also thinks of leaving this world as if her mother had never been born. Antara is unable to feel happy in the present because of her traumatic past. Her soul is rotting inside and life is in chaos. After giving birth to her baby, Antara suffers from postpartum depression. She notices hormonal changes and physical changes, worries about the birth of the child and tries to hide her dissatisfaction with the birth from others. She becomes bored with the baby and loses interest in it. She is getting closer to insanity with each passing day and even the baby falls out of carelessness and becomes uncontrollable. She is scared, intimidated, anxious and frustrated. Antara loses touch with reality and has hallucinations and delusions. "The difference between murder and manslaughter is intent" (255). Antara tries to erase her mother's memory by feeding her sugar every day so that her secret will not be made public. She is torn between the urge to improve herself and the desire to hurt her mother. Antara is caught between the fear of those inside and the fear of those outside. Tara's dementia gives her an opportunity to escape the harsh reality of her existence. Meanwhile, Ms. Antara is constantly stressed due to the horrific memories of her past. Antara finally realises that she is not like her mother Tara. Though Antara is married to Dilip, she is estranged from him and has little contact with him, just like her mother was at the beginning of her marriage. Antara's life has been surrounded by people who do not care or try to understand her feelings. Even Dilip's companions can hardly console her from her traumatic experiences. Avni Doshi takes us on a journey inside the minds of Antara and Tara, who have unfortunately become victims of suffering. Avni Doshi represents intergenerational trauma passed down through three generations. Tara has grown up with a degree of resentment and anger. Tara and Antara seem to be mirror images of each other, but in reality, they are not. Their names are swapped. Tara named the baby Antara because she despised herself and wanted her daughter's life to be different from her own. Antara is actually Un Tara, which means she is not similar to her mother. Antara will eventually inherit her



mother's suffering as they both share a common background where they suffer the same. Both are unhappy in their marriages and hate being with their husbands and daughters. Avni Doshi portrays Antara and Tara's heartache and struggle to free themselves from painful memories of the past. In this work, she explores the bond between mother and daughter and portrays the painful and anxious side of human existence. Tara reveals the painful truth of human life and the source of trauma passed on from generation to generation. Childhood trauma has a devastating effect on the psyche of the protagonists. A wounded past destroys a woman's identity. Avni Doshi depicts Antara's journey from fear and pain to a deeper realization of her inner self. Antara is haunted by a childhood trauma that continues to cause her sadness and anger even in adulthood. Doshi delves deep into the inner lives of both female characters, carefully examining their deepest thoughts and feelings. Literature provides a platform for authentically conveying the truth of human lives filled with horrific events. A hurtful past makes them journey from the present reality to the world of imagination. Trauma literature acts as a medium or weapon for characters to express their pain and suffering. Avni Doshi looks into the minds of characters who are unhappy with their lives and the world around them.

Traumas are rivals in people's lives. They can sometimes be overwhelming and painful. They are gaps that prevent the human psyche from functioning as it should. In fact, the severity of this invasion can vary from minor to fatal, but it always leaves wounds and weaknesses. In traumatology, trauma refers to a major upheaval or disaster that causes severe suffering. Traumatic experiences, whether permanent or frozen, are not reified as the past but are constantly re-experienced in a painful, alienating and traumatic present.

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