



Exploring Intersectional Tyrannies: Battling Trauma through Empowerment in Ruchira Gupta's *I Kick and I Fly*

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ABSTRACT

*This article scrutinises Ruchira Gupta's *I Kick and I Fly* through the lens of Intersectionality and trauma theory, evaluating the intersecting tyrannies and the psychological distress, shaping the characters' journey of resistance and agency. Set in Forbesganj, Bihar, the narrative highlights how young girls are pushed to the margins and oppressed by intersected oppressions of gender, poverty, caste and societal exclusion, resulting in deep psychological wounds. Using Caruth's trauma theory, examining trauma as a neglected and repetitive experience encountered by females. The selected narrative explores Heera's journey of regaining autonomy, disrupting the trauma loop with her martial arts program, symbolizing empowerment and resilience. Therefore, highlighting Cranshaw's concept of intersectionality by providing a voice to underrepresented females, while Caruth's Trauma theory focuses on the psychological wounds, illustrating Heera's emancipation and psychological healing. Together, these frameworks magnify oppressed women's voices and underscore Heera's path as a testament to perseverance, liberation, and solidarity.*

Keywords: Empowerment; intersectionality; resistance; sex trafficking; trauma theory

INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking is a monumental concern at the global level, a gruesome plague that continues to haunt societies, hunting people in the shadows, exploiting their free will, and destroying their lives. It is an abhorrent predicament that severely undermines human rights, subjecting individuals to inhumane circumstances where they are objectified, exploited, exposed to violence, and even subjected to torture. It has a harrowing impact on individuals, especially women and young children, which affects their psychological, physical, emotional, and societal well-being. Survivors often face significant physical abuse, which includes forced labor, starvation, and sexual violence, leading to long-term health problems such as sexually transmitted diseases, disabilities, and more. The United Nations Protocol recognizably defines human trafficking as:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation includes, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs. (UNODC, 2004, p. 42, Art. 3 (a))

This underscores the basic identification markers and the role of vulnerability in the process of trafficking. In this context, many factors such as poverty, casteism, gender discrimination, sexism, illiteracy, unemployment, and political turbulence combine together and contribute to trafficking. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, exploitation occurs in four major categories: sex trafficking, organ trafficking, forced labor, and domestic slavery. However, it is not merely limited to these and may also include various other forms of lesser-known victimization, such as child soldiers, trafficking for adoption or begging, as well as for organ trade (Shelley, 2010).

Poverty is a major factor in limiting opportunities and exploiting individuals, leaving them prone to conditions favorable for trafficking. Harsh socio-economic circumstances give birth to barriers that often diminish individuals' options for survival, entrapping them in a cycle of marginalisation. For example, the latest empirical survey in Bangladesh found that "poverty has a very strong relationship with child trafficking and prostitution" (Farhana & Mannan, 2024, p.14). Another example that

substantiates poverty is one of the social determinants of a short and miserable life in Southeast Asia. In particular, the link between poverty, gender, education, age and policy influences the vulnerability of women and children to trafficking (Perry & McEwing, 2013). Therefore, people from such backgrounds are more likely to be compelled and believe traffickers about the improvement of their condition. They are enticed by false promises of education, employment, or a good life. However, the situation gets increasingly complicated when economic deprivation overlaps with other factors such as gendered discrimination, ethnicity, age, and other societal inequities. Gender plays an important role in such exploitation, as females are at a higher risk of being trafficked for sex, consequent to the gendered discrimination and the conventional patriarchal norms of society.

Along with poverty, the gendered discrimination problematizes their lives and their access to education, financial freedom, and empowerment to make decisions on their own. Societal structures and paradigms devalue women by deeming them feeble and therefore unsuitable for basically anything except the household sphere, leaving them with a shattered sense of self. In this flux of marginalisation, age also complicates their challenges. Since children can be more easily controlled, they are at higher risk of being used or exploited by traffickers, especially orphaned, homeless children. They are easily maneuvered due to the scarcity of resources, literacy, and secure systems. Moreover, as females are deemed by society to be subservient and weak, small children and young girls become more susceptible to these phenomena.

Moreover, other factors like ethnicity, inequitable treatment, and insufficient legal safeguards further constrain their lives. Thema Bryant and Pratyusha Tummala opine in their paper: “Within the context of trafficking, racist attitudes and oppressive acts persist and result in increased risk for racial and ethnic group members, indigenous women, and migrants” (Bryant-Davis & Tummala-Narra, 2017, p. 154). This oppression makes them prone to criminal networks that exploit their nobility or innocence. Hence, women and children from such backgrounds are at a higher risk of being abused and compelled into exploitative conditions to support their families.

Despite being so grim and harrowing, such kinds of circumstances persist even today, marginalizing and traumatizing their soul. According to the report of the U.S. Department of State:

In 2022, the government reported identifying 7,134 trafficking victims and 900 potential trafficking victims, compared with 5,934 victims and 753 potential victims identified in 2021, and 6,622 victims and 694 potential victims identified in 2020. Of the 7,134

identified victims in 2022, traffickers exploited 5,151 in labor trafficking, including 1,600 in bonded labor; and 1,983 in sex trafficking. In 2021, authorities identified 3,885 labor trafficking victims, including 667 in bonded labor and 2,049 in sex trafficking, while authorities did not report the type of trafficking for the 753 potential victims. More than 98 percent of trafficking victims identified were Indian nationals; of the total, approximately 52 percent were adults and 48 percent were children; 60 percent were female and 40 percent were male. (U.S. Department of State, 2024, para. 12)

These statistics highlight that trafficking is not just a ghost of the past but persists even today, traumatizing and marginalizing people, with females and children being at the forefront of this agony. In India, according to the U.S. Department of State, traffickers use multiple techniques, such as debt-based coercion to entrap men, women, and children. They use such individuals as bonded labor, forcing them to work in places such as agricultural fields, textile factories, mines, stone quarries, brick kilns, and rice mills. According to Besler, in labor exploitation, individuals are compelled to work through the use of violence and deception, or by more subtle means like debt-bondage, withholding of passport or working permit, as well as retention of salary (Besler, 2005). Moreover, in the context of rural areas, bonded labour and domestic work still remain widespread, with little to no accountability. A lot of such victims come from historically marginalised castes. “Traffickers often target victims from marginalized backgrounds, including the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, migrant laborers, people from low-income households, and individuals with limited employment options, such as many women and people with disabilities” (U.S Department of State, 2024, para. 17). In this context, human trafficking cannot be viewed merely as an isolated element or something that occurs in a vacuum; rather, it is an active product of the systematic inequities that converge to create circumstances that push individuals into this agony via the practices of dehumanization.

The trafficking of women and children for sexual abuse has garnered significant attention in recent times in both developed as well as in developing countries. Scholars, law enforcement bodies, decision-making bodies, and information channels are now paying attention to the increasing instances of human trafficking. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 defines sex trafficking as “the recruitment, harbouring, transportation, provision or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act, in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud or coercion” (Ryf, 2002, pp.

45-46). Siddharth Kara, in his book *Sex Trafficking: Inside the Business of Modern Slavery*, describes sex trafficking as the most prevalent type of human trafficking in the modern world. He further says that there is a connection between trafficking and commercial sexual activity, which has been revealed in many ways, like pornography, sex tourism, and cybersex (Kara, 2017). In other words, it is described as a condition in which individuals are forced to work against their will under grim circumstances with minimal to no gain from the process.

Women from underrepresented communities are especially vulnerable to this and are under constant threat of being exploited on account of the systematic marginalization they face from society. They are seen as undeserving and unworthy by society and are perceived to be either toys to be played with or pieces of trash. Such mistreatment causes them significant anguish and suffering, which results in depression, emotional abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidal tendencies. This phenomenon not only offers a possible explanation for the intricacies of marginalisation but also holds relevance in the context of human trafficking, which devalues an individual's identity, strips them of their self, and transforms them into a commodity. As observed by the researchers in their paper, "Human trafficking... entails the coercive or deceptive transportation of individuals, particularly females, to disparate locations for the exclusive aim of sexually exploiting or abusing them" (Rathee & Pareek, 2025, p. 79).

Over the years, cinema has powerfully portrayed and challenged the grim realities of sex trafficking, which resulted in the unveiling of false promises, hidden violence, and the systematic failure that supports this global crime. Several cinematic narratives have depicted the gruesome traps set by traffickers and have often brought attention to the global dimensions of this severe issue as seen in movies like, *Liliya 4-ever* (2002), *Taken* (2008), *Lakshmi* (2014), *Mardaani* (2014), *Trafficked* (2017), *Love Sonia* (2018), *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022), *Bhakshak* (2024), also various literary works like, *Sold* by Patricia McCormick (2006), *The Slave Across the Street: The True Story of How an American Teen Survived the World of Human Trafficking* by Theresa L. Flores (2010), and *Girls like us* by Rachel Lloyd (2011), that have sought to illustrate the harrowing plight of women who are trapped into this act, exposing the discursive patterns of human trafficking. These narratives critically expose the chicanery and deceptions of traffickers who make false promises of providing favorable opportunities to women, the resultant abuse that occurs behind closed doors, and the consequent failure of the organizations that claim to safeguard them. "The representation of such films and others has evolved and progressed over the years, moving from

sporadic, often sensationalized portrayals to more nuanced and research-based narratives that aim to shed light on the complexities of the issue” (Kumari, 2025, p. 187). However, despite this traumatic reality, these narratives also unveil the journey of strength and resilience of survivors who strive for freedom and the retrieval of their voices. Therefore, these stories function as both a mirror to the global crises and a rallying cry to dismantle the discriminatory structures that allow sex trafficking to exist in society.

Various organizations work at a global level in eradicating the problem of sex trafficking, such as the Prajwala organization (founder Sunitha Krishnan), the Guria organization (founder Ajeet Singh), Justice and Care, and the Sanlaap organization, the Polaris organization located in the USA, International Justice Mission, La Strada organization located in Amsterdam, Europe and many more. However, many activists are also engaged in eradicating this deeply rooted issue of sex trafficking, including reputable figures such as Sunitha Krishnan, Rachel Lloyd, Natasha Falle, Anuradha Koirala, and Ruchira Gupta. These individuals have continuously worked for the survivors to provide them with support, justice, a safe environment, medical care facilities, legal protection, education, financial independence, and much more.

Ruchira Gupta, one of these prominent anti-trafficking activists, has been an instrumental figure involved in both advocacy and investigation of this harrowing issue, dedicating her life to empowering marginalised young girls and women by demolishing sex trafficking in India. She is the founder of the NGO (non-governmental organization) Apne Aap, which is dedicated to working for women’s empowerment and rights. Her investigative research led to the creation of the documentary entitled *The Selling of Innocents*, exposing the intricacies of human trafficking from India, Nepal, China, to the US. This experience significantly influenced her efforts to help young girls and women confront the brutal reality of sex trafficking. She emphasises the transformative impact of women’s collective action, her immense efforts to raise awareness globally, and the need to confront the patriarchal system in society. Her organization provides a safe space, education, self-confidence, government-authorized IDs. Her unwavering commitment to emancipation and justice has been acknowledged worldwide, which is evident through her global recognition and awards such as the French Ordre National du Mérite, the Clinton Global Citizen Award, and the UN NGO CSW Woman of Distinction Award.

I Kick and I Fly (2023), by Ruchira Gupta, is a literary narrative that critically delves into the intricacies of sex trafficking. Through this work, she not only reveals the circumstances that lead to trafficking but also fuses her

active, avid activism and deep conscious insights into the matter, exposing the stimuli that serve as essential catalysts to the process. The narrative primarily centres around the protagonist, Heera, a fourteen-year-old girl from an impoverished household in the impecunious city of Forbesganj, located in the state of Bihar, who, despite being left vulnerable to the clutches of human trafficking, changes her destiny and evades her way out of the evil using her resilience, determination, and resistance. Eventually, the narrative not only exposes the insidious realities of sex trafficking but also explores the root of the problem, highlighting the factors that contribute to this predicament.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The current study, through the application of Ruchira Gupta's *I Kick and I Fly* as a critical narrative lens, delves into the intricacies of intersecting tyrannies and the psychological distress caused by multidimensional stimuli faced by female victims of the gruesome practice of sex trafficking. Through the employment of Crenshaw's intersectionality and Caruth's trauma theory, the paper explores how overlapping identities collide to contribute to the marginalisation of people from impoverished backgrounds and examines the psychological repercussions of this marginalisation on their cognition. Through its exploration of various layers that lead to trafficking, the paper attempts to deconstruct the perception of human trafficking as a global meta-narrative and instead aims to address this evil in a more nuanced, fragmented approach. By doing so, the paper attempts to root this global phenomenon into more localised factors relating to socio-political constituents of individual identity rather than an isolated evil occurrence.

Charting the Palimpsestic Intersections of Identities

This novel reveals the harsh reality of sex trafficking through several characters. Sex trafficking is the central idea that functions as a major conflict in the narrative. Heera is a young girl who belongs to a community that is not only marginalised on account of their socio-economic deprivation but also due to factors such as caste, class, and exclusion. Her vulnerability arises from her social class background and the absence of structural protection and agency. Therefore, the threat of sex trafficking becomes a shadow in her life. Due to patriarchal beliefs imposed by her father, followed by coercion to give up her education, and the threat of being sold at the mela, which serves as a façade for trafficking, her life becomes symbolic of an oppressive societal structure, exemplifying that sexual abuse does not commence in brothels, but rather stems from the families where a lack of education and freedom enables widespread abuse.

The owners of the dance parties buy girls from their fathers or guardians, pay for a marriage to a banana tree in a Bisi Bele ceremony, and auction the girl's virginity to the highest bidder. That was after the first night... The men in the audience choose the girl they like, pay the dance party owner, and take her to a makeshift room behind the stage (Gupta, 2023, pp. 50-51).

The novel reveals, in the context of the narrative, how it is essentially the patriarchal society that is responsible for the trafficking and exploitation of the young girls and women. At the mela, girls are made to participate in the Bisi Bele ceremony, which symbolises their marriage to a banana tree, and they auction women's virginity to the highest bidder after the wedding. It exposes how, in the name of tradition, women are often forced to indulge in misogynist customs that devalue their identity and strip them of their freedom and agency in the name of culture. By marrying young girls, the traffickers hide abuse under the deception of tradition, which ultimately becomes a weapon to eliminate moral and legal structures. Characters like Mira and Rosy, exemplify such exploitation. Collectively, these women illustrate patriarchal domination and the gruesome reality of sex trafficking, subjecting them to deep trauma, powerlessness, and social rejection. Through their poignant narrative, the author underscores how caste, gender, and poverty converge to trap the young girls in repetitive abuse and dehumanisation. This is what Crenshaw describes about layered exploitation encountered by women as she narrates, "Discrimination may function like traffic through an intersection, as it may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149). Similarly, in the novel, the mela ritual emerges not only from patriarchy but also from caste and economic deprivation. The exploitation of Mira and Rosy showcases the combined effects of these overlapping forces, which resulted in trauma, marginalisation and societal rejection. The primary reason behind such treatment is the deep-seated psychology of dehumanisation. Philip Zimbardi, in his narrative *The Lucifer Effect*, opines:

Dehumanization is one of the central processes in the transformation of ordinary, normal people into indifferent or even wanton perpetrators of evil. Dehumanization is like a cortical cataract that clouds one's thinking and fosters the perception that other people are less than human. It makes some people come to see those others as enemies deserving of torment, torture, and annihilation. (Zimbardi, 2007, p. xii)

Hence, the reason why individuals commit acts of extreme cruelty lies within their distorted perception, which deems an individual as less of a human and therefore undeserving of empathy. This leads to a kind of bias, which he calls a “cortical cataract”. In medical sciences, a cortical cataract is essentially a spoke-like opacity that can cause clouded vision, colour vision, and glare (Game & Albert, 2025). However, here, Zimbardi uses it as a metaphor for a compromised moral perception of an individual, leading them to commit grave evils. Structural oppression, inadequate legal assistance, and lack of economic respite provide a breeding ground for conflict where exploitative circumstances give genesis to dehumanisation that makes individuals susceptible to exploitation, such as trafficking. These factors combine and oppress individuals who belong to the marginalised spheres of society. Though anyone could potentially fall victim to such evil, factors such as poor socioeconomic status, systematic inequalities, and the marginalisation of subjugated minorities significantly amplify their vulnerability. This notion greatly resonates with the concept of intersectionality, propounded by Kimberle Crenshaw, describing how the overlapping identities like poverty, caste, sexual exploitation, and gender discrimination intersect with each other and relate to the systems and structures of subjugation (Crenshaw,1991). In other words, “It reveals and interrogates the ways in which multiple and overlapping forms of structural oppression create and recreate patterns of marginalisation” (Evans, 2022, p. 986). In the case of Heera and her community, the condition of females becomes an apt exemplification of this idea. In her community, the females are not marginalized on a singular front but are continually oppressed by a combination of overlapping aspects, such as poverty, gender, and casteism, Within the patriarchal structure of society, the inherent gender discrimination acts as a catalyst that problematizes female identity in both households and public spheres, reinforcing inequalities.

Failed institutional structures, discriminatory policies, and unequal development worsen this discrimination. Hence, to the devaluing of their identities and personhood, transforming them into pawns to be used and thrown away. In this context, intersectionality offers a critical view, revealing how said intersections shape the consequent lives of such individuals and influence their sense of self. captures such persuasive forms of intersections and highlights the dark realities of such circumstances through Heera’s experiences. For instance, the incident in which Heera reflects on her family’s “bare feet” is of grave importance. It signifies their state of poverty, as they can’t afford footwear for the whole family; although the cultural connotation of feet symbolises “humble, impure and even polluting” (Nugteren, 2018, p.

3). It accentuates their vulnerable position within a hierarchical society. Heera opines:

My whole family has always been barefoot. Everyone except Salman—the blue-eyed boy of the family and our future hope—and my father. Mira Di...My mother is barefoot, as are my two younger sisters. She walks on the hot tar road and works in the fields without any slippers. She says her soles have hardened over the years. She ignores her bleeding feet, simply washes them in water and rubs them with some aloe vera leaves without a murmur. (Gupta, 2023, pp. 19-20)

These words describe the condition of Heera's family and their struggles with limited finances. Most of the family members of her household cannot afford shoes to wear, and when they could, they are worn by the males, which portrays the dire condition of women within a patriarchal system that is skewed in favour of men by sustaining intrinsic androcentrism and establishing phallogocentric hierarchies, thereby marginalizing and subjugating women under the pretext of the scarcity of resources. Heera's brother, Salman, is known as a "blue-eyed boy" and "future hope," who gets new leather shoes every two years, while Heera and her mother encounter the brutalities of labouring in the fields without any slippers and move barefoot on the hot tar road, which reflects exclusion under the hierarchy of the family. Her mother's heroic capacity for suffering describes the powerful structures of oppression that normalise women's suffering by neglecting their sacrifices and their desires. Therefore, this is a reflection of huge patriarchal ideals that diminish the needs and achievements of women and view men as the guardians of prosperity and family, particularly in destitute areas. In addition to the confluence of gender and economic destitution, the insertion of caste within the mix provides an even deeper insight into the intricacies of marginalisation that ultimately paves the way for circumstances such as sex trafficking. The narrative, through its discourse, eloquently exposes this through Heera's humiliation at the hands of her friend Manish. He says, "You're not gonna get away with this. I will make sure you never come to school again. You Nats are all thieves and prostitutes. You'll never change" (Gupta, 2023, p. 13). These harsh words mirror the deeply embedded, rigid stereotypes and biases associated with caste. Dominant hegemonic narratives often demean the very existence of a human life, devaluing the personhood of an individual, making them susceptible to exploitation and the Machiavellianism of traffickers. The speaker intends to make sure that Heera "never comes to school again," which reflects how social hierarchies and educational institutions converge with each other, ultimately leading to the

exclusion of individuals who belong to the marginalised communities. The label 'prostitutes' adds a dimension of violence against women by particularly targeting women and also creating hurdles in getting access to education. Instead of providing empowerment to Heera, the oppressive system of society expels her from school. Hence, this discourse brings attention to discriminatory structures of society and calls for inclusivity and empowerment in society.

Another poignant articulation of casteism is when Heera is having lunch in the school mess and is subjected to partial and demeaning treatment, which depicts the degrading effects of caste-based prejudices and how intersectionality contributes to the protagonist's oppression. She describes:

Even the kids who were forced to sit closest to me made sure to maintain distance, their steel plates angled away from mine. The lunch ladies would drop the rotis and daal onto my plate from way above so that their hands didn't touch my hand when they served the food. They didn't want to come into physical contact with someone of my caste. (Gupta, 2023, p. 80)

This moment illustrates how intrinsic notions of caste, patriarchy, and economic disparity transform institutions into a site of hegemonic power. The effort induced by the lunch ladies and her classmates showcases the subtle nuances of dehumanisation, revealing how caste becomes an essential marker of one's identity. This instance evokes the urgent need to deconstruct the ingrained hegemonic frameworks and campaigns for the deliberate restructuring of societal structures to nurture a more equitable, inclusive, and empowered society.

Moreover, the author vehemently exposes and criticizes the condition of women, highlighting how society dehumanizes women as commodities at the mercy of their male counterparts. The narrative in this context exposes such treatment through the characters of Heera and Rosy, showcasing their collective consciousness regarding their own exploitation. For instance, Heera opines: "We came to Girls Bazaar seven years ago. Now I am a girl of just the right age. Ripe, fresh meat, a new commodity, nayamaal are terms used for girls like us" (Gupta, 2023, p. 20). These derogatory annotations expose the dire discourses encountered by young girls and how they are commodified by the traffickers, both literally and ideologically. Young girls are perceived as "Ripe, Fresh Meat, Naya Maal," which exemplifies the patriarchal objectification and degradation of women. Women are so marginalised by their own communities and caste hierarchies that they have even lost their identity as females and have transcended into an even deeper realm of discrimination. As Professor Ashita Chadha discusses in her paper

about women's exploitation, she finds, "Reports indicate that traffickers often persuade victims through deceitful promises of education or employment opportunities" (Chadha, 2025, p. 5). However, true hypocrisy is revealed with the help of the intersectionality lens, which reveals how, on one hand, men of the lower caste are considered impure by the upper castes, but when it comes to females, their overlapping caste identity becomes an apt site for their exploitation. Therefore, this union of caste, gender, and poverty makes them more vulnerable to sex trafficking. The phrase "just the right age" highlights how youth play a role in oppressing marginalised communities, as young girls are becoming the centre of exploitation. Professor Chadha explains, "Primary drivers of trafficking across regions of the global south are poverty repression and lack of education due to poor socio-economic conditions" (Chadha, 2025, p.19). These oppressive layers reinforce one another rather than operating independently, which results in systemic injustices. Hence, this analysis emphasises how urgently systemic abuse must be addressed in order to eliminate the abuse.

Females from underrepresented backgrounds are not just objects of oppression on account of the social positioning of their communities, but also the patriarchal mindset that flows within them. Rosy's predicament exemplifies how the normalcy of misogyny often paves the way for multitudinous forms of oppression, such as sex trafficking, to occur. Rosy's father sold her own daughter into the hands of traffickers. As Heera opines:

The last time...Rosy whispered, wiping a tear. "My mother woke up with a black eye this morning. It will be better in Nepal. At least he won't be with us." Later that night... We heard Rosy's mother cry: How can you do this to your own daughter? (Gupta, 2023, p.26)

Rosy's story works to deconstruct the perception of sex trafficking as an external phenomenon, showcasing how internalised patriarchy, in conjunction with factors such as caste, significantly enhances the vulnerability of individuals to be trafficked. In this context, patriarchy not only functions as an apparatus of domination but as a structure that transforms female identities into transactional systems and objects of exchange. As Havva Kurt describes in her paper, "it critiques the normalization of exploitation within families and communities, particularly when the struggle for survival takes priority over moral values" (Kurt Taşpınar, 2025, p. 178). Thus, it reflects how women's persistent subjection to the structures of violence and modes of control, such as both physical violence and manipulation, are so extreme that exploitation may itself appear as a form of escape.

The Stigmatisation of Women

Erving Goffman remarks that stigma is attached to an individual in accordance with “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (Goffman, 1982, p.13). Goffman views stigma as a societal phenomenon where individuals evaluate differences and assign significance based on particular traits. Those with noticeable variations may face exclusion due to connections that result in stigmatisation. His theory of stigma affirms a special kind of relationship built between the discredited attributes of a person, such as physical deformity and stereotype (Goffman, 1990, p. 3). According to this theory, an individual with some deficit is easily stigmatised by society, which just so happens to be the case with Heera. She, too, encounters significant stigma from society due to the perception of her community in the eyes of society, in her words, “people will always believe we are thieves and prostitutes. We can never escape the stigma” (Gupta, 2023, p. 54). These lines mirror the dreadful oppression encountered by marginalised people, especially women. Through an intersectional lens, this stigma can be viewed as a product of the interrelated structures of gender inequality, casteism, and poverty, where women from marginalised communities are often made to endure sexism and oppression from the dominant edifices of society. Society labels them as “thieves and prostitutes,” diminishing their value as women and treating them as culprits due to their impoverished backgrounds. They are often subjected to adverse social labels like ‘criminal’, which objectifies them, showcasing society’s lack of empathy for their circumstance. These stigmas reflect both societal and endemic disparities that are caused by the normalisation of discriminatory attitudes and institutional injustices. By denying them their agency, it not only deprives them of their autonomy but also promotes structural inequalities that affect their meaningful engagement within society. Confronting this sort of injustice calls for fundamental and structural changes within the dominant power dynamics of society.

Unveiling the Contours of Trauma

Additionally, the paper employs Cathy Caruth’s Trauma theory, which defines trauma in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narratives and History*, as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other uncontrolled phenomenon” (Caruth, 1996, p. 11). In simple words, a traumatic experience does not have an immediate impact on the person; rather, its repercussions appear much later after the horrific incident has already passed. Due to this, the survivor’s reactions to trauma are frequently delayed and manifest as

repetitive hallucinations and nightmares. In the novel, many such instances show the impact of trauma on the psyche of the protagonist, as when she is followed by a stranger who tries to abduct her. This incident brings immense trauma to her, leaving her scared and agitated. She opines:

There are footsteps behind me and I assume it must be Salman... Suddenly, a hazy figure darts near the huts in the white eerie light of the morning moon, and I know at once that it's not Salman.... I hear his breath and realize that the blur is getting closer, following me as I begin to run. Sweat breaks through my skin even in the freezing cold. My feet take off in the opposite direction and I scream as loud as I can. His footsteps become louder. A hand comes down over my mouth. Another arm holds me in an iron grip. (Gupta, 2023, p. 129)

This moment resonates with Caruth's trauma theory, which states that traumatic experience does not have an immediate effect on the person, but its long-lasting effect appears later psychologically. Her experience is marked by confusion and uncertainty, as she falsely assumes the figure following her is her brother, but unfortunately, it is someone else who follows her and attempts to abduct her. The hazy atmosphere and uneven descriptions indicate how trauma creates a dreadful memory, which makes it difficult to immediately understand the atrocious experience. Reactions like screaming, escaping, and sweat breaks are visible examples of horrific incidents and reveal how trauma overwhelms, stays, and shapes the protagonist's encounters with such incidents. Subrata Banarjee also discusses in her paper that "Victims also suffer from psychological trauma, including threat, anger, depression, insomnia, vomiting, low self-esteem, self-blaming, and skipping meals" (Banarjee, Sadik & Sharmin, 2025, p.7).

Hopelessness is an essential part of trauma; it leads to a significant toll on individuals, often rendering them weak and full of pain. This can be exemplified through the psychological toll on Mira, who is persistently exploited by the traffickers like, Ravi Lala and Gainu. She narrates:

I didn't like it and used to plead with the men to leave me alone. I said I only wanted to sing and dance. I used to try and run away. But then I stopped fighting it. And that became my main job. We were sold repeatedly, from one dance party to another, one night after another. We were worse off than the cattle. (Gupta, 2023, p.52)

Mira's story poignantly explores the emotional and cognitive layers of abuse. Her initial efforts to escape give way to her hopelessness, showcasing how repeated abuse leads to emotional depletion and psychological agony. The metaphor of a treatment "worse off than the cattle" starkly serves as an example of the dehumanisation she faces. Gupta's use of

a personal mode of expression enhances the reader's interpretation of the systemic coercion. In contrast, another example that reflects the fear and existential disempowerment can be observed through the protagonist's father. The repercussions of traumatic experiences extend beyond the individuals; they are far-reaching and often have a profound effect on families as well. Heera's father deeply believes in fatalism and surrenders to suppression because of his poverty. He remains sceptical about their ability to change their destiny, as they belong to a marginalised community. Moreover, he feels continuously threatened by the risk of abduction and trafficking of his young daughter, which makes him feel worried about her. Heera remarks, "Baba looks at me and shakes his head. It's time for you to accept that people like us don't always get what we want. The venom has left his voice since Rini Di repaid our loan, but he still refuses to believe that our fate can be different" (Gupta, 2023, p. 132). His words showcase the psychological stress of eternal poverty, subjugation, and recurring failures over time, as well as his inability to trust his fate, suggesting a deeply embedded sense of despair that eventually leads to his trauma. These lines also stand as a testament to the painful experiences encountered by her father, as it seems like a legacy carried by the next generation, shaping his pessimistic attitude and hopelessness about the future.

The Hues of Resistance

Resistance is a transformative process that allows individuals who belong to underrepresented communities to assert their worth and dignity. However, it is not a simple process and foremost requires consciousness. In the words of Isaac Prilleltensky, "It is only when the oppressed attain a certain degree of conscientization that mechanisms of resistance take place" (Prilleltensky, 2003, p. 195). Conscientization refers to the development of an individual's awareness regarding their own condition or social reality. It is inherently this reflection that makes individuals aware of the intersecting forces that work together to oppress them and aids in developing potent tools to counter them. Hence, resistance in this context emerges as not only a reaction to the coercion but a deeply intentional tool that challenges the asymmetric power dynamics that bind them.

In *I Kick and I Fly*, resistance is portrayed as a potent tool for regaining agency. The narrative explores multiple instances of resistance through the characters of Heera and Rini. Heera and her family suffered lifelong oppression due to the intersection of various injustices. However, through critical awareness, she recognises the systematic forces that shape their agony and intentionally chooses to combat them, exuding a shade of

resistance. Her desire to learn kung fu is not just physical training rather it is a tool to challenge and resist the dominant structures. Her statement, “I want to learn kung fu, Mai, I interrupt. ‘It’s self-defence.’ If someone beats me, I can block them. I’ve seen girls practice it in our hostel compound” (Gupta, 2023, p. 67). This statement illustrates her rebellious nature and her quest to protect herself. She strives to reclaim her bodily autonomy and self-actualisation, which is indicative of her spirit to deconstruct and overcome the hegemonic structures that historically expelled women to the margins. Therefore, Heera’s wish to pursue the martial arts programme is a metaphor symbolising the demolition of the repressive edifices of society that actively try to subjugate her by disintegrating her space and identity.

Another shade of Heera’s resistance can be viewed through her challenging the rigid stereotype of her family, confronting her relatives’ beliefs that girls are inherently incapable of fighting. She asserts: “My parents, my brother, and even my pehelwan mamas say girls can’t fight.... I turn this thought over in my head a few times...But somewhere deep down, I know I am worth fighting for. “That’s why I am here,” I finally blurt out” (Gupta, 2023, p. 46). This colloquy between Heera and her teacher elucidates how Heera’s passionate desire to learn kung fu becomes a tool for challenging and transcending the entrenched hierarchies of society. It reveals how individuals view her as incapable of anything but prostitution on account of the collective identity and stereotyping of her community. However, her statement “I am worth fighting for” embodies a powerful assertion of self-reliance, illustrating that she will not succumb to the burden of societal pressure and will actively resist such notions. By embracing herself, she asserts her autonomy and challenges the gender expectations that are imposed on her. This resistance is not only hers but rather signifies a collective strength against the unfair structures and affirms that every girl subjected to exploitation within patriarchal and exclusionary frameworks holds the ability to confront, subvert, and eventually transform the system that makes her voiceless. Hence, self-empowerment becomes a political act that reflects the alliance between personal sovereignty and collective resistance.

Another character that embodies this shade of resistance is Rini Di, a teacher of Heera who supports her in everything. She is a very compassionate and empowering figure who plays an important role in Heera’s life. She incarnates the values of assertiveness and mentorship, actively subverting the invidious frameworks of society along with Heera. Rini di asserts: “You, your mother, your brother. You’ve all sent a message in your lane. This is not about destiny. It’s about control—who controls whom and why. Remember that your body is your own, and no one should be able to tell you what to do with

it” (Gupta, 2023, p. 152). These lines illustrate her deep “conscientization”, an awakened consciousness, of the systemic exploitation in girls’ bazar and the ongoing trafficking, symbolising her spirit of rebelliousness and resistance. She questions the disproportionate power dynamics and affirms that nobody should have the authority to command or dictate another’s bodily freedom and choices. By referencing mother and brother, the speaker implies that sovereignty and resilience can be obtained by inheritance through generations, showcasing that resistance does not need to be an individual act but could also be a legacy. Therefore, it serves as a reminder that defending oneself is part of a greater struggle against those who attempt to seize power and is not only personal. Hence, she vehemently opposes the coercion against women and extensively fights it. This serves as a turning point in the life of the protagonist towards emancipation that eventually stimulates her to regain control over her life.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the novel undoubtedly presents a captivating yet inspiring tale that confronts the horrid realities of sex trafficking, which is one of the most outrageous violations of human rights, especially haunting individuals from impoverished and marginalised backgrounds. Through the lens of Cranshaw’s intersectionality theory, the paper demonstrates how the overlapping oppressions, like poverty, gender, and caste, intersect with each other and lead to enhanced tyrannies and aid in activities such as sex trafficking. In the narrative, the suffering of characters such as Rosy and Mira isn’t monolithic; instead, it arises from a combination of variable factors that collectively lead to multitudinous forms of oppression. They weren’t only victims of poverty and casteism but also of elements, such as the normalcy of misogyny and trafficking, coupled with disproportionate development that fails to reach these individuals.

Further, through Caruth’s Trauma theory, the paper illustrates the distress of trafficking, highlighting the lasting emotional scars on individuals and their families, serving as a reminder of their vulnerability, illustrating how continual exposure to despair fosters a sense of hopelessness among individuals, along with a heightened sense of fear. However, despite these circumstances, Heera’s journey in conjunction with other characters towards empowerment serves as a cathartic force within the narrative that breaks away the hopelessness and the fear. Hence, she emerges as a symbol of hope and resilience within the narrative, showcasing a possible path to emancipation. In addition to her, Rini also exemplifies rebelliousness and independence, emphasising the need to take charge of one’s body and destiny. Through its

discourse, the narrative suggests countermeasures, such as proportionate access to education, economic assistance, and strict laws, in order to safeguard individuals from the evil of trafficking. Additionally, it emphasises the need for rehabilitation projects and sensitisation programs to create a holistic environment for the survivors, where they can recover and thrive.

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