



# REVIEW OF RESEARCH

ISSN: 2249-894X

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631 (UIF)

VOLUME - 15 | ISSUE - 7 | APRIL - 2026



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## TRAUMA, ANGER AND SELF-RECONSTRUCTION IN NANDHIKA NAMBI'S *UNBROKEN*

**Priyanka S. Thorat**

**Assistant Professor (MA-SET)**

**Night College of Arts and Commerce, Kolhapur.**

### ABSTRACT:

*This paper examines the interconnected themes of trauma, anger, and self-reconstruction in Nandhika Nambi's Unbroken. The study attempts to understand how psychological trauma affects the inner world of the protagonist and the formation of self-identity. The paper uses various features that show that the novel's author used trauma theory in the novel. In society, physically disabled children face many problems. Social acceptance is their basic needs. Such children are separated from people. This study helps to understand physically challenged children. Teachers, family members, and other people should treat these kids similarly. The study illustrates how trauma is generated step by step in an individual's mind. Because of an incident, a person distances himself from others. Dependency, social neglect, and family issues produce anger. At the last stage of trauma, an angry person slowly accepts herself. This is the procedure of self-acceptance. The novel Unbroken is closely related to this process.*



**KEY WORDS:** *Emotional Resilience, Fragmented Identity, Healing Process, Self-Reconstruction, Trauma.*

### INTRODUCTION:

Traditional literature values to external action and moral lessons. But, modern literature, particularly YA fiction (Young Adult fiction) focuses on psychological trauma and identity formation. Current narratives give voice to the confusion in the mind of characters. YA fiction targets teenage readers and focuses on adolescent experiences such as identity, self-discovery, and transitioning to adulthood. In the context of YA fiction, the novel *Unbroken* plays an important role in presenting the emotional realities faced by young individuals searching for identity, maintaining relationships and achieving psychological balance.

Parental authority and social rules make the adolescent period complicated. Through a creative narrative, *Unbroken* contributes to Indian YA fiction by offering a representation of suffering and resilience. The novel represents the psychological depth of adolescent life in a rapidly changing environment.

The protagonist of the novel *Unbroken* suffers from emotional pain caused by neglect and suffering. This presents psychological trauma and its long-lasting effects on the human mind. Rather than presenting anger as a sudden and aggressive reaction, the novel depicts it as an emotional response caused by hidden pain and identity conflict. Through this trauma lens, *Unbroken* explores how trauma changes emotional stability and simultaneously shapes the struggle for self-identity.

According to Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), trauma is explained as an experience that profoundly disrupts an individual's sense of safety and trust. She states that trauma affects memory as well as interpersonal relationships. Herman states that recovery is a complex and non-linear process. Recovery involves gradual reconnection with ordinary life. Finally, the paper argues that the novel *Unbroken* portrays healing as an on-going self-acceptance rather than a complete emotional resolution.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In an interview, Nandhika Nambi explains that her protagonist, Akriti, encounters numerous challenges due to her physical disability. Nambi shares her experience that she visited a few homes with disabled children, where she closely observed their lifestyle and problems. In these visits, she attempted to understand the inner world from a child's perspective, particularly that of a child who experiences trauma at a very young age. *Unbroken* emerges as a result of these experiences and observations. Nambi became aware of how physical disability not only affects the body but also deeply influences the psychological state-of-the individual. By exploring Akriti's emotional responses, Nambi presents the psychological impact of trauma within the narrative. She uses trauma theory in the novel *Unbroken*. Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), defined trauma "as overwhelming, unprocessed experiences that become 'foreign bodies' in the mind, causing symptoms because their memory remains active, leading to hysterical symptoms like pathogenic reminiscences."

Trauma Theory gained academic attention during the 1990s through the work of scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey H. Hartman. "According to Cathy Caruth, trauma as the repetition of a traumatic event, which remains unavailable to consciousness but repeatedly intrudes on sight, suggesting a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can simply be seen or what can be known." Trauma Theory offers a critical framework through which literary text can be examined.

## DISCUSSION

### Development of Trauma Theory

The word "trauma" originated from ancient Greek, where it literally means a physical "wound" or "injury." The word "trauma" was first recorded in English in the late 1600s. In 19<sup>th</sup> century, it took psychological turn. The early foundation of trauma theory was late 19<sup>th</sup> century & early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Trauma began to receive medical recognition particularly during and after the World War. According to medical science, trauma is not just a physical wound but also affects the mental health of a person. Scholars like Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman pioneered Trauma Theory in the 1990s. They linked trauma's study with literature. They tried to represent unexpressed thoughts through writing. Literature gradually emerged as a space in which personal suffering could be expressed. These studies provide a view that literature becomes an effective medium for expressing trauma indirectly through fragmented narratives, silence, and emotional dislocation. Over time, trauma theory shifted from a purely clinical framework to an important critical tool in literary studies. Such narrative techniques resist linear storytelling and instead present broken parts of narratives. These stylistic strategies offer readers a deeper understanding of suffering that remains unspoken.

### Traumatic Experiences in *Unbroken*

In *Unbroken*, Nandhika Nambi explores trauma not as a single disturbing event but as a continuous psychological condition that gradually shapes the protagonist's inner world. The novel depicts how Akriti's emotional pain and unexpressed wounds affect everyday experiences. An accident shatters her both physically and mentally. As a first-person narrator, Akriti states, "So okay, I am a monster... my mother is an ignorant doormat and all my friends are just plain irritating." This expression indicates her nervous emotional state. Akriti's self-description as a "monster" refracts her deep sense of alienation. The metaphor of being "in a prison" suggests that she is mentally trapped, where escape seems impossible. Family burdens, the passive role of her mother, and lack of empathy give scope for trauma.

Everyday classroom experiences in *Unbroken* depict how Akriti isolates herself from her classmates. Her seating arrangement in the class-in a corner-separates her from her peers.

### **Anger as a Psychological Response to Trauma**

Anger does not emerge suddenly; instead, it develops gradually over time. Akriti's day-to-day events create anger in her mind. Her dependency in every small work makes her disappointed. The dining table incident in the novel, when Akriti vomits in front of her family, the reactions of family members deeply hurt her. Her mother cleans her up, but she hates taking help from others. Akriti feels disgusted about herself. Her description of herself as "revolting" exposes the anger in her mind.

In another event, Akriti wishes to attend a music festival, but she cannot go alone. As she knows her father's view that Western music is a bad influence, she does not ask to attend the festival. Akriti passionately loves music, art, and games, but physical disability limits her. Akriti says, "I was angry, angry but I had to put up with everything that happened to me... I was angry that no one had a heart... I was angry that I would wake up one morning to find my whole-life upside down."

Her internal monologue depicts how anger exists with pain, injustice and emotional neglect. This paper argues that trauma reinforces anger rather than violence.

### **Silence & Withdrawal in Trauma Narratives**

After the creation of anger, silence and withdrawal function as important stages within the traumatic process. Traumatic sufferers find it difficult to express pain. In the novel *Unbroken*, Akriti says "I was not sure if I was in the mood to talk to my mother, but again then was I ever?" In this quotation, the protagonist, Akriti, appears withdrawn from the situation. Akriti's brother always tries to communicate with her, but she denies expressing her emotions in front of him. She needs empathy from her parents, but due to her father's arrogant behaviour and her mother's passiveness, she disconnects herself from everyone. Akriti tries to withdraw from situations which create in everyday life. She increasingly distances herself. She loves to live alone rather than mix with friends or family. Now Akriti is in a phase that is beyond anger, she chooses to remain silent.

From the point-of-view of scholars like Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, trauma denies direct communication and often appears in indirect forms such as silence and withdrawal. Here, the protagonist of the novel *Unbroken* goes through the same steps of a traumatic condition.

### **Domestic Environment and Trauma**

In *Unbroken*, Nandhika Nambi presents a strict domestic environment that provides space for trauma. Akriti needs comfort and security from her family, but unintentionally, the atmosphere creates tension and misunderstanding. Frequent arguments between her parents affect Akriti's psychological well-being. Her father's harsh comment that Akriti is "becoming lazy" depicts a lack of emotional sensitivity about her. Rather than offering support, her mother's visible distress further pushes Akriti into silence. Once Akriti's brother gives a brochure of the Kasturi Academy of Arts, she deeply thinks about the sketch on the front page. However, she immediately gets nervous by her awareness of familial disapproval. Her father firmly believes that "Art is not a profession; it is a hobby... and hobbies are a waste of time."

Akriti's artistic creativity is suppressed within the family. Her parents expect good academic performance from Akriti. When Akriti's father enters the room, she hides her sketchbook beneath her homework; this indicates fear rather than respect. Father asks about grades in exams to Akriti. She has passed only in Maths and English. He remarks that she might have passed other subjects had she spent less time with her sketchbook. At that time, Akriti cannot handle the tension, and she thinks of calling a child helpline. Her father's laughter in response to her thoughts contributes to an increase in her anger and frustration. As Herman observes, "emotionally unsafe environments often condition individuals to suppress their feelings, leading to withdrawal, frustration and unresolved psychological pain." Although Akriti's family appears to provide strong support to help her cope with her disability, their actions unintentionally develop trauma in her mind.

### **The Sense of Social Rejection**

In *Unbroken*, Akriti experiences a strong sense of social rejection that increases her psychological trauma. Before the accident, a few years ago, she actively spent her time playing football, tennis, badminton, throwball, and basketball. After the accident, she depends on others for most things. She develops a feeling of self-hatred. She hates taking help from others.

Akriti compares herself with other physically healthy children. Other children stand up when the teacher enters the classroom. Akriti prefers to remain at the back of the classroom. Akriti's experience at the mall shows how the sense of social rejection improves in her. As she moves through the basement for the lift, she becomes aware of the public gaze directed at her wheelchair. In crowded lift, she feels discomfort, as the lack of space forces her to face strangers directly. She engages herself in a mobile game to distract herself. She wishes to detach from her surrounding, which reminds her of her difference.

When a young girl stares at her openly, until gently corrected by her parents, it provides a sense of alienation. In this situation, understanding is more important than avoidance. It is even more disturbing for Akriti when she sees a boy in a wheelchair at the mall. She turns away. She silently withdraws from the situation. Furthermore, Akriti wants to return home, but her father is interested in shopping. It reinforces her feeling of emotional invisibility. While the public space exposes her to external judgment, the lack of attentiveness from her family compounds her isolation.

All these events in the novel are shaped by a feeling of social rejection that causes her psychological trauma. Through Akriti's experiences, the novel exposes how social neglect functions and how society fails to understand her emotional needs beyond her physical condition.

### **Trauma and Fragmented Identity**

In *Unbroken*, the novelist depicts trauma as a continuous psychological struggle that deeply affects the formation of identity. Akriti, a teenage girl, is at a crucial stage of self-development when an accident leaves her partially paralysed. This physical injury affects her emotional growth and creates confusion about her sense of self.

As a first-person narrator, Akriti says, "I started work on the outline - a huge tree that had massive spreading roots but a trunk that grew more and more withered and dead as it reached for the sky, I was not sure what I was trying to portray..." Through this incident, the protagonist herself remains uncertain about the meaning of the sketch, reflecting her confusion about her own identity. The fragmented identity can be seen in the protagonist's changing emotions- anger, withdrawal, and self-doubt.

In *Unbroken*, after the cigarette-smoking incident, the protagonist's parents take her to a child psychologist. Akriti says, "I am not going to see a psychologist. I am not crazy!" This incident shatters her identity. It reveals her deep frustration and unresolved anger. This indicates her desire for control over her own body. She fears being labelled by society. This event shows how trauma contributes to the breakdown of her identity.

The teacher can only see Akriti by "cracking her neck" shows her sense of being unnoticed or unimportant. This special treatment reflects a deeper psychological difference between Akriti and the other students. While other students are engaged in free conversations, jokes, and interactions, Akriti remains silent and detached.

At one moment, while class is going on and Akriti is sleeping, her teacher angrily says "Stand U". Although the teacher quickly withdraws the punishment, the damage is already done. Akriti's silence and lack of response symbolise helplessness and emotional numbness. The whole-class looks at her, smiling, reinforcing Akriti's sense of shame. These daily events illustrate how authority figures unintentionally contribute to the deepening of trauma through misunderstandings. This paper critically analyses how traumatic experiences affect the inner world of the protagonist, shaping her emotions, self-perception, and responses to everyday situations.

### Process of Self-Reconstruction

The process of self-reconstruction is a very important stage after trauma. This process further develops through Akriti's engagement with sketching. She says, "Ever since my legs stopped working, my hands seem to work twice as much, and I was getting prouder and prouder my work." Her growing pride in her creativity marks an important step in rebuilding her personality. Self-awareness is essential in identity formation.

During therapy sessions, Akriti openly discusses her feelings with Dr. Rishi, a child psychiatrist. She shares her experiences like family visits and academic pressures, expectations from her parents. This act suggests that the process of self-reconstruction slowly develops in her. From the beginning to end of the novel, *Unbroken*, Ranjith, brother of Akriti is taking care of Akriti, while she rarely responds to him. Akriti's rash behaviour with Ranjith suddenly changes into care when Ranjith is hospitalised. In the hospital, Akriti frequently interacts with doctors, visitors, and worried family members, and she feels emotionally overcome. As an elder sister, she reacts responsibly. This moment becomes a turning point in her process of self-reconstruction. Akriti has a single hope that Ranjith will remain alive. Her birthday wish, reduced to a silent prayer for his recovery, shows how trauma reshapes her priorities.

Because of this incident, Akriti slowly begins to communicate and face people instead of withdrawing from them. Ranjith's teachers, classmates, and parents come to visit him with cards and flowers, creating an emotional environment. Akriti feels moved by their presence. She realises the value of caring. She once experienced deep isolation after her own accident, and she avoided people. But this situation totally contrasts, as a responsible family member; she speaks to them and accepts their support. While recording video messages for Ranjith, she interacts freely with friends rather than feeling burdened. Her tears at the end indicate emotional release and acceptance. All these events in *Unbroken* help Akriti rebuild her confidence and self-reconstruction.

### Catharsis as an Intermediate Stage in Self-Reconstruction

In *Unbroken*, catharsis plays a very important role in Akriti's ongoing process of self-reconstruction. In one episode, Akriti telling the story of her accident to a young girl is a step towards self-reconstruction. By telling such a big event in a few lines, she decreases its emotional weight. Her narrative tone reflects her detachment and emotional distance from society.

Akriti denies sharing her pain - she thinks no one can truly understand what she has lost, which indicates her emotional isolation. Her avoidance of sympathy shows unresolved trauma. She ignores the pain of another wheelchair user; she does not want to compare herself with other disabled children. The interaction with the girl disturbs Akriti.

The girl's innocent question for "ability" motivates Akriti to redefine ability. It is like a cinematic incident, but the girl says, "It's being able to do everything from a chair an ability too then?" Akriti cannot move her legs, but she is able to do many activities using a wheelchair. Akriti confesses the reality. She deeply remembers the every moment she faced. The tear that finally rolled down indicates the deep grief in her heart.

During therapy session, Akriti's interaction with Dr. Rishi is a turning point in her life. He explains the five stages of grief - first denial, second anger, third bargaining, fourth depression, and lastly acceptance. He encourages Akriti's confidence. This conversation explores as a form of cognitive catharsis. Dr. Rishi reshapes Akriti's fixed understanding of acceptance, proving that acceptance does not mean surrendering dreams can regenerate within reality. He suggests that happiness comes from active efforts, like self-care and self-understanding. Akriti does not change suddenly after these conversations during therapy sessions but the process of healing appears within her. Recovery from trauma is not immediate but it develops slowly over time.

Thus, self-reconstruction in the novel, *Unbroken* is shown as a conscious psychological and social decision that needs the courage to face pain, imagine a life beyond loss.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper indicates *Unbroken* by Nandhika Nambi, showing how trauma and self-reconstruction reshape personality rather than permanently destroying it. Through Akriti's experiences

of accident, partial paralysis, loneliness, social withdrawal, and self-acceptance, the novel presents trauma as a non-linear psychological process. That influences the mind, behaviour, and actions. Nambi situates trauma within a broader framework rather than portraying it solely as an individual struggle. The points of view of teachers, friends, and family members affect whether trauma develops or slowly heals.

Trauma is represented as a long-lasting psychological condition sustained by silence and misunderstanding. Akriti's anger and withdrawal play the role of defence mechanisms. The most important point is that the novel denies immediate or miraculous recovery. Instead, healing appears slowly in a supportive environment. In the healing process, an individual needs cooperative relationships rather than indifference and judgement. The paper argues that collaborative efforts are essential in helping a challenged child regain self-worth.

Teachers play a key role in acknowledging emotional distress beyond academic performance, while friends' acceptance decreases isolation. Initially, family members do not fully understand Akriti's pain but slowly become more sensitive to her emotional needs. This combined support becomes a base upon which Akriti starts to articulate her deep sufferings.

Akriti's creativity in music and sketching is beneficial for her emotional release. The presence of a child psychiatrist and the beginning of empathy within her parents indicate that recovery requires active interaction instead passive sympathy. Through a trauma-theoretical perspective, *Unbroken* criticises the idea of trauma as fixed psychological damage. It proves that recovery becomes possible when society and family behave with care and responsibility. Finally, the novel presents a powerful idea: trauma can be overcome when teachers, family members, and friends come together to create a supportive and considerate environment.

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