

Mental Strain and Silent Sufferings: The Subtle Signs of Anxiety and PTSD in Chetan Bhagat's 400 Days

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Abstract

This paper explores the nuanced representation of mental strain, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in Chetan Bhagat's novel 400 Days (2021). Through a psychoanalytic and trauma-theory lens, the paper investigates how Bhagat's characters, particularly Alia and Keshav, embody internalized suffering masked by socially acceptable behavior. While Bhagat's writing style is accessible and commercially inclined, this paper argues that 400 Days subtly yet powerfully critiques societal indifference towards emotional trauma, especially among parents and children caught in dysfunctional relationships. Quotations from the novel support the analysis, complemented by theoretical insights from Sigmund Freud, Judith Herman, and Cathy Caruth.

Keywords: Chetan Bhagat, 400 Days, trauma theory, anxiety, PTSD, psychoanalysis, mental health, silent suffering, domestic relationships, Indian fiction

Introduction

Chetan Bhagat, known for his simple prose and wide readership, often embeds pressing social issues beneath the surface of his romantic or thriller narratives. In 400 Days, while the primary plot revolves around the kidnapping and recovery of a young girl, it is the psychological depth of the characters particularly Alia and Keshav that reveals a profound commentary on mental health. This paper contends that the novel subtly portrays anxiety and PTSD, especially through the internalized and unspoken struggles of its characters.

Anxiety and Psychological Repression: The Case of Alia

Alia, the protagonist and mother of the kidnapped child, becomes a case study in silent suffering. Her character encapsulates the modern Indian woman torn between traditional roles and emotional autonomy. Her marriage to Manish is emotionally sterile and neglectful. Despite her outward poise, Alia shows signs of chronic anxiety, which Judith Herman classifies as one of the "invisible wounds" of prolonged psychological abuse (Trauma and Recovery 33). "Manish barely talks to me anymore. Sometimes I feel like I'm invisible in my own house." (400 Days, Bhagat)

Alia's inability to express her inner turmoil, combined with societal pressure to maintain the appearance of a stable household, leads her to repress emotions a hallmark of anxiety disorder. According to Freud, repression is the ego's mechanism to deal with unacceptable desires or memories (Freud, The Ego and the Id). Alia's anxiety manifests not through dramatic breakdowns but through obsessive concern for her daughter, over-politeness, and emotional numbness.

Trauma and the Incomprehensible Event: The Missing Daughter

The kidnapping of her daughter is the traumatic event that destabilizes Alia's already fragile mental state. Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly" (Unclaimed Experience 4). This is evident in Alia's recurring fears and compulsive need for closure: "Even when I try to sleep, I keep seeing Siya's room. Empty. Her books untouched. I feel like she's calling me, but I can't reach her." (400 Days, Bhagat)

This quote reflects intrusive thoughts, a common symptom of PTSD. Alia's emotional paralysis, persistent fears, and avoidance behavior align with DSM-5's criteria for PTSD (American Psychiatric Association). Her trauma is not just about losing a daughter, but about losing control over her reality.

Keshav as the Quiet Sufferer

Keshav, the detective and Bhagat's recurring protagonist, presents another layer of mental strain. Though he is portrayed as confident and rational, he reveals signs of depressive tendencies and unresolved trauma from past failures, including a broken relationship and stagnation in his career. His sarcastic humor and detachment are defense mechanisms. "Life is like an Indian soap opera. No matter how bad things get, we pretend everything is okay for the guests." (400 Days, Bhagat)

Keshav's worldview, laced with irony, highlights a sense of learned helplessness. His interactions with Alia occasionally allow his mask to slip, revealing loneliness and emotional fatigue. His work becomes a distraction from personal demons, a common coping mechanism identified in trauma literature (Herman 45).

The Child's Voice and Muted Trauma

While Siya, the kidnapped daughter, has limited presence in the narrative, her silence is emblematic. After being rescued, she speaks little and clings to her mother. Trauma theorists emphasize that children often internalize their suffering, displaying withdrawal rather than verbal cues (Terr, Too Scared to Cry). Bhagat handles this subtly: "Siya would not sleep alone. She clung to Alia at night, whimpering even in her dreams." (400 Days, Bhagat)

Siya's symptoms sleep disturbances, attachment issues, and fear mirror classic PTSD reactions. Her silence speaks volumes, suggesting that trauma can manifest even without detailed verbal accounts.

Social Commentary: Middle-Class Denial of Mental Health

One of the strengths of 400 Days is its implicit critique of how Indian middle-class families often ignore mental health. Alia's in-laws dismiss therapy, and even Keshav's concern is veiled in pragmatism. Bhagat subtly addresses the stigma without overt preachiness. "We're

not mad people to go to a psychologist,” Manish snapped. “She just needs to be strong.” (400 Days, Bhagat)

This comment reflects the pervasive belief that mental strength is a matter of willpower, ignoring the complex nature of trauma. Such societal attitudes contribute to prolonged suffering and delayed recovery.

Conclusion

Though 400 Days is marketed as a thriller, it intricately weaves themes of anxiety and PTSD, often through quiet, internalized struggles rather than overt trauma narratives. Bhagat’s characters reflect a society grappling with emotional repression, denial, and stigma. By reading the novel through the lens of trauma theory and psychoanalysis, we uncover a deeper narrative one where the scars are not just physical or dramatic but subtle, mental, and ongoing.

Acknowledgement:

The author sincerely acknowledges and expresses gratitude to the Management of Nallamuthu Gounder Mahalingam College, Pollachi, Tamil Nadu, for their generous financial assistance through the SEED Money Support for this research work.

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