

## Chapter II

### Gender and Trauma: Theoretical Framework

Humans possess a unique array of attributes that distinguish them as remarkable beings in the natural world. Their linguistic prowess, cognitive complexity, emotional depth, capacity for empathy, and ability to express love set them apart from other species. However, the human experience is not devoid of darker facets; tendencies toward malevolence, cognitive distortions, envy, anger, and domineering behaviour sometimes draw parallels to animalistic instincts. These complexities of human nature underscore the spectrum of human behaviour, from altruistic compassion to destructive aggression. Violence, as a manifestation of aggression, is an undeniable aspect of human existence. It manifests in various forms, including physical, sexual, and psychological violence, as well as neglect and deprivation. The World Health Organization defines violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment, or deprivation” (Krug E, et.al. 5).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), violence can be categorised into three main types: self-directed violence, which encompasses self-abuse or suicidal behaviour; interpersonal violence, involving one person’s direct aggression towards another or small groups; and collective violence, perpetrated by larger groups of individuals. This research focuses specifically on interpersonal violence, which is further subdivided into two primary forms: Family/Intimate Partner Violence and Community Violence. The former encompasses domestic violence and child sexual abuse, while the latter includes acts such as rape, sexual harassment, acid attacks, and human trafficking.

Interpersonal violence represents an extreme manifestation of human aggression, often employed to assert dominance over others through fear and intimidation. Notably, women are disproportionately affected by interpersonal violence, underscoring its intersectionality with power dynamics and gender.

The research investigates the role of power and gender inequality as the primary factors contributing to the widespread prevalence of violence in society. Gender is not an inherent characteristic, but rather a social construct perpetuated by “patriarchal appropriation” in order to oppress women (Cottais). Lori L. Heise in his article entitled “Violence Against Women: An Integrated, Ecological Framework,” states that “adherence to rigid gender roles—either at the societal or the individual level—increases the likelihood of violence against women” (279). Gender norms serve as an obstacle for women in their pursuit of a fulfilling life. This disparity creates a divide between men and women, ultimately enabling men to maintain positions of power within society. As a result of this power differential, men subject women to mistreatment, devaluing their emotions and exploiting their bodies.

Violence against women remains a pervasive issue worldwide, cutting across cultural, social, and economic boundaries. Despite decades of activism and awareness campaigns, women continue to face various forms of violence, ranging from physical and sexual assault to psychological and emotional abuse. To comprehend the roots of this violence, it is essential to explore theories that shed light on the underlying mechanisms. One such theory that provides valuable insights is the Objectification Theory.

Objectification Theory was first proposed by psychologists Barbara Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts in 1997, it asserts that the societal objectification of women plays a significant role in their dehumanisation and subsequent mistreatment of women.

According to this theory, women are frequently reduced to mere objects, primarily valued for their physical appearance and sexual desirability rather than for their intellectual capabilities, emotions, or inherent worth as individuals. In simpler terms, “women are treated as bodies – and in particular, as bodies that exist for the use and pleasure of others.” (175). This objectification is deeply rooted in the notion that the body serves as the foundation for gender distinctions, and it is shaped by the “social and cultural contexts” in which individuals exist (175). Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts delve into the idea that bodies are not inherently objectified, but rather “constructed through sociocultural practices and discourses,” which in turn lays the groundwork for the sexual objectification of women (174).

The concept of objectification is significantly influenced by Simone de Beauvoir’s groundbreaking text, *The Second Sex* (1949). In her discussion of Monsieur Benda, she argues that a woman’s body is perceived as lacking substance without any reference to a man. A woman does not consider herself independently of a man, and she is viewed as “the sex,” essentially defined by her gender. Beauvoir further posits that man is the “subject” and he embodies the “absolute,” while woman is relegated to the position of “the Other” (26). By positioning women as ‘the other’ in relation to men, they are subjected to a process of diminishment. Their identity is eroded, reducing them to mere physical entities that can be objectified, commodified, and quantified within the confines of the sex industry. When a woman’s body is objectified and not regarded as her own, she is perceived as a mere sexual object. Regina Papa, in her work “Commodified Bodies,” argues that sexual objectification disregards a woman’s “intellectual capacities” and reduces her to a “mere instrument” (73). In essence, Sandra Lee Bartky contends that sexual objectification occurs when a “woman’s sexual parts or functions are separated out from her person, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or else regarded as if they were

capable of representing her” (35). Peter Hay supports the statement of Beauvoir in his seminal work *Main Currents in Western Environmental Thought* that patriarchy treats man as the subject and woman as the ‘other’: “masculine values are regarded as the ‘species-defining’, whilst the feminine is marginalised and trivialised. This has led to the categorisation of women and the values associated within the feminine as ‘other’, and it has paved the way for the development of systems of power and oppression that have consistently devalued the role and place of women” (73-74).

The objectification of women, coupled with experiences of physical, sexual, and mental suffering, can significantly affect their psychological well-being. The hostile surroundings disrupt their peace of mind, leading to feelings of depression. Women may experience restlessness, loneliness, anxiety, hopelessness, and a sense of unworthiness. These emotions can result in social withdrawal, exacerbating symptoms of PTSD and hysteria.

The study incorporates trauma theory to explore the psychological state of the victims. Trauma, which is defined as a substantial event that surpasses the ordinary coping mechanisms of individuals, frequently involves threats to one’s life or physical well-being, or personal encounters with violence and mortality. Cathy Caruth, in her seminal work *Trauma: Exploration in Memory*, defines that trauma constitutes a “pathological mental” and “emotional condition,” an affliction to the psyche precipitated by catastrophic occurrences, or the imminent danger of such occurrences, which surpasses an individual’s conventional “response mechanisms” (2). Traumatic stressors result in an excess of external stimuli and arousal within the brain, leading to difficulty in fully assimilating the experience. consequently, this difficulty may give rise to psychological numbness or the repression of typical emotional responses. To examine the psyche of victims with the

traumatic events, the researcher has utilised the theoretical works of Judith Herman, specifically *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, as well as Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, and *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*.

While both Herman and Caruth focus on the profound impact of trauma, their approaches diverge in significant ways. Herman's work is grounded in clinical practice and emphasises the need for structured therapeutic interventions. Her model is practical and geared towards recovery, focusing on the ways in which trauma disrupts the individual's sense of self and the steps necessary to rebuild a coherent identity. Caruth, on the other hand, is less concerned with recovery in a clinical sense and more with the representation and transmission of trauma. Her work is theoretically driven, engaging with questions of how trauma can be known and communicated when it inherently resists understanding. Despite these differences, both approaches contribute to a deeper understanding of trauma, offering complementary insights into the ways in which trauma affects victims and communities.

The research focuses on violence against women, including child sexual abuse, domestic violence, rape, and revenge pornography. The researcher has selected these four crimes due to their interconnected characteristics related to sexual assault. The study explores the experiences of women from childhood to adulthood and the challenges they encounter in both public and private spheres. Simultaneously, the research evaluates violence against women in the virtual realm and examines the impact of violence on the victims and those around them, as well as how they cope with it.

Chapter III titled "Divested of Innocence: Child Sexual Abuse and Trauma in Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder*," delves into the power dynamics between adults and

children that contribute to the ongoing issue of sexual abuse against children in society. Moreover, the perpetrators' disregard for the emotions of children reduces them to mere objects. Anat Talmon and Karni Ginzburg align with Fredrickson and Roberts' concept of objectification, which suggests that when an "individual's body is no longer perceived by others as a subject; rather, it has been transformed into an object for the other's use, satisfaction and enjoyment" ("Body Self"). Within the context of this narrative, Sonali's uncle neglects her emotions, turning her into the object of his sexual desires, which disrupts her normal daily activities and disrupts her peaceful existence. The impact of sexual abuse on children's mental well-being leads to a loss of trust in others and a tendency to isolate themselves to avoid shame. This chapter explores the psychological impact on victims by analysing four traumatic dynamics proposed by Finkelhor and Browne: traumatic sexualisation, betrayal, powerlessness, and stigmatisation, respectively. It also highlights how the failure to disclose the trauma further exacerbates symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. The violence against girls does not cease with their childhood but rather persists into their subsequent stages of development. As they transition into adulthood and enter marriage, they are confronted with abuse at the hands of their husbands and in-laws, a subject that will be expounded upon in the subsequent chapter.

Chapter IV titled "Trauma Behind Closed Doors: Domestic Violence in Poile Sengupta's *Mangalam*" delves into the complex interplay of power dynamics, gender bias, and the abuse of women within the confines of the home. By examining the female characters in the play, the chapter illuminates how women are dehumanised and subjected to mistreatment by their own family members. It also delves into the disturbing concept of marital rape, wherein the wife is considered as the husband's legal sexual property. In the institution of marriage, women are expected to fulfil all 'matrimonial obligations,'

including sexual relations, thereby relinquishing ownership of their bodies. Furthermore, this chapter explores the theme of self-objectification through the characters of Thangam and Revathi in the play, *Mangalam*. Self-objectification is described as the “internalization of being treated as objects, leading women to view themselves as objects to be looked at or evaluated” (Watson 10). This results in them valuing their physical appearance over their intellect or capabilities.

The perpetual agony and inability to reveal the mistreatment lead to their exclusion from society. This perpetuates a constant sense of emotional detachment and the reliving of the distressing incident. The victims are condemned to a life of diminished existence, plagued by haunting memories, and constrained by “helplessness and terror” (Herman 44). The traumatic encounters not only obliterate their sense of self-worth but also erode their belief in a “natural or divine order,” thrusting them into an “existential crisis” (Herman 51). They perceive themselves as belonging more “to the death than to the living,” due to the loss of trustworthiness (Herman 52).

Chapter V titled “Grim Realities: Rape Culture and Apathy in Manjula Padmanabhan’s *Lights Out*,” discusses the unsettling reality of gang rape, highlighting the objectification and violation of women’s bodies by the perpetrators. Fredrickson and Roberts, in their article “Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women’s Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks,” analyse how women are objectified in both explicit (such as sexual violence) and subtle (like the male gaze) ways. Playwright Manjula Padmanabhan exposes these forms of objectification in her play, emphasising that the sexualised gaze often leads to sexual objectification. In the play, *Lights Out* the rape victim is viewed as a mere sexual object by the offenders, who exploit her body. Meanwhile, Bhasker and Mohan, who witness the crime, derive pleasure from staring at

her body, a behaviour termed as “ogle” and “leer” (176) by Fredrickson and Roberts, who contend that the male gaze is a prevalent form of sexual evaluation.

This chapter not only delves into real-life social interactions but also sheds light on the role of visual media, which often focuses on women’s bodies in advertisements and photography. Manjula Padmanabhan emphasises how the objectification of women is deeply rooted in cultural norms and perpetuated through various forms of media in her play. In scene iii, Mohan, Bhasker, and Surinder are depicted discussing how to capture a brutal rape incident and the victim’s body on camera, even going as far as proposing to sell the images to the media for a substantial sum. Furthermore, this chapter illustrates how objectification contributes to victim-blaming attitudes, where victims of violence are unfairly held accountable for the harm inflicted upon them due to their perceived object status.

The act of rape is not merely a violation or exploitation of the victim’s physical body; rather, it serves as a warning or threat to the entire female community, instilling a sense of fear and vulnerability. The playwright explores how the traumatic incident affects the mental well-being of women through the character Leela in the play. Leela experiences a profound sense of fear and despair, which Judith Herman terms “traumatic countertransference” or “vicarious traumatization” (140). As a result of the traumatic incident, Leela exhibits hypersensitivity and undergoes intense auditory hallucinations of screaming, even in the absence of any actual rape incident. Child sexual abuse, domestic violence, and rape have been prevalent crimes against women for centuries, and they have evolved into a digital form in the digital era. The following chapter delves into the impact of sexual assault in cyberspace on the lives of victims and their families.

Chapter VI titled “Cyber Violence: Sexual Harassment, Cyberscape and Trauma in Anupama Chandrasekhar’s *Free Outgoing*,” examines the collision between the cutting-edge technological advancements of the contemporary era and the deep-rooted traditionalism of Indian culture. Revenge pornography is deeply rooted in the objectification of individuals, especially women, where their bodies are devalued to mere objects for the pleasure or exploitation of others. Objectification occurs when individuals are treated as objects to be viewed, judged, or used for the satisfaction of others, rather than as independent beings with inherent dignity and rights. In the context of revenge pornography, victims are often dehumanised and reduced to mere sexual objects, stripped of their autonomy, and subjected to the scrutiny and control of others. Dworkin, in her influential work *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, insightfully argues that the perpetrators of revenge pornography aim to assert power and dominance over their victims by using their intimate images for purposes of humiliation, coercion, or retaliation. This objectification not only breaches the privacy and autonomy of the victims but also reinforces damaging gender stereotypes and power differentials. In the play *Free Outgoing*, Jeevan deliberately records his intimate moment with Deepa, isolating Deepa in the video and sharing it with his peers. This behaviour illustrates Jeevan’s desire to belittle Deepa by objectifying her.

Studies suggest that exposure to revenge pornography can have severe psychological effects on victims, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicidal thoughts. Jeevan’s act of sharing intimate images or videos without the consent of Deepa destroys her self-esteem, trust, and sense of security. Furthermore, the continuous availability of such content online leads to ongoing harassment, stigma, and social exclusion, intensifying the trauma experienced. Objectification theory helps to clarify how revenge pornography perpetuates societal

norms that prioritise physical appearance and sexual attractiveness over the intrinsic worth and humanity of individuals, perpetuating cycles of shame, victim-blaming, and self-objectification.

The study examines how women are objectified and subjected to various forms of violence and what consequences they face, and how it affects their psyche, their lives, and the people around them.