

THE BURDEN OF TRANSGRESSION: PERPETRATOR GUILT AND SHAME IN E. SANTHOSH KUMAR'S *TAPOMAYIYUDE ACHAN*

Indu P

Department of English, NMSM Govt. College, Kalpetta

*Corresponding author: indusreenivasan88@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2612-324X>

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore the theme of guilt and shame in E. Santhosh Kumar's *Tapomayiyude Achan*. Through a close reading of the novel, the paper examines how memory is created and erased to deal with trauma. Memory is often suppressed and erased to hide the guilt and shame. The character, Gopal Barua, seeks the help of a forgotten/secret language to hide his memory from the outside world. His remorse over a momentary failure in his life decided the future of his life. Since guilt and shame are moral emotions, moral transgressions in the life of an individual can haunt him for the rest of his life. This paper is an attempt to analyze the complex conundrum of memory, guilt and shame in *Tapomayiyude Achan* through the lens of memory studies.

Key Words: *Guilt, Shame, Trauma and Memory*

Guilt and shame are two distinct, yet different concepts. Trauma Studies has long before incorporated discussions on the guilt and shame experienced by the victim. However, studies on the perpetrators' guilt, shame, remorse and disgust have been a rather recent area of study. It is important to understand that Trauma studies has expanded its boundaries to incorporate the trauma of the perpetrator. This paper is an attempt to study how memory is often created and erased to deal with guilt and shame. E. Santhosh Kumar's award winning Malayalam novel, *Tapomayiyude Achan* discusses the life of Gopal Barua and his attempts to deal with his guilt and shame. Tapomayi Barua, son of Gopal Barua, runs a charitable organization called Shelter, for refugees. During one of his bureaucratic ventures, Tapomayi befriends the narrator. During one of their conversations, Tapomayi mentions his father's interest in ancient scripts and code languages. The narrator, who shares similar interests, is fascinated by this piece of information and it helps him bond with Gopal Barua. Gopal Barua is a refugee from Eastern Bengal, who resides in Kolkatha. Through his conversations with Gopal Barua, the narrator gradually learns about Barua's insecurities and apprehensions.

Gopal Barua has always been in love with Sumana. But Shyamal, an elderly relative of Gopal marries Suman, breaking Gopal's heart. At one point, following a genocide, Shyamal, Sumana and Gopal, along with their fellow villagers had to leave their village and settle on a deserted riverine island. Though they were able to build a life there for a while, they had to flee that island as well. During a rainy season, the river overflows and threatens to drown their island. Realizing they have no other choice, the inhabitants of the village decide to leave the village. Since the available boats cannot accommodate all the villagers at once, Shyamal Da volunteers to stay back on the island, taking care of their possessions, until Gopal comes back to fetch him. Though Gopal goes to save him, in a moment of passion, Gopal decides to leave Shyamal Da behind him, since he believes that Shyamal is the reason for his unrequited love. However, the memory of this action torments him till his death.

After the death of Shyamal, Sumana comes to live with Gopal. Soon, Gopal realizes that Sumana loves Shyamal and Tapomayi is the son of Shyamal. To add to his distress, he realizes that Sumana knew about his betrayal. His remaining life is an attempt to cope with the guilt and shame resulting from his actions. As an act of purging himself, he begins writing his memoirs.

However, he is not courageous enough to write about it in plain language and he uses a code language to write memories that he wants to hide from the public eye and he lives in fear of someone deciphering his secret messages. Shame and guilt are moral emotions. They are among our most “private, intimate experiences” (Tangney and Dearing 2). Though people use these two terms interchangeably, they are different concepts. Mid-20th century anthropologists popularized an assumption that “certain kinds of situations lead to shame whereas other kinds of situations lead to guilt. For example, there is a long-standing notion that shame is a more “public” emotion than guilt. Shame is seen as arising from public exposure and disapproval of some shortcoming or transgression, whereas guilt is seen as a more “private” experience arising from self-generated pangs of conscience” (Tangney and Dearing 14). Tangney and Dearing quotes Gehm and Scherer’s observation, “shame is usually dependent on the public exposure of one’s frailty or failing, whereas guilt may be something that remains a secret with us, no one else knowing of our breach of social norms or of our responsibility for an immoral act” (14).

Guilt and Trauma are two self-related concepts that surface following a traumatic event. Gopal Barua’s failure to save Shyamal can be termed a traumatic event since “To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (Freud qtd. in Caruth 9). Gopal Barua’s trauma can be primarily attributed to the feeling of guilt that results from leaving Shyamal Da to drown to death, who had always loved and taken care of him. Following the death of Gopal’s father, Shyamal provided them with financial assistance. On those days, Shyamal worked as a cook, he brought them leftover food, which in Gopal’s words, were the days he ate well. Acceptance of having done wrong seems to be an important precondition of feeling guilty. Though Gopal has been successful in erasing the memory of his failure to save Shyamal for a while, he was questioned by Sumana bringing his forgotten memories to the fore. This exchange between Gopal and Sumana unearthed those hidden memories and along with it, his guilt. An individual usually endures his guilt or guiltiness in secret, while that individual tries to hide their transgressions from others. Trauma poses unique challenges to understanding as traumatic experiences may result from events which have social, cultural, political and ethical dimensions. The present study brings forth the ethical dimension of trauma.

Though Tapomayi is not his biological son, Gopal loves him and Gopal does not want Tapomayi to know his misdeeds. This could be interpreted as the reason behind his fear of Tapomayi reading his memories and diaries. In one of his conversations with the narrator, Gopal asks, “Has Tapomayi taught you these?” (77). The question reveals his fear of Tapomayi learning his secrets. In another conversation, he asks, “Don’t people think of inventing a script which only they can decipher?” (74). Gopal’s keen interest in ancient scripts and code language was not just a passion for him. It was a ruse that helped him to secure his secrets safely. Gopal Barua’s traumatic memory is a constant reminder of his inaction. His memory functions as an affective archive, repeatedly staging his guilt and shame even when he attempts to forget it. The memory of letting Shyamal die cannot remain in the past. It returns and intrudes into the present binding him to his unresolved guilt. “Memory can serve as a double edged sword; it can be a source of healing, but also a reminder of pain, influencing how stories are told and remembered across generations.” Guilt, shame and memory are intertwined in *Tapomayiyude Achan*. On one hand, Gopal’s memory is an instrument of pain. It does not allow him to forget. On the other hand, he is scared of losing his memory since it meant him forgetting the location of his memoirs and secret diary. Gopal Barua is worried about things going missing from his house. He has something to hide. He remarks, “My memories are wandering off. I used to keep all my documents safely. I used to carry it wherever I went. . . I searched a lot for that diary. I pray that I get my diary back even if I lose those ancient artefacts, paintings and sculptures. But, I wonder who took them?” (204) (Trans. Self).

Gopal Barua is the perpetrator of violence here. Since he is not inherently a bad person, his failure continues to torment him. Value must be placed on the shame experienced by Barua as it is a form of moral judgement and an important source of potential moral action. From this perspective, shame displayed by Gopal Barua is a proof of instinctual human morality, a proof that human beings are inherently good. Gopal Barua's attempts to help Tapomayi's cause can also be read as an attempt for redemption. To understand the trauma of the perpetrator is to understand the traumatic experience that affects the perpetrator. It is important to look at the early life of Barua to understand it. Gopal's father committed suicide leaving him and his mother financially and emotionally vulnerable. When Gopal's mother dies, Gopal practically becomes an orphan having no one to love him. It is his yearning for love that led to his moral failure. In the novel, the rain functions as an instrument that brings forth his guilt. He says, "The rain that I watch is not new. . Even now, I watch an age-old rain, a primeval rain" (157) (Trans.Self). He adds, "The rain is endless and it is inside my mind" (158) (Trans.Self). Rain is not a soothing memory for Gopal. It reminds him of the flood and his selfish moral failure. His remorse over his moral failure turns into a traumatic memory and a cause of shame.

Shame and guilt stem from our inner sense of right and wrong. Shame targets our self image when we fail to meet personal and social standards. When Sumana confronts Gopal and questions him of his betrayal, he is devastated. She asks him, "Did you see him from the boat?" (314) (Trans. Self). This question uncovered a lot of memories which he desperately wanted to forget. He tried to defend himself stating that he hadn't done anything wrong. However, he and Sumana know that it was his inaction-not his actions- that bore culpability. Gopal says, "What did I do? I consoled myself saying that I did not do anything. But isn't that itself the reason for my pain? I could have done it easily. But I didn't." (287) (Trans.Self). His moral sense criticizes him as his action does not align with his moral and ethical principles. Tangney et al. avers, "Shame is typically the more painful, disruptive emotion because the self, not simply one's behavior, is the object of judgement. When people feel shame about the self, they feel "small," worthless and powerless" (2). Gopal Barua's inner self of morality and ethics torments him, reviving the memory of his moral failure. As Tangney and Dearing remarks, "Guilt involves a sense of tension, remorse, and regret over the "bad thing" done. People in the midst of a guilt experience often report a nagging focus or preoccupation with the transgression- thinking of it over and over, wishing they had behaved differently or could somehow undo the deed" (19). Though Gopal could have easily sailed towards Shyamal and saved him, he chose not to do so. A decision which cost him a moment destroyed his entire life.

"One moment! Just one moment. But that moment decided my remaining life. Its heaviness suffocates me. An island guarded by shrubs was erased forever from the face of earth. Two shadows standing on its highest point, awaiting death." (314) (Trans. Self). The image of Shyamal and his pet dog is a recurring nightmare for Gopal. Memory is not just a passive archive of past events, but an active force that sustains guilt and shame. In events of ethical and moral failure, memory returns the individual to the moment of moral choice, rekindling the emotional weight of that moment. Each return to the remembered past, serves as a moment of conscience, in which the individual experiences responsibility for their choice.

Gopal's melancholic life was obvious to his friends and his associates. His friend Dr. Tapas Sarkar instructs him to write down his 'problems' in a diary. Gopal follows this instruction, however, he uses incomprehensible scripts to guard his secrets. The question, "Did you see him from the boat?" functions as the key to his secret life. When Gopal realizes that his memoir has gone missing, it scares him. He does not want Tapomayi to read it and understand that Gopal is not his biological father and he is the reason for the death of his father. Since the narrator is familiar with the ancient scripts and he could read them, Gopal tries to extract a promise from

him. Gopal suspects that his diary has ended up in the hands of the narrator. He says, "My dear friend, I don't know from where you get these messages. You may even have my diary with you. If it is not so, it may soon be in your possession. In such a situation, do me a favour. . . . Please destroy it. Burn it. . . . And never try to read it" (207) (Trans. Self).

The concept of humanity is based on a set of values, norms and behaviour. Transgressions of these concepts challenge the idea of humanity itself. Shyamal was a compassionate man, who helped others without any expectations. He helped Gopal and Sumana and their families in times of need. Betraying such a person is an inhuman act. Theisen-Womersley avers, "A significant source of shame is the loss of continuity in upholding culturally defined values, norms and respected patterns of behaviour – and the self-consciousness over disappointing others within one's social network and embedded within one culture"(211). Gopal realizes that he has disappointed Sumana. The realization becomes the reason for their estranged relationship. Gopal finds even her death a consolation, as her presence was a constant reminder of his moral failure. When Tapomayi expresses his desire to marry Parveena, a refugee, Gopal Barua discourages him. He says, "She is not a person. She is just a shadow. It is difficult to live with a shadow" (185)(Trans.Self). Though he made this observation about Parveena, it is applicable to his relationship with Sumana. She became a shadow in their relationship. Sumana was a lively girl in her childhood and teenage days. It was her mother who forced her to marry Shyamal. Though she was the wife of Shyamal, she cherished a strange bond with Gopal which helped her to understand him. Even when there was no witness to what Gopal did, it is because of this that Sumana came to learn about it. Once she realized she carried Shyamal's child in her womb, she wanted to protect it at all costs. At the same time, she wanted to hide the paternity of the child from Gopal. When Gopal raised his doubts regarding the paternity of the child, she said, "Children belong to God." However, only later did he realize the God mentioned was Shyamal, a compassionate human being whom he betrayed. Sumana and Tapomayi function as the living reminders that transformed his momentary inaction to a long lasting trauma.

In conclusion, *Tapomayiyude Achan* discusses the fragility of human emotions and its potential long lasting implications. A brief moment of inaction results in a lifetime trauma. Trauma does not always result from an exposure to extreme violence or a catastrophe, it may also arise from a single moment in which the individual fails to act. Memory transforms it into a persistent affective presence. Trauma, here, functions as an internalized, self-inflicted injury, sustained through the individual's memory. The resultant guilt and shame is intensified by counterfactual memory- the persistent imagining of what could have been done in that moment. In this way, the memory sustains trauma by negative closure and renewing and reopening moral accountability. Gopal Barua's guilt and shame over his momentary inaction is sustained through his memory and transforms it into a lasting moral burden.

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