

## Individual Trauma versus Social Factors and Cultural Values or Ideologies: Reading Mukta Sathe's Debut Novel, a Patchwork Family

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**Abstract:** Michelle Balaev, in her writing “Trends in Literary Trauma Theory,” defines trauma as a person’s emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual’s sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society. She highlights several trauma theories developed by scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Kali Tal, Kirby Farrell, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Bessel van der Kolk, and J. Brooks Bouson, who primarily view traumatic experiences and their responses to be either universally pathological, contagious, or essentialist in nature. These diverse responses to trauma, as noted by Laurence Kirmayer, indicate that different forms of trauma elicit different responses, influenced by societal perceptions of the traumatic event, and shaped by specific cultural contexts. The complex interplay among trauma, trauma narrative, and socio cultural context underscores the influence of socio cultural norms on understanding, interpreting, and communicating trauma. This research paper explores these dynamics by focusing on Mukta Sathe's debut novel *A Patchwork Family* (2018), examining how traumatic events, notably the rape and murder of Sandhya and the death of Janaki's mother, prompt the protagonist Janaki to grapple with socio cultural structures and institutions as she processes her trauma. Rooted in a progressive trauma studies framework that emphasises on the socio-cultural domain of trauma, the research delves into the set structures that shape identities, perspectives, and confrontations with cultural and societal factors after witnessing a traumatic incident. The study primarily relies on pluralist theories of trauma, as developed by Michelle Balaev which locate the meaning of trauma within the socio cultural elements of traumatic experiences. By critically analysing the narratives of trauma survivors and witnesses within socio cultural contexts, this research paper aims to deepen the understanding of these interconnected themes.

**Keywords:** Gender Norms, Institutional Betrayal, Neoliberal Rationality, Pluralist Trauma Theory, Retraumatization, Survivor’s Guilt, Trauma Narrative, Victimization

### Introduction:

Michelle Balaev defines trauma as “a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by

which one evaluates society". (Balaev, 2008, p.150) Such an event is often so profound and indescribable that the effects or symptoms of the trauma persist long after the event has ended. Survivors and witnesses of trauma, whom Judith Herman describes as a 'subject to the dialectic of trauma,' often experience symptoms such as a conflict between the desire to deny the horrific events and the urge to proclaim them loudly. They may simultaneously want to bring attention to the unspeakable event while deflecting it away. This internal struggle, along with the fragmented memories and dissociation resulting from the shattering impact on their psyche, complicates survivors' and witnesses' ability to assemble a coherent narrative and express their experiences persuasively through conventional language. This can undermine the credibility of the trauma narrative. Furthermore, the act of speaking out publicly brings unwanted attention and social stigma, which often attaches itself to victims, leading them to be viewed with suspicion or even blamed for their trauma (Herman, 1992, pp. 1-2). Herman notes that 'People who have endured horrible events suffer predictable psychological harm' (Herman, 1992, p.3). This doesn't however mean that the responses to various traumatic events will be the same or similar as Balaev highlights several trauma theories developed by scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Kali Tal, Kirby Farrell, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Bessel van der Kolk, and J. Brooks Bouson, that primarily views traumatic experiences and their responses to be either universally pathological, contagious, or essentialist in nature. The implied implication is that different traumas produce varied reactions shaped by the social evaluation of the traumatic experience within a particular culture (Balaev, 2008, p.155). The pluralist and revisionist theories of trauma emphasize the 'specificity of trauma that locates meaning through a greater consideration of the social and cultural contexts of traumatic experience' (Balaev 2014: 3). This model of trauma focuses more on the complexity and inconsistency of trauma with its complex interrelations with other forms of trauma, age, gender, identity, religion, surroundings, environment, and culture of an individual that make the response to trauma even more complicated (Karmakar 2023, p. 2), rather than the pathological, repetitious, timeless, and unspeakable traits of the classical or dominant model of trauma (Balaev 2008). This is an essential aspect of understanding the socio-cultural influences that shape specific traumatic responses in individuals, as represented in trauma novels. An individual can simultaneously experience multiple types of trauma including sexual, psychological, and physical, among others (Karmakar 2023, p.2). Further, a particular event may be perceived as traumatic by one person but not by another (Karmakar 2023, p.2). Similarly, there can be numerous traumatic responses from a single traumatic event that varies from individual to individual. (Balaev 2008) This leads to the significance of the pluralistic and revisionist theories of trauma and its underlying factors and implications that stretch from psychological to societal and cultural that help to better analyse and understand trauma novels which even though fiction presents perspectives and issues generally considered realistic and perplexing. A trauma novel, as defined by Michelle Balaev, is a work of fiction that depicts profound loss or intense fear experienced individually or collectively.

A central feature of such novel is the transformation of the self, caused by a traumatic experience, highlighting how memory shapes new understandings of identity and the world. (2008, p.150). Balaev further explains that the trauma novel “demonstrates how a traumatic event disrupts attachments between self and others by challenging fundamental assumptions about moral laws and social relationships that are themselves connected to specific environments” (2008. Pp.149-150). By these definitions, *A Patchwork Family* can be considered an essential trauma novel where the protagonist Janaki blurs the boundary between a trauma survivor and a trauma witness by being both as several interrelated factors shape her traumatic experience. Janaki witnesses the brutal rape and murder of her best friend, Sandhya, experiences the death of her mother towards the end of the novel, and witness with the arrest of her brother, all leading to her eventual fallout with her family. Her fight for justice against the perpetrators, costs her personally and reflects a survivor’s guilt over outliving the traumatic incident that claimed her best friend, her mother and the imprisonment of her brother. Janaki becomes a “representative cultural figure” for traumatised women who witness violence and rape, bringing “awareness to the specificity of individual trauma that is often connected to larger social factors and cultural values or ideologies” (Balaev, 2008, p.156).

The setting of the novel is the city of Pune in Maharashtra (India) where the events are narrated through the perspectives of Janaki, the central protagonist and her grandfather’s dearest friend whom she calls dearly as Ajoba<sup>1</sup>. Janaki goes through two major transformation in the novel. First as a shy and sensitive girl since childhood to a strong independent career-oriented woman. This transformation can be traced through various events in the novel. A second major transformation which is also the primary focus in this paper, is seen after a major traumatic incident shatters Janaki’s perception of herself and the society she lives in. This transformation brings to light socio-cultural norms, structures, institutions, practices and stereotypes that contribute to our understanding of how external factors other than the traumatic event influence the creation, interpretation and acknowledgement of trauma. The transformation of the protagonist Janaki after the traumatic incident points not just to the effect of the external terrifying experience, but to the overlying and seemingly invisible roles played by these socio-cultural norms and institutions. She criticises at length the Indian judicial system and gender stereotypes in India, among the several socio-cultural norms and institutions that shape our understanding of traumatic events, the trauma process, and how society perceives trauma.

### **Methodology:**

A pluralist trauma theory framework primarily drawn from Michelle Balaev is employed in this research paper to critically examine the socio cultural dimensions of trauma as

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<sup>1</sup> The term “ajoba” means grandfather in Marathi.

depicted in Mukta Sathe's *A Patchwork Family*. An intersectional lens that accounts for the complex interplay of gender, class, caste, and institutional power in shaping both the trauma narrative and the lived experience of trauma is foregrounded. The paper explores trauma as a dynamic interrelation between individual suffering and broader societal forces. This applies literary trauma theory alongside feminist criticism to interrogate patriarchal norms, gendered expectations, and institutional roles, enriched by sociological insights into neoliberal rationality and class privilege. This also focuses on retraumatization within legal and judicial settings, drawing on trauma psychology and legal studies to expose patterns of institutional betrayal and retraumatization. Further, it investigates the psychological aftermath of trauma, primarily survivor guilt and identity formation, critically engaging with societal pressures around performative victimhood and victim identity. The conclusion draws on the insights developed throughout the paper to advocate for trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, and intersectional responses that address both personal and institutional dimensions of trauma. Through this intersectional framework, the research paper aims to offer a nuanced understanding of how trauma is variously constructed and experienced within overlapping social and cultural dimensions.

### **The Interplay of Gender Norms, Socio cultural Dynamics and Institutional Roles in Shaping Trauma:**

Gender norms, socio cultural dynamics and various institutions play crucial role in understanding the narratives and process of trauma, as it is perceived, processed, narrated and shaped by several factors. Janaki, the protagonist functions as a 'representative cultural figure,' embodying both a trauma victim and a witness. Her trauma, while deeply personal, serves as a broader representation of the collective trauma experienced by many women, particularly those who witnessed violent events, primarily sexual molestation and murder of loved ones. This brings into awareness the specificity of individual trauma often connected to larger social factors and cultural values or ideologies. (Balaev, 2008) As Balaev points out:

If the self is conceived as both a product of culture and individual idiosyncratic tendencies and behaviours, then it follows that the meaning of trauma is found between the poles of the individual and society. A central thematic dynamic in the trauma novel is thus found in representations of individual experiences of trauma that necessarily oscillate between private and public meanings, personal and political paradigms. (Balaev, 2008, pp.156-157)

Janaki's traumatic experience gains meaning not just from her personal ordeal, but through its connection to the specific culture, society, and place in which it occurs. As a trauma novel protagonist, her traumatic experience "disrupts the individual conceptualizations of self and connections to family and community, but the values attributed to the traumatic experience are largely shaped by cultural forces created within

the world of the novel.” (Balaev, 2008, p.157) Even the very “speakability” of the traumatic experience has less to do with “epistemological conundrum or neurobiological fact, but more as an outcome of cultural values and ideologies.” (Balaev, 2008, p.157) These social and cultural factors and institutions will be crucial to understand the makeup of trauma within a society and culture.

Janaki Natu, an upper-middle-class urban Brahmin woman from Pune, resides with her educated and accomplished family. Her perception of society and identity are influenced by her upbringing and the different intersections of her class, caste, gender, religion, social status, and education. Her traumatic experience disrupts this perception, transforming the way she sees both herself and the world around her. Before Janaki’s traumatic experience, the enforcement and limitation of gender roles and socio-cultural norms were seen as challenges that have compelled her to assert herself as a career-oriented individual disrupting conventional social and cultural standards. Her choice to pursue a career in law was met with disapproval from her family and Ajoba, as they regard it as “despicable and intimidating,” that rendered it unsuitable for a woman. Her family and Ajoba deemed the medical profession more suitable for Janaki due to her appropriate attitude and disposition. Janaki remained steadfast in her decision to challenge traditional gender and societal norms despite being aware of the numerous challenges and prejudices she may face by entering a male-dominated profession. Janaki asserts that women must pursue excellence in their fields, irrespective of societal expectations. This conviction motivates her to grow in her aspiration to become a lawyer. Her emphasis on career achievement surpasses her involvement in fighting for rightful causes such as giving legal help to women, as can be seen from her argument with Pratiksha.

During her dispute with Pratiksha, Janaki emphasized that she does not feel compelled to fight for women's rights simply because she is a woman, pointing out that if she were a man, she wouldn't be expected to do so. This angered and disappointed Pratiksha as she stated that she had mistakenly believed Janaki to be concerned about the challenges faced by troubled women aided by their college campus gender cell. Janaki defended herself from her accusations by saying she already fights at a personal level and questioned why she should fight for everyone else. Pratiksha inquired who else would assist these troubled women if not them and contemplated what would happen if Janaki encountered a similar situation in the future like these distressed women waiting for legal aid with no one to support them. She emphasized that she was not expecting Janaki to handle only women's cases as a lawyer in the future but Janaki surely has enough reasons to care about their issues. Janaki defended herself by calling feminism a bottomless well, upon entering which she would never be able to escape and never find happiness. She emphasized that even when she is concerned with women's issues, she does not wish to devote her entire life to this single cause unlike Pratiksha who was so drawn into the struggles of distressed women that it had rendered her oblivious to other

forms of societal exploitation, including poverty and casteism. This comment caused Pratiksha to perceive that Janaki regarded her efforts as misdirected and dismissive of other societal concerns. Pratiksha responded to Janaki's insensitive comment with sarcasm, asserting that at her next encounter with an abused woman, she would inform her that her issues were insignificant. These ideological disagreements between Pratiksha and Janaki caused a rift in their close friendship. These arguments also provided a clear understanding of Janaki's perception as an individual before the severe traumatic event of Sandhya's rape and murder. Janaki dislikes any expectations that limit her potential, whether they stem from gender roles, societal norms, or feminist ideals. She utmost values personal freedom and dislikes any external factors that restrict or pressure her. She recognises the injustices within social structures and the systems that uphold them. Often at times, she gets frustrated when those who benefit from these socio-cultural structures complain about them, as they are not the ones truly oppressed by it. Her sheltered upbringing in a well-to-do middle-class family, allowed her privileges like good education and access to basic amenities that others from disenfranchised classes lacked. While she is aware of these social disparities and is vocal against injustice in social representation, she still prioritises her freedom, happiness and career, over conforming to societal or feminist expectations that may limit her. However, the traumatic incident of Sandhya's rape and murder, forces Janaki to comprehend the importance of institutional support as offered by the gender cell in her law college which she disregarded participating earlier.

The Gender Cell at her college played a crucial role in providing her with the necessary support and legal advice, helping her navigate the complexities of the court case against the three perpetrators of Sandhya's rape and murder. This aid makes Janaki understand that the systems she once resisted and considered a barrier to her individual success and happiness, serve as important tools for justice in moments of vulnerability for troubled and traumatised women. Janaki's individual goals of having a successful career and happiness, initially made her disregard the importance of legal aid for troubled women, which caused a rupture in her friendship with Pratiksha but the very institution she disregarded, provided her help during her initial legal fight against the three perpetrators of Sandhya's rape and murder. The teachers involved in the Gender Cell provided her with the necessary support and legal advice to deal with the aggressive defence lawyer during Sandhya's rape and murder trial in court. Janaki's reluctance to participate in the legal aid provided to troubled women by the Gender Cell on her campus stems partly from her prioritization of personal excellence over moral causes, and partly from her fear that committing to feminist ideologies will limit her potential. She disregards the broader moral cause, focusing instead on her individual battle against socio-cultural structures and gender restrictions. In her view, a woman should strive for excellence, with commitment to a cause being only one part of that pursuit. Janaki's pre-trauma perspective aligns with neoliberal ideology, which, when examined in the context of institutional support for trauma survivors, appears detrimental to their well-being.



Her perception changes only when she herself has suffered through an ordeal and required the necessary support and empathy. The neoliberal rationality as such can be seen to transform individuals into economic actors, prioritizing self-interest over collective political engagement (Brown, 2015 pp.42-43).

This same neoliberalist ideology makes people prioritize individual success over collective well-being, and makes them act out of economic self-interest rather than moral duty. (Brown, 2015 pp.42-44) This is highlighted by the refusal of the restaurant manager and the waiters to help Janaki or save Sandhya as they believed the rapists to be members of a local gang, and trying to save Sandhya by going against them will be bad for business. It was clear by their reaction and conversation that they simply didn't care about Janaki or Sandhya being molested and was entirely driven by the thought of what might affect their business. Sathe presents a similar scenario during Janaki and Rahul's childhood which can be interpreted as a trajectory through which we see the neoliberalism rationality ingrained into school children. Ajoba observes the school system as a reflection of the wider social system that thrives in neoliberalism. He blames this neoliberal rationality that drove the young Akshay, a friend of Janaki's brother Rahul to commit suicide in the fifth standard by jumping from the sixth floor of their school building. Ajoba blames the parents as much as the school system for Akshay's death. According to him, the competitive education system has turned educational institutions into factories where all human relations are destroyed. As Ajoba compares the childhood of his generation with the current childhood of young boys and girls like Akshay, Janaki and Rahul, he the one variable that is different from their time is the system at school and at home which tells small children that their life has value only if they come first, that even doing well is not enough. The children are expected to act like machines with no individual talents, aptitudes, or interests where they can be pushed to perform better than their capacity. As Ajoba points the education system can hardly be called school but a factory that considers all other profession such as scientists, thinkers, writers or artists or painters to be unimportant and produces only engineers and doctors. This aligns much with neoliberal rationality (Brown, 2015 pp.42-44) that prioritize productive careers such as doctors and engineers over intellectual or creative pursuits because they align with capitalist economic demands. They are trained to become machines to make maximum money after leaving school. Through Ajoba, we find Sathe criticising the social system where children and later citizens of the society are encouraged to push themselves to achieve success relentlessly, sometimes at the expense of their empathy and care for others. In such contexts, individuals may be primarily motivated by personal success even at the cost of causing or preventing harm to others. A vital question might be raised here. How does such a social system and structure expect traumatised victims to live and survive in absence of empathy and support? How can someone in a society be expected to help others in distress if the citizens are formally taught to only focus on achieving success and earn more money? The restaurant manager and waiters' refusal to help Janaki and save Sandhya can be seen as an outcome of such neoliberal rationality which

otherwise could have prevented Sandhya's death. Janaki's own mindset before the tragic event corresponds to the same rationality. Under this neoliberalism, the focus on personal success and economic productivity can overshadow the importance of empathy and civic participation. This mindset can breed indifference towards broader social issues and reduce the inclination to advocate for systemic change or support others in distress. The competitive nature of neoliberalism fosters a "survival of the fittest" attitude, which can result in people becoming desensitized to the struggles and injustices faced by others. (Brown, 2015 pp.40-44) Rahul and Janaki's conversation after Janaki goes to visit him in prison points how the two siblings were content with the system and injustice till it directly impacted them. Rahul believed that his act of killing Mohan was right as the judicial system had failed them, and Janaki being a part of that system couldn't deliver justice to their mother or Sandhya. He was angry and disappointed at Janaki for testifying against him and not giving a fake alibi. Janaki points that the system had always been corrupt giving examples but this truth never affected Rahul. He was satisfied with the system till their mother was murdered which made him see the injustice. Rahul points to Janaki's hypocrisy of doing the same despite acting as a loyal crusader trying to reform the system and standing for the truth. He pointed that she too was satisfied with the system and acted morally only when she was affected by the rape and murder of her best friend. Despite telling the truth regarding Sandhya and against Rahul, Janaki has always kept hidden the sexual harassment of Meena, the teenage daughter of their house maid that they witnessed when they were children. Janaki and Rahul witnessed Sunil Uncle attempted to sexually harass Meena which she managed to escape. Later the uncle made false accusation that Meena stole his money, which made Janaki's mother to fire both her and her mother. Despite knowing the truth, Janaki did not tell her mother and even stopped Rahul when he wanted to tell. Even if they were scared as a child, they kept this hidden and led on with their life. They were content with all the injustice and crimes till they were personally affected which made them act accordingly. Janaki's perseverance to seek justice for Sandhya despite the danger, insult and humiliation as well as her choice of not lying in her brother's testimony was not out of her moral righteousness which we find Janaki to accept towards the end of the novel. It was her guilt of surviving the traumatic event and her inability to save her friend, a symptom of trauma that made her testify so that she could live. As she wasn't able to put herself in danger to save her friend, she wanted to redeem herself by testifying no matter how dangerous it gets, which again retraumatized her by causing the death of her mother. Her choice or inability to lie at her brother's testimony even at the cost of sacrificing her family and everyone around her, is probably her attempt to do what seems morally as well as legally right no matter the circumstance so that she can live with the survivor's guilt of losing her best friend as well as her mother.

### **Legal and Law Enforcement Institutions as Spaces of Retraumatization**

The role of public institutions and judicial institutions in the trauma process is crucial, especially when trauma victims and witnesses attempt to seek justice and closure. A



significant setback in the trauma process can be the “retraumatization” also called “secondary victimization” of the trauma witness or survivor who encounter “victim-blaming attitudes, behaviors, and practices from service providers and institutions which result in additional trauma.” (Katirai, 2020. p.88) When made to retell the traumatizing event, the scrutinization of the survivor’s testimony, judged for authenticity by strangers present in such institutions, make them feel both like a victim and a perpetrator. A trauma survivor not only has to deal with their personal trauma, but also the underlying abuse and disbelief that stems after the traumatic event, making them feel as if they have lost control over their own narrative and must entirely rely on others who may or may not relate to the traumatic incident. The trauma survivors may struggle financially as well as in legal or public institutions if they do not have the necessary support or understanding. The process becomes exceedingly difficult for female survivors, during the depiction and retelling of trauma related to sexual assault, who often experience victim-blaming, negative treatment and intimidation during the intense cross-examination. (Katirai, 2020. p.89) Women victims who act against the gendered stereotypes are likely to face retraumatizing behaviours by those around them in these institutions, causing them at times more harm than the original traumatising event. (Katirai, 2020. p.91) The retraumatization might be severely harmful when the women victims are from a disadvantaged, vulnerable or marginalized populations. (Katirai, 2020. p.85). A judicial or public system that does not acknowledge the sensitivity of this particular matter bring severe psychological and lasting harm to the trauma survivor. Furthermore, court hearings often bring the survivor with a close proximity of the perpetrator or sexual abuser, who may take the chance to intimidate, stalk, threaten the victim from giving their witness and pursue justice. The stereotypes present in these institutions at times make the survivor’s narrative difficult to be believed which makes it possibly discredited. As such a “trauma-informed approach to lawyering” as well as a “cross-cultural intelligence” is very much required in order to handle such cases of trauma victims. (Katirai, 2020. pp.87-88)

The retraumatization within the judicial institution is apparent in *A Patchwork Family*. The delay in procedure causes enough mental burden and anxiety to the survivors and their family who are repeatedly made to understand that such delays were normal while seeking justice through public and judicial institutions. Sandhya’s death caused immeasurable grief and suffering to her parents who lost their only daughter. This was very visible in their face and emotions. Even if they didn’t blame Janaki for their only daughter’s death, and at times even comforted her, Janaki could not bear the guilt of surviving the horrifying incident and being unhurt physically. The survivor’s guilt, a very common symptom of trauma along with Janaki’s unwavering determination made her pursue justice for Sandhya even when she was not healed from the trauma herself. Janaki’s family assisted her as well as Sandhya’s parents during this difficult time. When Sandhya’s parents or Janaki tried to get information about the progress of the investigation against the unidentified perpetrators, they were politely dismissed by the

police. This polite dismissal as mentioned in the novel was given because of their social status or else they would have been forcefully removed if they would have been poor. This draws attention to an unequal approach within public institution and the reduction of delay in such process depending on the victim's class and social status. The situation seems to suggest that individuals from marginalised populations or financially weaker backgrounds do not receive necessary support from public institution in such situation, leading them to lose hope of getting justice, and further being traumatised. As Sandhya's father, Amit was a doctor, had some political contacts and influence in his community, he was able to reach out to the MP of his constituency and was taken seriously. The MP called the investigation officer on their behalf, which made the investigation officer meet them and assure them that the police will ensure prompt action. Three months after Sandhya's death the three rapists were finally identified as Raghav, Mohan and Mohammed Ali.

The hope for justice for Sandhya was further delayed during the court proceedings. Even after eight years had passed, by the end of the novel, there was no affirmative indication that justice had been served. Even when Janaki is a law student and has been advised by her law college's teachers about how aggressive the defence lawyers can be, nothing has prepared her for the utmost brutal cross-examination during her testimony that disgraced and humiliated not just her but even her dead best friend in the presence of Sandhya's family. The vaginal swabs taken at the time of postmortem and the DNA tests conducted on the three perpetrators proved that they have raped Sandhya, but the knife used to stab Sandhya was never recovered, which was very much needed to build a solid case against them that they had also killed her. As the murder weapon was not found, it relied heavily on Janaki's testimony in proving that the accused men were responsible for Sandhya's death. By this time, we were already able to witness the major long-term symptoms of trauma in Janaki such as withdrawal from the friends and family around her, losing weight, and the survivor's guilt of pursuing justice for her friend, whatever may be the consequence. As a year had passed since Sandhya's death, Janaki was asked by the public prosecutor to refresh her memory, remember the traumatising incident, tell it to the court in detail and avoid any discrepancy in her statements. It is already concerning and well noted in legal discourse, where "the nature, quality and content of any evidence victims are able to provide is likely to be affected by the trauma they have suffered." (Smith, 2020. p.112) A victim's psychological symptoms can affect the nature and content of any evidence he or she is able to provide in two discrete ways. First, these symptoms can affect victims' ability to provide a clear, accurate, coherent, chronological and complete account of the events that they either witnessed or experienced. Second, they can affect the way in which victims deliver their evidence. In legal practice, trauma in victim witnesses' symptoms can affect not only the degree to which investigators are able to collect complete, consistent and cohesive accounts of events, but also the ability of investigators and judges alike to properly evaluate both the credibility of the witness and the reliability of their evidence. (Smith, 2020. p. 112) The

public prosecutor began the examination for the court and asked Janaki to recount what had happened that day in minute detail. Janaki narrated the whole incident but was interrupted a few times to answer the public prosecutor's questions. The testimony she gave while answering the public prosecutor assured that she was sure the accused were the people whom she had seen that night. Her testimony also mentioned that she didn't see the perpetrators stab Sandhya, but she saw them running from the spot. After Janaki's testimony was complete, it was the turn for the defense lawyer to cross-examine Janaki. The cross-examination by the defense lawyer was brutal in order to shake Janaki and her testimony in order to change the outcome of the murder charge that relied heavily on Janaki's testimony. The defence lawyer kept twisting Janaki's statements to suggest meanings that Janaki never intended. He twisted her sentence, "I was so shocked that...that..." (Sathe, 2018, p. 117), to mean that Janaki was in a state of shock after seeing her friend raped, which could have affected her memory. When this tactic didn't work, he tried to frighten Janaki by implying that if Janaki is caught giving a false testimony it would lead her to prison. Janaki tried her best to remain calm and assured that she couldn't be frightened by these tactics, as she is a law student and knows all the clauses of the law. Janaki's actions in her testimony were heavily scrutinized and hinted to be conveniently made up by the defence lawyer. These accusations and intimidations were reasons enough for retraumatization of Janaki, but the defense lawyer went a step further. In order to counteract Janaki's claim that she saw everything clearly, indicating that she saw the perpetrators raping Sandhya, the defense lawyer paused for dramatic effect and asked if Janaki could describe the colour of her friend's underwear. Janaki never expected this kind of question and was very much disturbed and shocked. She expected that this question would be considered objectionable by the public prosecutor or the judge, but no one intervened. Janaki tried her best to reply but this question shocked her, hindering the way she would have answered. This gave enough opportunity to the defense lawyer to attack and twist Janaki's words in his favour. The next shocking question he asked was about the dress Janaki wore that day. This question agitated Janaki leading her to shout at the defense lawyer, asking what relevance it had to the murder of her friend. The defense lawyer irrationally slandered both Janaki and Sandhya based on their dress and the time they were out of the house, pointing out that no decent woman would wear jeans and stay out late in a suburban area of Pune. He fictionalized a whole made-up story where he defamed Sandhya and destroyed her dignity by calling her a promiscuous, immoral, and cheap woman who approached his clients, seduced them, induced them to have illicit intercourse with her, demanded money, and when refused, blackmailed them. When his clients didn't fall prey to her threats, Sandhya committed suicide and Janaki threw away the knife. He condemned Sandhya using the most eloquent language with "a very exhaustive vocabulary of objectionable words, which he generously utilized, stopping just short of actually calling Sandhya a prostitute, but making it clear that was what he thought." (Sathe, 2018, p. 121) In contrast, he presented the perpetrators as good men who work hard to earn their living and who were targeted by Sandhya for financial and sexual

gain. This brutal slandering by the defence lawyer, caused immense grief to Sandhya's parents as their expressions during this slander could not be described in words. They had not only lost their daughter to the violence and depravity of others but had to listen to these false accusations intended to slander the dignity of their daughter. The hypocrisy in the courtroom scene is highlighted as the defendant gave lectures on Hindu culture where women are hailed as mothers, goddesses, and symbols of purity, which Sandhya supposedly went against. However, he used whatever means necessary to prove his point, and no one, including the public prosecutor or the judge, stood up to object. Ajoba after witnessing this courtroom episode of the praise of "our culture" where women are shown as goddesses, talks of a different reality where people forget that women are humans and as such is being deprived of their human rights.

Janaki suffers retraumatization at the hands of the very profession she aspires to join, a profession Ajoba deems "despicable". The legal institution meant to help the victims seek justice, often retraumatize them causing them more sufferings, at times more than the original traumatising event. (Katirai, 2020. p.91) The novel showcases how victim-blaming, insensitive remarks, intimidation, biases and stereotypes within the justice system severely harm the victims and their families, leading them to question the integrity of such institutions. Sandhya is stereotyped to be cheap, immoral and promiscuous simply for wearing jeans and staying out late in a Pune suburb. The lack of objection to this statement highlights the deep-seated biases within the justice system that can affect the legal proceedings. Janaki's actions and efforts to survive was misinterpreted and she was retraumatized in the court not just by the defence lawyer, but also by the silence of the public prosecutor and the judge. Not only was she disbelieved, intimidated, and blamed but she also had to suffer the irrational stereotypes stemming from a complex power structure and cultural expectations that unfairly label women. In the novel we see the power structure and cultural expectation which when followed makes the women to be a symbolic representation of being a mother, a goddess, and a symbol of purity, and when not followed, is openly debased and verbally abused in order to make the women seem cheap, immoral, and promiscuous.

As a representative socio-cultural figure in a trauma novel, Janaki's experience highlights how the judicial process can prolong trauma for women survivors due to societal and institutional biases. Even as a well-informed law student, Janaki could not emerge unscathed from the retraumatization, raising concerns for those victims who might be less educated, unfamiliar with legal proceedings, and financially weak. A trauma-informed lawyering that "incorporates assessment of trauma and trauma symptoms into all routine practice" and "ensures that clients have access to trauma-focused interventions . . . that treat the consequences of traumatic stress." (Katirai, 2020. p. 117) cannot be emphasised enough lest the members belonging to the same gender or community or having faced similar traumatic incident choose to give up to seek justice through the legal institutions. The possibility lies that a victim that faces

retraumatization in the judicial institutions may also choose not to participate again, presenting a serious barrier to justice. (Katirai, 2020. pp. 96-98)

In the novel, the delay in the judicial process is portrayed as routine, and Janaki, her family, and Sandhya's family are expected to be patient. The delay in justice have caused enough pain and anxiety for Sandhya's parents, but the presence of their daughter's rapist and murderer, Mohan, supporting his adult companions, caused them further extreme distress. The perpetrator Mohan who was seventeen at the time of Sandhya's murder, has completed the maximum punishment of three years under the Juvenile Justice Act. His lawyers appealed for his release which was granted, and he now attends the hearings. The perpetrator and the survivor being in close proximity during the hearing, give opportunity to the perpetrator, their associates, and lawyer to intimidate and threaten the survivor. We see this happen when Mohan makes a 'veiled threat' to Janaki to scare her into not testifying against his friends and retracting her earlier statement given in court. Janaki understood that the police or court would not be interested in offering her protection as the threat was cleverly disguised. Janaki pretended to be strong despite being affected by the threat and refused to change her testimony. Mohan did not stop at his threat. He acquired Janaki's cell phone number, and gave missed call to her from different PCOs late at night. He kept an eye at all her activities, stalked her and let her know that he was trailing her. He stood beside her when she waited for her bus to go to work and even followed her back home. She finally had to apply for a restraining order from the court to prevent him from stalking her. The threats and harassments took a toll on Janaki's health and work life. She was unable to concentrate at her job and made serious mistakes in her work which led her to be fired from her job. Despite the series of psychological attack, Janaki did not back away from her testimony in future court sessions. She gave the necessary details to the public prosecutor, withstood the cross-examination of the defence counsel, who again tried to slander her and Sandhya by calling them 'cheap women'. However, this time as a female judge replaced the previous judge, the defence lawyer's strategy of defaming the deceased was not allowed any further. The retraumatization of Janaki can be attributed to the patriarchal structure and expectations imposed upon women in India as clearly seen during the court sessions. Further, the process of healing remains impossible for Janaki as long as one of the perpetrator is free to use different underhanded strategy to intimidate and threaten her from pursuing justice. The patriarchal mindset is found to operate not just within individuals but institutions as well which threaten to silence women and intensify their experiences of trauma as is clearly highlighted in the courtroom episodes.

Even the heinous crime of rape and murder of Sandhya by the three perpetrators Raghav, Mohammed Ali, and Mohan who were rickshaw pullers, has much to do with their patriarchal mindsets as is visible in their confessions to the police. Sandhya who came to hire them as rickshaw pullers, saw how drunk they were, and turned back. This action was seen as a perceived arrogance of a "city girl" which angered them and made them feel insulted giving them the reason to rape her. Raghav raped her first, followed by



Mohammed Ali, and then Mohan. After the assault, they broke the bottle from which they had been drinking and cut her with the glass pieces, continuing even after she became unconscious. They soon realized the gravity of their crime and the potential consequences and panicked. Fearing that Sandhya would be able to recognize and testify against them, they chose to eliminate this possibility, and decided to kill her. Raghav used his knife to stab her first, followed by Mohammed Ali, and then Mohan. These men who have women in their own family commit such heinous crime against another women who might be a daughter, sister or a wife to someone may seem unimaginable but to them their patriarchal mindset gave them sufficient justification to their actions. This mindset is expressed and evident in Mohan who even after spending more than three years in a Juvenile Correction facility, never thought his and his adult friends to commit any wrong. They believed as men, they had the moral right to give orders to women, and it was inconceivable to them that a woman might dare to say no. Janaki's resistance to Mohan resulted in a furious desire for revenge, as in his view, Janaki wronged him by not being submissive, making her the culprit. As Mohan was unable to take his revenge directly on Janaki, he chose to target her mother in order to hurt Janaki and make her submissive.

### **Trauma, Victimhood, and the Struggle for Identity**

The trauma process of a victim or a survivor is also severely tied to the societal expectation to perform in specific manner. When these expectations are not followed, questions are raised regarding the authenticity or legitimacy of the victimhood and the traumatic experience. If the performative victimhood does not match with the social narrative of traumatic suffering, the traumatic experience is considered inauthentic and dismissed. (Watts, 2024. p.1) These societal and cultural expectations often form "stereotypes of legitimate and illegitimate trauma and victimhood," that shapes the formation of the "ideal victim." (Watts, 2024. p.1) This rigid and permanently fixed identity and image of a victim can hinder the process of recovery from trauma. The societal expectations related to how social narratives of trauma often shape the general understanding of trauma can be seen during the cremation scene of Janaki's mother. During Janaki's mother's cremation, her father and brother tried to protect her from the pain of attending a second cremation within the span of four years, after the cremation of her best friend, Sandhya. They were scared that Janaki would break down, but she did not. While her relatives cried, Janaki stared at them. She was so numb at that moment that she was unable to cry, which led her relatives to believe that she did not care about her mother and had become an outsider according to them. But, this sometimes happens because of excess of shock, not because of lack of emotion.

The societal expectations of following a trauma narrative in the aftermath of trauma, at times lead to undermining of social identities and emphasising much on the victim's identity, hampering the healing process and growth of the survivor. This is observed when Janaki started to attend the activities of the Gender cell at her college



after Sandhya's rape and murder. Janaki remembered how once she disapproved and left the gender cell, but now, is offered help by the same Gender cell. Janaki was expected to attend all the meetings of the Gender cell and contribute to every discussion. She was called to narrate her traumatic experiences countless times, after which many members offered their condolences to her. This helped Janaki in the beginning but after few repetitions, Janaki started becoming uncomfortable and grew tired of the sympathy offered to her, tired of other women listed as examples and tired of being part of a list of victims. This repetition made Janaki feel as if she is expected not to move on and live the rest of her life with the identity of a victim. The members started asking Janaki about the factual details, wanting her to remember every detail of her ordeal and narrate it repeatedly. Janaki felt as if she is being made a culprit and a victim at the same time through this relentless interrogation. This slowly made Janaki hostile towards the members of the Gender cell. Unable to bear this fixated identity of a victim any longer, Janaki soon cut ties with the Gender cell and blamed Pratiksha for making her feel like a victim. Janaki can be described as what Herman earlier described as a trauma survivor who are 'subject to the dialectic of trauma.' She experiences symptoms such as a conflict between the desire to deny the horrific events and the urge to proclaim them loudly. As described by Janaki herself, she does not need condolences, or some assurance that everything would be alright, but instead someone who would listen to her, someone whom she could show her anger, someone who would understand when she blamed herself for Pratiksha's death and would also tell her it was not her fault. This points the importance of providing a trauma victim such as Janaki, a space where she can vent, and be understood, instead of reminding her of the trauma through general sympathy or by focusing on her 'victim' identity. The 'victim identity' should not be fixated, and instead there should be focus on the post-traumatic growth and healing of the survivors through new, innovative and adaptive reconstruction of their personal and societal identity.

## Conclusion

Janaki's journey in *A Patchwork Family* foregrounds the intricate web of norms, structures, and institutions that shape the experience and aftermath of trauma, as illuminated by pluralist and revisionist trauma theory. The novel demonstrates that trauma is never solely personal and is always embedded within intersections of gender, class, culture, and institutional power, revealing how individual suffering is interpreted and amplified or suppressed within broader social frameworks. Sathe's narrative situates trauma in the interplay between the self and collective, exposing the ways in which social and legal systems driven by neoliberal ideologies and patriarchal values perpetuate and deepen wounds through disbelief, humiliation, and intimidation leading to retraumatization. The subtle structure in the novel that play major role in the trauma process leads to certain critical questions about justice and healing for survivors, especially those who lack social, financial, or political capital. The repeated silencing, victim-blaming, and institutional apathy encountered by Janaki underscore the urgent

need for trauma-informed, intersectional, and culturally sensitive responses that move beyond static constructions of victimhood. The novel also envisions the trauma survivors as complex agents capable of resistance, transformation, and new forms of relationality, despite profound adversity. Ultimately, *A Patchwork Family* calls for renewed ethical attention, not only to the events of trauma but to the subtle power structures, ideologies, and social narratives that frame how trauma is conveyed and contested. In doing so, Sathe's work expands the field of trauma studies in Indian literature, reminding us that compassion, and systemic reform are essential if justice and genuine healing are to be realized for all trauma survivors.

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