

***Rethinking Resilience, Traversing Trauma: A Study of Sexually Abused Children and Young Adults in Tracey Hoffmann's "Valley of Chaya"***

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**Abstract**

In *Valley of Chaya*, Tracey Hoffmann depicts a harrowing global community where young adults and children are abducted and sold into brothels. The survivors of sexual violence at these brothels endure unimaginable conditions. Their resilience is inspiring, yet it is chilling to contemplate what they have suffered. These survivors face ongoing trauma, including symptoms such as anxiety, depression, nightmares, sleep disturbances, hypervigilance, and memory issues. Unlike trauma, which brings recurrent and unpredictable consequences, resilience involves confronting significant hardship and adapting constructively. Survivors of such atrocities become more resilient and better equipped to handle trauma. Understanding the trauma experienced by these survivors and how they cope is crucial. In *Valley of Chaya*, survivors come from diverse age groups, religious backgrounds, and cultures, complicating their ability to support each other through shared experiences. This research delves into trauma and resilience theory, exploring the impact of spatiality and religious faith on the coping strategies of Hoffmann's Indian and Australian characters who have endured sexual abuse.

Keywords: Sexual Violence, Abduction, Trauma, Resilience, Survival

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## **Introduction**

The Australian author Tracey Hoffmann, who wrote *Valley of Chaya*, has experience counselling traumatized and crisis-stricken individuals as a therapist. The narrative explores the murky realm of the commercial sex trade as well as the kidnapping of young girls and children from the streets. Two street children introduced in the story are 10-year-old Ashok and his younger sister Shanti, who used to pick up trash in Mumbai's slums. One day, Shanti is abducted by some men, shattering the lives of both Shanti and Ashok. Unaware of the grim reality of sexual slavery, she finds herself in a brothel, experiencing abuse and sexual violence. Shanti suffers continuous mental and sexual violations, which traumatises her, leading to her murder by one of her customers. Charlotte Turner is a teenage Australian from a wealthy family. Against her parents' wishes, she travels to India and volunteers with Hope Mumbai, an NGO that assists street children. During her time there, she works with Dr. Philip Mangan and falls in love with him. However, on her way to her hotel room, she is followed and eventually kidnapped by a man who takes her to a brothel where she meets Shanti, Gargi, Padma, and many other victims of sexual slavery. The horrifying experiences of these women highlight the importance of sharing emotions, building community, claiming space, and preserving identity as a way to cope with trauma.

The experience of trauma can be the result of a complex interplay of social, psychological, and biological factors, leading to long-lasting emotional problems. Even if traumatic experiences do not immediately cause physical or psychological harm, they can still profoundly impact the emotions of the victims. Hence, the concept of psychological trauma is broad and encompasses reactions to events and their aftermath (Alayarian 2015, p. 135). In addition to enduring the trauma of sexual abuse and rape, female children and young adults also have to cope with the psychological consequences of severe personal violations. Across the world, child and young adult female victims endure unimaginable suffering and abuse—physical, psychological, and emotional—often without proper treatment. In cases of sex trafficking, children and young adults may have traumatic memories that are unrelated to their present circumstances because of their past experiences. These victims not only have to deal with the challenges of migration due to trafficking but also struggle with the memories of the assault and trauma they endured. For victims of human trafficking, stress comes in various forms and intensities. While each victim's experience is unique, they all have to cope with being uprooted from familiar surroundings and disrupting their normal lives. The common thread in these diverse experiences is the loss of the victim's home, friends, community, and comfortable way of life. Until genuine integration is achieved, this experience often leads to feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and alienation at all levels (Alayarian 2015, p. 133). The paper delves into the trauma and suffering experienced by the victims, prioritising their shared experiences and distinct differences such as age, religious background, and culture. It examines how these commonalities and differences both facilitate and complicate their resilient behaviour. The paper analyses the characters of Hoffmann's *Valley of Chaya* to establish the concept of resilience among child and young adult victims of sex trafficking.

## **Abduction, Sexual Violence and Trauma**

Trauma is typically experienced as a result of subjectively perceived objective events. Our susceptibility to trauma increases with the degree to which we see and feel threatened. In cases of abduction, 58% of incidents are likely to be carried out by someone other than the victims' friends and relatives (CTDC, n.d.), resulting in a heightened sense of fear and the

threat of serious harm or death. Sexual exploitation, which accounts for nearly 70% of the abducted victims (CTDC, n.d.), is unexpected for the victims and intensifies their fear and trauma. Consequently, determining whether an incident is traumatic and to what extent is subjective and relies on resilience. Accordingly, any experience or contact that leads to intense feelings of powerlessness and emotion might be considered psychological trauma. An inability to distinguish between one's body and mind can stem from psychological issues or physical injuries (Alayarian, 2015, p. 135). Therefore, before the actual act of sexual violence occurs—that is, after the abduction and subsequent arrival at a brothel—the victim of sexual slavery may experience trauma. Hoffmann tries to depict the fear and impending threat before Shanti and Charlotte are sexually abused. The malevolent individuals who kidnap Charlotte from her hotel room and take Shanti from Ashok pose a direct threat to them. The stress is intensified by Scarface, the brothel owner, and his men's unpredictable behaviour and intentions. The mental danger of the brothel has a harmful effect on both Shanti and Charlotte, causing them to become increasingly anxious, paranoid, and afraid of death. Even before they are sent to customers, this psychological aspect worsens and causes distress for them. Padma, the caretaker of the brothel and Scarface's wife, takes Shanti to get ready for customers. The treatment of Padma frightens Shanti even more as she is unaware of the looming threat. Hoffmann writes, "The slap across her face stunned Shanti, and she staggered back. Her hand went to her cheek as fresh tears stung her eyes. Fear gripped her stomach, and Shanti curled up into a tight ball on the floor" (Hoffmann, 2011, p. 80). Shanti and Charlotte both show typical physical symptoms of fear, such as shaking, perspiration, and rapid breathing, when they see other victims and the environment of the brothel. The initial trauma that Shanti and Charlotte are going through before the act of sexual exploitation is shown by these visceral emotions and tangible terror.

Children and young adults see very violent, repetitive, prolonged, and explosive acts of sexual violence at brothels. Additionally, they frequently get worse after seeing potentially fatal acts of sexual violence. The newly recruited victims face isolation in the brothel, which adds to the sense of fear and represents their vulnerability. The victims are forced to face threats alone because of their seclusion from the outside world. Crimes against the vulnerable, including abduction, incarceration, torture, and domestic abuse, are generally linked to feelings of impotence and terror of harm or death. Shanti is more vulnerable to abuse due to her difficult past, which includes growing up in poverty as an orphan. Shanti often recalls her brother and fantasises about Ashok teaching her to count while men are exploiting her. Hoffmann uses this to highlight the lasting impact of trauma caused by sexual assault and the ongoing cycle of exploitation in brothels. To effectively convey the long-term effects of sexual abuse, the story portrays Shanti dissociating during instances of exploitation (both verbal and physical) and experiencing triggers while sleeping. These scenes depict Shanti entering a mental void and struggling with thoughts of death in vivid detail, demonstrating how seemingly ordinary objects or sounds can unexpectedly trigger her trauma. This illustrates the harsh reality of being trapped in a soul-destroying prison.

Through a series of terrifying occurrences that put Charlotte's fortitude and will to survive, the narrative explores resilient behaviour amongst the victims. The horrific reality of the physical, mental, and psychological torture that occurs in the brothel is depicted through the victims of various age groups and religious and cultural backgrounds. Charlotte's journey from Australia to a brothel in Mumbai highlights the subtle ways in which abuse may permeate and upend a person's life, undermining their sense of autonomy and self-worth. "Her body felt alien to her. Every inch ached and was sensitive to touch. The deep bruising covered large areas" (Hoffmann, 2011, p. 142). Charlotte has never been naked in front of the

unknown, and after being repeatedly beaten and sexually harassed, she feels shattered. Caruth also acknowledges the potential of sharing one's own experiences, highlighting how trauma is intertwined with the pain of others and how it can result in unexpected connections with others through hearing about someone else's journey (Caruth, 1996, p. 8). Hoffman explores the mechanisms of resilience and control that form the basis of relationships established on shared trauma through Charlotte's interactions with different characters. Charlotte's determination to help Shanti, Gargi, Padma, and herself escape the brothel encompasses emotional support, care, cultural ambivalence, and religious faith. However, despite their best efforts, sexual assault victims frequently struggle to get over their horrific experiences as Gargi and Padma continuously refuse to escape the brothel. This might be the case because accepting that other people have experienced torture or death would entail disregarding their own history. The accounts of victims, however, portray the challenges faced by Charlotte in reclaiming her identity, the process of overcoming trauma, and the prolonged journey to recovery. A ray of hope shines in the darkness as Charlotte's resilience and determination to overcome her experiences of sexual violence testify to the human spirit's capacity for healing and renewal.

### **The Trauma of Sexual Violence and Resilience**

Since trauma is a highly subjective experience, what one person experiences as traumatic may not have the same impact on another (Alayarian, 2004; 2011). Experiences from the past, especially unpleasant ones, might influence a victim's reaction to current atrocities. The way trauma is perceived and processed can be influenced by cultural background and societal norms. When it comes to grieving and accepting their losses, some children and young adults go through it fast, while others battle intensely with feelings of guilt and sadness stemming from distressing events (Alayarian, 2015, p. 137). Even if children and young people are trafficked into the sex trade or places where they are exposed to extreme human suffering, they emerge from these situations with severe physical and psychological wounds that trigger painful memories from their time in the brothel. Hoffmann's nuanced depiction of Charlotte, Shanti, and Gargi emphasises how each character's experience and reaction to their hardships are shaped by their distinctive traits, cultural background, and personal past. The diversity of their experiences underscores the intricate nature of human resilience and the different ways in which individuals confront and overcome challenging situations. Charlotte's trauma is shaped by her subjective experience of sexual exploitation. It is influenced by her personal history and emotional vulnerabilities. Her Australian cultural upbringing shapes her expectations of safety and trust. Her feelings of anxiety and loneliness are heightened by being distant from home. She feels ashamed of being sexually violated when Scarface makes her walk naked in front of him. As she navigates linguistic and cultural difficulties, in addition to physical and emotional dangers, the foreign setting exacerbates her trauma. Charlotte's resilience is tested and developed throughout the narrative as she learns to reclaim her autonomy. Shanti is a garbage picker who lives on the streets of Mumbai and is reliant on her brother; hence, her socioeconomic status also has an aspect in her abduction. Her early reaction to trauma was formed by the severe sufferings of starvation and orphanhood that she had previously experienced before men snatched her from Ashok. In the brothel, she is constantly abused physically and sexually by men. As a child, she struggles with her emotions, hopelessness, fear, and despair, and her body becomes a site of constant violation. While seeing defecated flies across the surface, she thinks, "My life is like that, ... dirty. She imagined her blood turning black, ... Even the worms she had seen on some people's skin would not want to live on her body" (Hoffmann, 2011, p. 133). Though she was murdered by one of her customers just before escaping the brothel, her journey oscillates between hope

and despair, influenced by bonds of empathy with Charlotte. Gargi's trauma is kept hidden in the mask of her cold attitude. She is pregnant and hiding it from the brothel owner due to the fear that they might kill her child, which they eventually do. Charlotte is shown as her godmother, who not only rescues her from the brothel but also helps her to get over her past traumatic memories. It is impossible to undo the horrific atrocities that Shanti, Charlotte, Gargi and Padma as well have experienced. Nonetheless, therapeutic interventions such as care, support, and empathy make such victims resilient.

Resilience is the ability to adapt to adversity and trauma positively. It is not a fixed trait but a concept that involves facing hardship and achieving positive life changes (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000, p. 858). Mlambo asserts that resilience focuses on people's strengths rather than their vulnerabilities by highlighting their coping strategies. It demonstrates how individuals navigate and adapt to challenges and showcases their ability to maintain or regain well-being despite adversity. This perspective shifts attention from what makes people vulnerable to what empowers them, exploring how they effectively manage and overcome difficult situations (Mlambo, 2014, p. 39). A child's lasting impressions of themselves and their surroundings may alter as a result of traumatising experiences of torture, sexual assault, and violation. For a child victim to feel in control of such atrocities, they might not yet be able to adjust to them or change their radical ideas about themselves and the world (Alayarian, 2015, p. 141). This might lead to a child victim who has experienced sexual assault to believe that everyone around them is possibly a rapist or offender and that no one can be trusted. Shanti finds herself in a strange and unfamiliar setting, a brothel that she had never heard of, without her brother. Shanti feels dreadful and tries to remove the invisible dirt from her body by scratching the skin. It is challenging for her to trust anyone. She becomes acquainted with Charlotte after spending some time at the brothel. She has opened up to Charlotte about her worries, uncertainties, and estrangement, giving them room to become resilient. Charlotte brings smiles, laughter, and light to Shanti's miserable life by playing with knuckle bones and conversing with her. They were deprived of sunlight and fresh air since men brought them to the brothel, and when they found little beams, it felt like a revival for them.

“She cranked her head back to look at the sky and squinted at the sun. As a light breeze fanned her cheeks, she opened her mouth. Her gaze swept the small area, and she ran her hand over the bark of the tree. The rough surface caught at the fingers, but she didn't care. Warmth filled her and she felt a sob catch in her throat.” (Hoffmann, 2011, p. 212)

For a young adult who has experienced extreme trauma—such as being trafficked or sexually enslaved and losing their home, family, and trust—the therapy objective is to assist them in regaining confidence in humanity. This entails fusing their painful memories of sexual violence with their prior pleasant experiences in life (Alayarian, 2015, p. 142). In her book *Aftermath*, sexual assault victim Susan Brison highlights this process, pointing out that discussing horrific events is both an outward and an internal process that helps to change the suffering (2002, p. 56). Through talking about their experiences of brutality and physical abuse, trauma survivors may change the way their trauma affects them and keep it from taking over their lives (Soderstrom, 2017, p. 72). Trauma is not a universal experience for all sexually abused children and women. For some, it is a constant, lifelong experience that is often intensified and less obvious (Pain, 2022, p. 1796). Trauma survivors from the brothels can rebuild their resilient behaviour and sense of self and start the healing process by testifying about their experiences and creating a narrative about them. Although the trauma of

sexual violence in a brothel (sexual slavery) is a cyclic incident, telling one's experience is necessary for the healing process, even if it can be difficult and unpleasant. Charlotte is depicted as an embodiment of resilience as she tries to rescue Shanti, Gargi, and Padma, along with herself, despite all hurdles and threats. She also loses hope to survive, which leads her to thoughts of death, but her faith in God keeps her alive, and she endures pain and trauma. She is seen to convince Padma and Gargi to escape the brothel and eventually succeeds in getting Gargi out of the soul-destroying prison. Charlotte's faith in God becomes a driving force to cope with the dark reality and trauma of what she could not be able to change. While convincing Shanti that they will soon be free from this trauma, Charlotte says, "This place is so full of darkness, Shanti. We need to pray together so God can hear us" (Hoffmann 214). They pray for strength, hope, survival and especially for Shanti to cope with the brutality she endures every night.

"Lord Jesus, we know you're here with us. Lord this is a dark, evil place. We cannot survive without your help. Please give Shanti strength to endure what happens to her. Help her feel your presence, when she is taken where she doesn't want to go. Lord Jesus, please help us to hold onto the hope of rescue, to trust that you will lift us out of this prison and restore us stronger and better than before. Amen." (Hoffmann, 2011, p. 214-5)

Padma, being Scarface's wife, could not let Charlotte and others escape from the brothel, but Charlotte's positive, resilient behaviour could not stop her. She, along with Philip and her brother Eli, helps rescue Gargi. She also helps Gargi to overcome her trauma and to help others who go through such a traumatic journey. Shanti always has nightmares that she is approaching Ashok from a filthy place but fails, and she wakes up dazed and breathless. Charlotte nearly retrieved Shanti from her mental void and planned to get her to Ashok, but just one day before they planned to escape, one of the customers, who calls himself the devil, brutally killed her.

## **Conclusion**

Tracey Hoffmann's *Valley of Chaya* offers a harrowing yet insightful exploration into the world of abduction, sexual slavery and its devastating impact on young girls and women. Hoffmann skilfully illustrates the severe suffering endured by victims of sexual slavery through the characters of Shanti, Charlotte, and Gargi. The narrative explores the emotional wounds that these encounters leave behind, as well as the severe physical and psychological violence. It draws attention to the complexity of trauma and how a variety of social, psychological, and bodily components interact to shape it. Hoffmann's portrayal of her characters demonstrates that trauma is deeply subjective, influenced by past experiences, cultural backgrounds, and individual vulnerabilities. This underscores the complexity of psychological trauma and the varied responses of individuals to similar traumatic events. Moreover, the narrative poignantly illustrates the concept of resilience. Characters like Charlotte and Shanti show glimpses of hope, resilience, and persistence despite the victims' extreme physical, mental, and emotional torture. The human spirit is shown to be resilient through its relationships with one another and attempts to regain its autonomy and individuality in the face of horrific circumstances. The narrative also sheds light on the importance of community, empathy, and faith in coping with trauma. Charlotte's endeavours to assist Shanti and other victims in escaping, her dependence on faith, and the connections forged among the victims serve as compelling reminders that even under the direst circumstances, healing and rejuvenation are possible. Hoffmann's portrayal of resilience is

not one of unwavering fortitude but rather an indication of the ability to heal and the continuous battle against trauma. *Valley of Chaya* is a compelling narrative that exposes the grim realities of sex trafficking while celebrating the resilience and enduring hope of its victims. Hoffmann's work highlights the possibilities for healing and the human spirit's ability to overcome even the most horrific situations, underscoring the importance of empathy, support, and understanding in confronting the complicated and very personal experiences of trauma.

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