

Traumatic Experiences in *Under the Tamarind Tree* by Nigar Alam

Ellisa Reggita Chayani^a, Farhanah Zulfi Purwanti^b, Ramadhina Ulfa Nuristama^{c,*}

^{a,b,c} UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, Indonesia

*Corresponding author. E-mail address: ramadhina.ulfa.nuristama@uinsa.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study explores how Nigar Alam's book *Under the Tamarind Tree* presents trauma and coping strategies in a complex way. The research applies John Bowlby's attachment theory as a framework for analysis to investigate the traumatic experiences of the protagonist, Rozeena, through a narrative lens. An in-depth analysis of Rozeena's journey—one characterized by grief, remorse, and dashed hopes—reveals the profound psychological effects of both personal tragedies and historical occurrences like the Partition of India. The study provides insights into Rozeena's coping mechanisms, using qualitative methodologies and narrative research, ranging from constructive activities like community service to detrimental habits of concealment and emotional disengagement. The study adds to our understanding of trauma's multiple expressions and the many avenues to resilience by uncovering Rozeena's intricacies. Furthermore, it emphasizes the novel's investigation of human suffering and the search for healing in the face of tragedy, encouraging readers to consider the complexities of trauma and the power of storytelling in exposing the human condition.

Keywords: traumatic experience, psychoanalysis, coping mechanism, Nigar Alam

INTRODUCTION

People are frequently left with permanent scars from traumatic events, which affect their mental, emotional, and physical health. These upsetting occurrences, which can include both personal and natural calamities, can overwhelm a person's coping strategies and have long-lasting psychological impacts (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). In *Under the Tamarind Tree*, by Nigar Alam, the protagonist Rozeena struggles with a string of tragic experiences that mold her life and mentality. Rozeena's experiences provide a prism to examine the intricacies of trauma and resilience as the story progresses.

Traumatic experiences include a wide range of highly stressful experiences that exceed an individual's ability to cope effectively and have lasting effects on mental, emotional, and physical levels. These alarming events are widespread and include natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, and wildfires, where sudden and cataclysmic environmental changes destroy our sense of safety and security. Similarly, violent attacks and assaults, whether physical or sexual, leave deep scars on a person's psyche and often create a pervasive sense of vulnerability and fear. Furthermore, the sudden and violent loss of a loved one leaves behind a shadow of sadness and mourning, causing deep psychological turmoil in people. Even medical trauma, such as a severe illness, surgery, or medical emergency, can cause intense distress and anxiety, reducing feelings of control and well-being. The aftermath of such traumatic events can manifest in a variety of symptoms, including flashbacks, nightmares,

anxiety, depression, and physical symptoms such as increased heart rate and sweating when faced with reminders of the trauma.

John Bowlby's attachment theory offers a theoretical framework for comprehending how early attachments affect people's emotional development (Bowlby, 1969). The attachment theory holds that an individual's capacity to control their emotions and build connections in later life is influenced by their degree of attachment to their main caregivers (Marrone, 2014). Through the application of Bowlby's theory to the examination of Rozeena's experiences, this research endeavors to reveal the fundamental mechanisms that mold her reactions to trauma.

Under the Tamarind Tree is a novel written by Nigar Alam. *Under the Tamarind Tree*, the book was published in 2023. The story is about Rozeena's life, which started in 1964 when she struggled to build her medical practice and save her family home. Her parents fled India during the Partition of India. Since her father passed away, Rozeena has taken on the responsibility of being the head of the household.

Nigar Alam is a Pakistani writer who was born in Karachi, Pakistan, Nigar Alam spent her childhood in Turkey, Nigeria, Italy, Kenya, Indonesia, and the United States before returning to Karachi. With an MBA and CPA, she has worked in brand management and auditing. Currently, Alam teaches at Anoka-Ramsey Community College and lives with her family in Minnesota.

This paper will discuss the main character, Roozeena's trauma, using attachment theory by John Bowlby. Attachment theory is a theory that suggests that an infant's relationship with their primary caregivers has a profound impact on their emotional and social development. The foundation of Bowlby's theory is that attachment formation is a survival strategy ingrained in infant biology (Marrone, 2014).

This research uses the Qualitative method with narrative research by Creswell. John W. Creswell defines narrative research as a qualitative research approach that focuses on understanding and interpreting individuals' lived experiences through storytelling. In narrative research, the researcher collects and analyzes personal narratives or stories individuals share to gain insight into their experiences, meanings, and interpretations (Creswell, 2007).

Using storytelling, narrative research provides a methodological framework for investigating people's lived experiences (Creswell, 2007). By examining the personal tales included in *Under the Tamarind Tree*, this research aims to shed light on Rozeena's individualized experiences with trauma and the coping strategies she uses to get over hardship. This study attempts to clarify the complex relationship between trauma and resilience as shown in the book by examining the nuances of Rozeena's story.

This research seeks to add a comprehensive interpretation of Rozeena's experiences in "Under the Tamarind Tree" to the body of knowledge already available on trauma and resilience. The goal of this research is to improve our comprehension of the psychological processes that underlie trauma and resilience as they are portrayed in literature by fusing narrative research with attachment theory. This study aims to clarify the intricate interactions between prior experiences, interpersonal connections, and coping mechanisms amid hardship by examining Rozeena's path.

METHOD AND THEORY

This research uses a qualitative methodology, namely story research, as Creswell (2007) described. The goal of narrative research is to utilize storytelling to analyze people's lived experiences in a way that makes their meanings and interpretations more complex. This study analyzes personal narratives to explore the traumatic experiences and coping strategies of Rozeena, the main character in *Under the Tamarind Tree*.

John Bowlby's attachment theory serves as the theoretical foundation for this investigation. According to attachment theory, people's emotional and social development is significantly influenced by their early interactions with their main caregivers (Marrone, 2014). Within the framework of this examination, attachment theory offers a prism through which to view Rozeena's reactions to trauma and her social interactions. By utilizing Bowlby's theoretical framework, this study attempts to clarify the underlying dynamics of Rozeena's attachment patterns and their influence on her coping mechanisms in hardship.

ROZEENA'S TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES

The first trauma experienced by Rozeena was her feeling of guilt over the death of her older brother, Faysal. At that time in India in 1947, there was a Partition which separated India and Pakistan based on religion or teachings adhered to. The partition caused a lot of violence, murder, and mass displacement that occurred to millions of people there at that time, including Rozeena's family. At that time Rozeena lived with her father, mother, and older brother, Faysal. With the Partition incident, Rozeena's family decided to flee to Pakistan to escape the truly chaotic events at that time in India. However, on their way to escape, Rozeena was separated from her father, mother, and brother. He was still small then and didn't know what was happening. Until her older brother, Faysal pushed Rozeena and told her to run to an empty house where their family hid. Rozeena ran as hard as she could and entered the house. She thought her brother could run after her. Because Rozeena believes that her brother is as fast and agile as when playing cricket. However, her brother couldn't achieve it.

“Rozee!” he screamed again. “Run, Rozee, run!” Where to? Behind her was the raging fire and the approaching mob, and in front, from a lane across the street, a bigger, even louder group of men emerged.

Faysal pushed her toward the fire, pointing at the house next to it, a safe house where their parents were headed. It would lead to another house, behind it. “Another house? A safe house?” He shook her by the shoulders and aimed her toward it. “That way! Just run, Rozee, run!” Without looking back, she ran like she'd never run before. That was the last time Rozeena saw her brother. (Alam, 2023, p. 9)

Her brother, Faysal was caught. Rozeena felt that it was all her fault. Rozeena thought that if only Faysal had not stopped to encourage her to run quickly, then Faysal would not have been caught and died. Inside the house, her mother hugged Rozeena and she felt her mother's body tremble. Her mother and father saw her older brother, Faysal, being speared. Rozeena was too scared to look at him and buried her face in her mother's arms.

“It wasn't much later that Rozeena got separated from her family in the chaos and violence and fires all around. But Faysal found her. He pushed her toward the house where their parents were headed. It would lead to a safe house behind. He held her by the shoulders and aimed her toward it. (Alam, 2023, p. 216)”

This terrible incident continued to haunt Rozeena even when she was a teenager. Blaming herself for what happened to her brother. She was afraid after sunset because of the party incident where Kabir would tell him about the dangers that would come at night.

“Kabir had come to warn them of the approaching danger. Rozeena had never seen him the night before. Milk was only delivered in the early morning. She wondered if he always looked frightened after the sunset. (Alam, 2023, p. 215)”

From this, we can see that Rezoona feels that she is the reason why her brother died even though it is not her fault and she also experiences anxiety. Anxiety, when it starts to get dark, is caused by a sense of insecurity about the danger that could harm her family at any time. When Rozeena was in her 20s, she lived with her mother. Fighting for the plan or dream she once told her father was to pursue higher education and become a doctor at a national hospital. Not only that, Rozeena also wants to improve her family's status and make the only woman she has, namely her mother, happy after her father died of a heart attack. She must defend the house left by her late father. But all dreams disappeared when her close childhood friend experienced a kind of poisoning caused by datura leaves.

Rozeena knew that datura leaves poisoned Gul because Rozeena often forbade Gul to see a judge or someone we could call a healer who suggested using datura leaves to cure her asthma when it flared up.

“I’ve told you to stay away from datura.” Rozeena released a breath to lessen the frustration and fatigue in her tone. “It’s not safe. You can even . . .” How many times before had she warned Gul?

“Where did you get the datura?” Gul bit her lip and shrugged. “It came from some hakim, didn’t it? I saw the new store sign in the market. You know, just because a person calls himself a hakim doesn’t mean he studied in a college to learn medicine. Most hakims just cook something up in their kitchens and sell it to you.” (Alam, 2023, p. 22)

Rozeena knows that datura leaves have dangerous properties if used continuously, and as a medical student, she knows this. However, at that time, when she was busy taking care of Zohair and Aalya so that other people wouldn’t talk about them, she was careless. Gul uses the leaves again even though Rozeena told her not to use the datura leaves. Rozeena regrets this because she should have gone to Gul's room and snatched all the leaves.

Gul was taken to hospital after she suddenly experienced nausea like she was going to vomit and also felt thirsty. Rozeena recognized these symptoms when she saw Gul's face darker than usual and her pulse rate increased. Rozeena asked Abdul, who first noticed something was wrong with Gul about whether Gul ate or drank anything. Abdul answered no. So that's when Rozeena thought of Datura's leaves.

“Gul said she felt sick, like she would vomit, but then she was so thirsty also,” Abdul said to Rozeena. He twisted his head from side to side away from Gul’s tossing and turning. “She kept on saying her mouth was dry, too dry, and then she started screaming about seeing snakes and other things. But there weren’t any in our quarters. I looked under the bed and behind the door, everywhere.” His eyes widened in panic. “Do you think it’s a snake bite?” (Alam, 2023, p. 42)

Gul was taken to the national hospital and treated by the doctors there. Rozeena knows one of the doctors who treated Gul, namely Dawood, a lung doctor. Dawood said that what Rozeena thought was true—namely datura leaf poisoning. Dawood also said that he had only

handled a serious datura leaf poisoning case. Of course, this statement was very unpleasant for Rozeena. Abdul feels very guilty because he was asleep at that time and didn't keep an eye on Gul, but Rozeena thinks it's not Abdul's fault, it's her fault. However, Dawood said things were far from wearing anymore. He says that Gul said that the doctor is Rozeena. Misunderstanding. Rozeena is indeed the doctor, but Rozeena never suggested Datura leaf Gul as a medicine for her asthma, instead she forbade it. Dawood knew that Rozeena would not recommend this. But the problem is that's what Gul said and all the hospital people who treat Gul know it all. *"The others in the room, doctors and nurses, asked her where she got the datura, but her speech was slurred. Your name, as her doctor, was clear though...."* (Alam, 2023, p. 45).

Gul dies and all her close friends attend her funeral including Rozeena and Dawood. At that time, Dawood said that Rozeena's application to become a doctor at the national hospital would not be accepted after everything that had happened. What do others say if Rozeena is still received after everything.

"Your application for employment at National Hospital won't be considered, Rozee. No one is accusing you of giving datura to Gul, but everyone heard her ask for her doctor, for Dr. Rozeena. Her words were clear enough to know that you were aware Gul was burning datura leaves and inhaling the smoke." He paused. "Everyone heard Gul say that, and everyone talks, and the hospital has many qualified applicants." (Alam, 2023, p. 47)

That's when Rozeena felt that she deserved this after her negligence in keeping Gul away from the leaves. Rozeena could only surrender and think about becoming independent by setting up her clinic rather than maintaining that position. She also wants to make his brother's dream come true.

Many bad incidents happened to Rozeena. After losing her brother, her father, Gul, and also her dream of working as a doctor at a national hospital, Rozeena had to lose another person she loved, Haaris. Haaris, her best friend and soulmate who has been with her for a long time, has to marry someone else, namely Kulsoom, Waleed's ex-wife, the man who died as a result of being pushed by Zohair.

As a result of Waleed's death, Kulsoom helps Rozeena and Haaris to cover up Zohair's murder. Kulsoom only requested that Rozeena take care of her son, Mansur, and Rozeena agreed. Rozeena and Haaris thought everything would end there and they could live happily. However, Kulsoom's family, who knew about all this, asked Haaris and Kulsoom to marry for their family's dignity.

"Zohair isn't safe yet." Haaris's voice was stronger now. "Kulsoom's family can deny the photographs, take back the truth. I told her about us, Rozee, and Kulsoom agreed easily not to marry. But her parents say they will take it all back, deny everything, if we don't do it." (Alam, 2023, p. 271).

Kulsoom and Waleed's divorce was something very dishonorable there so her family asked them to marry by threatening to reveal that Zohair was the cause of Waleed's death. Haaris was forced to agree to the marriage, and Rozeena was completely devastated.

THE WAYS ROOZENA OVERCOMES HER TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES

The trauma that Roozena has experienced is enough for her, she cannot continue to be stuck in the sadness and heartache that she is experiencing. There were still many things she wanted to do and achieve, and she didn't want to be someone who was pitied. She now has Mansur, a boy from Kulsoom whom she gave to her care. Rozeena didn't think so. Mansur is her child not Kulsoom after she gave it to her. There is a feeling of joy because she can be Mansur's mother, but she also has to accept that Haaris will marry Kulsoom. Therefore, she did several things to get rid of his trauma. It's not about the trauma about Haaris that haunts her, but about several problems in her past that make her feel guilty. Some of the methods used by Rozeena are healthy and unhealthy. The healthy way is to help others, while the harmful way is to hide secrets and distance yourself from the people around you.

Rozeena likes many activities, from gardening to helping people around her. She did this to recover from the past which continued to haunt her, especially the trauma she experienced. With the clinic she owns, she helps underprivileged people to seek treatment at national hospitals by charging a small fee, even free. Even though she is not a doctor at a national hospital, Rozeena feels quite satisfied with the clinic she has. She has built many positive relationships with the people around her because without them recommending him to each other, there wouldn't be the clinic he has now.

Gul nodded, but Rozeena knew the girl didn't really believe that these hakims, the doctors of traditional remedies, preyed on the poor and illiterate. To add to the confusion, there were some hakims who had studied homeopathy and pharmacology. People like Gul, however, were bound by access to the closest, cheapest care, which was also the most suspect. That's why Rozeena offered this free clinic, if only Gul would listen. (Alam, 2023, p. 22)

Not only that, even though Haaris already has his own life, she still maintains a good relationship with him. Even after decades of not communicating, when Haaris called her, she still received it even though she felt a little anxious and sick. Even when Haaris asked Rozeena for help to look after her grandson temporarily, Rozeena still accepted. However, with the presence of Zaraa, Haaris' granddaughter. Rozeena feels better.

Zara is silent, facing the crashing waves, and Rozeena wonders if the girl has heard the confession. Surprisingly, Rozeena feels lighter after saying the words, though it's too late to fix any of her mistakes. But it's not too late for Zara. (Alam, 2023, p. 145)

Zara has the same characteristics and similarities as in the past. Feels guilty for the death that took her brother and wants to be free to do the things he wants to do. Zara's presence helped her feel better and so did Zara.

Rozeena lives a lie, namely hiding the facts about the origins of Mansur, her son. While caring for Mansur, Rozeena was careful not to utter Haaris' name around him. She was afraid that one day Mansur would find out about her relationship with Haaris and find out who his biological parents were. *She'd never recounted stories of that time because it was a part of the past she wanted to keep from Mansur.* (Alam, 2023, p. 78).

Rozeena considers Mansur to be her child. Even though there is no biological relationship, Rozeena is still the one who raised and loves him. One day Haaris met the two of them and urged Rozeena to tell the truth because Haaris knew that all this time, Mansur had been looking for his origins and had not gotten an answer. However, Rozeena again refused even though Mansur had tried to ask about her origins. Rozeena still says that Mansur is still

her biological son. “I won’t make this decision without you. You’re his mother, Rozee.” Her face crumples, lips quivering. “Yes, I am his mother.” (Alam, 2023, p. 276)

Rozeena is certain he remembers the conversation they had that night. She asked him why he wanted the photograph, and he said he wanted a reminder of old friends, from before. Now she knows it was a premonition of what was to come—a definitive after, one in which the friends would be ripped apart and away, for good. (Alam, 2023, p. 228)

In order to maintain her mental health, Rozeena distanced herself from people involved in her past such as Haaris and Aalya. After the death of her best friend, Zohair. The relationship between Rozeena, Haaris and Aalya is not good. Haaris decided to marry Kulsoom to keep Zohair, who was still alive, from being imprisoned. However, after accepting the marriage, Zohair died as a result of being hit. Aalya, who really loves Zohair, is also matched by someone else and decides to move abroad. Rozeena also chose to communicate with them after that, there were too many dark events that hurt the three of them. According to Rezoona, the meeting between the three was just a meeting that opened wounds in their hearts.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Under the Tamarind Tree* is a moving examination of trauma and resiliency as seen via the main character's experiences, Rozeena. Rozeena's feelings of grief, remorse, and dashed hopes are powerfully shown through the lenses of attachment theory and narrative analysis, illuminating the tremendous effects of historical events and personal catastrophes on the human psyche. The book deftly explores Rozeena's coping strategies, which range from constructive pursuits like volunteer work to detrimental tendencies like emotional disengagement and concealment. In the end, Rozeena's journey highlights the complexity of trauma and the variety of routes to recovery, provoking readers to consider the value of narrative in shedding light on the human condition. *Under the Tamarind Tree* is a profound reflection on the ongoing search for healing in the face of hardship and serves as a monument to the human spirit's tenacity.

The significant influence of early connections and life events on Rozeena's psychological health has been clarified by this study using the frameworks of attachment theory and narrative analysis. The examination of Rozeena's coping strategies, which range from constructive activities to harmful avoidance behaviors, demonstrates the variety of approaches people use while overcoming trauma. This research adds to a better understanding of how people react to hardship as depicted in literature by fusing theory and technique. In the future, more studies in this field may help to clarify the complex interactions that shape people's reactions to trauma by examining the roles played by coping mechanisms, interpersonal connections, and prior experiences. Ultimately, *Under the Tamarind Tree* is a moving reminder of the human spirit's resiliency and the never-ending pursuit of healing in the face of adversity.

REFERENCES

- Alam, Nigar. (2023). *Under the Tamarind Tree*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). American Psychiatric Publishing.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and loss*: Vol. 1. Attachment. Basic Books.
- Caffo, E., & Belaise, C. (2003). *Psychological aspects of traumatic injury in children and adolescents*. Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America, 12(3), 493–535.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S1056-4993\(03\)00004-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1056-4993(03)00004-X)
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage Publications.
- Freud, S. (1926). *Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety*. In J. Strachey, & A. Freud (Eds.), The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Herman, J. L. (1997). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books.
- Kolk, B. A. V. D. (2015). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. Penguin Books.
- Lieberman, A. F., & Van Horn, P. (2008). *Psychotherapy with infants and young children: Repairing the effects of stress and trauma on early attachment*. Guilford Press.
- Marrone, M. (2014). *Attachment theory: Exploring the roots of trauma*. Counseling Today, 57(6), 10-15.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d). *Novel Definition & Meaning*. (n.d.). Merriam-Webster. Retrieved December 13, 2023, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/novel>
- Yehuda, R. (2002). *Post-traumatic stress disorder*. New England Journal of Medicine, 346(2), 108-114.