



**Inherited Wounds: Intergenerational Trauma in
Kavita Daswani's *Everything Happens for A Reason***

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Abstract

This research paper explores the theme of intergenerational trauma in Kavita Daswani's *Everything Happens for A Reason* through Jeffrey C. Alexander's Cultural Trauma Theory. Centering on the protagonist, Priya, the study examines her family dynamics and cultural expectations to understand how collective traumatic experiences are transmitted across generations. The analysis highlights the emotional and psychological impacts of inherited trauma on Priya's identity and mental health, particularly how family secrets and unspoken histories perpetuate these struggles. The paper delves into the cultural and societal pressures that Priya faces, emphasizing the conflicts arising from traditional values and modern aspirations. Additionally, it investigates Priya's journey toward healing and reconciliation, showcasing her efforts to address and overcome the cycle of trauma. By applying Cultural Trauma Theory, this study offers a nuanced perspective on how cultural and societal factors shape personal histories and resilience, contributing to literary scholarship, psychology, and cultural studies.

Keywords: Intergenerational Trauma, Identity, Family Dynamics, Cultural expectations, Societal pressures

Introduction

Everything Happens for A Reason (2004) is a chick-lit novel written by Kavita Daswani. Kavita Daswani became the pioneer of Chick Lit featuring Indian-American protagonists. She emerged into the literary scene in the early 2000s with her debut novel *For Matrimonial Purposes* (2003). This genre reflects the lives of urban professional women, addressing issues such as romantic

relationships, female friendships, and workplace challenges in humorous and light-hearted ways. Although often criticized for their stereotypical covers featuring women's accessories, chick-lit novels offer deeper insights into the lives of their protagonists, who navigate societal pressures and ultimately emerge with a stronger sense of self-worth (Ferriss 49).

In Kavita Daswani's novel, *Everything Happens for A Reason*, the protagonist Priya grapples with the inherited wounds of her family's past, which significantly shape her identity and mental health. Intergenerational trauma, a complex and pervasive phenomenon, has garnered significant attention in contemporary literary and cultural studies. It refers to the transmission of traumatic experiences from one generation to the next, manifesting through intricate family dynamics, unspoken histories, and cultural pressures. Aditi Chakraverty in her research paper *Intergenerational Trauma Studies in Diasporic Writers: Unveiling the Literary Narratives of Inherited Wounds* (2023), defines intergenerational trauma as 'the transmission of psychological and emotional distress from one generation to the next, even when subsequent generations did not directly experience the traumatic event' (Chakraverty 323). The current research paper explores how intergenerational trauma is depicted in Daswani's work, utilizing Jeffrey C. Alexander's Cultural Trauma Theory to provide a nuanced understanding of the interplay between personal and cultural histories in shaping resilience and identity.

The significance of studying intergenerational trauma in *Everything Happens for A Reason* (2004) lies in its ability to uncover the hidden and often unspoken effects of past traumas on present generations. By examining how trauma is transmitted through family narratives and cultural contexts, this research sheds light on the broader implications of cultural trauma and its impact on identity formation. Priya's story, marked by the inherited burdens of cultural expectations and societal pressures, offers a profound exploration of how unexamined traditions and norms continue to shape individual lives across generations.

The concept of intergenerational trauma has been extensively explored in psychological and sociological literature. Cathy Caruth, in her seminal work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, emphasizes the repetitive and unassimilated nature of traumatic experiences, which often resurface across generations (Caruth 74). This notion is echoed by Dominick LaCapra, who distinguishes between acting out and working through trauma, suggesting that unresolved traumas are often reenacted by subsequent generations (LaCapra 71). These

theories offer a foundation for analyzing the complex dynamics of intergenerational trauma in Daswani's novel.

Research on intergenerational trauma in diasporic literature underscores the profound impact of historical events on cultural identity and family dynamics. Aditi Chakraverty, in her study on intergenerational trauma in diasporic writers, highlights how historical events such as colonization, war, and displacement leave lasting imprints on communities, shaping their collective consciousness and perceptions of self (Chakraverty 326). Despite the extensive scholarship on trauma, there is a noticeable gap in understanding how cultural factors contribute to the transmission of trauma across generations in contemporary fiction. While previous studies have focused on the psychological aspects of intergenerational trauma, there is a need to explore the cultural dimensions of this phenomenon, especially how cultural narratives and societal expectations shape the experiences of individuals and families. This research contributes to the existing literature by offering a comprehensive analysis of intergenerational trauma in *Everything Happens for A Reason* (2004) through the lens of Cultural Trauma Theory. By integrating Jeffrey C. Alexander's framework, which emphasizes the collective and cultural aspects of trauma, this study provides a deeper understanding of how historical events and cultural contexts influence the transmission of trauma. Additionally, this research offers new insights into the interplay between cultural identity and inherited trauma.

In *Everything Happens for A Reason* (2004), Daswani skillfully portrays the transmission of trauma through the character of Priya, whose life is deeply influenced by her family's past experiences. One of the key aspects of this transmission is the role of family secrets and silence. Priya's grandmother, for instance, harbors painful memories of partition and migration, which are never openly discussed but continue to affect the family's dynamics. For example, she often emphasizes the importance of humility and the transient nature of happiness, which can be interpreted as a response to her own experiences of loss and upheaval during partition. She tells her granddaughters that "the more you laugh, the more you will eventually cry," (Daswani 16) indicating a belief that joy is often accompanied by sorrow, a sentiment likely rooted in her own painful memories. As Alexander (2004) posits, cultural trauma involves the collective memory of a group that feels subjected to a horrendous event, leaving indelible marks on their identity (Alexander 1).

Priya's struggles with mental health, including her bouts of depression and anxiety, can be seen as manifestations of this inherited trauma. The pressure to conform to cultural expectations, coupled with the unresolved traumas of her family's past, creates a sense of dislocation and identity crisis. Furthermore, Daswani's depiction of cultural pressures and societal expectations highlights the broader implications of cultural trauma. Priya's journey towards healing and reconciliation is marked by her efforts to navigate these pressures, and engaging in personal reflection to address her inherited wounds. This process of healing is indicative of LaCapra's notion of working through trauma, where individuals actively engage with their past to find a path toward recovery.

In conclusion, this research paper offers a comprehensive analysis of intergenerational trauma in Kavita Daswani's *Everything Happens for A Reason*, utilizing Jeffrey C. Alexander's Cultural Trauma Theory to explore the intricate dynamics of trauma transmission. By examining the role of family secrets, cultural pressures, and societal expectations, this study provides valuable insights into the impact of inherited trauma on identity formation and mental health. The findings highlight the need for a deeper understanding of the cultural dimensions of intergenerational trauma, contributing significantly to the fields of literary scholarship, psychology, and cultural studies.

Discussion

In *Everything Happens for A Reason* (2004) by Kavita Daswani, the transmission of cultural and generational trauma within Priya's family is intertwined with the protagonist's journey of self-discovery. The novel delves into the life of Priya, a young Indian woman whose life takes unexpected turns as she navigates the complexities of love, family expectations, and her career. The novel highlights the protagonist's efforts to balance traditional values with her aspirations. This journey is marked by challenges that ultimately contribute to Priya's growth and understanding of herself and the world around her.

The trauma in Priya's family is deeply rooted in the cultural and societal expectations placed on women, particularly regarding marriage and familial duty. These cultural and societal expectations are discussed by Nisha Dhawan in her research paper *Women's Role Expectations and Identity Development in India*. In the paper, Dhawan highlights the role of women in India and states, 'the ideal Indian wife is the devoted and self-sacrificing, caring mother and homemaker' (Dhawan 82). Priya's grandmother and mother both embody traditional roles, which create a sense of pressure and conflict for Priya as she navigates her aspirations and modern lifestyle. The transmission of this trauma is evident through the strict adherence to cultural norms. Priya's grandmother's

experience with traditional marriage sets a precedent that Priya's mother feels compelled to follow. Priya's mother continues to enforce these traditional expectations on Priya and her sisters, creating a generational cycle of pressure and unspoken obligations.

This pressure and unspoken obligation can be seen when Priya talks about her role as a wife and daughter-in-law. She says "My most important role in this family was as a housekeeper, cook, and general errand runner, duties that came along with my new position as wife and daughter-in-law" (Daswani 2). It has been ingrained in her by her mother and grandmother "That her primary profession was to serve her father and brothers in early life, and her husband and sons" (Daswani 1). These familial pressures that Priya faces, are exacerbated as she never questions the reason behind these expectations. The family's inability to openly discuss their adherence to traditional roles perpetuates the trauma, making it difficult for Priya to address and understand the root causes of her struggles.

Cultural Trauma Theory, as articulated by Jeffrey C. Alexander, emphasizes the role of collective memory and identity in the transmission of trauma. Alexander explains that cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event, which leaves indelible marks on their group consciousness and changes their identity in fundamental ways (Alexander 10). In Priya's case, the cultural and generational expectations placed on her family create a form of trauma that is passed down through generations, shaping their collective identity and individual experiences.

Srijani Ghosh in her research article *Hybridity as Neoliberal Choice in Kavita Daswani's The Village Bride of Beverly Hills* (2023) highlights the significance of traditional values in Indian families, noting that Indian chick lit often inflects the genre with regional flavor, reflecting the cultural narratives that prioritize family honor and duty. This regional flavor is evident in the pressures Priya faces, as her family's adherence to traditional norms is a reflection of broader cultural narratives within the Indian society.

Priya's family adheres to traditional cultural norms that prioritize marriage and family duty over individual aspirations. Nisha Dhawan in her research paper *Women's Role Expectations and Identity Development in India* states that women are socialized to accept roles that emphasize sacrifice and duty to family. The ideal Indian woman is often seen as a devoted wife and mother, which can overshadow personal ambitions and career aspirations (Dhawan 82). Her mother and grandmother's relentless focus on finding a suitable match for Priya and her sisters exemplifies

this pressure. This is not merely a personal preference but a reflection of the broader cultural narrative that values women primarily for their roles as wives and mothers. Ferriss and Young discuss how cultural narratives in chick lit often revolve around the tension between traditional expectations and modern aspirations (Ferriss, Young 49), which is evident in Priya's story.

Cultural Trauma Theory provides a framework for understanding how cultural pressures contribute to the transmission of trauma. Alexander argues that cultural trauma must be represented and integrated into the collective memory through narratives, symbols, and rituals. In Priya's family, the adherence to traditional cultural norms serves as a means of preserving their collective identity. However, this adherence also perpetuates the trauma associated with these norms, creating a cycle of pressure and conflict that is passed down through generations.

The impact of these cultural and societal expectations on Priya's personal aspirations and lifestyle choices is profound. As a successful journalist, Priya faces the challenge of balancing her professional ambitions with the traditional expectations of her family. Usha Chandran in her article *A Woman's World* describes the state of young women in India, "Today, the young woman in India finds herself in an ambivalent state, entrapped between the lure of freedom and equality and social pressures to preserve the 'classic' image and representation of traditional gender roles." (Chandran 298). Priya tries her best to be the ideal Indian wife and daughter-in-law at home by waking up early to make breakfast for the whole family before leaving for work and doing all the remaining household chores in the evening, as she says 'being a good Hindu wife, dutiful, devoted, and always smiling' (Daswani 24). The pressure to conform to traditional gender roles created a sense of conflict and tension, as Priya navigated her career and personal life.

Priya's mother also has her share of significant emotional and psychological stress and experiences. Since she could not bear a son, everyone told her that she had been cursed. 'Multiple girls, no sons, everyone kept saying, as if she needed reminding' (Daswani 57). Though her mother was quite modern in many ways for herself, but, when it was about the upbringing of her girls, she tacitly agreed with their father about the most appropriate way to bring them up like 'the concealing clothes they should wear and the restrictions that were to put on their minds' (Daswani 61). The pressure to conform to traditional roles and not being able to speak for her daughters was some of the many emotional struggles she faced. These emotional struggles are passed on to Priya, who inherits the burden of her mother's unresolved trauma. LaCapra suggests that unresolved traumas

often manifest in subsequent generations, perpetuating cycles of emotional and psychological stress (LaCapra 22).

The theme of healing and reconciliation is central to Priya's journey in *Everything Happens for A Reason*. Her efforts to confront and understand her family's past and ultimately seek reconciliation are indicative of the process of working through trauma. This aligns with Dominick LaCapra's notion of "working through" trauma, where individuals actively engage with their traumatic past to integrate it into their identity and move toward recovery.

The novel depicts various pathways to healing, reflecting the complex and multifaceted nature of recovery from trauma. Priya's journey involves a combination of personal reflection and engagement with her family's history. These efforts create a sense of closure and reconciliation, allowing her to move forward with a stronger sense of self. She breaks the cycle of generational trauma by not staying in the unhappy marriage and leaving her in-law's house. When Sanjay, her husband, comes to her home to apologize and take her back with him, she voices her concerns regarding their marriage. She opens up about her desire to work without requiring his permission before she takes him back (Daswani 269). She also gets affirmation from Sanjay that it is going to be a marriage of equals (Daswani 269),

The novel also explores the tension between individual and collective healing. Priya's journey towards healing is depicted alongside broader communal efforts to come to terms with cultural trauma. The process of reconciliation involves not only personal reflection but also engagement with the broader community and cultural narratives. Srijani Ghosh in her research paper *Hybridity as Neoliberal Choice in Kavita Daswani's The Village Bride of Beverly Hills (2023)*, discusses how Indian chick-lit often addresses the complexities of cultural identity and personal freedom, noting that the cheeky chick-lit heroines embraced by readers who see the lighter side of Indian mores. This lighter side is evident in Priya's journey, as she navigates the challenges of cultural expectations with humor and resilience. Her ability to find strength and resilience in the face of adversity reflects the broader theme of healing and reconciliation.

Cultural Trauma Theory, as articulated by Alexander (2004), emphasizes the importance of collective efforts in addressing and overcoming trauma (Alexander 4). In *Everything Happens For A Reason*, the process of healing involves not only Priya's journey but also the collective efforts of her family and community. One such incident is when towards the end of the novel, there were talks about the marriage of Roma, Priya's sister, she and her to-be fiancée decided not to commit

until they went out together, alone, at least three times. They also talked numerous times on the phone and have been in touch through emails, unlike Priya who met her fiancée only on the day they were going to be engaged. On this approach of Roma, Priya's grandmother had 'initially resisted as 'too modern', but when her mother reminded her where hard-core tradition had got Priya, Kaki relented, hoping that perhaps Roma may now have won the biggest prize of all' (Daswani 293). By engaging with their shared history and confronting the cultural narratives that perpetuate trauma, Priya and her family work towards a sense of collective healing and reconciliation.

This research paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the themes of family dynamics, cultural and societal expectations, psychological and emotional impact, and healing and reconciliation in Kavita Daswani's *Everything Happens For A Reason*. By utilizing Cultural Trauma Theory and incorporating critical insights from the chosen texts, this analysis offers a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between personal and cultural histories in shaping identity and resilience. The findings highlight the significance of addressing and understanding intergenerational trauma, contributing to the fields of literary scholarship, psychology, and cultural studies.

Conclusion

This research paper has explored the theme of intergenerational trauma in Kavita Daswani's novel *Everything Happens for A Reason* through the lens of Jeffrey C. Alexander's Cultural Trauma Theory. The analysis has delved into how cultural and generational expectations are transmitted within Priya's family, creating a complex web of pressure and conflict that shapes her identity and mental health. By examining the role of family dynamics, societal expectations, and the psychological and emotional impacts of this inherited trauma, the study has provided a nuanced understanding of the interplay between personal and cultural histories in shaping resilience and identity.

One of the main findings of this research is the significant impact of cultural and generational expectations on Priya's sense of self. Priya's grandmother and mother embody traditional roles that prioritize marriage and family duty over individual aspirations. This adherence to cultural norms creates a generational cycle of pressure and unspoken obligations that deeply affect Priya. The study also highlights the significant role of silence and secrets in perpetuating trauma within Priya's family. The family's inability to openly discuss their adherence to traditional roles exacerbates the trauma, making it difficult for Priya to understand and address the root causes of

her struggles. This is in line with Cathy Caruth's argument that trauma often manifests in silence, leading to repetitive patterns of behavior and emotional struggles across generations. The cultural and societal expectations placed on women within Priya's family and community further complicate her efforts to navigate her personal aspirations and lifestyle choices.

Cultural Trauma Theory, as articulated by Alexander (2004), provides a framework for understanding how these cultural pressures contribute to the transmission of trauma. Alexander argues that cultural trauma must be represented and integrated into the collective memory through narratives, symbols, and rituals. In Priya's family, the adherence to traditional cultural norms serves as a means of preserving their collective identity. However, this adherence also perpetuates the trauma associated with these norms, creating a cycle of pressure and conflict that is passed down through generations.

Priya's journey towards healing and reconciliation reflects the broader themes of Cultural Trauma Theory. Her efforts to confront and understand her family's past, and ultimately seek reconciliation are indicative of the process of working through trauma. Dominick LaCapra's notion of "working through" trauma, where individuals actively engage with their traumatic past to integrate it into their identity and move towards recovery, is particularly relevant here.

The novel also explores the tension between individual and collective healing. Priya's journey towards healing is depicted alongside broader communal efforts to come to terms with cultural trauma. Srijani Ghosh (2023) discusses how Indian chick-lit often addresses the complexities of cultural identity and personal freedom. This lighter side is evident in Priya's journey, as she navigates the challenges of cultural expectations with humor and resilience.

Thus, *Everything Happens for A Reason* by Kavita Daswani offers a profound exploration of intergenerational trauma through the lens of Cultural Trauma Theory. The novel vividly depicts the transmission of trauma across generations, illustrating the impact of family dynamics, cultural pressures, and societal expectations on the characters' identities and mental health. By examining the role of silence and secrets, cultural expectations, and the psychological and emotional impact of trauma, this study provides valuable insights into the complex interplay between personal and cultural histories. The themes of healing and reconciliation highlight the importance of confronting and understanding the past to move toward recovery, contributing significantly to the fields of literary scholarship, psychology, and cultural studies.

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