

According normal by  
the community. she  
goes through



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

According to American Psychological Association, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) occurs in some people after a horrific event, accident, war or sexual abuse. People with PTSD can re-experience the traumatic event, and the memories will arise involuntarily, “ the individual has recurrent, involuntary, and intrusive recollections of the event” (APA 275). Through sudden recalling of the event which caused PTSD, the person who experienced the event returns to the day of the traumatic event and relives it. Mala Ramchandin in Shani Mootoo’s 1996 novel *Cereus Blooms at Night*, experiences traumatic and destructive events which disrupt his life.

I will attempt to examine the relationship between PTSD, physical and emotional abuse in this paper. Set in a fictional place called Lantanacamara, *Cereus Blooms at Night* exposes the lives of the citizens living in the town of Paradise. The main focus of the story is how Mala is abused by her own father and treated as everything that is happening in the Ramchandin house is perfectly normal by the community. She goes through a lot from an early age; her mother and sister abandon her, the man she loves runs away when he realises what was going on in the house, her father sexually abuses her. After her visit by Otto who is dressed like Ambrose, Mala’s love, the police takes the old woman, Mala, to an Alms House and this is where she meets Tyler and is taken care of by him. Despite Mala’s silence, after listening to Mala’s fragmented sentences and gossip, Tyler narrates her story. Tracing back to the abusive father Chandin’s life as a child, the novel provides a detailed description of the colonisation of the island, how the citizens of this imaginary island were treated by the colonisers and the backstory of Mala’s

own story. The old Ramchandin, who is an indentured field labourer, is concerned and hopeless about the future of his only child.

Thus, when the Reverend Thoroughly wants to adopt his son he thinks that it is a good chance for Chandin, that his life is saved. The immigrant workers hear about the Reverend's visit quickly and talk about how lucky Chandin and his family is. However, it becomes clear that the Reverend had an agenda when adopting Chandin and it was to convert Indians who live on the island to Christianity. Colonisation's power becomes evident when Chandin "was unwittingly helping to convert Indians to Christianity" (Mootoo 29) even before he enters the Reverend's house. Edward Said argues that the idea of "The East" is created by "The West" to justify the occidental's desire to colonise and dominate. Europeans justification for postcolonial violence is that the eastern people such as Indians, need to be "educated" and "civilized", whereas the actual reason is the desire to take advantage and oppress. An example of this can be seen in the Reverend and his family's treatment of the Ramchandin family, especially Chandin.

The effects of moving out of his own house to the Thoroughly house changes Chandin's personality; he stops visiting his parents, starts to look down on them, and tries hard to be like the Reverend: "He would change, he decided once and for all. . . he diligently studied and imitated the Reverend's pensive stroking of his chin or his tapping of his fingers against a book. .

. he made strides as wide as the towering Reverend's, and he clapped his hands, similarly" (Mootoo 34). He is the colonised and being the "Other", the outsider whose presence in the Thoroughly house is for the purpose of

converting Indians to Christianity. His name is kept because the Reverend thought that "Chandin's own name would win is people's trust" (Mootoo 30).

He is the colonised, the "Other" whose presence in the Thoroughly house is for the purpose of converting Indians to Christianity. His name is kept because the Reverend thought that "Chandin's own name would win is people's trust" (Mootoo 30). Deracinated from his culture, Chandin craves to be taken as an English man like the Reverend, and he completely detaches himself from his own family.

As time passes, he realises that he will never be entirely English and white, he develops feelings of self-hatred especially after Lavinia "failed to notice him" (Mootoo 33). His self-loathing starts to grow and he hates everything about himself: "He began to hate his looks, the colour of his skin, his accent, the barracks, his real parents and at times even the Reverend and his god" (Mootoo 33). The symptoms of postcolonial trauma start to show itself in Chandin's behaviours when he is in the Thoroughly household. Once he realises that there is no way for him to be with Lavinia, Chandin begins to hate himself: his appearance, his posture, his accent, etc. The term liminality can be applied to Chandin; he cuts all his ties with his biological parents and cannot relate to his culture. He wants to be seen and treated just like the Reverend, and when he understands that he will never get to live that dream, he becomes the monster he created with his hatred and grudge. Understanding that the Reverend's strict saying that he is "to be a brother to Lavinia and nothing more" (Mootoo 37), day after day Chandin becomes aware of the fact that he will never be part of the Thoroughly family entirely.

Having learnt that the Reverend does not approve his love for Lavinia and <https://assignbuster.com/according-normal-by-the-community-she-goes-through/>

hearing that he is “ to be a brother to Lavinia and nothing more” (Mootoo 37), Chandin’s self-loathing peaks.

He marries Sarah who is “ the small, dark girl from the barracks” (Mootoo 32) and his knowledge of being discriminated because of his race and Lavinia’s direct rejection reveals the spiteful, self-loathing man he always was deep down. Years later, his wife Sarah and his obsession Lavinia run away together and so begins the nightmare of Pohpoh and Asha: Chandin sexually and emotionally abuses them. Having witnessed her younger sister’s rape as well, Mala experiences the trauma of witnessing Asha’s suffering and psychological damage inflicted by their own father. Thinking that Asha would have left with her mother and Aunt Lavinia and be safe from Chandin’s cruelty if it was not for her, Pohpoh develops feelings of guilt, so she takes the role of the mother and goes to Chandin’s room to suffer for her little sister when he calls for Asha too. It is fair to say that the reason for Tyler’s interest in Chandin’s backstory is because of his yearning to understand how a human can possibly reach such a low point. In this novel, the reader can see that Chandin, who is the perpetrator of Mala and Asha, is also a victim of Eurocentric society through racial oppression. Mootoo gives the rape scenes without holding back; these graphic descriptions of the abuse help the reader better understand the trauma Mala went through almost all her life.

Mala’s actions or lack thereof, make the symptoms of PTSD become apparent in the first pages of *Cereus Blooms at Night*: Her refusal to talk and eat, her groaning in the middle of the night, and her inability to even lift a finger. The most distinctive characteristic of PTSD is the recurrent memories <https://assignbuster.com/according-normal-by-the-community-she-goes-through/>

of the traumatic event. According to APA, one of the symptoms of PTSD is the “exaggerated startle response” which shows itself in the beginning of the novel, Mala is taken to the Alms House but does not want anybody touching her. After Tyler’s initial attempt to approach Mala fails because she flinches “as though Tyler might hurt her” (Mootoo 13).

The most distinctive characteristic of PTSD is the recurrent memories of the traumatic event. According to APA, one of the symptoms of PTSD is the “exaggerated startle response” which shows itself in the beginning of the novel, Mala is taken to the Alms House but does not want anybody touching her. The impacts of incest and rape do not always show themselves in the form of PTSD, sometimes it can not be easy to detect the symptoms of sexual abuse especially if the abused one is a child. Being hurt by someone they trust, the children describe the abuse with expressions of fear or disgust.

In the case of Mala, being continuously raped by her own father, she tries to find a way to cope with all this. Asha who is also abused by Chandin runs away from the incestuous house, whereas Mala does not leave with her sister but stays behind which leads to even more depression. Starting from the abandonment of her mother and Aunt Lavinia, Mala goes through many different traumas in her life. Her father’s sexual and emotional abuse all her life, her sister’s seeming abandonment and Ambrose’s escape from her house after he understands “everything” (Mootoo 226), leave Mala unable to express any of her emotions anymore.

Mala Ramchandin is a marginalised figure who is seen as a madwoman in the Paradise society; she is believed to have lived an incestuous relationship with her own father, Chandin. Even after she kills her perpetrator, her nightmare continues. The man whom she thought was the love of her life turns out to be a coward who chooses to do nothing when he realises the dreadful crime which Chandin had been committing against Mala. Even after she kills her perpetrator, her nightmare continues. The man whom she thought was the love of her life turns out to be a coward who chooses to do nothing when he realises the dreadful crime which Chandin had been committing against Mala. After the police barges into her garden and the entire society which rejected her, she is taken to the Alms House. Having gone through so many traumas in her life, plus what she experienced before she was taken to the hospital, Mala refuses to say one word to people who never tried to save her from the hands of her cruel father. One of the main reasons for Mala's PTSD is because of her justifiable distrust of the people of Lantanacamara.

Although everybody is aware of the crime, nobody dares to actually do something about it. The passiveness of the Lantanacamara society is furthered by what the postman does to Mala for years. He refuses to deliver Asha's letters to the Ramchandin house because the townspeople gossiped that Mala's " father had obviously mistaken Mala for his wife, and her mother had obviously mistaken another woman for her husband" (Mootoo 109).

DSM-V holds the view that the person who has either been exposed to direct trauma such as sexual violence or witnessed someone close to them experience a traumatic event may have " recurrent, involuntary, and

intrusive distressing memories of the traumatic event(s)” (DSM-5 271). Mala, even after killing Chandin, is still afraid that the horrible times will return, never steps foot in the house; she sleeps in the garden, which is her safe place. Before she kills Chandin, however, she once again goes through a horrible chain of traumatic events. After he figures that Ambrose and Mala have been seeing each other, he rapes her over and over again, he tortures and beats her all through the night.

Mala put her face in her hands and wailed, doubling over in fright. The memory of her father when he discovered her mother gone came flooding back. . . Instead of hitting her he unbuckled his belt and unzipped his trousers. .

. He pushed her to the sink and shoved her face down into the basin, pressing his chin into her back as he used both hands to pull up her dress. He yanked out his penis, hardened weapon-like by anger. . .

shoved his penis into her mouth. . . When she went limp, he took the weapon out of her mouth and spurted all over her face.

. . He raped her three more times that night. (Mootoo 224)At times of pain and worry, Mala’s identity splits into two: the adult Mala and Pohpoh. This split is visible especially when Mala is in the Ramchandin house with the police, about to see her father’s dead body after almost twenty years. As Mala continues to talk to her younger self, Pohpoh, when she feels that the police is coming for her, she tries her best effort to help Pohpoh, the little girl who is still the same age as her mother and Aunt Lavinia left. The adult

Mala’s mind is busy with trying to save Pohpoh from the life filled with abuse, <https://assignbuster.com/according-normal-by-the-community-she-goes-through/>



she keeps thinking “ I, Mala Ramchandin, will set you, Pohpoh Ramchandin, free, free, free, like a bird!” The fact that Mala is referred to as “ The Bird” is significant because this symbol acts as a representation of freedom which Pohpoh needs in order to stop suffering from Chandin’s sexual and emotional abuse. Unlike her sister Asha, Pohpoh does not leave the island and her oppressor’s house physically, however, unable to cope with the trauma she is going through, she gets in touch with nature and refuses to use her oppressor’s language.

This choice frees Pohpoh from the physical world of pain she has suffered for many years. Being one of PTSD’s most prominent characteristics, recurrent memories are not easy to cope with; Mala’s solution for this is to try to go back to the day her mother and Lavinia left and free Pohpoh. Another example of PTSD can be seen in Mala’s behaviour against Chandin’s sexual and emotional abuse: She blames herself, thinks that the reason why such a tragedy happened to her is her fault. Even after the last heinous crime, Mala thinks about Ambrose coming into the house and seeing her bruised face.

She “ berates herself, and thinks that she should have known better than to cheat on her father. In the end she was to blame” (Mootoo 224). According to DSM-5, the person who is affected by a traumatic event attempts to “ avoid distressing memories, thoughts or feelings. . . associated with the traumatic event(s)” (271); in addition to this “ avoidance of . .

. external reminders” (271) such as people or places which can cause distress to the traumatised person, is common. After the police enter the house and turn on the lights in every room, Mala’s traumatic memories,

<https://assignbuster.com/according-normal-by-the-community-she-goes-through/>

which she tried to ignore for years, come to the surface. She imagines her abusive father standing right in front of his room, drunk and shirtless. The light brings back all the horrible feelings, her fear becomes unbearable to her. She began to feel what she was normally oblivious to: her face and neck, wet with sweat and tears, bruises on her legs. .

. Her lower stomach ached. Fear was breaking her, was unprying her memory. She was reminded of what she usually ignored or commanded herself to forget: her legs being ripped apart, something entering her from down there.

. . Her body remembered.

(Mootoo 174-175)