



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access
Vol.10/No.2 June 2025

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee



www.daathvoyagejournal.com

: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English
(A Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

ISSN 2455-7544

Vol.10/No.2, June, 2025

Addiction as an Illness: Reading Sangeetha Sreenivasan's *Acid*

Shivam Kundu,

Research Scholar,

Department of English and Modern European Languages,

University of Lucknow

Email: shivam.lkouni@gmail.com

Received- 06/05/2025, Revised-19/05/2025, Accepted-19/06/2025, Published-30/06/2025.

Abstract: Sangeetha Srinivasan's *Acid* presents a montage of traumatic experiences and their effects on its characters. It expresses the challenges wrought by addiction, depression, and disability. The present paper aims to elaborate *Acid* as a narrative that elaborates the events and the effects trauma. It presents addiction as an illness through its expression in the novel. It further presents the challenges of caregiving and posits giving and receiving care as acts of resilience.

Keywords: Addiction, Disability, Illness, Resilience, Trauma.

A Lotus Pond looms large on the cover of Sangeetha Sreenivasan's *Acid*. Framed by figures that bear resemblance to the four characters whom the narrative springs from and revolves around, the pond draws the reader into the novel. The novel reads like a narrative of urban life, an expression of the challenges of a modern Indian family, a tale woven by the love between two women, and a bildungsroman. Additionally, it also figures as a rural gothic narrative, a depiction of disintegration of the usual threads of family roles, and a narrative of one's collapse into addiction and depression. In doing so it reveals the various layers of trauma in the lives of its characters.

This paper presents *Acid* as a narrative that sheds light on the circles of trauma that its characters inhabit. It further seeks to posit addiction as an illness. It proposes illness and disability as events of trauma as elaborated in the novel. Additionally, it argues that providing and receiving care are acts of resilience.

Kamala, a divorced mother of twins, Aadi and Shiva, lives with her partner Shaly in a Bangalore neighbourhood and moves in and out of bad trips and hallucinations caused by severe depression and her addiction to acid (LSD). Born and raised in rural Kerala in an old 'ancestral house of horrors', Kamala had to marry her cousin, Madhavan on the insistence of her mother and uncle. Her relationship with her mother and husband never seems to go beyond the discomfort ensued by the complicated union and even casts a shadow

over her feelings of motherhood. The twins Aadi and Shiva live under the shadow of their mother's addiction and illness as well as an accident that left Shiva paralysed from the waist down and Aadi a caregiver for his brother. Shaly has grown under the shadow of a reluctant mother, Rita Mama, who thought her to be an illegitimate child that her husband, Joseph, thrust at her. In her childhood, she witnesses death and devastation because of famine in the villages of Mizoram. The novel hints at abuse in her childhood. She feels responsible for the three lives she shares a living space with and is bound to them in a force that escapes expression.

Acid follows this family as it moves to Kamala's ancestral home after the death of her mother, on the way to a new home that Kamala hopes to set up for her kids and Shaly. The novel ends in the halfway house itself as Kamala's life spirals into her addiction and depression. Before coming to its end, the novel gives us a diachronic panorama of the lives of its characters, revealing layers of trauma in their lives and their efforts to mitigate the effects and their attempts at resilience. While the novel loses one of its characters to her trauma, it does leave others with resilient agency and a possibility of healing.

Kamala's struggles with depression and addiction encircle all the characters in the novel. The narrative provides a vivid account of her struggles with depression by using the metaphor of "a pet dog called Depru...Monsieur Depression" that figures as a "cushioned bundle of sadness" (Sreenivasan 234). The narrative goes on to give an uncanny image of her imaginary pet that goes on to "mount her shoulders, its weight crushing her" (Sreenivasan 234). This addition of militaristic act of 'mounting' elaborates the severity of Kamala's depressive episodes and her vulnerability. Peggy Penn in "Chronic Illness: Trauma, Language, and Writing: Breaking the Silence" observes, "Metaphor can unpack meanings slowly, indirectly allowing us to absorb new information at an appropriate rate, just as a time a capsule releases its contents" (46). The 'dog' punctuates the narrative in multiple instances in order to make the reader aware of the frequency of the episodes. In the later parts of the novel, the dog features steadily, sometimes on her bed, at other times "wagging its tail at her bedpost" (Sreenivasan 235). The descriptions of Kamala's depressive episodes give way to those of hallucination caused by her use of acid. What starts as voluntary recreation gradually turns into crippling addiction. While her depression paints Kamala as a sufferer, her struggles with addiction complicates the attempts at sympathy for her. The stigma associated with addiction stems from the "false

belief that addiction involves a moral shortcoming, that people “choose to use” (Morse 163). The novel does justice to the overlapping struggles by switching seamlessly, sometimes in the same paragraph, between the effects of addiction and effects of her depression.

Goldbach, J., et al. in “Traumatic Experiences and Drug Use by LGB Adolescents: A Critical Review of Minority Stress” conclude that, “A commonly discussed correlate of drug use in the literature was the experience of psychological distress related to LGB identity. Specifically, this included measures of internalized homophobia” (96). These findings corroborate the Minority-Stress theory that talks about “unique and traumatic experiences specific to identification as a sexual minority” (91). The novel seems to hint to the same as the advent of Kamala’s depression and subsequent addiction links to her realisation of her queerness and the resultant abuse and stigma she has to undergo. Kamala herself never seems to come to terms with her sexuality and struggles with her own ‘internalised homophobia’. During one of her trips, in an imaginary conversation with her mother, Kamala says, “It seems awful to announce even now that Kamala could love no man in her life, that her orientation is different” (Sreenivasan 138)

In the essay, “Portraying addiction as a disease: A Phenomenological Answer”, Ion Copoeru elaborates the experiences of hallucinations induced by prolonged addiction as “truncated and unconscious ‘formations’ [which] rather belong, to a non-temporality” (qtd in Copoeru 5). Kamala’s trips come and go as free agents, when they do, the reigns of her consciousness seem to have been snatched away from her,

acid took the reins, it designed the maps of convulsed ecstasy under Kamala's tongue... it would travel, numbing whatever it touched on the way until Kamala was numb to the world outside her eyes. Red kangaroos wearing lucky horseshoes would race up to her brain, making her forget her present, past and future in the haze of dust their hooves would raise...short pleasure ride (Sreenivasan 21).

In *Empty Suffering: A Social Phenomenology of Depression, Anxiety and Addiction*, Domonkos Sik argues,

addiction impacts the subject at the fundamental level of giving sense to the world. Construction of meanings occurs through passive synthesis (i.e. the functioning of idealizations and schemas) and active interpretation (i.e. turning the attention towards prominent objects). While most acts of perception include both elements, in case of addiction the former becomes dominant. (116)

This understanding of meaning making by addicts finds reflection in Kamala's surrender to her trips. At various instances, she hallucinates Shaly as a monster, and her helper, Janu as a big bird at her window as she increasingly shows "complete dependence on the object as a source of meaning: the subjects subordinate themselves to it by resolving from taking actively part in the construction of its meaning (115)." In Kamala's case, as with several addicts with underlying illnesses, "the dividing line between normalcy and pathology remain[s] a blurred one: the moral judgments referring to the weakness of will were never completely replaced by narratives of bodily illness" (119). To bring the severity of the condition at the forefront, the novel elaborates Kamala's helplessness, "trips happened without invitation, without even a touch of acid" (Sreenivasan 89).

Generational trauma binds Kamala and her mother together. Widowed at a young age and shrouded by the trauma of loss and fear of raising Kamala on her own amid hostile relatives, she figures in the novel as an invalid woman, on her deathbed, and eventually as a disembodied soul that flees the funeral pyre in search of her daughter. Earlier, Kamala's departure for a trip, in her youth, freshens her trauma of loss and relegates her to a life of renewed sorrow. While the people in the ancestral house worry about the "the smell of the rotten dampness of death that spread sorrows" the cause of her illness was "loss of the child, the baby girl, the love of her mother life, her pleasure, her happiness, her relief, the loss of everything she had longed for, the loss of Kamala (282)." She eventually "slip[s] into Kamala's body, and kill[s] Kamala who was once her child" (288).

This trauma seeps into Kamala's motherhood and is on display during her pregnancy as she hallucinates her twins as, "two little snakes moving around her oversized belly, making purple blotches on her skin, filling the room with the mild smell of amniotic fluid whenever they opened their tiny mouths" (92). The descriptions of Kamala's fears during her pregnancy hint at the presence of depression even during the early phases of her life. It figures as a presence relegated to the label of whimsical worry and left unattended, only to raise its head ferociously in the later parts of her life. Her relationship with the twins is summarised in one of the sentences that express her thoughts while on the way to procure acid "Her children were her private sorrow, her happiness, her pain" (93).

Within the narrative circled by Kamala's struggles with illness, addiction, and trauma, there exists another circle of trauma shared by her teenage twins, Aadi and Shiva. An unfortunate accident in their

boarding school in their childhood leads to Shiva's paralysis in his legs and consequently dependent on the wheelchair. Shiva drowns in a pool of cold water and is left paralysed while chasing after a Frisbee near his hostel. The accident leaves Shiva with a traumatic memory and a continuous reminder in form of his disability. Shiva's obsessive gaming comes across as a coping mechanism, a world where he can slay adversaries and wreak havoc on them. While Shiva never addresses this traumatic episode of his life directly, the episode features as slips in the narrative of a trip that Kamala and Madhavan take in an effort to mend their marriage. The novel allows for some expression of Shiva's experience with his trauma when he compares his state to a permanent state of 'detention' while remembering an episode of punishment in his school. It also comes up as a comparison that he draws between himself and Aadi as he leaves to travel on his own. He looks across in the distance and thinks, "Aadi had broken his pupae. It was easy for him, for his legs were strong". The narrative, at least in the case of Shiva, echoes Richard Crownshaw who sees trauma as that which "defies witnessing, cognition, conscious recall and representation" (4). While Shiva's struggles with his disability finds elaboration in his emotional anguish, the novel situates his disability in his surroundings rather than his body. As the family move to Kamala's ancestral home, the elevated thresholds of the rooms in the old house make his struggles with movement more pronounced in comparison to their house in Bangalore.

Having witnessed the accident and the subsequent disability of his twin, Aadi, in his dreams, seems to address the traumatic past. In one such instance he sees his brother "dissolving on the membrane of the water...as his Voice became breath; a faint smudge in the air. Aadi realized that his voice was not forming, not taking shape or dimensions, yet Shiva heard him, and he turned his head and tried to hush him" (Sreenivasan 69). The novel, in these episodes presents trauma as "generative of narratives" (Bond 5). In contrast to Shiva's outbursts and gaming, Aadi's response to the trauma he shares with his twin follows a different mode of coping in repression, as he "knew the art of transforming tears into crystals, making the eyes sparkle" (Sreenivasan 58).

The term "relational trauma" finds elaboration in Aadi's as it speaks trauma's "effects on members of a wider system who also show signs of physical stress, isolation, and helplessness" (Penn 33). The "relationally traumatizing experience" of the illness and disability of his mother and brother instils a sense of responsibility in Aadi. Aadi assumes the role of primary caregiver for Shiva as his mother stumbles through

her struggles. Even as his exhaustion and frustrations make him leave for a trip, he never seems to get away from the shadow of his trauma. His days away from his family are punctured by traumatic memories and fitful dreams about his brother like the one where he imagines Shiva “sitting in his room, with no light, no wind and no air. If he does not get any more sunlight, he thought, he will die” (Sreenivasan 298).

While usually depicting him as a sensible and sensitive caregiver, the narrative provides space for the expression of “caregiver’s fatigue” experienced by Aadi that eventually draws him away from his family before coming back to them (Day 2). At one instance, he blames Shiva for the life that he is confined within, “For a second, he hated Shiva...He was the one who broke the rules and ran out of the hostel and I am the one who is paying the penalty” (Sreenivasan 305).

Aadi shares this ambivalence of emotions with Shaly, his mother’s partner, who feels the same tug of responsibility towards Kamala and her kids. While the novel presents Shaly as a foil to Kamala, a “dandelion puff riding on the wind. Fancy-free!” Shaly has her share of traumatic memories from her childhood (35). Her trauma is traced to abandonment on the part of her biological father and the experience of death and destruction wrought by a famine that ravaged her beloved home in the forests of Aizawl before claiming the life of her adoptive father. The reason for Shaly’s insistence to stay with the family that she shares no biological or social bonds with is the guilt that engulfs her. Her being “remorse stricken” is acknowledged by Kamala, as it was “Shaly who had introduced her to acid nights, raves, and then to the doctor who assisted with the rehabilitation of the addicts.” Just as Aadi falls into phases of ambivalence about Shiva, Shaly does so as she “accused Kamala of spoiling her life...her future” (29). While the conflict in the emotions of Aadi and Shaly reflect the pertinent issue of a caregiver’s compassion fatigue, they present resilience within their behaviour in dealing with the suffering of the people closest to them.

Michael Ungar, in “Resilience, Trauma, Context, and Culture” presents three principles with respect to “Environment Individual interactions” resilience.

- (1) Resilience is not as much an individual construct as it is a quality of the environment and its capacity to facilitate growth.
- (2) Resilience looks both the same and different within and between populations, with the mechanisms that predict positive growth sensitive to individual, contextual, and cultural variation.

(3) The impact that any single factor has on resilience differs by the amount of risk exposure, with the mechanisms that protect against the impact of trauma showing contextual and cultural specificity for particular individuals. (255)

The presence of Aadi and Shaly in the lives of Shiva and Kamala respectively stand as courageous acts that are acts of resilience in themselves and acts that encourage resilience in Shiva and Kamala. The “Performative” imagination of a resilient subject makes the individual “subject and their resilience” a continuous act “always in a process of remaking or becoming”. It is achieved through “embodied, individually and collectively lived biographies, identities and emotional and unconscious processes” (Aranda 554). Aadi and Shaly present resilience as a performative act by their repeated efforts to care for Shiva and Kamala. Such acts, when employed by caregivers, have “a positive impact on adaptation and reduces risk factors for families and informal caregivers related to emotional distress, burden, fatigue, and stress and improved patient care” (Palacio 8). The sporadic moments of agency that Kamala displays between her acid induces trips bear testimony to her attempts at resilience. Her attempts at setting up the new house and her belief that “life was the only thing that would never fail you in life...it didn't matter how badly you had of dumped it. It remained yours” display a certain sense of resilience on her part.

Acid presents the fractured nature of the expressions of trauma in its form as it lets Kamala’s dreams, her hallucinations, acid induced or otherwise, and the flashbacks from the lives of all the characters puncture its narrative train. The persistent employment of narrative tangents mirror the effects of trauma that leads “temporality and chronology [to] collapse” and by presenting a narrative that is interspersed with indirections (Whitehead 3). The novel seems to highlight some other aspects of trauma scholarship in its treatment of the traumas of each of its characters. While the lack of articulation of his trauma by Shiva presents the apparent breaking down of narrative at the face of trauma, the presence of various narrative devices mentioned above give reason to believe in the ability of a narrative expression of trauma. It echoes the opinion that “Trauma is both highly resistant to articulation and wildly generative of narratives that seek to explicate the ‘unclaimed’ originary experience” (Bond 4). In its attempts at narrativising a traumatic past through the three generations of characters it portrays, the novel presents itself as an attempt at “working-through (or mourning), a process

that restores the distinction between past, present, and future” (LaCapra). Aadi and Shaly reclaim their future when they make their respective choices irrespective of the circumstances that make them do so.

Arthur Frank in his *The Wounded Storyteller* coins the term “Chaos Narratives” to denote a certain type of illness narratives that acknowledge the unpredictability of a chronic illness experience. *Acid*, in its depiction of the traumas and challenges wrought by the addiction, illness and disability of its characters represents such a narrative that defies the causal relationship of one with the other. In being a narrative of the Trauma of death and loss with respect to Kamala’s mother; a narrative of Trauma of Illness with respect to Kamala; a narrative of Trauma of an accident and resultant disability with respect to Shiva; and a narrative of relational trauma with respect to Shaly and Aadi, *Acid* presents a challenge to causal relationship of the one with the others. This highlights the lack of coherence in illness narratives just as in illnesses themselves. Addiction, Depression, Disability, and Loss hover over the narrative in a discontinuous yet connected chain of signification, reflected in the novel as “days, nights, afternoons and mornings were chained to each other, to a tangled labyrinth of no time and no space and no concepts” (Sreenivasan 234).

Works Cited

- Aranda, K., Zeeman, L., Scholes, J., & Morales, A. S.-M. (2012). The Resilient Subject: Exploring Subjectivity, Identity and the Body in Narratives of Resilience. *Health: An Interdisciplinary Journal for the Social Study of Health, Illness and Medicine*, 16(5), 548–563. doi:10.1177/1363459312438564
- Copoeru I. *Portraying addiction as a disease: A Phenomenological Answer*. J Eval Clin Pract. 2018;1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jep.13022>.
- Crownshaw, Richard (2010) *The Afterlife of Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Literature and Culture*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Day, Jennifer R., Anderson, Ruth A., *Compassion Fatigue: An Application of the Concept to Informal Caregivers of Family Members with Dementia*, *Nursing Research and Practice*, 2011, 408024, 10 pages, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2011/408024>
- Frank, Arthur W. *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness & Ethics*. United Kingdom, University of Chicago Press, 2013.

- Goldbach, J., Fisher, B. W., & Dunlap, S. (2015). "Traumatic Experiences and Drug Use by LGB Adolescents: A Critical Review of Minority Stress". *Journal of Social Work Practice in the Addictions*, 15(1), 90–113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1533256X.2014.996227>
- LaCapra, Dominick (2001) *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Luckhurst, Roger (2008). *The Trauma Question*, London: Routledge.
- Morse, Eric D. "Addiction is a chronic medical illness." *North Carolina Medical Journal* 79.3 (2018): 163-165.
- Palacio G, C., Krikorian, A., Gómez-Romero, M. J., & Limonero, J. T. (2019). Resilience in Caregivers: A Systematic Review. *American Journal of Hospice and Palliative Medicine*, 37(8), 648–658. doi: 10.1177/1049909119893977 10.1177/1049909119893977
- Penn, P. (2001). Chronic illness: Trauma, language, and writing: *Breaking the Silence. Family Process*, 40(1), 33–52. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2001.4010100033.x>
- Sreenivasan, Sangeetha. *Acid*. Penguin. 2018.
- Ungar, M. (2013). Resilience, Trauma, Context, and Culture. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 14(3), 255–266. doi: 10.1177/1524838013487805
- Whitehead, Anne (2004) *Trauma Fiction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.