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# Roxane Gay's *An Untamed State*: A Healing Narrative

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## Abstract

In addition to political unrest, poverty and class conflict also contribute to the violence against women in Haiti. Rape of women becomes a political weapon of rival groups as well as a common practice of criminal gangs that emerge in a large number due to poverty and youth unemployment. Kidnapping against ransom becomes a source of income for these gangs, and rape or rape threat is used against the kidnapped women to compel their families to pay the demanded ransom. Reports show Haiti's alarming rate of poverty and an increasing number of kidnapping cases during 2004-2006. Haitian writer Roxane Gay captures this period in her novel, *An Untamed State* (2014), by showing violence through her protagonist, Mireille's kidnapping. She is kept in a small and suffocating room for thirteen days, and the repeated gang rape traumatises her. The gang makes her the medium to vent their anger against the privileged Haitian families. Though she is released in exchange for a huge ransom, she loses her former identity. Instead of many medical treatments and therapies, she finds support in her mother-in-law, Lorraine, who appears compassionate and supportive. Few works which have been done on this novel, present it as a postcolonial trauma narrative. This article tries to fill the gap in the existing research works by emphasising Mireille's healing journey and coping by taking relevant examples from the novel. For this purpose, the theory of healing from trauma has been applied.

**Keywords:** Criminal Gangs, Healing, Kidnapping, Poverty, Rape, Trauma.

## Introduction

"Slavery, a warlike past, and poverty" are the sources from where gender-based violence, racial discrimination and class conflicts in Haiti emerge (1). Haiti has gained freedom after being dominated by so many colonisers – Spanish, French, and Americans – over the years (1). During French colonisation:

Women and men between the ages of fourteen and sixty were sent to Saint Domingue ports, separated from their relatives, branded with red-hot irons, and forced to work under grueling conditions in homes or on plantations. Women were particularly vulnerable to rape and sexual abuse by masters and slave drivers (1).

Bell hooks rightly mentions how "black women's bodies were the discursive terrain, the playing fields where racism and sexuality converged. Rape as both right and rite of the white male dominating group was a cultural norm" (2). After the independence from slavery on January 1, 1804, the reins of the government of Haiti passed through the hands of several repressive leaders, and their poor governance strategies created political unrest (3). From 1991 to 1994, these internal conflicts start to impact Haitian women's lives, and "[s]exual violence against girls and women, particularly gang rape," is used as the weapon of "political repression" (1). "[S]ystematic political rape" is done to harm the raped women's family members, especially fathers and their partners (1). In addition to political unrest, poverty also contributes to the violence against women. According to a report by the World Bank on April 27, 2006, Haiti is affected by "widespread poverty and inequality, economic decline and unemployment, poor governance, and violence" (3). This inequality and "high levels of youth unemployment" become crucial factors in increasing "civil unrest and gang activity" in Haiti (3, 1). "[T]he widespread and systematic rape of women and girls" becomes not only a "political weapon of rival groups but also a common practice of criminal gangs implicated in illicit activities" (1). The emergence of many gangs use rape as a weapon to "terrorize the population," and during 2004-2005, an estimated number of "19,000 per 1000,000 girls were raped in the greater Port-au-Prince" (4).

Since literature is "a powerful vehicle for social commentary," it can be an effective tool to give a



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voice against rape which is "rampant yet hidden" and mostly goes unpunished in Haiti (5, 6). Haitian writer Roxane Gay captures this period in her debut novel, *An Untamed State* (2014), where her protagonist, Mireille, becomes the victim of gang rape during one of her vacations in Haiti. The narrative takes place in the early period of 2005, as it mentions Mireille's kidnapping and her traumatic experience five years before the 2010 earthquake (7). Most of her works, like *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* (2017) and *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture* (2018), are focused on sexual violence and trauma. In *Hunger*, she discloses her own rape, which happened when she was twelve years old. She intends to give a platform to those voices which have been unheard for a long period within the rape culture through the anthology, *Not That Bad*. She states that though she has not fully recovered from her trauma, she "has learned to live with her trauma" (8). By ending with a note on her unfinished healing journey, she declares that her story is not "a story of triumph" or "a success story" but simply "a true story" (9). She wants to tell the stories of those bodies which are easily ignored and dismissed: "This is not a story of triumph, but this is a story that demands to be told and deserves to be heard" (9). She embarks on this journey of unlocking the voices of the raped victims through her protagonist, Mireille, in *An Untamed State*. She neither presents the picture of a completely healed Mireille nor portrays her as a defeated victim. She delivers a realistic character with whom many victims can relate. By presenting Mireille's struggle to overcome her trauma of gang rape, her gradual healing journey, and finally, how she accepts the darker truth of her life and learns to live with her trauma, Gay emphasises coping.

Gay divides her novel into two ironic parts: "Happily Ever After" and "Once Upon a Time." Though starting in a traditional fairy-tale-like manner, the reader realises that this story is going to be a gloomy and realistic tale where "the black princess" of this novel – Mireille – "after being kidnapped and raped by a gang in Port-au-Prince, suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) following her liberation" (10). Neither her wealthy father, who has a castle-like mansion, protect her, nor her American husband can save her from the cruel grasp of the rapists. In the first part of the novel, the flow like a fairy tale, "Once upon a time, in a far-off land," is cut abruptly with "I was kidnapped by a gang of fearless yet terrified young men" (7). Two parts of the novel are ironic because they do not represent what they claim in the title. They reflect the psyche and reality of the protagonist. The first part deals with her kidnapping, gang rape, her love and marriage with Michael and gives two different life narratives of Mireille. These two narratives are "in a complex and contrasting interrelationship" (11). The second part provides the picture of Mireille's post-abduction "where Mireille's past becomes her ongoing present due to the hauntological nature of trauma" (11). This part "does not deal with what happened 'once upon a time' but with the ongoing effects of an event located in the past" (11). Gay's novel "is not a traditional fairy tale but rather, a revisionist one," keeping in mind the harsh reality where gender violence is prevalent all over the world (10). This is evident from the dedication part of the novel, in which Gay mentions, "For women, the world over" (7).

Very few critical works which have been done on this novel analyse the novel mainly from a postcolonial perspective and present it as a trauma narrative. Though K. Poornima and D. Jockim give hints about Mireille's recovery process, they do not elaborate on it further (12). Bakhtiar S. Hama concludes by talking about Mireille's inability to lead a normal life (13). Janani KS and Manali Karmakar discuss "various manifestations of trauma in the protagonist's life" and "narrativization of trauma" (11). Christopher Garland deals with issues like kidnapping and the negative image of Haiti in the American minds (14). Laura Roldán-Sevillano has done much work on this novel, mostly from the postcolonial perspective. She presents this novel as a trauma narrative (15). Roldán-Sevillano highlights the second-generation immigrant, Mireille's resistant nature in the light of her Haitian ancestors who fought for freedom against the colonial masters (16). However, she indicates the female compassionate support that Mireille gets from her mother-in-law, but she does not deliver a detailed discussion about her healing (17).

This article tries to fill the gap in the existing research works by emphasising Mireille's healing journey and coping by taking relevant examples from the novel. For this purpose, theories of trauma and healing propounded by Ellen Bass and

Laura Davis, Claudia Black, Karen Duncan, Dena Rosenbloom and Mary Beth Williams, Bessel A. van der Kolk, and Judith Herman have been applied. The discussion about Mireille's trauma and healing journey has been done taking Haiti's poverty and class conflict into account, which are the leading factors of her rape.

## Methodology

Based on a qualitative approach, this research analyses the condition of the protagonist of *An Untamed State* through the lens of the theory of trauma and healing. This research emphasises character-centric analysis through the close reading of the text and the structure of the novel. This research examines the emotional and psychological difficulties that the protagonist of the novel, Mireille, has to go through during her captivity for thirteen days. Instead of depicting the novel as a trauma narrative, this article tries to bring out a positive note by highlighting the psychological healing journey of Mireille. To carry out this research, glimpses of the social context of Haiti – class conflict – have been provided, which is responsible for Mireille's misfortune.

## Results and Discussion

This novel is built around discrimination: race, class and gender. Racial discrimination is prevalent when Mireille finds her unacceptable both in America and her homeland, Haiti, because of her diasporic identity (10). In her school days, she becomes the laughing staff of her American classmates because of her Haitian look. Though she comes from a free land, Americans still recognise her as nothing but a descendant of the slave class. Her mother-in-law, Lorraine, also did not accept her first because of her origin. She finds her mismatched even in her homeland, Haiti, where her privileged upper-middle-class status becomes the source of anger among the poor class of Haiti. She becomes the victim of both racial discrimination and class conflict, and her body becomes the tool for showing anger and frustration in both cases. In order to avoid poverty and unemployment, many young Haitians opt for migration abroad. Thirty percent of the Haitian households have close relatives living abroad, mainly in high-income countries like the United States and Canada (3). Mireille also refers to her parents' poverty in their childhood and how her ambitious father, Sebastien Duval, goes to the United States with nothing and makes his fortune by doing hard work. He builds his own construction company, returns to Haiti triumphantly, and it becomes "the largest, most successful firm in the country" (7). Mireille knows that she is a curious object to her American friends: "[A] Haitian who is not from the slums or the countryside, a Haitian who has enjoyed a life of privilege" as well as this privileged status puts her in an odd situation in her own country which is submerged in extreme poverty (7). Because of the racial discrimination and diasporic identity, she finds herself unacceptable in both countries. She, along with her husband and little son, lives in Miami, and she mentions how the news of Haiti's poverty and high rates of kidnapping reach every corner of the world. One of her American friends tells her about Haiti's "kidnapping epidemic" and how "Haiti had surpassed Colombia as the kidnapping capital of the world" (7). A report given by the United Nations states that in the face of unemployment and poverty, "kidnappings against ransom payment have become a critical source of revenue for gangs," and "[r]ape or the threat thereof is frequently used against kidnapped women and girls to press their families to pay ransom" (18).

The novel is built around Mireille's body, which is the site of male violence as a result of hatred born from the class conflict between rich and poor Haitians. Be it white colonial masters and poor Haitian men, woman's body becomes doubly colonised "by *colonialist* realities and representations, and by *patriarchal* ones too" (19). Mireille is kidnapped in Port-au-Prince at gunpoint from outside of her parent's luxurious house by "a gang of fearless yet terrified young men with so much impossible hope bearing inside their bodies" (7). Gang leaders often "portray themselves as the bearers of the social and economic aspirations of these populations who lack access to the most basic services and opportunities" (18). Gay has chosen a significant name for the chief kidnapper, "Commander," which indicates men's assumed inborn rights to command over women's bodies (7). When the chief kidnapper introduces himself as the Commander, and Mireille dares to mock his power by asking, "Commander of what? Where is your army?" his male ego gets hurt, and to display his male superiority, he grabs her by her throat and pulls her to her feet (7). When she struggles to

breathe, his male ego has been satisfied and lets go of her: "He wiped his hands, spat on the floor. He laughed. 'Let's try this again. I am the Commander. Today, I am the Commander of you'" (7).

Class conflict between rich and poor gives birth to resentment in poor Haitians towards wealthy migrant Haitian families. This anger is reflected in the Commander's words when he tells about his father to, Mireille, who used to work for a wealthy Haitian family. When the family was out of the country – Paris, New York, Montreal, Miami – he took his children in his employer's Mercedes and drove them around the city. When they came across the part of Haiti where wealthy Haitian families lived, his father said, "'Look how these people live. Never forget what they choose to deny you'" (7). On the seventh day of her captivity, the Commander shows his resentment again: "'You people are all the same. You live in your grand homes looking down on us in the gutter. You think you control everything and can have anything. . . . One day all of you will live like the rest of us. You will know what it's like to live the way the real people of this country do'" (7). Class conflict results in gender violence when he vents his anger on Mireille's body through repeated inhuman abuse. The kidnappers held her captive in a small, overheated and suffocating room for thirteen days. During her captivity, they demanded a huge ransom of one million dollars from her father, but when he refused to pay the money, they subjected her to immense torture and repeated gang rapes. Sebastien ignored the kidnappers' demand on the basis of the fact that he could not hand over his hard-earned money to some "thieving losers" who could kidnap the other members of the family even after releasing Mireille and demand more money in order to leave him "with nothing of a life again" (7). Instead of acquiring an economically privileged position, Mireille's kidnapping casts Sebastien into a crisis. The position of the privileged/dominant and unprivileged/dominated changes where unprivileged Haitian man dominates the privileged Haitian man. Bell hooks says:

Sexuality has always provided gendered metaphors for colonization. Free countries equated with free men, domination with castration, the loss of manhood, and rape—the terrorist act re-enacting the drama of conquest, as men of the dominating group sexually violate the bodies of women who are among the dominated. The intent of this act was to continually remind dominated men of their loss of power; rape was a gesture of symbolic castration. Dominated men are made powerless (i.e., impotent) over and over again as the women they would have had the right to possess, to control, to assert power over, to dominate, to fuck, are fucked and fucked over by the dominating victorious male group (2).

Mireille's body becomes the combat zone for the "Haitian long-lasting class conflict between the rich and the poor – respectively embodied by Sebastien and the Commander" (10).

The readers have been taken through the various phases of Mireille's mental state. Earlier, Mireille keeps nurturing optimistic hope: "It was not personal" and "[k]idnapping was a business transaction, one requiring intense negotiation and, eventually, compromise, but I would be safe. I would be returned to those I love, relatively unharmed" (7). But, finding it difficult to procure the money, the kidnappers turned her body into a threatening tool to frighten her father and started to divide it among themselves. Rape has been used as a "weapon of terrorism men might use to express rage about other forms of domination, about their struggle for power with other men" (2). The chapter which describes her first rape begins, "This is how a fairy tale ends" (7). Her first rapist enjoys chasing her and treats her as his prey when she tries to escape: "I don't mind a little chase" (7). She tried to fight her first rapist:

I fought him and he laughed louder, said he would never forget me. I scratched and kicked and screamed and spit in his face. He only laughed more. He stripped me of my clothing, stripped me bare, and then he stripped me of something I cannot name, flipping me onto my stomach, pulling me by the hips, forcing my thighs apart with his, forcing himself inside me. He ripped me wide open. Everything tore. All I could think about was my body, how for the first time in my life I understood the very weakness, the utter fragility of human flesh (7).

On a single day, she was raped by seven men, and this was only the start of her hellish experience. The Commander threatened her by saying, "You have no idea what will happen to you if your father doesn't pay" (7).

After the third rape, she consoles herself by murmuring that she will survive this. But during

the fifth rape, she does not recognise her own voice: "It was the sound of something lost" (7). She starts to lose herself little by little. Her sixth rapist, TiPierre, tells her to clean herself and get properly dressed before going to the Commander. This sounds like preparing an animal for God's sacrifice. Mireille feels weak and broken, and her own body seems stranger to her: "My body was not my body; it was less than nothing" (7). TiPierre locks her in the Commander's room, a new cage. She is treated like a lump of meat and food. Her identity as a human being was already lost, and it became more evident when the Commander said, "I have a problem finding women who will satisfy my particular, shall we say, appetites" (7). She had no idea of the Commander's cruelty. When he knelt between her bare thighs and lit a cigarette, she sensed a dangerous possibility but tried to ignore it by hoping as positively as she could with what little left of something of her own body. Nevertheless, she was proved wrong when the Commander said he would not have to do it if she had learned her lesson sooner. She felt helpless and understood that he enjoyed not only a woman's body by sexually abusing it, but he took sadistic pleasure by hurting the woman's most intimate part most cruelly:

He held the cigarette so close to my skin, the heat seared. . . . The smell of my own flesh burning was almost a comfort. I was alive. There was something of me left to burn. I screamed and screamed.

When there was no more of his cigarette, he pressed the flaming tip to my stomach, twisted it until my body extinguished that fire (7).

For the first time, he pleads with the Commander for the sake of her little son, who is still not one year old and whom she still breastfeeds. She thinks that it is important to remind this man that she is "not merely meat for him to butcher," but she is "a woman," she is "a mother and a wife and a daughter" (7). However, nothing could melt his heart, and he said, "You shall not know kindness from me" (7). She feels the need "to step out of" her "skin" and "abandon" her "body" so that she can survive (7). The Commander tries to teach Mireille a lesson by raping her, burning her body with a cigarette, cutting her body with a sharp knife, and penetrating her with a gun.

Her body becomes an object to buy and sell. TiPierre, one of the kidnappers, appears at first as a kind lover to Mireille, only to have full access to her body later. He was ready to let go of his share of the ransom in order to have her completely: "I gave part of my share of the ransom to the others so they would leave you alone" (7). Mireille mistakes this act as a favour and allows herself to believe that he has rescued her, but her misunderstanding gets cleared when TiPierre states, "I bought you for myself" (7). She says she is tired of being claimed by so many men when TiPierre demands, "I paid for you. You are mine" (7). She has no ownership of her own body. Her consent does not matter. Men are playing among themselves, and her body becomes an object of gambling upon which every man wants to claim ownership. TiPierre considers buying Mireille as a matter of pride, and he boasts of his manhood, which means "the right of men to have indiscriminate access to the bodies of women" (2). The day the ransom is finally paid, she hears nothing but the sound of the cash machine calculating her worth (7). Even that day, the Commander did not leave her free and "enjoyed" her for the last time (7). These rapes shatter her fairytale-like life completely, and the former Mireille that she used to be, comes to an end with her being affected by trauma.

Jericho M. Hockett states that the experience of rape may not be limited to the act of rape itself, but "the oppression experienced by women who have been raped may be exacerbated by physical and psychological injuries that may persist long after the crime has taken place" (20). A raped woman may suffer from trauma. Dena Rosenbloom and Mary Beth Williams indicate that trauma can affect the whole person differently, like "changes in body, mind, emotions, and behavior" (21). Bodily violation indicates a complete disempowerment of one person. Cathy Caruth mentions: "[T]he term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (22). This blow to one's emotional self is so powerful that it results in a "breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" (22). Unlike bodily wounds, which can be healed over time, emotional wound takes time as it is not present consciously and manifests itself through nightmares, personal detachment and fear.

Judith Herman hints at the "[p]rolonged, repeated trauma" which "occurs only in circumstances of captivity" and "when the victim is a prisoner, unable to flee, and under the control of the

perpetrator" (23). In *An Untamed State*, the Commander and his gang leave no stone unturned in casting Mireille into a traumatic situation by sexually abusing her for thirteen days. She feels "filthy," "hopeless," and knows "[t]here was not enough rain" to wash the rest of her clean (7). When Mireille is finally released in exchange for ransom, her body and mind are no longer hers, and she is psychologically still in the cage: "I was free even if I did not know it yet or my body was free and my mind was in the cage" (7). Mireille's body is violated more than once in a cruel manner, and as "[t]he body is the passport, the warrant, the seal of one's identity," trauma causes psychological damage (24). She suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), loss of the self, flashbacks and dreams of her hellish experience, and fear of any male touch, be it her loving husband, her little son, or a doctor.

The novel takes its readers through various stages of Mireille's trauma, and it can be recognised through the gradual changes in her personality. Her early signs of traumatic state are noticeable when her former defiant state, recalling sweet memories of her happily married life while waiting for her father to pay the ransom, changes into "an almost defeated individual attempting to suppress those happy recollections" (17). She does not want to recall those days as they are the source of pain and indication of losing something forever: "I made myself forget everything I could no longer bear to remember . . ." (7). Even after her release, she still feels she is under the "sweaty bodies" of some immoral men who are not her husband (7). This article deals particularly with the loss of her identity and fear of being touched because these two symptoms are more prevalent in Mireille as a consequence of her trauma.

The ways of "establishing control over another person are based upon the systematic, repetitive infliction of psychological trauma," and these methods are designed to make the victim disempowered and disconnected and to "instill terror and helplessness and to destroy the victim's sense of self in relation to others" (23). Mireille starts to lose herself slowly when, for the first time, she has to be submissive to the Commander: "I became no one" (7). When TiPierre asks about her son, she denies his existence by saying, "I do not have a child" and "I am not the mother of that child" (7). Before her kidnapping, she used to breastfeed her little son, but during her confinement, she sensed her milk started to dry up, and she felt like losing this one last part of herself. Kidnappers did not leave even this sacred part of her untouched. TiPierre suckled and stole the milk from her body (7). When her bodily pain becomes unbearable, she utters: "I was no one, so the pain did not matter," and she wants the kidnappers to kill her: "I was no one. My death would not matter" (7).

The victim often "retains the dehumanized identity of a captive who has been reduced to the level of elemental survival: the robot, animal, or vegetable" (23). Over the course of time, Mireille also repeatedly addresses herself as an "animal" whom the Commander will enjoy "taming" (7). Bessel van der Kolk mentions that people who are affected by trauma often perceive themselves as "either *some body else*, or like *no body*" (25). "I was no one" becomes a refrain in almost every sentence of Mireille, and she utters it repeatedly. She perceives that she is only flesh, "meat and bones" for the "cruel appetites" of men (7). A person who is subjected to prolonged, repeated trauma develops "an insidious, progressive form of post-traumatic stress disorder that invades and erodes the personality" and "the victim of chronic trauma may feel herself to be changed irrevocably, or she may lose the sense that she has any self at all" (23). Mireille starts to address herself in the third person singular multiple times: "Leave her family alone;" "She is married. She has a husband she loves. She will never want you" (7). As "[t]rauma snatches the self-identity from oneself" and casts "the victim into a state of existential crisis," gradually, Mireille finds it difficult to recall her name (23). She remembers only the shape of the name, nothing more because "[i]t was locked somewhere" she could not reach (7). She loses count of time and finds it irrelevant because she is "no one" and does not want to measure the time between who she was and who she becomes (7).

Kolk explains that people who are assaulted more than once may be subjected to alexithymia: "not being able to sense and communicate what is going on with you" (25). Those persons can completely recover from the trauma once they get back in touch with their body and self and feel entirely safe in their skin (25). Judith Herman mentions that victim often cannot retain her former identity even after release from captivity, and she develops a new identity which "must include a body that can

be controlled and violated" (23). When Mireille is set free, she is still held captive psychologically and cannot believe it is true. At the time of running, she did not stop, fearing that people might hurt her again. When she reached a church, she could not trust even the Father and stepped back when he reached for her. When the Father asked her name, she only remembered a vague memory relating to her name: "There was a name of a woman I had once been" (7). Finally, when she could utter her name, she did it in the third person: "Mireille. Kidnapped" (7). The Father tried to calm her down by approaching her, but she was afraid of male touch and said: "Don't hurt me" (7). Fortunately, the father knew her family, and before they came to take her away, she remained awake because she felt hypervigilant all the time: "Time passed. I wanted to close my eyes, relax, but I was not safe. I was not safe. It was best to stay awake" (7). When her husband, Michael, tries to comfort her by pulling her towards him, she backs away and wants to run again (7). She was terrified of men's touch and could not trust even her husband. She forbids everyone to come closer and says, "Don't any of you touch me" (7). Rosenbloom and Williams show that touch, intimacy and trust are interrelated:

We think of touch as the most intimate of our senses because it requires us to be closest. But a person close enough to touch is close enough to hurt. This is why there is always some risk with intimacy, just as there is with trust. Intimacy requires us to trust that those we allow to be close will not intentionally harm us (21).

As a breach takes place between the trust and touch with the unwelcome intimacy of seven unknown people cum rapists, Mireille loses her trust in every male person. When Michael starts to rub her back to calm her down, she feels as if he is tearing apart what remains of her skin from her body (7). Kolk suggests that human beings usually calm down their distress "by being touched, hugged, and rocked" because these methods make people "feel intact, safe, protected, and in charge" (25). As Mireille is not out of her trauma, she does not calm down and feels safe when Michael comforts her by rubbing her back. Kolk says that a traumatised person cannot fully recover if she does not feel safe in her skin (25).

Sometimes, medical examinations can be upsetting and re-traumatise the patient. Certain procedures like taking off clothes, being touched, and insertion of medical instruments into the private parts may trigger "feelings of being unsafe, distrustful, and powerless" (21). Instead of taking Mireille home, Michael takes her to a doctor's chamber, and when the doctor tries to take her by her elbow, she "hissed, practically spitting on him" (7). She does not tolerate the idea of changing her clothes in a doctor's chamber when he hands her a gown for treatment purposes because it seems like taking off her clothes for another man again, whom her body does not care to know (7). "Medical settings can trigger uncomfortable feelings and memories of the trauma," and when the doctor tries to force her knees apart gently, her traumatic moments are aroused, and she starts to see the Commander standing between her legs (21, 7). She becomes self-defensive, throws a glass jar in his direction, and says, "Stay away from me" (7). "The vulnerability that comes with physical touch and providing a personal history" can make it difficult for a raped survivor to seek medical treatment (21). Mireille cannot bear any other man's touch: "I was not going to let him touch me, examine me, try to fix me. He had no right to any part of me" (7). On her way to America, at the airport security checkpoint, when she is examined, her traumatic memory is triggered again: "The floor tilted as he patted down my chest, pressing his hands too long, too hard against my breasts, so very sore. . . . It was getting difficult to keep count of the men who had no right to my body taking liberties" (7). For a long time, the four words "Please don't hurt me" become her "mantra" whenever any man comes closer to her (7). Kolk mentions that when a person becomes mentally upset, she usually needs another person's assistance to comfort her, but sexually abused victims face a dilemma because they "desperately crave touch while simultaneously being terrified of body contact" (25).

Psychological healing is a process "through which the harmony between mind, body and spirit is restored" (26). It involves "a transcendence of the existing state of consciousness, which would entail a reconstruction of one's reality, a change in attitude, and (broadening of) one's vision and perspective" (26). Healing is not the complete change of the existing situation but it enables a traumatic victim to deal with her present condition effectively. Psychological healing provides "hope,

acceptance, release of trapped psychic energy, resolution of internal conflicts and new insights" (26). As healing and suffering are inseparable, healing is not linear, it is cyclical in nature. Suffering "begets healing and vice versa, and thus the cycle continues" (26). This cyclical nature implies that neither suffering nor healing is permanent.

The day the Commander releases her, he says she should stay with him because he has ruined her and she will be useless to anyone else. When she starts to run away, she hears him saying, "I will not forget you. . . . And you will not forget me" (7). Yes, it is challenging to get healed from the imprint of one's traumatic past, but it is not impossible. Kolk states, "Nobody can 'treat' a war, or abuse, rape, molestation, or any other horrendous event, for that matter; what has happened cannot be undone. But what can be dealt with are the imprints of the trauma on body, mind, and soul," and that is why the "challenge of recovery is to reestablish ownership of your body and your mind – of your self" (25). One day, Mireille says, "I threw those filthy clothes holding those memories of my body into the fire pit behind my parents' house and watched the clothes smolder" – this can be taken as Mireille's first step towards her healing journey (7).

Emotional support, consoling behaviour, and interpersonal regulation of emotions are foundational to psychological healing (27). Interpersonal regulation of emotions calls for social cooperation meaning empathy and consoling behaviour from another person towards the person in distress (27). Mireille's healing journey is an instance of psychological healing which consists mostly empathetic, compassionate and supportive behaviour from her mother-in law, Lorraine. After returning to Florida, she still feels restless and frightened. It is finally on a remote farm where her healing starts with the help of Lorraine, her mother-in-law. When she arrives at her in-laws' house, Lorraine does not look "surprised" and welcomes her warmly instead of avoiding her (7). Recognition of suffering that has occurred to the victim is inherent in healing after trauma (28). From the very first moment, Lorraine becomes supportive and recognises her sufferings: "Miri, I am glad you are here. You were done wrong. You were done real wrong. . . . The older I get the less the world makes sense" (7). "Healing is not about finding a quick fix," but it takes time (29). Lorraine also tells her: "You have some time to find yourself out of wherever you are right now" (7).

Herman proposes three stages of recovery – "establishment of safety," "remembrance and mourning," and "reconnection with ordinary life" – which are an attempt "to impose simplicity and order upon a process that is inherently turbulent and complex" (23). This article deals only with the first stage of Herman's proposed recovery process, as there are few examples in the novel to explore the other two stages. The process and outcome of the first stage of recovery are "complicated in proportion to the severity, duration, and early onset of abuse" (23). One of the factors which works as a "safety net," provides "great comfort," and becomes "a source of strength" for the survivors of sexual abuse is the mental support which they can get from a family member, a teacher, or a friend (30). Mireille finds it in Lorraine as she is supportive, compassionate, caring and an attentive listener. "Trust and safety are related" and "[w]hen others prove themselves trustworthy, you feel more secure and less alone" (21). As trauma shatters the sense of safety, it is difficult to trust oneself and others for a rape survivor. Instead of forcing, Lorraine wins Mireille's trust slowly by treating the wound on Mireille's feet first and showing her concern: "You should let me look at the rest of you, . . . I can see you're bleeding elsewhere" (7). She feeds her slowly and treats her with such kindness that Mireille needs "greedily" (7).

Claudia Black also talks about the requirement of an "Emotional Safety Net," which "occurs when you form a trusting relationship with the person(s) who will guide you through your process. In order to walk back through the pain, there must be a feeling of trust of self and the trust of at least one significant other with whom you will work through the process" (31). When Mireille starts to trust Lorraine, she is encircled by this Emotional Safety Net: "I stood behind Lorraine and wrapped my arms around her, pressed my chest to her back and we stood there for a long while. She was something safe and good I could hold on to. I held tight. I allowed myself that" (7). A person needs "to feel safe in order to trust and to share" her "vulnerabilities" (31). Lorraine's continuous assurance that Mireille is "safe" with her and positive words earn Mireille's trust and make her

feel safe (7). Mireille finally lets Lorraine look into the other wounds on her body: "She said, 'You have nothing to be ashamed of.' She said, 'Your body will heal.'. . . Lorraine squeezed my shoulder. 'There's so much good in you, it can't possibly be gone. And I believe you feel dead right now but you won't always'" (7). "People in your support system trust your capacity to heal yourself. Rather than view you as someone who is damaged, they perceive you as a good person who's having a hard time right now," mention Bass and Davis (30). Mireille spends almost six months under the care of Lorraine, who keeps encouraging Mireille that she has to survive her present miserable state and that she is not unwanted, but everyone needs her: "They need you, my boy and your boy. We all do. . . . you're going to have to find your way out of wherever you are for you and for them" (7).

Lorraine opts for various healing strategies for Mireille to release her anger and inner pain as well as divert her attention from her traumatic memory. Lorraine gives her a dough and tells her to release her anger on it (7). She also keeps Mireille busy with farmwork like "repairing fences, baking pies, building a new chicken coop, even planting seeds" in her garden (7). These methods become therapeutic for her and keep her mind diverted from her traumatic memory for some time. As the "first task of recovery is to establish the survivor's safety," "[n]o other therapeutic work should even be attempted until a reasonable degree of safety has been achieved" (23). Lorraine arranges for a doctor's check-up after ensuring an adequate amount of Mireille's safety. Though Mireille is sceptical at first, when she meets Dr. Darcy and notices kindness in her, she hopes that she can entrust her body to this doctor (7). The doctor tells her that she is suffering from all the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. As a result of repeated torture, her vaginal canal is damaged extensively, and the doctor advises surgery which can be "one step toward getting better, hurting less, being whole" (7).

Gay does not make it clear whether Mireille is fully recovered or not because, at the end of the novel, after more than five years, Mireille feels choked when she spots the Commander at a restaurant in Miami (7). Though she faces the Commander, the "architect" of her fear and attacks him, she keeps repeating, "You should have killed me" (7). Though she "was strong" and "worked very hard five years into the after to be strong, to fight even harder," this unexpected meeting triggers her traumatic memory: "The memories filled my body at once, threatened to spread through me like a malignancy, destroying everything I had done to become closer to alive again" (7). Though the possibility of reliving the trauma cannot be dismissed, it should be remembered that healing takes time, and it is not about "finding a quick fix" (29). Black says, "Recovery isn't changing who you are. It is letting go of who you are not" (31). Similarly, Mireille cannot change her traumatic past, but she can let go of her traumatised state by accepting the darker truth and coping with her life, which will make "a hardship easier to bear" (21). Healing is time-consuming, and "the relationship between time and healing is not linear" (26). The healing journey is full of ups and downs, and it "is not necessarily progressive, i.e., healing does not necessarily get better with the passage of time. Yes, with time one may learn to live with one's losses and so the intensity of one's suffering may lessen" (26).

To heal from the trauma of sexual abuse, accepting the truth that she has been raped is necessary. Bass and Davis consider this acceptance as the crucial step which gives the survivor "the freedom to explore and understand" her "history" (30). After five years, Mireille consults several therapists and psychiatrists, and almost everyone prescribes her complex drugs, which makes her "listless and tired" (7). There is only one therapist who tells her that she will be better but cannot be the former self: "I am going to come clean with you, Mireille. You will get better but you will never be okay, not in the way you once were" (7). This truth frees her and makes her "lighter and cleaner and calm" (7). By accepting that she has to live the rest of her life with the darker truth, Mireille learns to cope. "The cycle of suffering and healing" gives "meaning and direction to one's life" (26).

## Conclusion

Recovering from trauma "is not a matter of being cured all of a sudden," but an "ongoing, daily process," and understanding of which helps the affected person "feel more in control" (32). Even though healing takes place, the scars produced by the traumatic experience leave its sign behind. During the healing journey, "the pain one has undergone and lived with, somehow gets so

intermeshed in one's life, that it can never be eradicated from one's psyche till the person exists" (26). This novel portrays Mireille as neither an eternal victim nor a fully recovered survivor. It depicts her healing journey and coping and presents her as a fighter who does not give up easily but is strong enough to try to overcome her trauma and rebuild herself. "Healing means more confidence" that one will be able to cope with one's memories and symptoms and better manage one's feelings (32). Mireille's ongoing healing journey depends not solely upon medicine and therapy, as she has mentioned how the complex drugs prescribed by the therapists and psychiatrists make her "listless and tired" (7). However, she is able to heal slowly with the help of continuous, compassionate support from her mother-in-law. Raphael and Meldrum refer to "the quality of human compassion for another person's sufferings, regardless of the nature of the trauma" as the most vital element in the healing process (28). Lorraine's motherly protection and assurance towards Mireille – "'It's just me, child'" – make her feel safe and comfortable (7). Allen talks about the blending of sympathy, "a feeling of concern for someone in distress," and empathy, "the comprehension and sharing of another person's emotional state," in order to help a traumatised victim cope with life (33). Lorraine possesses both of these two qualities, which is evident from her behaviour towards Mireille: "My mother-in-law stood, slowly, and stepped toward me, her hands held open like she might pull all the hurt out of me. I backed away, trembling. She stopped. 'It's okay. You can talk to me'" (7).

In *Hunger*, Gay mentions that she prefers the term victim over survivor because she does not want "to diminish the gravity of what happened" and "to pretend that everything is okay," but she wants to portray that she is living "with what happened, moving forward without forgetting, moving forward without pretending" she is "unscarred" (9). It can be said that before publishing her memoir, Gay shapes her protagonist in the shadow of herself. At the end of the novel, by showing Mireille's fear and choked voice at a sudden meeting with the Commander, Gay wants to show the deep wound created by rape which is fresh even five years later. Though she is not healed completely, during these years, she is able to collect some of her broken parts, which gives her the courage to face the Commander and attack him with all her strength. Though published much later, the main focus in two of her works, *Hunger* and *Not That Bad*, is coping with trauma. By giving reference to her own rape, Gay proclaims that though the rapists have killed the girl she used to be, they cannot kill all of her, and she has learned to live with her trauma (8). Though Gay's healing is incomplete, she learns to cope with her trauma by accepting the truth. Similarly, Mireille may not regain her former self but will not live like a loser. She is neither a completely healed survivor nor a defeated victim. She is a strong woman like Roxane Gay, whose struggle to achieve a better life is still active.

## Abbreviations

None.

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