

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165

The Criterion

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

15 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

VOL. 15 ISSUE-6 DECEMBER 2024

Editor-In-Chief: **Dr. Vishwanath Bite**
Managing Editor: **Dr. Madhuri Bite**

www.the-criterion.com

AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Silent Cries: The Hidden Struggles of a Romani Boy

Priyanka Prasannan

Research Scholar

&

Dr. Arya Gopi

Assistant Professor,

Research and PG Department of English,

The Zamorin's Guruvayurappan College,

Affiliated to the University of Calicut.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14606036>

Article History: Submitted-31/07/2024, Revised-20/12/2024, Accepted-24/12/2024, Published-31/12/2024.

Abstract:

Childhood plays a crucial role in the construction of one's personality. We become what we experience in childhood. Mikey Walsh, through his autobiographies, narrates a heart-wrenching life journey in which he struggles to fight back against the challenges life throws at him. By critically analysing the autobiographies, the study explores the themes of childhood trauma, resilience and coping mechanisms. The paper calls attention to the catastrophic impression of child abuse on Mikey's life, including his struggles with identity formation, self-esteem and relationships. Despite the challenges he faced, Mikey's story exemplifies his extraordinary bravery and determination to rebuild his life beyond the boundaries of his community. The research aims to highlight the importance of listening to children's voices, providing protection and support to foster healing and self-discovery. By sharing Mikey's story, this paper offers a glimpse into the lives of the Romani community, raising awareness of their struggles and the need for greater understanding and support.

Keywords: Romani, Romanichal, Gypsy, Trauma, Child Abuse, Resilience, Coping Mechanism.

Mikey Walsh is a Romanichal living in the United Kingdom. His autobiography, titled *Gypsy Boy* and its sequel *Gypsy Boy on the Run*, chronicles the lives of gypsy people and their culture. These memoirs provide an intriguing story of his childhood experiences growing up in a Romani family. The story also talks about the struggles he had to undergo as a boy in a highly patriarchal community, his resilience and his eventual escape from his community. Childhood trauma, one of the central themes of the story, offers a poignant perspective on child abuse and its impact on adult life. Furthermore, the consequences of such traumas will lead to troubles in identity formation, establishing healthy relationships, self esteem and self confidence. This paper discusses the author's resilience, coping mechanisms and how he successfully achieved an everyday life even in the face of these life-threatening traumas.

Romani gypsies are one of the ancient communities spread across Europe. They are known by different names, with subtle cultural variations observed across borders. They have a unique way of life in which travelling plays a pivotal role in their culture. These communities are highly patriarchal, with fathers holding the utmost authority over their families. Both males and females have separate and well-defined gender roles. The community often ostracizes those who try to avoid these traditional roles. Since the community is not fully integrated with the outside world, the outcast will find it challenging to live in both their community and the outside world. However, the pressure to conform to these gender roles is more on men in the community. They are expected to be physically strong to protect their family and community from external threats, marry at a young age, and have children to preserve their culture and traditions. Concepts from the outside world, such as homosexuality and child abuse, were alien to them and were not believed to exist in their community.

Walsh's grandfather was a renowned bare-knuckle fighter who had accumulated significant wealth by retaining his title as a fighting champion. Hence, all his sons and grandchildren were expected to be brave fighters like him. This put enormous pressure on the boys in his family, and they were expected to fight anyone passing by their trailer. Walsh's father, Frank, was unable to gain his father's approval, so he decided to achieve this through his son Mikey.

Consequently, his father put Mikey through hard training from a very young age. The severe training was unbearable for the young boy, and people often beat him due to his cowardice.

Often confronted by shame and contempt, Mikey had low self-esteem and confidence. Soon, he realized that he was a source of humiliation for the entire Walsh family. Growing up, Mikey longed for his father's recognition and support, which was impossible for him to attain. Later, he was sexually abused by his paternal uncle Joseph, which shattered him completely. His life changed when he met Caleb, a gadje(non-gypsy) who works at a pub. He helped Mikey to escape his community and introduced him to the outside world. From there, he finally starts to understand his true identity and finds his place, free from threats and shame. Though he escaped his gypsy way of life, he is a proud gypsy boy who adores his cultural heritage. From the beginning to the end, Mikey was always haunted by memories of the abuses that he had undergone. Moreover, it had massively affected his individual development and relationships. Child abuse being one of the primary themes in the autobiography, it should be critically analysed as it can leave a permanent scar on one's life.

Judith Herman is an American psychiatrist and a prominent author in the field of trauma studies. In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, she talks broadly on topics of trauma, abuse and recovery and how trauma affects individuals and society in the long run. Herman states that trauma arises when people experience events that are too much for them to handle, which leave them feeling overwhelmed, helpless and vulnerable. Trauma often involves a violation of a person's physical or emotional boundaries, like sexual assault, physical abuse or neglect. It can damage attachments and relationships; as a result, they end up feeling isolated and disconnected from their loved ones. Trauma has the power to shatter one's core beliefs and assumptions about themselves, leading to a sense of loss and self-doubt.

Physical abuse is generally defined as "any non-accidental physical injury to a child" and can include striking, kicking, burning, or biting the child, or any action that results in physical impairment to the child. In the memoirs, Mikey has clearly shown how hard it was to live a life full of traumas. As he is from a traditional Gypsy family, it was even more challenging for him to speak out what he was going through. As the eldest son, Mikey was expected to uphold his family's legacy by becoming a bare-knuckle fighter. Unlike other children, Mikey was larger in size than other boys his age, which heightened his father's hopes. Unfortunately, Mikey was fragile and hated fighting. Instead, he enjoyed playing with his sister Frankie with dolls and costumes and also enjoyed spending time with his mother. All of his inclinations towards feminine traits infuriated

his father, who subjected him to brutal training. His dislike of fighting and fear of getting punched are evident in the following lines.

As the training was stepped up I spent my days waiting, terrified, for the moment when he would turn to me and say, 'Ready, Mikey?' I was supposed to nod cheerfully and run to get my miniature boxing gloves on. Instead I screamed, kicked, sobbed and begged him not to make me fight - all to no avail. Every day he set out to train me, and every day I failed him. He even made me fight Frankie, in an attempt to humiliate me into succeeding.
(Walsh 9)

Thus, his life of pain and humiliation began to progress. Though his mother and sister intervened in the brutal training, his father left them with heavy blows. No one could save him from the hands of his father, and sometimes he was even locked up bruised. This training made him think of himself as worthless and desolate.

Emotional abuse is defined as an "injury to the mental capacity or emotional stability of the child as substantiated by an observable or substantial change in demeanor, emotional response, or cognition", and injury as evidenced by "anxiety, depression, withdrawal, or aggressive behaviour." Emotional abuse is another form of abuse that Mikey had gone through. For him, his self-worth largely depended on his father's approval. Nevertheless, this was hard to achieve as he felt sick and tired of fighting.

By the time I turned thirteen, I was a fearful and lonely boy. My father had grown so ashamed of me he found it difficult to look me in the face. And I couldn't blame him. Not only was I incapable of fulfilling even one task that he gave me, but my feelings towards men would not go away, and I knew by then that I could do nothing to change them. (Walsh 15)

Every battle he failed to win was a blow to his self-confidence. Also, his father made sure that he remembered all these failures and constantly insulted him by calling him a worthless coward.

Sexual abuse is another form of extreme abuse that a child can go through.

CAPTA(Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act) defines sexual abuse as "the employment, use, persuasion, inducement, enticement, or coercion of any child to engage in or assist any other person in engaging in, any sexually explicit conduct or simulation of such conduct for the purpose of producing a visual depiction of such conduct; or The rape, and in cases of

caretaker or interfamilial relationships, statutory rape, molestation, prostitution, or other form of sexual exploitation of children, or incest with children." Sexual abuse is another form of extreme abuse a child can experience. Sexual abuse can leave a child feeling perplexed and trapped, unable to escape the powerful abuser.

Mikey's hard life escalated when his father decided to take him out to work. He was then made an apprentice to his uncle Joseph. Mikey had no choice except to follow his father's strict commands. Initially, Mikey was happy to be with his uncle, who was kinder and more affectionate towards him. It did not last long as he used Mikey's helplessness to his advantage. He was often left alone with his uncle, and Mikey was a victim to his sexual gratification.

Joseph had been kinder to me than most of the men. He seemed more understanding, rubbing my back and winking at me when no one was looking. But that day he took me into the office, stripped me, and abused my body repeatedly. Afterwards he told me that if I ever breathed a word, he would tell my father I had misbehaved. (Walsh 18)

Herman suggests that trauma is a relational phenomenon where a child experiences trauma from the immediate family or caretakers. Furthermore, she adds that the only way to get out of this trauma is through the help of the immediate family. Children often find it challenging to open up to their families because they fear the consequences, as well as the blame and shame they might endure.

And every week, while the others went out collecting pallets of building material in the truck, Joseph abused me. The things he did to me often left me unable to swallow or sit or even breathe without pain. But he behaved as though we were both enjoying it, chuckling and chatting to me, while I lay, mute and numb, praying for deliverance. (Walsh 18)

Due to this constant abuse, Mikey was devastated physically, mentally and emotionally. He was confused, hurt and had no one to talk to. He felt like he was trapped and had no hope of escape from this intimidating situation. Most of the children who have gone through such experiences start to hate their bodies and feel disgusted.

Another cruel attitude on the part of parents and caregivers towards children is neglecting them when needed. Parents should always create a safe space for children to open up to them, ensuring they feel secure and protected. Furthermore, parents should closely observe their children and any changes in their behavior. This behaviour change allows them to ask questions and help

their child cope with stress and trauma. Children who do not receive this kind of affection and support from their parents are considered neglected. An example from the story is as follows:

There was one time when I did try to tell my father what was happening, but he beat me for lying. And after that I knew there was no possibility of salvation, I would simply have to endure the abuse. I kept silent. (Walsh 18)

Uncle Joseph took advantage of Mikey's silence and kept him as a sex toy. When this exceeded his limit, he decided to confess to his father. Mikey was so sure that his father would beat him to a pulp if he revealed this. Still, he held onto a ray of hope that he could somehow escape the clutches of his uncle. Sadly, he did what Mikey thought his father would do. At that moment, he felt like his world was crumbling because his father didn't believe him. The reason behind his father's action can also be the fact that gypsies did not believe in the notion of homosexuality.

Richard B Gartner is a clinical psychologist who talked predominantly about male adults who had undergone different childhood traumas. In his book *Betrayed as Boys: Psychodynamic Treatment of Sexually Abused Men*, Gartner argues that child abuse has always been considered a social taboo, misunderstood and stigmatised. Society has neglected the sexual victimization of children. However, the child abuse of boys is even more underrated and ridiculed than the abuse of girls. Gartner associates this with societal myths, such as the belief that men cannot be sexually abused, women cannot be sexual abusers, and that sexual abuse is always overt. He affirms that research has refuted these myths, yet people continue to perpetuate shame and silence among victims.

All his life, though he was repeatedly subjected to all sorts of abuse, he also had a few people who loved and supported him wholeheartedly. Among them, his mother and Caleb played a significant role in building his mental strength. The most effective and powerful influence in Mikey's life is his mother. Though she is a gypsy, she was very different from others; she was liberal and protested against her husband for the sake of her children.

My mother would often step in to try to protect me. She took many beatings herself as he turned on her, furious at her intervention, throwing her across the room and on occasion even knocking her unconscious. She fought him bravely, and though she never won, she continued to intervene when she felt I had taken enough of a pounding. (Walsh 9)

As a child, Mikey was always terrified and felt lonely due to the nonstop abuses he had known. His mother was the only person in his family who truly understood him and tried to protect her son from the inhuman acts of her husband.

Standing outside, bloody and battered, listening to the sickening sound of my mother being beaten, I knew that I had to find a way to leave. If I didn't, I felt quite certain that he would kill me and I would continue to be the cause of my mother's sufferings. (Walsh 28)

The instance above is a powerful example of her motherly instinct to protect her children. Mikey strongly believed that his mother loved him no matter what and would do anything to help him out. Even then, the very thought of his mother getting hurt because of him made him numb, which eventually made him conceal his pain.

We don't look it, but me and you, we're the same. I see me in you, more and more every day. I know you're unhappy, Mikey, but things will get better, I promise you they will. You wouldn't be my boy if you were like every other one of those fools out there. People are scared of what they can't understand. One day, you'll find your way. And I hope you leave all these behind. Be proud of being different, Mikey. Don't let the jealousy of this lot ever crush that special person that I see in you. (Walsh 37)

His mother's words, like those above, have always consoled him and helped him regain his strength. The second most influential person in Mikey's life is Caleb. He met Caleb at a nightclub when he went out with his friends. At first, he was reluctant to talk to Caleb because gypsies were forbidden from having close relationships with non-gypsies. All his decisions in life have a massive influence on his fear of becoming an outcast. Often, he felt invisible and worthless to his father and community, which drew him to the other side of the world. This feeling led to a deeper connection with Caleb and eventually to his elopement with him to escape his community. Even then, the terror of being watched by his father and gypsy men made each day of his life challenging. The following lines show his mental state during those elopement days:

I was tortured by memories. I wound the seat back so that I was out of sight to anyone passing. I felt I should sleep to pass the time, but couldn't close my eyes. I listened to mindless chatter on the radio to calm myself but my mind began to play tricks on me. I imagined figures approaching the car, dragging me from it and beating me to death right there. Every few seconds I turned around in my seat to check for faces at the window. (Walsh 60)

Though he ran away from his community, he was still within their reach; somehow, he always managed to escape their sight. Since Caleb helped Mikey escape his community, Caleb's life was entirely destroyed by Mikey's father, which led to their painful breakup. By this time, Mikey was going through an avalanche of emotions, full of guilt, shame, and longing for the family he had left behind. However, this did not stop him from pursuing what he wanted in life.

Along with this, his ability to self-reflect on his experiences has helped in building psychological resilience. In addition, his escape from his community to the outside world played a key role in his healing and self-discovery. "Recovery from trauma requires a safe and supportive environment, where the survivor can re-establish a sense of control and empowerment." (Herman, 1992) Free from the constraints of his community, he was able to educate himself and discover his true passion. Additionally, he was able to meet like-minded people and create a positive environment. Moreover, writing down his life experiences as memoirs worked as therapeutic to him. Writing one's own life story allows the writer to self-reflect and provides an opportunity to share deep, untold stories with the world. At the same time, this also helps readers develop empathy and a sense of connection with those who have had similar experiences. Later in life, Mikey managed to survive in the outside world as he had gone through all forms of hardships from his early life. He slept on the streets and even begged for alms to fill his stomach. Then he made new friends and found happiness in being treated as a human being; however, Mikey missed his family at the same time. From there, he earned a degree with the support of his friends and later discovered his true passion as a teacher for children. In the long run, he successfully regained the love and support he had always dreamed about.

To conclude, Mikey Walsh's autobiography, *Gypsy Boy*, showcases the profound struggles he faced growing up in a Romani community. As a boy from a conventional life setting, Mikey's life was very different. The culture he grew up in greatly influenced all his decisions. All his experiences under a patriarchal system bring out the harsh realities many children endure. Despite these misfortunes, Mikey's resilience and persistence radiate through the story. He finds strength in the support of vital relationships, such as those between his mother and Caleb. Also, he is involved in deep self-reflections to understand and cope with his journey towards self-discovery and healing. Mikey's story is a testament to the power of the human will to conquer even the most severe trauma. His ability to handle the immense challenges and ultimately frame a new life outside his community offers hope and inspiration to those with similar struggles. Mikey highlights the

importance of listening to children's voices, as well as the need for protection and support from their families.

Works Cited:

Gartner, Richard B. *Betrayed as Boys: Psychodynamic Treatment of Sexually Abused Men*. The Guilford Press, 1999.

Walsh, Mikey. *Gypsy Boy on the Run*. Thomas Dunne Books, 2013.

Walsh, Mikey. *Gypsy Boy*. Thomas Dunne Books, 2012.

Child Welfare Information Gateway. "*Definitions of Child Abuse and Neglect*." U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, May 2022, www.childwelfare.gov. Accessed 25 June 2024.

Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery: Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, Basic books, 2015.