Transcending Trauma: Examining Post-Traumatic Growth in Indian Sports Memoirs

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Abstract

People often look at trauma through the lens of suffering, especially in the context of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). However, as our understanding of mental health deepens, it becomes clear that challenges can also act as a catalyst shaping lives. This study looks at the paradigm of Post-traumatic Growth (PTG), illuminating how individuals can channelize their traumatic experiences for personal evolution. The in-depth analysis of memoirs, notably Milkha Singh's The Race of My Life (2013) and Yuvraj Singh's The Test of My Life (2013), will provide the complex dynamics by which trauma transcends into transformation. This study showcases the pivotal role of resilience, perseverance and growth amidst the challenges by exploring the tragic phases in the narratives which facilitates PTG. The memoirs of Milkha Singh and Yuvraj Singh serve as a testament to the human capability for transformation, highlighting the significance of channelling traumatic experiences towards triumph. The nuanced bond between trauma and growth strives to enhance the understanding of post-traumatic growth (PTG) thus reinforcing the human potential to grow more assertive, compassionate and goal-oriented irrespective of the shadowed history.

Keywords: Post-Traumatic Growth, Resilience, Endurance, Channelization, Healing.

Introduction

Trauma is a psychological reaction to a deeply upsetting experience that can leave a lasting mark in a person's mind, body and behaviour. It can stem from various experiences such as accidents, abuses, violence, natural disasters, war or loss, leaving an everlasting impact on an individual. It can manifest in dreadful ways, ranging from anxiety to suicidal tendencies. Trauma affects not just the person experiencing it, but their loved ones too. The dichotomy of trauma can be observed through the contrasting yet interconnected phenomena of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Post-traumatic Growth (PTG). PTSD is a devastating psychological condition that often emerges following exposure to extreme trauma and is characterized by symptoms such as flashbacks, hypervigilance, and emotional numbness (American Psychiatric Association). It highlights the damaging impact trauma can have on mental health often leading to long-term psychological suffering. Whereas, PTG represents a more positive response to trauma, where individuals experience profound personal growth, new perspectives and enhanced resilience

following traumatic experiences (Tedeschi & Calhoun). Research has shown that not everyone who undergoes trauma will come out with flying colours but it unveils a new outlook to trauma where individuals can find purpose and possibility as they process their trauma. Various factors such as individual coping strategies, support systems and the nature of the trauma experienced facilitates PTG thus leading to positive metamorphosis. Trauma can also be a catalyst for positive psychological change, termed post-traumatic growth (PTG), though it is commonly associated with detrimental effects. As Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun introduced in the 1990s, PTG emphasizes personal transformation from adversity. This paper explores PTG through the memoirs of two Indian sports legends- Milkha Singh and Yuvraj Singh- the growth they attained after healing from a terrible past. The paper also examines the role of sports as a healing aid while acknowledging that trauma-induced growth unfolds differently in individuals. This paper looks into the theoretical foundations of the concept, its manifestation in real-life scenarios and its broader implications on mental health and well-being. By integrating personal narratives with psychological insights, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how adversity can be transformed into a source of strength and renewal.

Calhoun and Tedeschi claim that traumatic experiences are "seismic." Some instances are so psychologically seismic that they will profoundly affect a person's presumptive universe, much like earthquakes can shake or shatter building foundations. The occasion must be significant enough to warrant a challenge. Post-traumatic growth does not focus on changes that happen immediately after the event rather that takes place over a long period ranging from days to years as people process their experiences. The important thing is that this transformation will be empowering.

History of Hope: Tracing the Concept of Growth Beyond Trauma

Insights of thinkers like Freud, Lacan and Jung influenced our understanding of trauma over the years. Sigmund Freud was one of the first to explore trauma, describing it as a psychological wound caused by overwhelming experiences. He believed that when people cannot fully process these experiences, the memories get pushed into the unconscious mind, subtly influencing behaviour (Freud 20). Jacques Lacan expanded on Freud's ideas by emphasizing the role of language in shaping trauma. Lacan built on Freud's idea, claiming that trauma can disrupt a person's sense of identity, especially when it is too difficult to make sense through language lingering in them in ways they might not fully understand (Lacan 52). Carl Jung viewed trauma as a confrontation with the unconscious that could lead to individuation or the process of becoming one's true self (Jung 45).

In contrast, in A Thousand Plateaus, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari introduced a more fluid and non-linear perspective on trauma, seeing trauma as a fixed, defining event, they argued that healing and growth could occur by creating new connections within the individual's life, forming a "rhizomatic" network of experiences (Deleuze and Guattari 10). They believed that post-traumatic growth does not refer to returning to a pre-trauma state but embracing the potential for transformation and becoming through continuous reconfiguration (Deleuze and Guattari 29). This perspective challenges traditional psychoanalytic views that often associate trauma with permanent damage, suggesting that it can also lead to personal growth. The belief that adversity can lead to strength has existed for centuries. Many cultures, religions and philosophies have emphasized this idea including the rebirth of the phoenix in Egyptian mythology. Friedrich Nietzsche's assertion, "That which does not kill me makes me stronger" (Nietzsche 18), strengthens this idea. Dr Richard Tedeschi and Dr Lawrence Calhoun, professors at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte introduced the concept of post-traumatic growth. Their work particularly in "The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory: Measuring the Positive Legacy of Trauma," explores how individuals can experience positive transformations in various areas after undergoing trauma. Tedeschi and Calhoun

emphasized how individuals may experience growth in five key domains: increased appreciation for life, improved personal strength, discovering new possibilities, enhanced relationships with others and spiritual or existential development.

Post-traumatic growth (PTG) is about deep transformation, allowing individuals to grow beyond their previous levels of functioning. PTG leads to new perspectives and personal development beyond the baseline functioning unlike resilience, which helps people return to their pre-trauma state (Lepore and Revenson 23-41). Research indicates that PTG does not erase the emotional pain of trauma but rather coexists with it, offering a renewed sense of purpose and perspective (Joseph). Research suggests that social support, thoughtful reflection and cognitive processing are critical in fostering PTG (Park 268). For instance, autobiographical narratives often illustrate PTG as individuals recount their journeys from despair to newfound strength and understanding (Linley and Joseph 18). The memoirs, Milkha Singh's The Race of My Life and Yuvraj Singh's The Test of My Life throws light on the transformative power of trauma illustrating their journey from despair to a stronger, more insightful self. Understanding PTG provides insights into the dynamic interplay between suffering and growth, ultimately contributing to trauma recovery frameworks (Calhoun and Tedeschi 507).

Several factors contribute to Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG), helping individuals derive positive change from adverse experiences. Social support is vital, offering comfort, guidance and validation which create an environment conducive to growth enabling individuals to derive positive changes from adverse experiences (Tedeschi & Calhoun). Cognitive processing deliberately reflecting on trauma helps individuals reinterpret their experiences, find meaning and develop new perspectives (Joseph 75–78). Personality traits like openness to experience and optimism, also significantly facilitate PTG by enhancing adaptability and a forward-thinking mindset (Park and Helgeson 69).

Spirituality or religious coping provides existential grounding, helping individuals connect more deeply to their purpose and values (Shaw, Joseph, and Linley 33). Narrative reconstruction, which involves organizing fragmented memories into a coherent personal story where individuals create coherent personal stories can also support growth by bringing structure to one's experience (Pals 1081). Finally personal agency and resilience empower individuals to take transformative actions, reinforcing self-efficacy and renewed life goals (Calhoun and Tedeschi 41-59). These interconnected factors demonstrate how personal characteristics, external support systems, and reflective practices collectively help the growth in the aftermath of trauma.

Mapping Post-Traumatic Growth: A Domain-Based Analysis of Memoirs

Milkha Singh's memoir *The Race of My Life* (2013) chronicles the partition-ravaged childhood to becoming "The Flying Sikh". Born in Gobindpura (now in Pakistan), Milkha's life is anguished by the partition of India. He had to witness the brutal massacre of his family during communal violence. As he recounts: "They were killing everyone in sight... I saw my father fighting valiantly, then I saw him fall... As he fell, Father screamed, 'Bhaag Milkha, bhaag'" (M. Singh and Sanwalka 20), became a metaphor for his life's journey -a relentless pursuit of survival and success. He endured every conceivable hardship that a child could experience. According to Tedeschi and Calhoun, growth is reflected in how an individual finds, follows and adopts motivation. The trauma forced Milkha to flee to India, where he struggled with poverty and displacement. Nevertheless, these adversities laid the foundation for his resilience. His early experiences illustrate how trauma can disrupt one's sense of security and identity but also how it can catalyse growth.

When I arrived at the starting line, I saw some of the competitors give me startled looks, but only I knew why. But I didn't care. In that moment, all the hardships I had ever faced in the past flashed before my eyes. This was the catharsis I had needed. In that moment I swore to

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myself I would not let anyone (or anything) come in the way of my future. I focused all my energies on running fast. (M. Singh 37)

Milkha's entry into athletics was serendipitous. After joining the Indian Army, he participated in a six-mile race to escape fatigue duty, realizing his innate talent. Running became his outlet for pain and a means to redefine his identity. As he reflects, "Running had thus become my God, my religion, and my beloved...I would start again, encouraged by visions of victory" (M. Singh 43). The meaning you give to a loss or trauma can have a profound effect on your life (Brandt, 2017). Milkha Singh channelled his emotional suffering into an unwavering commitment to build a better future for himself. "Who can fight fate? Perhaps I would never have reached such pinnacles of success if I hadn't endured those early days of austerity and adversity" (M. Singh 64).

Yuvraj Singh's memoir, *The Test of My Life* (2013), recounts his struggle with mediastinal seminoma, a rare form of cancer. Diagnosed shortly after his crucial contribution in India's triumph in the 2011 Cricket World Cup, Yuvraj initially grappled with denial: "At one level I was confused. I thought, I am young, I am a sportsman, I am living my life full-tilt... How can I have cancer?" (Y. Singh 32). Sigmund Freud defines denial as a way by which individuals shield themselves from thoughts or feelings that feel too overwhelming to face. Denial involves the refusal to accept aspects of reality, particularly those that are distressing, to prevent the anxiety that acknowledging these facts might cause (A. Freud 89). People diagnosed with life-threatening illnesses may refuse to accept the diagnosis, continuing to live as if nothing has changed (A. Freud 105). Yuvraj's reaction mirrors this, yet his journey didn't end in denial. Rather than succumbing to despair, he fought through the gruelling experience of chemotherapy, redefining his identity beyond just being a cricketer.

Wilson and Drozdek explain that trauma fundamentally changes an individual, affecting their emotional and cognitive states and reshaping their identity and worldview (Wilson and Drozdek 1–23).

I was: more than a cricketer, a fun-loving foodie, who loved talking to people, not just to beautiful women, which I certainly did, but everyone: going to parties, listening to music, watching movies, dancing, being the prankster of the party. Instead, I met my new self: Yuvi, the shell. This person who didn't want to talk, whose world only looked inward, who found it awkward to start a conversation with a woman (Y. Singh, 100).

Yuvraj's sense of self drastically changed but this confrontation with mortality led to a profound reassessment of his values and priorities. Social support played a crucial role in his recovery, as described by Tedeschi and Calhoun. His mother, Shabnam Singh and close friends served as a vital support network, offering fortitude during his cancer treatment, thereby mitigating the debilitating effects of the disease. Improved relationships are another domain of PTG, as people develop a deeper appreciation for their social connection. "All these people, Nitesh, Nishant, Bunny, Sandy, who stayed with me, left their problems and their families behind to be with me and my problems. For them I was their family, and for me they were my allies. Relationships made in these times seldom change" (Y. Singh, 107). Optimism emerges as a critical factor in the post-traumatic growth process. Yuvraj Singh recounts his battle with cancer exemplifying how optimism enabled him to reframe his traumatic experience to transformation. "These days, I don't like calling the unfortunate things that happen 'bad luck'. Because when good things happen, I don't put it down to luck either. Things just happen, you have to go with the flow, cope, handle it and move on" (Y. Singh, 37). Singh recollects, "A voice inside me said that things would be horribly bad. I fought it by telling myself that being negative never helped, and better days lay ahead" (72).

Spirituality also became an anchor for Yuvraj, offering a more profound sense of purpose and connection to something greater than oneself. This growth may manifest as a greater appreciation

for life's mysteries, an increased reliance on spiritual practices for coping, or a renewed connection to one's values and principles (Tedeschi and Calhoun 6). "I don't know if I've become more spiritual since the cancer or simply more humble.... It is my way of thanking God for his gifts, not merely the good things I have in my life, but for also giving me the will and persistence to fight cancer." (Y. Singh,120)

Post-traumatic growth is a deeply transformative experience allowing individuals to emerge from adversity with a renewed sense of purpose and broader perspective on life. They start exploring new avenues which they find to be useful for their personal growth. Their growing sense of adaptability and sensibility facilitates this transformation which helps the individuals to reevaluate their fundamental values, priorities and life goals leading to a profound shift in their life. These inner strengths help individuals to transcend their limitations thus embracing new challenges and experiences that foster a renewed sense of purpose and fulfilment (Tedeschi and Calhoun 6). Through the successful battle with cancer, Yuvraj recognized the profound impact of his experience on his life and the lives of others. This realization sparked a novel sense of purpose, as he identified an opportunity to leverage his public platform to raise awareness about cancer and its effects. By launching the "YouWeCan" foundation, Yuvraj transcended his identity as a cricketer, embracing a new role as a cancer awareness advocate. This endeavour not only helped countless individuals affected by cancer but also enabled Yuvraj to find meaning and direction in his post-traumatic growth journey.

Body as Battleground: Physical Trauma and Psychological Resilience

When examining post-traumatic growth in sports memoirs, the role of the body is central to understanding the physical and emotional manifestations of trauma and recovery. Concept of corporal reality plays a vital role in understanding the physical and emotional processes involved in trauma and recovery. The idea of Corporal reality refers to the understanding that the body not only experiences trauma but also retains its memory with recovery being a complex interplay of physical and emotional healing (Leder 45). In the memoirs of athletes like Milkha Singh and Yuvraj Singh, overcoming severe injuries and personal loss highlights the importance of the body in their healing journey. Both narratives illustrate that trauma is not merely a psychological or emotional ordeal but also a deeply physical experience. Drawing from the philosophical ideas of Deleuze and Guattari, the body is seen as an active site of transformation, where trauma and healing are constantly redefined through experience (Deleuze and Guattari 10). The interconnectedness of mind and body as reinforced by this concept, shows that post-traumatic growth in sports extends beyond mental fortitude to include the ongoing process of physical healing.

The human body is not just a biological entity but a site where struggles, endurance, and survival manifest. In times of crisis, it becomes a battleground where pain, trauma, and resilience collide. The Race of My Life by Milkha Singh and The Test of My Life by Yuvraj Singh bring this battle to life illustrating how physical suffering, whether inflicted through rigorous athletic training or endured through illness, tests human limits. These memoirs depict the body not just as a passive recipient of trauma but as an active agent in the journey of post-traumatic growth. Through their encounters, both athletes depict that process of healing- both physically and mentally, ultimately shapes a deeper sense of self, resilience and leads to purpose driven life, irrespective of their troubled past.

Body Under Siege: Endurance, Pain, and the Limits of Physicality

Milkha Singh's life is a testament to resilience, where his body is both his battleground and weapon. Survival from horrors of partition taught him that it was not merely a physical struggle,

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one that required relentless endurance and unbreakable will. He channelled his trauma into something tangible: his body. Through gruelling workouts, injuries, and athletic training, he forged himself into a warrior, using his physical strength both as a shield against past suffering and as a means of rebuilding his fractured sense of self. Singh recalls, "There were times I vomited blood after intense training but I never let myself stop" (M. Singh 67). This statement encompasses a powerful anomaly that the body, while a source of pain, is also a very thing that enables healing and transformation. In his case, pushing physical limits becomes an act of defiance against his past and fears that once made him weak. While Milkha Singh's struggles were rooted in extreme physical torment, Yuvraj Singh fought a different war, which was no less harrowing.

His body, his greatest asset once, betrayed him at the peak of his cricketing career following the diagnosis of mediastinal seminoma, an aggressive form of cancer which transformed his body from a well-trained machine into a fragile and deteriorating entity. He defines, "I could feel my muscles waste away, my body collapsing under its weight" (Y. Singh 112). Unlike the voluntary suffering of an athlete pushing his body to the extreme, Yuvraj is involuntarily subjected to pain that is beyond his control. His chemotherapy treatments, characterized by nausea, exhaustion, and weakness, strip him of the physical strength that once defined him. In losing his physical prowess, he discovered resilience beyond muscle and stamina- the resilience of mind, of the spirit, of a self that is no longer solely defined by physical ability.

Sports as a Catalyst for Post-Traumatic Growth

Trauma channelled into meaningful pursuits, equips individuals with a sense of control and provides them a constructive outlet for their emotions. Sports is a powerful medium to channel inner trauma which offers healing by providing a structured and cathartic space where trauma can be processed and transformed into strength. This process is rooted in sublimation, a psychological coping strategy that redirects inappropriate impulses or emotions into behaviours that are deemed socially acceptable. Freud says, "The most important of these processes is undoubtedly sublimation, which turns an instinctual impulse into a non-instinctual, or ideal one and thus enables the instinct to be satisfied without damage to the ego or the demands of reality" (82). Milkha Singh and Yuvraj Singh exemplify how sports can serve as a transformative medium for individuals grappling with trauma

More than a sport, running was a path to freedom for Milkha Singh, in both metaphorical and literal sense. Milkha Singh, India's iconic sprinter, harnessed the healing power of sports to overcome the traumatic events of his past. Milkha, orphaned in the communal violence regained a sense of belonging through sports, which helped in his empowerment and victory. Being part of a team provides a built-in circle of network where individuals can share their experiences, receive emotional support, and develop meaningful relationships. As the Centre for Healing and Justice through Sport noted, "Sport is uniquely suited to support the healing of trauma because of the way sport inherently combines physical activity, relationships, routine and competence building." Participating in sports can foster adaptive coping strategies, fortify resilience and promote holistic well-being. Moreover, the social fabric of sports can offer a nurturing environment of community and support, which plays a vital role in facilitating trauma recovery and healing.

Similarly, Yuvraj Singh turned to cricket not just as a profession but as a source of healing during battle with cancer. The diagnosis of mediastinal seminoma forced him into a struggle that had nothing to do with sports- one where survival rather than victory ,was the ultimate goal. Through his intense training and rehabilitation, Yuvraj channelled his experiences of trauma into a resilient mindset, ultimately emerging vigorous and determined. His majestic comeback to international cricket in 2012 served as a testament to the cathartic impact of sports on his trauma

recovery. Endurance sports, such as distance running, cycling, or swimming can have a profound impact on individuals who have experienced trauma. Endurance sports can serve as a therapeutic outlet for individuals with trauma, providing a sense of control, empowerment, and emotional regulation (Brewer and Sparkes 234). An alternative way to heal trauma is by creating a "runner's high", a phenomenon that is attributed to the emission of endorphins, endocannabinoids and other neurotransmitters during endurance sports (Boecker et al. 2523–2531). Brain's opioid receptors interact with these natural chemicals producing euphoria, relaxation and reduced stress, thus paving facilitating healing.

Conclusion

The narratives of Milkha Singh and Yuvraj Singh stand as powerful testaments to the resilience of the human spirit. Their journeys depict that trauma can also serve as a catalyst for profound personal growth though it is deeply painful. By channelling their struggles into their athletic pursuits, they achieved remarkable success and inspired millions. Milkha ran not just to win races, but to outrun the shadows of his past. Yuvraj fought to regain his place on the cricket field, proving that illness could not define him. In both the cases, their struggles did not break them, instead it built them. Their achievements affirm the possibility of Post-traumatic Growth, where adversity catalyses profound personal and professional evolution. Though their experiences are their own, they carry a universal message which can inspire many. We need to understand that every trauma cannot end in triumph but there are journeys that end in transformation. The path from trauma to triumph is neither linear nor straightforward but it certainly is transformative. Their lives showcase the power of sports as a healing medium to channel trauma and attain positive metamorphosis. While not every individual's trauma leads to growth, the stories of these two athletes remind us of the human capability of resilience to rise above adversities.

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