

**Fragmented Identities, Flavourful Echoes, and Cultural Crossroads:
Exploring Trauma in Anjali Joseph's *Keeping in Touch***

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Abstract

In recent times, the advancement in the popularity of North-Eastern literature has sparked enthralling conversations about identity, similarities, and differences in cultural and social aspects, and brought the region's literary voices to the forefront. Literature is a coherent medium through which connections beyond borders are made. One of the most devastating forms of trauma is linked to childhood sexual abuse. It manifests itself in the form of unfathomable psychological disruptions throughout the lives of the survivors in one form or another. Far from being an isolated event, abuse intertwines itself with the developing psyche, affecting the attachment patterns, emotional resilience, and identity formation of the survivor. New-age authors, especially women authors, are writing about topics, including childhood sexual abuse, that are considered too uncomfortable for society, along with embracing cultures in their works. Anjali Joseph is one of those voices. She is notable for her delicate prose, her psychological acuity, and her nuanced depictions of everyday life. Her works often explore intersections of modern Indian identity, diaspora, intimacy, and the interior landscapes of her characters.

This paper foregrounds how childhood trauma presents itself in adult relationship patterns through the character of Keteki in Anjali Joseph's *Keeping in Touch*, while simultaneously analysing how the novel's representation of Assamese food culture functions as both a coping mechanism for trauma and a marker of cultural identity in diaspora. The study adopts an interdisciplinary approach combining trauma studies, attachment theory, and Winnicott's Transitional Object Theory, to investigate how Keteki's documented childhood experiences of sexual abuse and family dysfunction create her systematic commitment phobia and hyper-independent behaviour patterns. Thus, arguing that Joseph's novel offers a more refined critique of traditional romance narratives by validating women's trauma responses as rational self-preservation strategies and side by side examining how cultural practices serve as both reservoirs of traumatic memory and a road toward healing and belonging.

Keywords: childhood sexual abuse, trauma representation, Assamese cuisine, Assamese Culture, postcolonial food studies, cultural identity, diaspora literature, food and memory, Complex Female Character, Cultural Hybridisation, Textile industry, Women's Writing.

Introduction:

Food not only provides nourishment and energy, but it also gives way to nostalgia, memory, and an ancestral bond all folded into one. All the conversations, activities, and important discussions are held at the dining table, during breakfast, lunch, or dinner hours, which brings the family together at least three times a day. Food serves as the most important part of any culture and tradition, beyond its necessary presence in the kitchens around the world. Every region, country, and state has its own unique traditional dishes, which are culturally significant to its atmosphere, the spices grown there, and the climate needed for each specific dish. When these dishes and recipes are brought to other regions, they mix with that region's specific dishes, and this amalgamation of recipes, spices, and cooking techniques makes the dish a living archive of collective effort and experiences of two regions. Assam is famous for its rich heritage, culture, and culturally diverse yet traditionally rooted food and cuisines. This diversity is reflective of Assam's expansive agricultural fields and river-centric geographical set-up. It is within this landscape of diverse food patterns and traditional cultural expression that Anjali Joseph's *Keeping in Touch* takes place. The novel's protagonist, Keteki, is an art curator who later takes up a job in the textile industry, spends her time shuttling between London, her ancestral home in Guwahati, Assam, and wherever her job takes her. She herself does not have a place called home, because putting down roots would mean settling down, for which Keteki is not ready, even at thirty-nine years of age, because of her past trauma. Ved is another central character who is the potential love interest of Keteki. He is settled in London and works as an investment banker. Heathrow Airport is where they meet by chance, and what follows is a complex love story across London, Mumbai, Guwahati, and Assam. The places, as well as the food and traditions, play a very important role in their relationship. Ved is very clear about his decision to spend the rest of his life with Keteki, but on the other hand, Keteki is confused about ever settling with anyone or having a family. Here, the name 'Keteki' also holds a lot of significance. Keteki is the name of the bird that is known for its trickster nature. This bird lays eggs in other birds' nests, leaving them to raise its young. This is ironic because Keteki was left by her own mother to be raised by her uncle. Anjali Joseph has not only put Assamese food and culture in the book, but she has also inserted Assamese language in the novel as well to provide the full traditional presence of Assam. This is how she keeps the cadence of the culture alive, through her characters living and absorbing the vibrant shades of Assam's rich heritage.

Keteki's character is a complex mixture of childhood trauma, familial abandonment, and the search for belonging that ultimately shapes her adult relationships and career choices. She is thirty-nine years old at the beginning of the novel and has been through a lot of grief. "Since she had been four years old, she had trusted almost no one; that falling in love was, she had found, a dubious blessing, and that even if she did fall in love, she had no illusions it would clarify anything else in her life. On the contrary: she'd then have to deal with not only her own unwise decisions, but someone else's too" (Joseph 17).

These experiences have made her resilient and deeply wary of the commitment. Keteki's childhood years were marked by trauma, dissociation, and loneliness. Her parents'

separation and moving out also created an unstable environment during her formative years. In this landscape of instability, Joy Mama, Keteki's uncle, became the most important and influential person in her life. Through him, she was introduced to the everyday rituals of Assamese life, the preparation of traditional Assamese dishes, and following the cultural traditions became a very integral part of Keteki's life. Food became both an act of remembrance and a means for Keteki to root herself in her cultural identity. In this way, she is not solely defined by her sadness and loss but also by the comfort that Joy Mama provides. Throughout her adult life, Keteki maintained a connection with Joy Mama, whom she considered her only family. His presence offered her a sense of comfort and guidance. His home in Guwahati became a sanctuary for her, a place she could return to whenever the world felt heavy. Joy Mama and his abode not only gave her ancestral roots but also served as an essential link to her Assamese heritage. These returns allowed her to take a much-needed pause from her everyday busy and chaotic life, enabling her to reconnect with her roots and find solace in familiar surroundings. Her visits to Guwahati often coincided with festivals, especially the Durga Puja celebrations, where she got the chance to reconnect with her culture and traditions, while enjoying festivals with the family and relatives. During her early childhood years, the most significant relationship Keteki had was with Tuku. Although he was an ordinary housekeeper, he became like a brother to her. Keteki describes Tuku as someone who was there for her when her own parents were not.

"We are so lucky to have him in our family. There is an amazing story about how he came to be here. My other Uncle was a government officer, and they took the baby to his office. Then he came to this house. We were very close when we were young. He is only about a year older than me" (Joseph 65).

Her relationship with Tuku represented one of the few sources of genuine care and stability in her early life. They played together a lot, but there was one game that Tuku made up, which they both loved playing. They called the game "Bhex Bodoli" (Joseph 65), which translates to the shape-shifting game. Keteki and Tuku had a very emotional relationship, which was not forced or tinted. Tuku had been in Keteki's life for the good as well as the bad parts, especially during the bad moments that defined her childhood and her adult life as well. When Keteki was seven years old, she was molested by Sandeep Mama, and the abuse sent her into shock. She didn't know how to behave or articulate her trauma to others. She just sobbed with pain in her eyes. Tuku got to know what happened, and he told Joy Mama about it. After this incident, Keteki was sent to boarding school, and when she returned for the holidays, Joy Mama assured her she would never have to face Sandeep Mama again in her life. Although Anjali Joseph didn't give the background of what actions Joy Mama took to deal with Sandeep Mama, he wasn't mentioned in the novel after this scene. This significant change happened in her life because of Tuku. But over the period of time, they grew apart.

"At some point in her peripatetic childhood life, Tuku has retreated into the status of a neighbour or a childhood schoolfriend. Her love for him was still there, but she knew less

and less about his life. He used to call her Bhonti, little sister, but when she became a teenager, began to address her more formally as Baideo, older sister” (Joseph 174).

However, Tuku’s sudden and unexplained disappearance created another rift in her emotional and psychological state. She has been on the receiving end of people leaving without any explanation, and Tuku’s departure felt more personal to her. This corroborated her fear of noticing the pattern of people disappearing from her life, acknowledging her deep-seated fear of abandonment and commitment. But she still had an overpowering feeling of love and respect for Tuku, despite his unexplained disappearance, which demonstrates her capacity for forgiveness and understanding of others’ actions, even in the face of loss and sadness.

Through the lens of Winnicott’s Transitional Object Theory, Keteki’s attachment to food can be understood in relation to her fear of commitment and history of abandonment. This theory presents the non-living possessions or attachments that children form to navigate the difficult transition from total dependence on caregivers to developing independence and a separate sense of self. These non-living attachments provide comfort and a sense of belonging during separation anxiety and when the child feels alone and vulnerable. These transitional objects enable the children to develop the ability to survive sudden separation and build resilience, while maintaining an emotional connection to security and comfort. For Keteki, food functions as a maladaptive transitional object rooted in her traumatic childhood experiences. Keteki’s relationship with food carries on into adulthood because her attachment system was fundamentally disrupted by abuse, abandonment, and betrayal. This theoretical framework lays out why Keteki’s attachment to Assamese food specifically is so important for her sanity and safety in the world. These cultural dishes for her represent not just nourishment but also symbolic connections to identity and belonging. When Keteki visits her friends, Lily and Mary, they ask her to stay for dinner of pork curry and fish curry, but all keteki wanted to do was, “Go home and raid the fridge for Dail-Bhaat. There was nothing like simple food, eaten at home, even at two in the morning, before crawling into bed” (Joseph 31).

She had a more intense relationship with homemade traditional food rather than outside food. For her, food, unlike people, cannot abandon her, betray her trust, or cause the kind of devastating emotional harm she experienced in childhood. Research on comfort food consumption reveals that for individuals with secure attachment, food can fulfil belongingness needs and trigger positive outcomes. However, for people like Keteki, with disorganised attachment styles, food becomes a substitute for the reliable emotional regulation that secure caregiving relationships should have provided. She is also in love with Ved, who has a secure, healthy relationship with food. She is terrified of spending her whole life with him because she is scared of commitment. “It was true, she did love him, but without attachment. She couldn’t remember what it felt like to be in love, or why people wanted to entangle themselves. Was there something wrong with her” (Joseph 34)? But they were very different people in terms of the food they consumed. While Ved was used to ready-to-eat

meals, cosmopolitan dinners, and lunches, Keteki was a person who preferred home-cooked meals. When Ved comes to visit Keteki at Joy Mama's home, he is made to try all the traditional Assamese food, and then he realizes what he was missing. "When a dish of small fried fish appeared, he needed little encouragement to try them. They were spangled with slices of green chilli and onion, and were delicious" (Joseph 50). It was Joy Mama, who helped Ved develop a taste for the traditional food, like he did for keteki. He liked Ved, and he wanted Ved to enjoy the things Keteki enjoyed so that they could be more suited for each other. He said, "Ved, have a chicken sandwich. And try it with one of these puffs. Ketu, pass him the jam. Ved, this is made from a fruit called sohiong. We get it in Shillong, it's very good" (Joseph 59). Like this, there are many instances in the novel that describe Keteki's relationship with food and with Ved.

This theoretical model helps explain the complexity of Keteki's relationship with her body. Disorganized attachment patterns can lead to challenges with emotional regulation and self-soothing. As a result, individuals may turn to sexual behavior and food consumption as ways to cope with overwhelming feelings while keeping emotional distance from others. In Keteki's case, her relationship with Sumit was purely sexual. "In fact, she couldn't remember why they began sleeping together, except that she liked him and he was neither chauvinistic nor bad in bed" (Joseph 26). Her unapologetic sexual relationships and her deep connection to cultural foods both serve the same underlying function, which is that they provide temporary comfort and connection without requiring the kind of vulnerable emotional intimacy that her childhood experiences taught her was dangerous. This is the reason why, when Ved asked Keteki to be with him forever, and he wanted to be a part of her future, Keteki replied, "Ved, you know, the future... I don't think I really believe in the future" (Joseph 77). Winnicott's concept of the holding environment becomes particularly relevant here. Keteki never experienced a consistently safe holding environment in childhood, so she creates substitute holding environments through food rituals and cultural practices that she can control. Her work preserving Assamese textiles and her periodic returns to Joy Uncle's household for festival meals represent attempts to access cultural holding that feels safer than intimate personal relationships. That is why when Ved asks her if she feels the same about him as he does for her, she replies, "I think in some ways I find it easier being alone. There are always people, of course... But it's easier to keep things at a distance, better than trying to go into the nightmare and come out" (Joseph 191).

Thus, through Keteki's journey, the novel shows how childhood trauma wounds naturally reappear in adult relationships, influencing her intimacy, trust, and attachment. At the same time, by placing her story within the textures of Assamese culture, where food symbolizes memory, care, and belonging, the narrative provides a culturally rooted yet universally relatable portrayal. In doing so, it fairly depicts both the psychological impact of abandonment and the symbolic role of food as a source of comfort and conflict.

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