



The Unspoken Court: Squash as a coping mechanism for grief and trauma in chetna maroo's Western Lane

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Abstract

Chetna Maroo's debut novel, *Western Lane* (2023), explores grief, trauma, and coping mechanisms within a British-Indian family following the sudden death of their mother. Through the perspective of 11-year-old Gopi, the novel portrays squash as a central metaphor for navigating loss, offering structure and control while potentially hindering emotional expression. This paper examines the pervasive silence surrounding grief, the unique experiences of childhood trauma, and the role of squash as both a refuge and a barrier to healing. Drawing on close readings and critical reviews, it argues that while squash provides temporary solace, the family's avoidance of open emotional processing risks long-term emotional consequences. The study also considers cultural influences and other coping strategies, such as sibling dynamics and daily routines, to highlight the complexities of healing in a culturally nuanced context.

Keywords: Grief, trauma, coping mechanisms, squash, family dynamics, British-Indian identity, Chetna Maroo

Introduction

Grief, though universal, is often shaped by cultural and personal silences that complicate its expression. In Chetna Maroo's *Western Lane* (2023), shortlisted for the Booker Prize, a British-Indian family navigates the sudden loss of their mother through the disciplined world of squash. Set in 1980s London, the novel centers on 11-year-old Gopi, her father (Pa), and her sisters, Khush and Mona, as they grapple with unspoken grief and trauma. Maroo's minimalist narrative amplifies this emotional restraint, using the squash court as a metaphorical space where grief is both confronted and avoided.

This paper argues that squash in *Western Lane* serves as a complex coping mechanism, offering structure and connection but ultimately underscoring the limitations of emotional avoidance. Through close analysis of unspoken grief, childhood trauma, and the physical and emotional dynamics of squash, this study explores how Maroo highlights the necessity of emotional expression for healing. It also examines secondary coping mechanisms, such as sibling relationships and daily routines, and considers the cultural context of the family's British-Indian identity.

The Pervasiveness of Unspoken Grief and Trauma

Western Lane opens days after the mother's funeral, establishing a profound silence that defines the family's response to loss. Pa, described as "poleaxed by loss," withdraws emotionally, unable to articulate his grief or support his daughters (*A Life in Books*). This silence is reinforced by cultural expectations within the British-Indian community, where open mourning may be discouraged. The absence of formal mourning rituals and the family's reluctance to mention the mother reflect this restraint, as seen when Aunt Ranjan criticizes Pa for his daughters' perceived lack of discipline, highlighting external pressures on their grieving process (Maroo 45).

Gopi, at 11, internalizes this silence, channeling her grief into squash rather than verbal expression. Her sisters, Khush (13) and Mona (15), also struggle to articulate their emotions, with Khush retreating into private introspection

and Mona adopting a caretaker role. This lack of communication fosters emotional distance, as the siblings grow apart. The novel's minimalist style, described as "tight and disciplined," mirrors this silence, using subtle gestures to convey unexpressed grief (*The Indian Express*).

Childhood Grief and Its Manifestations

The impact of grief varies among Gopi, Khush, and Mona due to their developmental stages. Gopi experiences grief through sensory memories, such as eating strawberries while watching Wimbledon with her mother (*The Guardian*). Her hyper-focus on squash isolates her from her sisters, as she "grows apart" from them (*New Book Recommendation*). Khush engages in private rituals, speaking to her mother in Gujarati at night, while Mona, feeling "duty-bound," takes on a maternal role, straining her emotionally (*The Booker Prizes*).

Physically, grief manifests in Gopi's intense squash training, where the sport's rhythms—"the serve, the volley, the drive, the shot and its echo"—provide a tangible outlet for her restless energy (Maroo 12). Subtle changes in eating or sleeping patterns, though understated, suggest a broader physical toll. The family's avoidance of open mourning indicates deferred grief, which may lead to long-term emotional repression, as critics note the "silence reverberating within the family" (*The Booker Prizes*).

Trauma and its impact

The mother's sudden death is the central traumatic event, described with restraint to amplify its emotional weight (*The Guardian*). The immediate aftermath shifts family dynamics, with Pa becoming emotionally distant and the sisters struggling to adapt. Each experiences trauma uniquely: Pa's withdrawal, Gopi's hyper-focus on squash, and the sisters' distinct reactions—Khush's introspection and Mona's caregiving—illustrate individual responses within a shared loss.

The novel subtly hints at intergenerational trauma through the family's inability to cope openly, potentially perpetuating emotional repression. Cultural pressures, such

as Aunt Ranjan's suggestion that Gopi live with her in Edinburgh and community expectations around Pa's remarriage, exacerbate the trauma (Maroo 67). References to avoiding racism in 1980s London, such as "no one spat on us from a height," suggest a broader cultural trauma (The Booker Prizes).

Squash as a Coping Mechanism

Squash is the novel's primary coping mechanism, particularly for Gopi and Pa. The sport's structure—its rules, training regimens, and tournaments—offers order in their chaotic emotional world. Gopi's life becomes "reduced to the sport, guided by its rhythms: the serve, the volley, the drive, the shot and its echo" (The Booker Prizes). This discipline provides control, allowing Gopi to channel her restless energy and Pa to connect with her non-verbally. The squash court is a space where "time seems suspended and the outside world can be forgotten" (The Booker Prizes). However, squash also serves as a distraction, potentially delaying emotional healing. Gopi's intense focus isolates her from her sisters, as she "grows apart" from Khush and Mona (New Book Recommendation). Critics argue that squash risks becoming "a form of emotional avoidance," preventing the family from confronting their pain (The Telegraph). While it facilitates non-verbal communication, particularly with Ged, a 13-year-old player, it does not fully address the emotional work needed for healing.

Other Coping Mechanisms

Beyond squash, the family employs other coping strategies. Khush's private conversations with her mother and Mona's caregiving role reflect their individual approaches, though strained by silence (The Booker Prizes). Daily routines, such as school and chores, provide normalcy but limited emotional support (A Life in Books). Sibling interactions, marked by arguments and unspoken understandings, serve as both support and tension.

Memories of the mother, such as Gopi's recollection of eating strawberries, evoke both comfort and pain (The Guardian). These moments suggest that while memories keep the mother's presence alive, they reinforce unresolved grief. The family's silence risks perpetuating a cycle of emotional repression.

Conclusion

Western Lane offers a nuanced portrayal of grief, trauma, and coping mechanisms through a British-Indian family's experience. Squash serves as a powerful metaphor, providing structure and connection but highlighting the limitations of emotional avoidance. The family's silence, influenced by cultural norms, underscores the challenges of articulating grief. Secondary coping mechanisms, such as sibling dynamics and routines, illustrate the complexities of healing.

Maroo's minimalist narrative amplifies the emotional weight of the family's loss, suggesting that while squash provides temporary solace, true healing requires confronting emotions directly. This study contributes to literary discussions on grief and trauma, emphasizing the role of cultural identity in shaping coping strategies.

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