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Sexual Violence, Stigma and the Reclamation of Female Agency in Sunitha Krishnan's *I Am What I Am*: A Study

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Abstract: *I Am What I Am*, written by Sunitha Krishnan, is an autobiographical story about sexual abuse, social stigma, trafficking, advocacy, rehabilitation, and the fight to restore dignity to women and children who have been sexually exploited. With a focus on rape culture, victim-blaming, the social construction of the "ideal victim," sexual trafficking, prostitution, labelling, bodily violation, social reintegration, and female self-definition, this study analyses gender themes in the memoir. Krishnan's story of gang rape reveals a patriarchal society that often shifts blame from offenders to victims. Personal trauma is transformed into ongoing advocacy against sexual crimes by her refusal to internalise this shame. However, the memoir is more than just a personal account of perseverance. Krishnan exposes the institutional, economic, familial, and societal factors that expose women and girls to human trafficking and recurrent sexual exploitation through her work with Prajwala. Her criticism of the term "rape survivor," which can simplify a complex female identity to a single horrific event, is also examined in the study. The paper argues that *I Am What I Am* challenges the cultural construction of women as passive victims and reconstructs survival as self-definition, resistance, economic rehabilitation, social reintegration, and collective action by drawing on feminist, intersectional, and marginality-based perspectives. In the end, Krishnan's narrative calls for a gender politics that transcends pity in favour of agency, justice, dignity, and structural change.

Keywords: trafficking, survivor identity, gender stigma, sexual abuse, Sunitha Krishnan, and female agency

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Introduction

I Am What I Am by Sunitha Krishnan is a critique of societal reactions to sexual violence and trafficking as well as an autobiography, survivor story, and activist testimony. Gender continues to be one of the memoir's most potent organising themes, despite the fact that it documents a number of aspects of Krishnan's personal and professional life. The story keeps coming back to women and girls whose bodies have experienced abuse, whose identities have been shaped by social labels, and whose opportunities for reintegration are limited by discrimination. However, Krishnan declines to utilise pain as the only way to represent these women. Resilience, dignity, capacity, choice, and the potential to reconstruct life are all emphasised in her story.

Krishnan's criticism of the way survivors are treated by society highlights the memoir's gender politics. The physical attack is not the end of sexual violence. Suspicion, shame, victim-blaming, sensational representation, familial anxiety, institutional indifference, and the enduring attachment of a socially formed identity to her history are all possible challenges for the survivor. Thus, Renu Sud Sinha characterises the memoir as a tale of "hope and resilience" that highlights patriarchy and society's unsettling treatment of victims of sexual offences and human trafficking. This secondary victimisation is at the heart of Krishnan's autobiography's gender critique.

Because Krishnan writes from both personal and activist experience, the memoir is very important. She has firsthand understanding of trauma from her own gang rape, and she has worked with survivors for decades through Prajwala, exposing her to systemic patterns that go much beyond her personal experience. As a result, the personal becomes a pathway to the political. The biography "exposes grim realities and raises uncomfortable questions" regarding sexual exploitation and the rehabilitation of survivors, according to Priya M. Menon. These difficult issues are at the heart of Krishnan's story because she consistently pushes society to look at both the offenders and the societal norms that support the continuation of sexual abuse, trafficking, and stigma.

The fact that women are not always marginalised must also be acknowledged in a gender-centered reading. Wandana Sonalkar and Nidhi Sadana Sabharwal highlight that "women in

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India are not a homogeneous category" (45). Their insight is pertinent to *I Am What I Am*, where poverty, caste, class, age, family instability, abandonment, disability, and economic dependency all intersect with gender vulnerability. As a result, rather than just one type of gender discrimination, women and girls who are trafficked may encounter several vulnerability patterns.

In a same vein, Visweswara Rao Chenamallu notes that crossing "caste, class, and gender" systems influence women's paths to self-emancipation (608). The women in Krishnan's book often hold economically and socially marginalised positions, despite the fact that it focuses mostly on sexual violence and trafficking. It is impossible to isolate their vulnerability from the circumstances that restrict access to justice, economic independence, family safety, work, and education.

Krishnan's emphasis on self-definition is particularly relevant to feminist debates on the voices of marginalised women. Rather than thinking that dominant groups can effectively represent every woman, Gopal Guru's claim that "Dalit women talk differently" highlights the importance of respecting socially situated experience (2548). In a similar vein, *I Am What I Am* highlights the significance of lived experience. By incorporating survivors into the organization's operations, Prajwala's rehabilitation methodology allows people who have personally experienced exploitation to participate in the rescue, counselling, rehabilitation, and reintegration procedures.

According to Kranti Lodhi and Nisha Indraguru, the New Woman in disadvantaged feminist narratives is "a figure of transformation as well as uprising" (67). Both Krishnan and the women whose transformations she documents can be understood through this formulation. In the memoir, survival does not always imply that trauma goes away. It entails not letting trauma take over a person's whole identity.

Because society often reduces sexually attacked women to the violence inflicted against them, the issue of identity is critical. Gendered stigma can endure even when a woman achieves professional achievement and public esteem, as Krishnan's battle against being forever labelled as a rape survivor shows. Therefore, a fundamental question is raised by her memoir: who has

the power to define a woman—the society that labels her, the crime perpetrated against her, or the woman herself?

This essay makes the case that *I Am What I Am* reveals sexual violence as a societal tool of gender control as much as a physical crime. It also looks at Krishnan's transition from individual survival to group activity and from violation to self-definition. In the end, the memoir changes the conversation from one of female victimisation to one of dignity, agency, healing, and each survivor's right to choose her own life's purpose.

Review of literature

In "Freeing the Labels of Caste: Marginality, Self-Definition, and Liberation in Sunitha Krishnan's *I Am What I Am*" (2026) P. Gayathri and Dr. Jeripotula Malavi focuson labels, marginality, and the fight for self-definition. When evaluating Krishnan's denial of the permanent "rape survivor" identity, their conceptual emphasis is very helpful. The narrative frequently illustrates how labels turn complicated people into socially acceptable categories. By looking at the labels given to trafficked girls, women in prostitution, survivors, and socially marginalised women, the current study expands this concept through gender.

"Caste, Stigma, and Social Marginality in Sunitha Krishnan's *I Am What I Am*: A Study" (2026) by Prof. Visweswara Rao Chenamallu explores the memoir using the frameworks of caste, social exclusion, stigma, and marginal identity. Because stigma is also deeply gendered, Chenamallu's research is especially pertinent to the current paper. Women who are involved in sexual exploitation, prostitution, trafficking, or rape are often evaluated not only for their experiences but also by societal presumptions about female sexuality and respectability. Chenamallu's focus on marginality is extended in this study to the gendered production of survivor identity.

In "Dalit Women and Their Journey toward Self-Emancipation" (2026), Prof. Visweswara Rao Chenamallu explores how marginalised women have moved from oppression to self-emancipation via political engagement, education, awareness, solidarity, and self-expression. The essay's focus on self-emancipation provides a helpful comparative framework for Krishnan's rehabilitation philosophy, even if its main focus is Dalit women. Her approach

also promotes the development of skills, confidence, economic independence, social acceptance, and self-respect, going beyond rescue as a unique occurrence.

According to Sinha Renu Sud's *"I Am What I Am"* by Sunitha Krishnan: Of Hope and Resilience," (2024) the memoir is an account of tenacity in the face of institutional obstacles related to anti-trafficking activity and sexual abuse. In particular, Sinha highlights Krishnan's resistance to allow her identity be defined by her gang rape. Her review also highlights the significance of both social acceptance and economic rehabilitation, as well as Prajwala's survivor-centered rehabilitation. The current analysis of gender and recovery revolves around these observations.

Priya M. Menon's *"I Am What I Am'* Book Review: Importance of Being Earnest*"* (2024) interprets Krishnan's autobiography as an activist story that addresses unsettling facts about sexual slavery, trafficking, and rehabilitation. Menon emphasises Krishnan's emphasis on action and her rejection of autobiographies that seek sympathy. The review is helpful since it highlights how the book combines institutional activity with personal history. Krishnan's personal encounter with sexual assault takes on significance not because it creates a heroic persona but rather because it results in long-term intervention in the lives of others.

The intricate interplay between care, institutional practice, rehabilitation, and modes of control is examined in T. Kavya. "Between Care and Control: Biopolitical Practice in Sunitha Krishnan's *I Am What I Am"* (2026). This viewpoint is important since anti-trafficking efforts inevitably raise issues regarding decision-making for survivors and how organisations can safeguard vulnerable individuals without perpetuating paternalistic power. This worry is used in the current study to highlight the need for true rehabilitation, which goes beyond simply moving women from one controlling system to another, to eventually strengthen survivor autonomy.

Kranti Lodhi and Nisha Indraguru's "Resistance and Resilience: The New Woman in Dalit Feminist Narratives" (2026) examines how underprivileged women transition from victimisation to self-assertion. Krishnan's reluctance to play the socially anticipated role of a broken victim of sexual assault is relevant to their emphasis on resilience. It also applies to Prajwala women who reconstruct their life and learn new skills. Their research bolsters the claim

made in this work that female agency should be viewed as the ability to act in spite of trauma rather than as the absence of trauma.

Sabharwal Nidhi Sadana and Wandana Sonalkar's "Dalit Women in India: At the Crossroads of Gender, Class, and Caste" (2015) observes an intersectional framework for comprehending the various forms of marginalisation experienced by women. The universalisation of Krishnan's personal survivor experience is thwarted by their contention that women's experiences vary based on caste and financial status. It is particularly pertinent to women who are trafficked, since their susceptibility may be exacerbated by poverty, caste marginalisation, illiteracy, family dissolution, and limited work possibilities. The study aids in identifying sexual exploitation within more general systems of inequality.

Objectives

To analyse how Sunitha Krishnan's *I Am What I Am* depicts gendered victim-blaming and sexual assault.

To examine the labels and societal stigma placed on victims of rape, human trafficking, and commercial sexual exploitation.

To examine Krishnan's rejection of victimisation and her use of agency and self-definition to reconstruct her identity as a survivor.

To look into the gendered institutional, social, and economic factors that put women and girls at risk for sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

To analyse Prajwala's focus on the interrelated processes of rescue, rehabilitation, economic independence, dignity, and social reintegration.

To assess the memoir as a feminist testament that turns individual trauma into group resistance to gender injustice and sexual assault.

Methodology

The study uses intersectional and feminist methods to support qualitative textual analysis. Sexual violence, victim-blaming, trafficking, prostitution, stigma, survivor identity, rehabilitation, economic independence, and female agency are all examined through a close reading of *I Am What I Am*. Selected secondary research on Krishnan's memoir, marginality,

resilience, Dalit feminism, and women's self-emancipation contextualises primary textual evidence. Krishnan's difference between victimhood and survival, as well as her criticism of gendered social categorisation, receive special focus.

Discussion

Sexual Violence and the Transfer of Shame

In Sunitha Krishnan's *I Am What I Am*, the transfer of shame from sexual abusers to their victims is a major issue. Communities may scrutinise a woman's attire, movements, independence, or behaviour rather than the reasons behind a crime. The attack is therefore viewed as an assessment of her personality. Following her gang rape, Krishnan experiences this reaction. Members of a male-dominated panchayat accuse her of working with village girls, while women encourage her to keep quiet. "Why should I be ashamed?" she asks, rejecting their criticism. The monsters who assaulted me need to be reluctant to reveal their identities (Krishnan 18). Her inquiry shifts moral accountability back on the offenders.

The panchayat's response also demonstrates how women who question conventional norms can be disciplined by victim-blaming. Krishnan had talked about menstruation hygiene and urged females to go back to school prior to the attack. The men inform her that she had been "giving them bad ideas" and that she "got what I deserved" (Krishnan 18). They seem to be saying that a woman who challenges gender norms loses protection. The broader idea "that women who question the status quo deserve punishment, that rape is a good tool to discipline them" is later identified by Krishnan (19). According to this narrative, both sexual violence and the reaction to it aim to limit the independence of women.

Krishnan goes on to refute the notion that a woman's honour is contingent upon her sexual "purity." Such a view portrays the survivor as morally harmed by the actions of another person. She distinguishes between bodily transgression and moral worth by refusing to feel ashamed. Although the offence has long-term consequences, it does not change her right to dignity.

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Trauma and the "Ideal Victim"

Following an assault, patriarchal expectations persist through assessments of what a survivor should do. According to Krishnan, a "template of an ideal victim" is someone who is obviously afraid, humiliated, reclusive, and reliant on sympathy (19–20). A woman may be perceived as having not responded correctly if she is angry, self-assured, ambitious, or involved in public life. Despite acknowledging the severity of her injury, Krishnan refuses to follow that script.

Nightmares, panic attacks, terrifying sensory reminders, and ongoing emotional suffering are all described in her story. She refers to trauma as her "silent companion, an ever-present shadow" (Krishnan 20). The picture captures a moment that stays with her but doesn't become her entire existence. She describes "feeling the shame and yet standing straight and proud; feeling helpless but also powerful" (21). These conflicting emotions coexist. Her trauma does not negate her strength, nor does her strength demonstrate the absence of trauma.

Because public narratives frequently leave survivors with only two viable identities—permanently broken or fully recovered—this multiplicity is important. Both simplifications are rejected in Krishnan's account. She is able to acknowledge what transpired, discuss its ramifications, and keep making choices for her future. Rather than asserting that the violence has been forgotten, her resilience is rooted on that ongoing agency.

Beyond the Labels of "Victim" and "Survivor"

In Krishnan's quest for self-definition, language is crucial. "No doubt a crime had been committed against me, but I considered myself a survivor, not a victim," she says at first, rejecting the idea that she is only a victim (14). The victim recognises an act against her, but the survivor focuses more on her subsequent life. However, the narrative also raises concerns about what occurs when a person is permanently labelled as a survivor.

Krishnan says in the chapter "Branding for Life" that while revealing her gang rape caused the attack to dominate her work, it also helped others grasp the direction of her campaigning. She notes, "People would not let go of my identity as a rape survivor" (13). The brutality she endured repeatedly introduces her to trafficking, institution-building, rehabilitation,

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and activism. "The label is for life," as she states (13). Her professional expertise and the numerous decisions that have defined her life may be obscured by public attention to her trauma.

"Being a victim of sexual assault is not my identity," Krishnan puts it succinctly. It is an actual experience (15). Although the attack is part of her past and has impacted her job, it does not give others the authority to fully define her. This issue includes labels that disparage women's bodies, employment, marital status, and sexual orientation. These remarks predetermine which women will be respected. Even when organisations claim to have aided in their reintegration, they might still mark individuals.

When their institutional background is made public, the children connected to Prajwala encounter a similar issue. "How is social reintegration possible when your past looms heavily over your present?" Krishnan queries. (16). The question highlights the paradox of encouraging someone to start again while continuously introducing her to what she has gone through. Recovery necessitates a shift in the way communities view survivors and the resources available to them.

Trafficking and the Gendered Conditions of Exploitation

Krishnan becomes aware of the pathways that women and girls take to become sexually exploited as a result of her interactions with prostitutes. She hears stories of financial desperation, trafficking, deceit, and abandonment in Bengaluru. She writes, "The majority of them had been trafficked with promises of jobs or marriage" (12). These promises take advantage of current weaknesses. While the promise of marriage is based on a woman's expectations for the future and her faith in a potential spouse, the offer of a job appeals to someone who needs money.

Minors coerced into sexual exploitation are also included in her report. Their experiences demonstrate why, before treating participation as a free decision, the conditions of entry, compulsion, age, and control must be considered. The evolution of Krishnan's activism is significantly influenced by her first rescue, which involved a young girl. It draws her focus to the systems and adults who take advantage of a child's vulnerability.

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Krishnan describes what can happen to trafficked women and girls "on a daily—hourly?!—basis" (19), reflecting on her own assault and the ongoing injustices they endure. Her analogy is to acknowledge the scope and recurrence of violence associated with forceful exploitation. It clarifies the stance she takes through Prajwala's work: real bodily choice is severely restricted when someone else controls access to a woman's or girl's body for financial gain.

The Child's Body and the Failure of Protection

The introduction of the memoir describes Krishnan's encounter with a critically damaged four-year-old girl who has allegedly been abandoned and gang-raped. Krishnan finds out that one of the accused offenders was the child's father. The case casts doubt on the reassuring notion that a child's family always ensures their safety. It also demonstrates why danger in relationships that are typically linked with protection must be taken into consideration when responding to sexual violence.

The episode includes Krishnan's rage and anguish, but she later considers the danger of viewing the child solely through her wounds. "I ran the risk of ignoring the victims' strength and resiliency as long as I concentrated on their suffering and trauma," she writes (3–4). The severity of the violence is not diminished by the observation. A child who has been damaged is still a person with needs, capacities, and a destiny beyond the crime, which creates an ethical obligation for care.

The memoir's approach to rehabilitation is guided by this idea. In addition to providing immediate protection and care, responding to a wounded kid necessitates creating an environment that allows the child to rebuild trust, carry on with their education, and live without being permanently marked by the assault. How to help the individual who has to carry on living after it is the question.

From Rescue to Rehabilitation and Dignity

According to Krishnan, rescue is just the start of a prolonged journey. Poverty, psychological harm, interrupted schooling, unemployment, rejection from family, and public stigma are not always resolved by removing someone from human trafficking. Physical removal

may put a woman or girl in another precarious situation if these regions are not supported. Counselling, education, vocational training, legal action, livelihood, and ongoing institutional assistance are all included in the memoir's narrative of recovery.

The idea that unites these actions is dignity. Bodily autonomy is violated by sexual exploitation, and stigma can exacerbate the trauma by viewing the victim as morally inferior. A youngster has to comprehend "that they have been wronged, and that they should not be ashamed of being a victim," according to Krishnan (4). This undoes the judgement that makes the victim feel ashamed. The first step in rehabilitation is acknowledging that the victim is still valuable and has done nothing wrong.

Although employment by itself cannot ensure acceptance, economic independence is equally essential. Krishnan remembers setting up a hotel job for a young Prajwala woman. Ordinary social behaviour becomes suspicious due to her past when the management views her friendship with male coworkers as a reason for concern. While providing employment, the workplace still sees her through the lens of her past, which she is attempting to overcome. Krishnan's irritated query regarding the necessity of reintegrating survivors on "another planet where their background is not known" highlights the issue: if education and employment are to become real opportunities, society views must shift.

Voice and Control over One's Own Story

Who has the right to share a survivor's experience is examined in *I Am What I Am*. Publicly discussing sexual abuse can combat silence and highlight injustice, but it can also lead to sensationalism, invasive interrogation, and long-term labelling. Krishnan has firsthand knowledge of both outcomes. Her memoir does not suggest that in order to be brave or valuable in politics, every survivor must reveal what transpired.

Rather, it finds agency in the survivor's capacity to choose whether, when, how, and to whom to communicate. Regaining autonomy following an encounter where authority was taken away includes regaining control over one's story of an assault. When journalists, organisations, or supporters describe survivors, the same rules apply. A woman's right to privacy and an

identity that goes beyond the abuse she experienced is not diminished by their efforts to increase awareness.

Krishnan's advocacy includes her personal choice to speak. She claims that over time, her experience gave her "the certainty that I would pledge every breath of my life to fight sex crimes against women and girls" (19). But the attack was not the start of her social involvement. According to the memoir, the incident altered the course and intensity of the work she was already drawn to. It doesn't imply that she had to endure pain in order to find meaning in her life.

Survivors as Participants in Collective Recovery

A distinction between those who save and those who are rescued is complicated in the narrative. Early on, Krishnan is alerted about a vulnerable youngster by prostitutes, who assist her in responding. They take action to keep others safe. Later, women who have personally experienced exploitation take part in Prajwala's work and contribute expertise that can aid recently rescued individuals. Their experiences can guide behaviour without serving as the only foundation for their worth.

Krishnan's explanation of agency gains practical support from this involvement. Women and girls may select how much of their histories to share, seek assistance, defend others, go to school, pick up a skill, make a living, or work in rehabilitation. These behaviours take place under unfair and frequently harsh restrictions, which cannot be lifted by willpower alone. To enable choices, institutions must offer safety, legal assistance, employment prospects, and social acceptance.

Krishnan's resistance to fit into any one category—victim, survivor, activist, rescuer, or public figure—is expressed in the title of the memoir. The "sum total of all the choices that I have made" is how she describes herself (21). The systemic obstacles and trauma that other women encounter are not eliminated by her claim to self-definition. It maintains that a woman's identity cannot be ultimately determined by acts of violence against her.

From Sympathy to Justice

In the end, Krishnan's story begs for more than just compassion for survivors. While empathy may acknowledge suffering, it can perpetuate behaviours that denigrate women,

facilitate human trafficking, and turn away people who want to start over. She highlights the need for institutions and communities to take action by discussing prevention, legal action, rehabilitation, education, livelihood, and reintegration.

Age, poverty, coercion, trauma, and societal rejection are among the several circumstances that the women and girls in *I Am What I Am* must deal with. One declaration of resilience is insufficient to safeguard their futures. Krishnan's autobiography establishes a link between individual agency and the social and material circumstances required to exert it. It makes the case that sexual abuse shouldn't be the ultimate defining of a woman's existence while emphasising the necessity of persistent group action for freedom and dignity.

Conclusion

In her book *I Am What I Am*, Sunitha Krishnan depicts gender injustice as a multifaceted system that goes beyond the actual act of sexual assault. Women's bodies and identities are still governed by patriarchy, as evidenced by rape, trafficking, victim-blaming, prostitution, stigma, branding, social exclusion, and institutional bias. Krishnan's own experience shows that when society passes blame from offenders to victims and permanently defines women via the crimes committed against them, survivors often face a second form of violence.

However, the memoir declines to utilise suffering as its ultimate language. Prajwala's focus on rehabilitation, Krishnan's difference between victimhood and survival, and her rejection of permanent tagging all contribute to the reconstruction of female agency via self-definition, livelihood, dignity, skills, and social acceptance. The stories of women and children who have been trafficked also show that rescue is not complete without social and economic reintegration.

Above all, *I Am What I Am* questions the authority of society to determine what a victim should look like, how she should act, and how long she can use her tragedy as a public identity. By arguing that victims of sexual violence are more than just their injuries, Krishnan turns autobiography into feminist witness. Meaningful gender justice depends on their ability to define themselves, start over, exercise agency, and live without stigma.

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