

Exploring the Post-traumatic Growth in the Frame of Traumatic Experiences among the Single Mothers of Assam

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Abstract

Post-traumatic growth (PTG) explains the helpful psychological modifications brought about by getting over tough and stressful life situations. The goal of the current study is to explore the post-traumatic growth of single mothers of Assam, focusing on their subjective experiences and the factors that support their growth following divorce or the loss of a spouse. A qualitative research design was employed, involving twenty single mothers (aged 20–49 years) from both rural (Nagaon, Morigaon, Lakhimpur) and urban (Kamrup Metro, Sonitpur) areas of Assam, using a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. An extensive qualitative dataset was collected using semi-structured interviews, which was thematically analyzed using the Braun and Clarke methodology. To refine data accuracy, qualitative data analysis software, Taguette (a free tool for coding qualitative data), was employed. The findings suggest that single female parents are improving, especially in the areas of financial independence, child companionship, maternal pride, and social support. Key growth facilitators included a resilient personality type, the influence of traditional practices and community involvement, and the empowering effect of education. The study highlights that culture-specific measures, interventions, and support systems are important to facilitate post-traumatic growth of single mothers.

Keywords: Post-traumatic Growth, Single mothers

1. Introduction

Post-traumatic growth is a gradual process by which a person experiences positive changes in their perception and attitude toward themselves and the world around them, or surrounding them, after a period of trauma and hardship. This process mostly involves the development of insights, new strengths, and a deeper appreciation for the life-imposed challenges and a degree of self-acceptance that leads to personal growth. The concept of post-traumatic growth (PTG) has witnessed growth in the discipline of psychology. Still, its exploration within the cultural context of Assam in northeastern India remains relatively limited. Besides the challenges single mothers face at the individual level, some broader cultural and societal factors are at play. For example, Traditional gender roles, family dynamics, and community expectations shape the experiences of single mothers in ways that may differ from other contexts. Assam, like major parts of India, is a collectivist state, where society and group matter, and where thoughts become predisposed with societal beliefs and value systems. Single mothers in this region not only experience the pain of losing a life partner but also feelings of being unlucky in marriage, superstitious guilt, and regret of choosing the wrong partner (in divorce). These emotional burdens are often accompanied by societal stigma and economic fluctuations (considering a significant proportion of single mothers in Assam are financially self-dependent (Denim Deka et al., 2016)). Moreover, single mothers play a crucial role in shaping the future human resources of the state, as they are responsible for raising their children, who will contribute to society. Therefore, it is important to investigate the psychological processes contributing to their growth following their marriage dissolution and spousal loss. This study represents a significant step towards illuminating the often-overlooked experiences of single mothers in Assam and advocating for their rights and well-being. Single mothers, within the context of the

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research, are the women who are solely responsible for raising their biological children without the support or presence of the children's biological father or any stepfather, after the demise of the children's father or the dissolution of the union with the children's father.

2. Research Questions

- How do single mothers in Assam cope with the psychological trauma after divorce and spousal loss?
- What are the factors that contribute to their personal growth?

3. Objectives

- To explore the positive subjective experiences of the post-traumatic period among single mothers of Assam.
- To recognize the elements that contribute to the post-traumatic growth in single mothers after spousal loss or divorce.

4. Methodology

With the help of a qualitative methodology, the study discovered the difficulties of single mothers' real life, which allows for a thorough understanding of their experiences. The population of the study includes single mothers who belong to a culturally and socio-economically dynamic state of Assam, India. A sample size of 20 participants has been found suitable to provide comprehensive details on the experiences of single mothers in Assam. Data collection procedure has been continued until thematic saturation was reached to an extent; no significantly new themes were emerging from additional interviews. The sampling techniques that are used for participant selection in this study are purposive sampling and convenience sampling. In this present study, participants are selected based on some criteria, including gender, age, marital status, and residence. Convenience sampling allows the researcher to select participants based on accessibility and availability. Participants must meet the following criteria: Gender: Only female participants. Age: Within the age range of 21 to 49 years. Marital Status: Participants must currently identify as single mothers who have experienced divorce, separation, or widowhood. Residence: Participants must be residents of any part of Assam. The data collection method involved a semi-structured interview as the primary means of gathering detailed information from single mothers regarding their experiences of post-traumatic growth. The interview schedule covered various aspects related to posttraumatic growth, including trauma history, factors facilitating or inhibiting growth, and personal experiences. While the Post Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI), by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence, was not used as a quantitative scale, yet the study utilizes PTGI to formulate the qualitative questionnaire. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interviews, emphasizing their right to refuse to answer any questions and to withdraw from the interview at any point without facing any negative consequences. It is informed that their identity and information will be kept confidential, and data will only be used for the research. Interview durations ranged from 30 to 60 minutes, with an average duration of 45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in data analysis. The Interview medium was face-to-face. Considering the sensitivity of all their experiences, immediate debriefing was provided to offer emotional support. Thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to identify and explore themes.

5. Analysis of the Data

The method of thematic analysis used by Braun and Clarke involves several steps to identify patterns within any kind of qualitative data. As the first step of any qualitative data analysis, the transcripts of all recorded interviews are reviewed as precisely as possible. After that, systematically, all the reviewed data is being coded by dividing into meaningful units. It was ensured that each unit represents a concept or idea that is relevant to the present research objectives. After that, the generated initial codes were identified. In the next step, the codes were organized into potential themes by grouping all the codes that share similar meanings or concepts. For rural single mothers, potential themes include- connection with nature; seeking comfort in natural surroundings; cultural practices and communal support networks; community-based cultural practices. For urban single mothers, potential themes include: seeking opportunities for financial stability and being financially independent; being educated; having pride as a mother; innate resiliency; practicing yoga and being physically active; and focusing on personal grooming. In the fourth and fifth steps, the generated themes are reviewed again and defined properly, to make it sure that they accurately capture the essence of the data.

The following are the themes found for rural and urban single mothers:

- Soulful nature experiences: This theme covers the experiences of single mothers who find peace, strength, relaxation, and fulfillment through their interaction with nature.
- Collectivism-ritualism: This theme emphasizes the compassion and sense of belonging provided by neighbors, relatives, extended family members, kinsfolk, and clan members, as well as the role of traditional activities or practices in finding purpose and continuity among these women.
- Educational empowerment: The theme highlights the power of education, which helps single mothers cope with various situations with their knowledge and wisdom, which ultimately contributes to their financial independence.
- Hardiness: The theme emphasizes that some women have an inborn or innate trait to bounce back from any adversity easily or in a shorter duration, or the tendency to be challenge-oriented.
- Financial autonomy: It talks about how the single mothers who have established careers before the adversity or who have developed a career after the adversity can achieve growth in healthier ways and can easily compare to others.
- Maternal pride: The single mothers, whose children show growth in terms of their career or academics, feel a sense of fulfillment and pride, and that enhances the power of growth of the mothers.
- Mother-child companionship: The presence of the child develops a feeling of responsibility as well as camaraderie in the absence of the husband and other companions, which may lead to growth.
- Nurturing oneself: It is about involving oneself in self-care activities like yoga, meditation, cooking for oneself, personal grooming, etc.

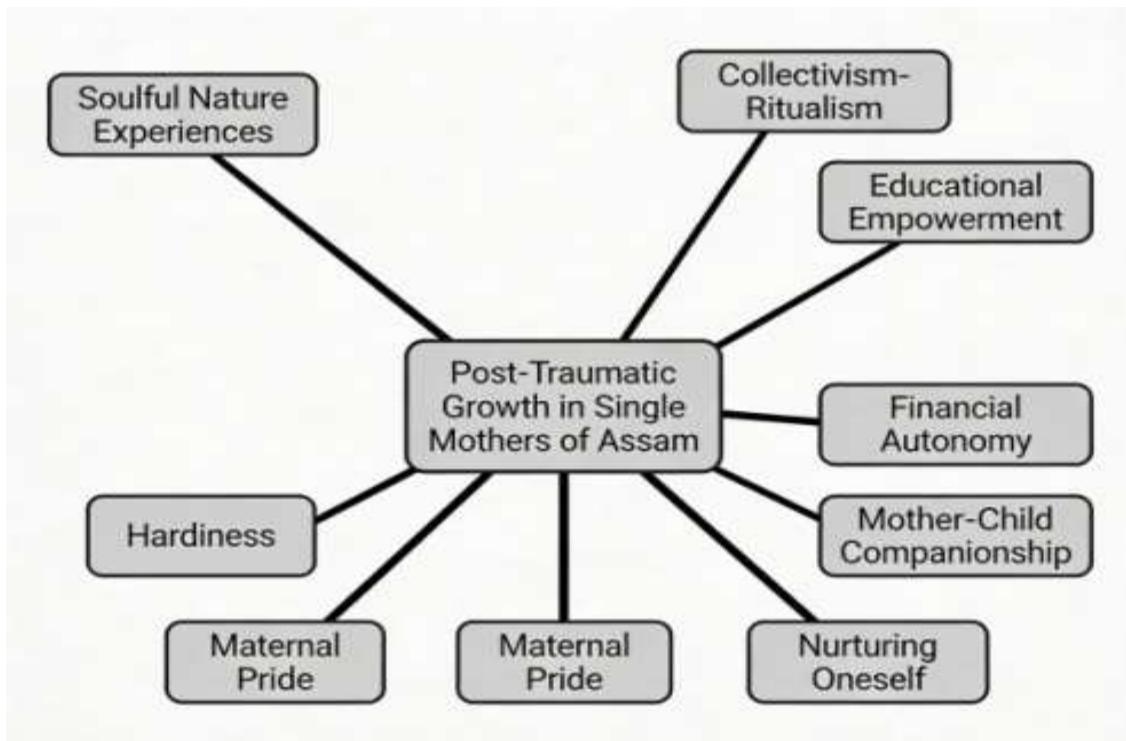


Figure1: Thematic Map

Based on the objectives, the themes mentioned earlier were elaborated below.

5.1 Objective 1: To Explore the Positive Subjective Experiences of the Post-traumatic Period Among Single Mothers

Everyone's subjective experience related to the different influencing factors in their post-traumatic growth is not the same. A theme that is common and present in both urban and rural contexts is the soulful nature experiences. A single mother from Nagaon, who faced widowhood in her mid-thirties, expressed feeling at peace, calm and refreshed in the mini forest close to her homeland. She spoke, "Every time I took a step amidst the trees, it felt like I was away from all the worries and pain." Another single mother from Morigaon expressed, "Watching the plants in my garden grow feels like I am growing with them." Another mother, whose husband died, expressed, "Our yoga team keeps on planning trekking and picnics to nearby hills. Climbing through those hills reflects my life challenges; reaching the top always feels like reaching ultimate peace." Single mothers also shared their individual experiences of community support and cultural observance, as well as the power of collectivism and ritualism. A woman from Morigaon district shared, "After the demise of my husband, I used to feel lonely and isolated, because my in-laws are also no more with me, my child is also very small; visiting the namghar (a traditional Assamese prayer house and community center) for our community activities and prayers gives me a feeling that I am not alone." Another mother expressed, "Listening to the Bhagavad path recited in our village namghar (a traditional Assamese prayer house and community center) with its meaning, gives me a sense of direction and peace." It also revealed that some of the single mothers are resilient and hardy by nature, which helps them grow through the challenges. One expressed, "I was never someone who will break down

due to challenges. It was a tough time when he left, but I always knew I was strong. Anyway, no one will stay in this world forever, and it is the ultimate truth." Another one from Guwahati expressed, "I am always a person who thrives in times of problems. I can never be someone crying about what had happened, I always focus on thinking about what to do next." Some of the mothers expressed how being financially independent helped them in their growth. "I was earning by myself, hence after divorce, though there were challenges, especially people's judgments, but it didn't become hard for me to focus on myself and provide my child whatever she needed." In the interviews, women also revealed the importance of maternal pride and child-parent companionship in their growth. One woman expressed, "My child's responsibility didn't let me mourn for long; I had to grow for him, and when I saw his good performance in academics, I was just filled with happiness and pride." Another woman expressed, "My children's company is everything to me; I am just living for them. And when my first child topped the 12th board and got admission into Gauhati Medical College, I was the happiest."

5.2 Objective 2: To Recognize Elements Contributing to the Post-Traumatic Growth of Single Mothers of Assam

The thematic analysis aimed to identify the elements that may be linked to the growth of single mothers after the traumatic experience of spousal loss and its aftermath.

Table 1. Key Themes and Rural vs. Urban Contextual Differences

Theme	General contribution to PTG	Rural	Urban
Soulful Nature Experiences	Provides peace, strength, relaxation, and fulfillment	Deeply connected to the land; engagement in farming/agriculture (Paddy fields, mini forest).	Drawn to outdoor pursuits (hiking, trekking, picnics); Cultivating plants on balconies; Focus on yoga/meditation outdoors.
Collectivism- Ritualism	Offers compassion, sense of belonging, purpose, and practical support.	Strong network from neighbors, kinsfolk; Active participation in traditional activities like visiting the Namghar.	Less reliance on direct neighborhood support; Utilizes organized and passive community groups (e.g., yoga teams, structured support networks).
Financial Autonomy & Educational Empowerment	Fosters confidence, stability, and healthier growth.	Educational qualifications enable securing jobs; Vocational training is a key pathway to financial security.	Established professional careers are more common; Focus on career progression and skill enhancement for financial independence.
Nurturing oneself	Reduces stress and improves mental health and self-esteem.	Primarily found comfort in nature-based activities and traditional community rituals.	Active self-care practices (yoga, meditation, personal grooming etc.) are emphasized.
Hardiness and maternal pride	Innate trait for resilience; Fulfillment from children's success.	Common factor in both the groups, less distinction based on location.	Common factor in both the groups, less distinction based on location.

5.3 The Elements Include

5.3.1 Soulful Nature Experiences

For most of the single mothers, nature acts as a facilitator of growth and survival. They mentioned that spending time outdoors, engaging in activities such as farming, and watching the sunset provided them with a sense of peace, rejuvenation, relaxation, and inner strength. "Working in the paddy fields doesn't feel like doing just a job; it brings me a sense of calm that I can't find anywhere else."

5.3.2 Collectivism-ritualism

Single mothers emphasized the importance of strong social networks and a sense of belonging in their healing journey. They received warmth, compassion, and practical support from their neighbors, friends, and extended family members. Single mothers found meaning and continuity in engaging with traditional practices and cultural gatherings. These activities provided them with a sense of identity, purpose, and connection to their community. "After the demise of my husband, I used to feel lonely and isolated, but visiting Namghar (a traditional Assamese prayer house and community center) for community activities and prayers gives me a feeling that I am not alone."

5.3.3 Educational Empowerment

This highlights the power of education that helps some single women cope with every situation with knowledge and wisdom and helps in financial independence. "I managed to secure a good job after my husband's demise, due to my prior educational qualifications, which helped me support myself and my children financially."

5.3.4 Hardiness

There are some women who have an inborn or innate trait to bounce back from any adversity easily or in a shorter duration, or the tendency to be challenge oriented. It works as a facilitator in their post-traumatic growth. "But I always loved challenges. Without it, life would be boring..."

5.3.5 Financial Autonomy

It highlights how the single mothers who have an established career can foster growth in a healthier way than others. Financial independence helps any woman tackle challenges confidently. "I am earning enough for my child and me, and that made me live the life to the fullest."

5.3.6 Maternal Pride

The single mothers whose children show growth in terms of their career or academics, feel fulfillment and pride, and that may have a positive impact on the mother. "Despite the hardships, seeing my child excel academically fills me with immense pride and joy."

5.3.7 Mother-child Companionship

The presence of the child develops a feeling of responsibility as well as camaraderie in the absence of the husband and other close connections, which may lead to growth. "There was a moment when I saw my children looking up to me for guidance and support after their father's passing. In that moment, my perspective shifted from feeling overwhelmed by my circumstances to feeling empowered as a mother."

5.3.8 Nurturing Oneself

It is about involving oneself in self-care activities like yoga, meditation, personal grooming, etc. "Attending yoga classes helped me; I started to feel good after joining the classes. Visiting the parlor occasionally is a real treat. It makes me feel refreshed."

6. Discussions

While both rural and urban single mothers find comfort in nature, their experiences manifest in distinct ways. In rural areas, mothers often find themselves deeply connected to the land, engaging in activities that are linked to agriculture and traditional practices. For instance, rural mothers find comfort and peace amidst the green rice fields. For women in both rural and urban areas, gardening provides a sense of comfort, peace, and contentment. On their balconies, a lot of urban female parents cultivate little plants. Furthermore, they are frequently drawn to outdoor pursuits like hiking in naturally attractive locations and picnics in neighboring parks. While both groups find comfort in the outdoors, single mothers in urban areas are more at ease looking for chances to grow personally and take care of themselves. Actively practicing yoga, meditation, cooking their favorite foods, and taking care of themselves, urban mothers place equal importance on their health and that of their kids.

Participants' descriptions of nature as a source of comfort, peace, and strength are consistent with previous studies. For instance, Capaldi et al. (2015) discovered that emotional resilience and psychological well-being are greatly enhanced by exposure to natural environments. According to a study by Vinn den Berg et al. (2010), urban green spaces can improve mental health by offering healing settings that lower stress and encourage healing. Mothers from rural areas discovered that spending time in the outdoors helped them deal well with their life stresses. The research conducted by Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) on the restorative effects of nature on psychological well-being also supports this conclusion.

The research also reveals collectivism-ritualism as a key element in promoting development. For many, participating in joint religious activities and having encouraging neighbors, friends, and family members provided a sense of emotional protection. In rural places, where single female parents faced obstacles in their lives, community networks and neighbors acted both as a support network and as a source of negative judgment; these experiences are personal and vary from one to another. Their experiences aligned with research by Cohen and Wills (1985) that highlighted the role that social support plays in managing stress and fostering psychological well-being. Also, in rural civilizations, support from the community or neighborhood is more common than in metropolitan areas, despite the existence of judgment apprehension. This finding is further supported by recent South Asian research. For example, Praveena and Abraham (2021) found that social support was critical in facilitating post-traumatic growth among women in India who had survived intimate partner violence, confirming the importance of community networks in collectivist settings.

The post-traumatic development of single female parents was also significantly influenced by maternal pride and the companionship of the mother-child. Hunai et al. (2004) discovered that sentiments of motherly or paternal pride and duty can fuel resilience in the face of adversity. Parental involvement and the sense of responsibility that goes along with it can greatly improve psychological well-being and personal development, according to a 2009 study by Palkovitz et al. According to Leeh and Larsons' (2000) research, parents frequently find meaning and purpose in their children's accomplishments, which can promote development. Research by Murray et al. (2008) highlighted the function of maternal pride in encouraging single mothers' psychological adjustment and good parenting practices. Their findings demonstrated the

importance of maternal pride in giving these women's lives a feeling of direction and significance.

Some individuals who see themselves as naturally flexible and challenge-oriented tend to be inherently hardy. This aligns with research by Connor and Davidson (2003), who developed the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale to measure resilience and found that hardness and natural resilience are key factors in overcoming hardships. Furthermore, Campbell-Sills and Stein (2007) demonstrated that people with high hardness are better at managing stress and recovering from traumatic events. According to Tuagade and Fredrickson (2004), hardness is an innate trait that helps people maintain positive feelings even in tough situations. This connection between personality traits and growth is continually affirmed; a study by Kala and Sharma (2023) confirmed that hardness and resilience are significant predictors of post-traumatic growth in a parental context.

Another important factor that is seen as critical to the rise of single female parents is financial liberty. Individuals who achieved financial independence expressed reduced levels of stress and increased autonomy in their lives. It is corroborated by research by Pearling et al. (1981), which discovered that stress management and psychological well-being depend heavily on financial stability. According to Zimmerman et al. (1999), financial independence has a major positive impact on self-actualization and empowerment. Sercombe et al. (1998) also emphasized that having enough money enables people to concentrate on growing rather than just existing, which promotes personal growth. More recent evidence supports this socio-economic link; Liu and Zhang (2022) found that higher education and income levels significantly influenced post-traumatic growth by providing survivors with greater coping resources.

Another key to accelerating progress is educational empowerment. Even in the absence of outside assistance, mothers with education felt secure in their lives. Educational level has a beneficial effect on post-traumatic growth, according to Schaefer and Moos (1992). Afterwards, any traumatic event, higher education levels are linked to improved coping mechanisms and decreased psychological discomfort (Galea et al., 2009). Studies on the brain's neuroplasticity and cognitive flexibility, which promote faster brain growth, have been related to higher educational attainment, which eventually helps people recover from adversities.

Activities aimed at nourishing oneself or self-care have also been identified as growth-facilitating factors. Brown et al. (2019) found that engaging in self-care practices such as exercise, mindfulness, and relaxation techniques can reduce symptoms of stress and improve mental health outcomes. Exercises are found to release endorphin, a natural pain relief chemical in the brain, which is found to help in psychological well-being growth. Personal grooming activities are found to be significantly related to self-esteem and confidence, which help in boosting a person's self and lead to growth (Ieizsen, 2019). Homan and Boyer (2018) explored the role of self-care in working against burnout and enhancing psychological resilience among individuals facing adversity.

7. Implications of the Study

Mental health professionals should consider using nature-based interventions, such as *eco-therapy*, in their therapeutic approaches; it may not only be beneficial for single mothers but also for other neurotic populations. Community-based organizations and support groups should prioritize creating safe and inclusive spaces for single mothers to share their experiences, receive support, and engage in meaningful activities. Educational programs and workshops can be developed to raise awareness, and in this way, later they can be utilized as human resources.

Single mothers, especially of rural Assam, can be given vocational training to uplift their skills. Yoga and meditational programs should be encouraged not only in schools but for everyone for emotional and physical well-being.

8. Limitations

Sampling Bias: The study relied on a convenience and purposive sampling method, which may have introduced bias. *Self-reported experiential data:* As the study heavily relied on self-reported data and experience-based data, it is possible that participants over-reported or under-reported their experiences. *Particularity in context:* The results of this study may not be applied to single mothers in other areas or cultural contexts because this is unique to the environmental and cultural context of Assam. *Restricted Analysis Scope:* The study did not investigate quantitative measures of post-traumatic growth; instead, it concentrated on qualitative analysis. A more inclusive strategy that combines qualitative and quantitative methodologies might offer a more in-depth comprehension of the experiences of single mothers.

9. Conclusion

The present study highlights that several factors play a key role in the post-traumatic growth of single mothers in Assam. Important themes include soulful nature experiences, child-mother companionship, maternal pride, hardiness, education, financial independence, nurturing self, and collectivism-ritualism. Effective interventions on a preventive basis are needed to address their challenges, as this group of population is not visibly suffering, yet they are themselves human resources and building the future human resources of the nation; hence, helping them build resilience and well-being for effective growth is crucial.

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