



BOOK REVIEW

Left Behind – Surviving Suicide Loss by Nandini Murali (2023)

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Suicide is one of the most stigmatized and least understood phenomena in human society. Nandini Murali's *Left Behind – Surviving Suicide Loss* (2021) is a seminal work that explores the harrowing yet transformative journey of a suicide loss survivor. This book is part memoir, part social critique, and part advocacy, shedding light on the often-muted voices of those left behind in the wake of suicide. Murali's work is not merely an account of personal grief but an interrogation of the systemic and cultural silence surrounding suicide in India. Through her deeply reflective and evocative narrative, she raises fundamental questions about loss, mental health, and societal responses to suicide, making this book an essential addition to the interdisciplinary discourse on suicidology, psychology, and sociology.

The book is structured into four parts, each unfolding a journey from devastation to transformation, making it both an intimate testimony and a guide for those navigating the uncharted waters of suicide bereavement. Murali's approach is marked by profound introspection, social critique, and an unwavering commitment to breaking the silence and stigma surrounding suicide. Each chapter begins with a carefully chosen quote, an artistic choice that lends intellectual and emotional depth to the narrative, situating personal grief within broader philosophical and psychological discourses.

The book forces the reader to confront uncomfortable truths: Why does suicide remain so deeply stigmatized despite its prevalence? How does language shape our collective understanding of loss? What does it mean to truly grieve in a society that urges us to "move on"? Murali's work is a masterclass in intellectual and emotional excavation, demanding that we rethink not only how we support survivors of suicide loss but also how we, as a society, construct narratives of death, loss, and healing.

R. Raguram's foreword sets the tone for the book, emphasizing self-discovery and transformation in the aftermath of profound loss. He introduces the idea that grief, while deeply painful, can also serve as a pathway to understanding oneself and one's relationship with the world. His reflections resonate with existentialist thought, particularly Viktor Frankl's (1963) *Man's Search for Meaning*, which asserts that suffering, when met with purpose, can lead to profound personal growth.

Murali begins with a harrowing account of her husband's suicide—a moment of complete rupture that leaves her in what she describes as a state of "collapse and chaos." The first part of the book opens with five chapters and is a visceral chronicle of grief's immediate aftermath, capturing the raw, disorienting nature of suicide bereavement. Drawing from thinkers like Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (*On Death and Dying*, 1969) and Joan Didion (*The Year of Magical Thinking*, 2005), one can see how Murali grapples with the tension between shock and the gradual realization of loss.

She captures the emotional collapse and overwhelming chaos (*Collapse and Chaos*), the deep despair of grief (*Drowned in Grief*), and the painful process of coming to terms with reality (*The Reality Check*). The chapter *Drowned in Grief* particularly evokes Judith Butler's (2004) notion of *precarious life*, where she argues that grief exposes our fundamental interconnectedness. Murali, much like Butler, emphasizes that grief is not just an individual experience but a relational one—a concept that resonates throughout the book. Her journey through early mourning aligns with psychological models of grief, particularly Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's (1969) five stages of grief, though Murali demonstrates how suicide bereavement often does not follow a linear path.

Through Potholes to Possibilities and *The Gift of Grief* shift the focus towards transformation. Here, Murali's reflections echo the concept of post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), suggesting that through grief, individuals can develop new perspectives, deeper empathy, and greater resilience. However, she does not romanticize suffering; instead, she presents grief as an ongoing negotiation with pain.

The second part of the book is where Murali shifts from personal loss to broader systemic and social issues surrounding suicide loss. *Connecting with Carla* marks a turning point in her journey, where she finds solace and solidarity in fellow survivors. This is crucial, as research indicates that peer support plays a vital role in suicide bereavement (Feigelman et al., 2012). The chapter *The 4S's: Stigma, Shame, Secrecy, Silence* is particularly compelling, echoing Erving Goffman's (1963) work on stigma and Michel Foucault's (1978) discussion on how silence is weaponized in discourse. Suicide remains one of the most stigmatized forms of death, and Murali deftly unpacks the ways in which survivors are often rendered invisible, their grief deemed inconvenient or excessive. Here, the book also takes on a restorative tone. In *Owning Our Stories*, Murali invokes the philosophy of Brené Brown (2010), who argues that vulnerability and storytelling are essential for healing. Through her own journey, Murali models what it means to reclaim one's narrative in the face of societal erasure. This aligns with narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990), which emphasizes rewriting personal narratives to process trauma. Her reflections also resonate with Paulo Freire's (1970) idea of *conscientization*—awareness that transforms personal suffering into social action. The final chapter in this section, *From Pain to Purpose*, encapsulates the transition from mourning to advocacy. Here, Murali's journey mirrors Judith Butler's (2004) argument that grief can be politically transformative, turning personal loss into a collective movement for change.

The third section includes seven deeply moving narratives that showcase how suicide loss affects different people. *A Mother's Search for Meaning* and *No Time to Say Goodbye* highlight the unique grief of parents and family members, while *The Neglected Mourner* brings attention to those whose grief is often unrecognized,

such as friends and colleagues. These narratives underscore Thomas Joiner's (2005) *Interpersonal Theory of Suicide*, which explains how perceptions of burdensomeness and thwarted belonging contribute to suicide risk.

A particularly striking chapter is *The Psychiatrist as a Survivor of Suicide Loss*, which examines the emotional toll of suicide on mental health professionals. This aligns with Michael F. Myers' (2017) work on physician suicide, illustrating the need for better mental health support within the profession. *Playing Hide and Seek with Sorrow*, *Redefining Resilience*, and *Grief Cast in Plaster of Paris* further explore how grief manifests in daily life, reinforcing Bonanno's (2004) research on resilience and adaptive coping. Murali's insights highlight that resilience is not about suppressing grief but learning to integrate it into one's life.

The final section of the book is both practical and philosophical. *The Right to Grieve* is a particularly compelling chapter, as Murali argues that all grief should be acknowledged, regardless of societal expectations. Her critique is reminiscent of Butler's (2004) argument that certain lives—and, by extension, certain deaths—are deemed more grievable than others.

What to Say and What Not to Say and *Mind Your Language, Please* serve as important guides for navigating conversations about suicide loss. Research suggests that the language used to discuss suicide significantly impacts stigma and help-seeking behavior (Wray et al., 2016). Murali's insistence on compassionate communication reinforces the idea that language shapes our realities.

The final chapters—*The Elusive New Normal*, *Transforming Through Trauma*, *Radical Self-Care for Survivors*, *The Oyster and the Pearl*, and *Churning the Ocean of Grief*—bring the book to a powerful close. Murali emphasizes that healing is a continuous process, advocating for self-care, community support, and policy change. Her reflections align with contemporary discourse on trauma recovery (Herman, 1992), which emphasizes the need for both individual and systemic healing.

The afterword includes contributions from leading experts such as Carla Fine, Michael F. Myers, Manoj Chandran, and Aravind Srinivasan. Their reflections contextualize Murali's experiences within the broader landscape of suicide prevention and mental health advocacy, reinforcing the book's interdisciplinary significance.

Left Behind is more than a memoir; it is a socially engaged text that challenges dominant narratives on suicide, mental health, and bereavement. By blending personal experience with systemic critique, Murali contributes to a growing body of literature that demands a more compassionate and evidence-based approach to suicide loss. The book is a testimony to the urgent need to reframe our understanding of grief—not as an individual pathology but as a relational, cultural, and political experience that requires collective acknowledgment and support.

Murali's writing is both poetic and unflinchingly honest, marked by a rare blend of intellectual rigor and deep emotional resonance. The decision to begin each chapter with a quote adds depth and intertextual richness, allowing readers to see her grief through multiple lenses—philosophical, psychological, and literary. This stylistic choice is reminiscent of Hélène Cixous' *The Newly Born Woman* (1975), where personal narrative becomes a means of critiquing broader socio-cultural norms. In *Left Behind*, Murali adopts a similar approach, refusing to let grief be reduced to a clinical checklist and instead portraying it as a deeply embodied, evolving process that cannot be rushed or neatly resolved.

Unlike conventional self-help books, *Left Behind* refuses easy resolutions. Instead, it invites the reader to sit with discomfort, to question dominant narratives around grief, and to consider how society can better support those left behind after suicide. This refusal to offer simple closure is perhaps the book's greatest strength—it respects the complexity of grief and honors its enduring presence in the lives of survivors.

While the book is deeply insightful, it could have further explored cross-cultural perspectives on suicide bereavement. Comparative insights from other

collectivist societies, such as Japan's deeply ingrained cultural attitudes toward suicide (*kamikaze*, *seppuku*), or indigenous healing practices, could have enriched the discussion. Additionally, a more detailed policy analysis would have strengthened the call for reform, particularly in the Indian context, where mental health infrastructure remains inadequate, and suicide prevention policies are often reactive rather than proactive.

Nevertheless, *Left Behind* is essential reading not just for survivors of suicide loss but for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of grief, resilience, and the social constructs that shape our mourning. At a time when mental health remains a global crisis, Murali's work is a clarion call for greater awareness, empathy, and systemic change. The book forces us to confront uncomfortable but necessary questions: How do we, as individuals and as a society, create spaces where grief is acknowledged rather than silenced? How can we change the language around suicide to foster compassion rather than stigma? What does it mean to truly bear witness to another's pain without seeking to 'fix' or erase it?

These are the questions that *Left Behind* compels us to ask—and they are questions that demand urgent answers. In a world that often demands resilience without offering care, Murali's work stands as a powerful testament to the necessity of radical empathy and collective healing. The challenge now is not just to read *Left Behind*, but to carry its lessons forward, ensuring that those who grieve do not do so in isolation, and that the silence surrounding suicide is broken, not through sensationalism, but through meaningful, systemic change.

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