

Transforming Anguish into Action, with Amita Swadhin (founder of Mirror Memoirs).

Nandini: Hello everyone, this is Nandini Ray the host of the Maitri podcast, conversations with friends. As you know, this podcast we analyze and examine different aspects about gender, domestic, and sexual violence so we can raise awareness about this issue and engage our community members in identifying and ending interpersonal violence. In that effort we will be shedding violence on sexual violence and abuse against young people. Before we start our conversation I would like to give you a warning that today's show will contain disturbing and heartbreaking stories of child sexual abuse and violence but still, we want to do this show so that many victims who are still trapped in abusive situations are carrying their own trauma, it can be empowering to claim their individuality and autonomy. Also, all of us can think deeply about how each of us can take part in this effort. Today's guest is a very important community issue; we have invited Amita Swadhin. Amita is an educator, storyteller, and her practice is dedicated to fighting interpersonal and institutional violence against young people. Their dedication to this work stems from their experiences a genderqueer, queer person of color, daughter of immigrants and years of abuse by their parents including eight years of rape by their father. Amita is the founding codirector of Mirror Memoirs, a national storytelling and organizing project intervening in rape culture by uplifting the narratives and leadership of LGBTQIA, black, indigenous, and women of color survivors of sexual assault. Amita it is such an honor for me to have you on our show today, thank you so much for coming.

Amita: Thank you so much for inviting me, Nandini, it is a pleasure to be here.

Nandini: When I was reading your story, at that very moment, I thought more people should know about your powerful life, resilience, activism, and energy so that we can send out a message to all victims of family violence, sexual violence, and abuse. To show that it is possible for every victim to break the chain of abuse. It is possible to come out of abusive situations and move toward a path of safety and self-sufficiency. So, let's start our conversation with your life journey. Tell our audience about your childhood, anything you want to share, good, bad, and ugly.

Amita: Well, that's a big question. Let me see if I can distill it down to something interesting. I was born in the United States, I was born in Ohio in 1978. My mother was also raised here for most of her childhood; my mom was born in India but she came to the United States specifically to Cleveland heights Ohio when she was eleven years old because my Nani is really amazing woman who comes from a family of upper caste, it must be said, but socialist freedom fighters in Maharashtra and so my Nani had the opportunity because her father was very progressive, to go to college in India and pursue graduate school in India. So, my Nani was a professor and a labor organizer at that time in Varanasi where my mom was born. And my grandfather, my nana, they met the movement. My Nani and Nana met in the movement, but they didn't have a very healthy marriage. My grandfather cheated on my grandmother, he was not a very good partner or father and because my grandmother had the benefit of education, she was able to leave him in India but of course, in the late 1950s, early 1960s, there was such a stigma against being a single woman at the time, she didn't even get legally divorced, she just separated from my

grandfather, and still people were very critical and unsupportive of basically her being a single woman with two daughters. And she wanted a better opportunity for my Masi and my mom and so my grandmother came to the United States in 1969 when she was 35 years old. She didn't have any family members here. She came for another graduate studies program bringing my mom and my mom with her when they were in middle school. So, I think that is one thing that is different than a lot of people my age, I'm 42 now, most people I know people who are my age, who were born in the United States had parents who had arranged marriages, parents who had endogamous caste marriage, parents who were born and spent their adulthoods, at least their young adulthood in India before emigrating. My family is a little bit different in that way; my mother grew up going to middle school and high school in suburban Cleveland and then did a year of school at Ohio state university and she met my father on campus, he is also Indian American, he came to this country through a bit of a different channel than my mom. He came in his early twenties, and he emigrated through Canada. He was an import export business. He vended this group of time in the United States in the 1970s in which white Americans, especially, were very enamored with buying sandalwood fans and India oils and skirts from India and furniture from India and all of that so that's how he made his living. And there was a far on the campus of Ohio state and my father would have been 26 at the time, my mother was only 18, she was college freshmen, and she didn't know that many Indian American people and I think she was just very hopeful that perhaps she had met someone that she would finally have something in common with and they had a very rushed courtship. Behind my Nani's back, my Nani did not approve of the marriage being so quick. My father needed a visa, and my mother was a naturalized citizen and so he was really pressuring her to get married quickly and so they eloped in a courthouse without my Nani's marriage after knowing each other for only three months. I think that's the main thing I want to share is you know, my mother made a mistake at a very young age as a lot of people do and a lot of people have, and it led to her being in a very textbook abusive domestic violence marriage for sixteen years. And that's the context in which I was raised and a lot of the violence that directly happened to me.

Nandini: So, what kind of story did you want to share?

Amita: Sure, I'm quite open about it at this point in my life. My mom was, you know sexually, verbally, physically, emotionally, and financially abused by my father, she was eight years younger than him so within that context my father who had a long history of raping, beating and berating women in his family including, back in India before he emigrated to the US, he also was physically and emotionally and sexually abuse to me. The sexual abuse and, rape, started in my life, when I was four and it continued a very regular basis. At least once a week, sometimes more than that, until I was about twelve. And so of course that had a profound effect on my life. I also have a younger sister who is four years younger than me, so another dynamic in our family is I tried very hard to be protective of her and shield her from my father's violence as much as possible. And of course, my mother was also enduring my father's violence that entire time. I would say the contrast and my safe space. I was very lucky to have school be a safe space for a lot of children; for a lot of children, school is not a safe space. For a lot of children, children who are immigrants, people of color, face racism in schools. I certainly did face some racism, but I also grew up in northern New Jersey. I grew up about twenty minutes outside of New York

City and one of the largest Indian American communities in the country. So, I was lucky that, yes there was racism from some of the white children in our town, but there were also a lot of Indian American, and other Asian American children to befriend, and in general a lot of other children of color. So, I had community in school, I enjoyed school; school was a place where I was academically oriented. I got a lot of positive affirmation from the teachers, which a lot of children don't get, so I was lucky in many ways that I had school as a safe space, I really look back and I think it was my friendships with other children and my extracurricular activities in school that helped me survive all the violence in my house over the years.

Nandini: I'm so happy to hear that you had support in school; I'm really awed to see your positive outlook. That after suffering so much abuse you are still talking about how you got support from your school and how you got a space within space and your school. But before that, I want to ask you that, I'm sure you felt oppressed and suffocated when you had that kind of abuse going on and, on the one hand, you were suffering abuse, and on the other hand, you were seeing domestic violence and abuse. Your mom is going through this kind of abuse; it's a huge thing. And I'd read in your testimony that you suffered eight years before disclosing your father's abuse to your mother. So is that because you thought no one would believe you or were you scared admitting

Amita: That's a great question. I helped create a theater project over a decade ago in New York City where I told more of my story than I did in the testimony. That theater project was called Secret Survivors and I co created it with a theater project named King Cham and company, and in that theater project I had a chance to go into more detail. The full story in my family is that the first time my father ever raped me, I was only four years old, I did end up telling my mother but because we don't tell children in this children in this country about the full language of sexual violence, I didn't know the word rape, I knew that what happened to me was wrong and I knew it was terrible and it felt terrible, but I didn't know what the words were to name it and so I told my mother that my father touched me and I didn't like it and then when she confronted him that evening after I had gone to bed, mind you she was a twenty four year old woman at that time who had also just had a baby, my younger sister, she didn't have a job, my father ran a store that he managed that sold Indian goods, but my mother was on his payroll, essentially. Which meant she wasn't getting paid. She didn't have a care. She didn't have a cellphone, this was 1982, right? So, she was very isolated and under his control and so I think it's very brave that she even found it within herself, and she was being beaten, raped, and berated by him regularly already. That's the context in which this disclosure happened when I was four. And she did confront my father and he of course, because he has raped many women and girls, I was certainly the first, nor was I the last, he ended up telling her that all he had done was expose his genitals to me. Honestly, when I hear that now, and I'm not certainly making an excuse for her lack of ability to protect me in that moment either, but she ended up taking my father at his word and she did check in with me, I don't really remember this disclosure. I only know it because years later, she and I processed it together and she told me, do you remember what happened to you when you were four when I disclosed it to her when I was thirteen. And I hadn't remembered that first testimony; best I could tell you know is that I said it the first time, I was not protected, my mother didn't have the resources internally or in the world to actually leave my

father and I kind of just carried about my survival because I knew that my mother wasn't strong enough or able enough to protect me so I just learned how to endure my father's violence and of course it was very lonely, very isolating, it was a very terrible way for any child to grow up.

Nandini: Yeah, you were a child, you were a child, and your mom was under a lot of agony, she was going through this same thing herself so even if she wanted to, I doubt she could have done much, whatever she did for you. It is so sad.

Amita: Yeah. I mean it's not something I would wish on any child; I think what makes me motivated to do the work that I do in the world is knowing the data from a public health perspective. We're in the middle of a global pandemic in the form of the covid virus, now, and the way I talk about my work is that any child sexual abuse survivor is living through a dual global pandemic because the rape of children and the sexual assault of children is also a global pandemic. The rates of sexual violence against children are egregiously high; in the United States, there is the adverse childhood experiences (ACES) study that is run by the centers for disease control that has found that one in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually assaulted by the age of eighteen. That's twenty percent of the US population. In India, you know, my ancestral homeland, the ministry of women and children commissioned a study in 2007, around child sexual abuse and they found that one in two children are survivors of child sexual abuse with boys being slightly higher about 53% for boys and just under that for girls. So, you know, certainly my experience is very sadly not exceptional, and I think that's what motivated me to do my work because even though this violence is happening at a pandemic level rate, children are not taught the language of rape and sexual assault in school. We're not taught in our public health curriculum, education curriculums that hey if this is happening to you it's not your fault, you're certainly not alone, here are the things you can do. Here's how we build a supportive community that does not tolerate rape culture. I think about what would have taken for my mother to be able to leave my father. She was part of an immigrant community that deeply stigmatized divorce. You know when she finally did find the strength to divorce her father when i was fifteen, there were a lot of women in the community who were the Indian American women who knew that maybe they didn't know what had happened to me, but they certainly had seen her get yelled at, get hit at parties, at community events, and these women had the gall to come to my mother's house to come to my mother's house and try to convince her to stay with my father so she didn't have to face the shame of being a divorced woman. There is so much cultural change work that needs to be done in our communities and in our communities and in the United States, it's not only a Southeast Asian American issue by any means. Again this is a global community. Rape cultural is very sadly universal and we need to do a much better job as human beings to support children who are growing up in abusive situations.

Nandini: Of course, that is so frustrating and so sad. I think all children should have someone in their lives, a family member or relative, anyone who they can trust and share the pain and helplessness with, and all of us can be that foster parent. If children see that they are believed and not judged, they will be more comfortable and they will share their problems. And all community members, all adult community members should take that responsibility to create a safe space for all children inside the home and outside and we are failing our children. And you

know, Amita, I think that whenever children are abused or neglected by their own family members and parents, they seek love, attention, and family from outsiders, and they can do anything to get that kind of validation and attention. In that way, those children have huge possibilities. You can get abused and exploited, it's kind of all interconnected. Do you think so?

Amita: I absolutely think it's interconnected. In a united states context, there's no way to separate the violence of rape culture from the violence of white supremacy; this country was created through the rape of children who were enslaved and rape of children who were indigenous and we live in the legacy of that still today. I think about again, my ancestral homeland, my family on three sides of my family come from a Brahman lineage, my grandfather, my nana, comes from a Kshatriyas lineage, caste oppressors, right? And when I think about that, the violence of rape culture in an Indian context, you can't talk about ending that violence without also talking about ending Brahmanical patriarchy. So yes, these systems are very much all connected because rape has been weaponized as a tool of oppression and colonialization around the world in any society, when we look at power imbalance historically, we see that children of oppressed populations have always been raped by the dominate castes, by the dominate groups, by the colonizer populations. I think about that very much, all the time. And I think a lot about what it would take to build a society in which we really honored the autonomy and the power of children. I am an educator. I was a youth organizer in New York City public high schools and afterschool programs for about a decade, before I moved to Los Angeles. And a lot of my work was around health education and sex education and providing young people with information to make health decisions about their lives. And in a context of ending child sexual abuse, I think a lot about a statistic from the International Journal of Child Abuse and Neglect. In 2008, they found that of all the children who were raped and sexually assaulted whoever tell anyone else, 80% of those children only ever disclose to another child and then they never speak of the violence again. So if we don't include child sexual abuse as a health issue, in textbooks, health curriculum, what we are saying to children is, we are abdicating this space as educators and as adult allies, you will as a child, absolutely hear from other children who are being sexually assaulted, and you're not going to know what to do because we are too afraid as adults to bring this issue into the school curriculum. So, when you say we are failing our children you are right. There is so much more that we could be doing to provide children with the information they need to be good care supporters because the truth is, they're discussing to each other all the time and they're trying to find ways to help each other survive.

Nandini: Since we are talking about support, when you report your abuse did you get support from your family, community, and from the system? Did you have adequate support?

Amita: That's a great question, there was mandated reporting in my life when I was thirteen years old. Very much against my wishes because the way that mandated reporting worked, this was in New Jersey in 1991, I ended up telling my mother because there had been about a year without sexual violence in my life, and I was very worried that my father then was raping my younger sister. I wasn't sure. But if it was no longer happening to me my question was then where would this violence go? And so, in order to protect my sister, I told my mother what had happened to me all those years. And my mother tried to get me help and she called a therapist

to try and get me help. The therapist was a white woman who of course was a mandated reporter because I was a minor and so the therapist called the division of youth and family services here in New Jersey. Then within about 48 hours of me disclosing to my mother there were white social workers in my living room, and they were very paternalistic. I was a very sharp 13-year-old child as a lot of thirteen-year-old kids are, and they were condescending, they were racist, they said to me, “we know that this happens more in your culture, so you can trust us and you can tell us what it is happening, we are here to help you.” I already knew that it didn’t happen more in my culture. I couldn’t have told you about the statistics at thirteen years old, but I can tell you at 42 years old. But I knew other kids were child sexual abuse survivors because they were disclosing to me as well.

Nandini: And it is happening in every culture, domestic violence and sexual violence, this kind of social ills. We can see that this is not only happening in such a specific community. It is such a stereotype and wrong assumption. You were only thirteen years old and still you realized they were blaming your culture.

Amita: That’s right. And it is a form of white supremacy and so in the months, the weeks, that ensued from there, I had to go to the police station in our country to make a report, and I got questioned by the prosecutors. The police officers was a white woman, and when I saw the double mirror, you know, the seat you in front of a two sided mirror, I think it’s called, so that someone can watch you from the other side to see what kind of witness you would be on the stand, again I was not an unintelligent child and so I don’t mind talking to you, but I feel like I should at least be respected enough to know who I am speaking to and I don’t want to speak to you in front of this two side mirror and the police officer said that I watched too much TV and then I started to cry and then she, I’ll never forget it because I was only thirteen, she was a grown woman, she said, “you clearly need therapy but that’s not my job, I’m just here to get the story from you.” So then I stopped talking to her unsurprisingly, then I had to talk to the prosecutors who were grown white men, they tried to play good cop bad cop with me and one of them said, “you know we could prosecute your mother for being complicit in this violence, is that what you want?” and of course I didn’t want that, again I watched my mother be abused by my father my entire childhood, I knew she needed help, I very much loved my mother, I loved my mother, we have a complicated relationship but I certainly didn’t want her to go to jail, I didn’t want to go to foster care, I didn’t want to split up from my sister, I mean, carceral feminism, right? Anything connected to police or prisons is not going to save people of color, these are white supremacist systems are not set up to help our communities. I am an abolitionist, I believe we can protect each other, we can create a community in which we can keep each other safe, and that’s why I do cultural organizing, that’s why I do story telling work, that’s why I do narrative change work because stories are what change people’s hearts and minds. I must share with you this beautiful story that, you know, I now am the founder and co-director of Mirror Memoirs, and we start our project with an audio archive, so I traveled across the country from 2016-2018 interviewing 60 LGBTQ+ people of color who were raped and sexually assaulted as children, recording their stories on audio. And I’ve edited some clips together that I used to gather people together in person in healing circles. I started fundraising when we created an actual non-profit in 2019 and I’m so grateful that my mother and stepfather have a good relationship at this point

in my life, and they hosted the second Mirror Memoirs fundraiser ever. They got their friends to come and listen to an excerpt of the audio archive. Many of the friends that came included three of my aunties, my mother's friends who she's known since I was four. These are the only three women who stood by her when the rest of the community walked away when she finally divorced my father and they listened to me tell a little bit of my story and they listened to these audio clips from other Desi survivors and they started crying and when we passed the mic around the room so they could say "what's one thing you're thinking, feeling, or wondering?" many of them said: "you know this happened to us when we were little too, and this happened to us as adults and we didn't know what to do to help you. And then they made a donation to support our work, but what was more important, I mean yes, the donation was nice, but what was more important was the witnessing that they were survivors, and I was a survivor and that something our culture needed to be changed. That we needed a community in which we could support each other without being harmed by the patriarchal violence of rape culture that were all forced to survive in the early 1980s in New Jersey in my community. So, I guess what I'm sharing is that I don't believe that healing and transformation requires police or prisons. I believe that in witnessing each other, we can make the relationships with one another that we really need to be interdependent and to take care of one another.

Nandini: Amita, I'm just so impressed, what kind of resilience that you had at the time, as a kid who was not getting enough support from the home, and the community, and the system, but still didn't give up. Kudos to you. The trauma you suffered is huge, I cannot even imagine the intensity of the pain and I don't know what to say, I'm just at a loss for words. I am so sorry. And every child is so powerless. They are a kid and home should be the safest place for them and if they are abused in their own home, then it is so scary, so shameful for all of us who are adults and community members that we cannot protect children from our community. I am glad that you didn't give up. You fought a lot to get justice for you and for your mom, and for others and you are still fighting today to get justice, your strength and resilience; how did you create your own space.

Amita: A lot of trial and error. It was a very messy path, you know. I certainly had a lot of coping mechanisms that were unhealthy. When I went away to college, I was seventeen, and I definitely developed a drinking problem, which I got sober years later in my early thirties, but you know I don't want to paint a picture like it was all roses and rainbows because it wasn't. I had a lot of insomnia, I got diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder when I was twenty years old, and I failed an entire semester of my classes in college. I had nightmares a lot, and I had very high anxiety. I think what kept me going was the support from other survivors who were my age. Right? Other students in high school were friends who were also survivors and were also people of color. In college, it was LGBTQ people, people of color who were childhood abuse survivors who happened to be my friends, people who understood because they were struggling in very similar ways, and all we could do was try our best to try and love one another. It sounds a little trite but it's really the guiding truth of my life because that love was an action and receiving it and giving it has really helped me keep going when I don't have an easy answer for what healing looks like. And certainly, trauma has continued in my life in different ways as a person of color i face white supremacy, as a queer person I face homophobia, my partner is a

black transgender man, he faces a lot of anti-black violence and transphobic violence, and state violence so it's not like we're living peaceful lives, but I have a lot of love and community support in my life. I met so many amazing warriors on this path. There are so many resilient survivors out there who are doing the work every day in their personal lives and in their immediate communities to changing rape culture. I think I mentioned that I have a fourteen-year-old brother. I was twenty eight when he was born, so I've done a lot of work in my own immediate family with my mom and step dad and my younger sister to make sure that we create a healthy culture in our home and family relationships that he can grow up in. I'm very proud, and he's not a survivor of child sexual abuse and that he knows what child sexual abuse is, and that he knows if he was ever hurt in that way, he can always tell us, and he will be loved and protected. So that's a victory, that sometimes, I think, even though trauma continues in my life in different ways, that is also healing. It's an ongoing practice more than a destination.

Nandini: Yeah, anybody who is listening to this podcast right now, and wants to join in Mirror Memoirs, how can they find you and this organization?

Amita: Great question, we are on Instagram, @mirrormemoirs. We're also on Facebook, mirror memoirs, my email is mirrormemoirs@gmail.com, our website is under construction but soon you will be able to see it updated at mirrormemoirs.com. It's been a lot of work during the pandemic to try and get that done, but it's happening soon. Yeah, we're out there, we've been doing a lot of work to support our impoverished members through this pandemic. We have a great member support campaign at tinyurl.com/supporttranssurvivors where we are redistributing, so far, we've redistributed \$50,000 to ninety-five of our members because you know how it is during covid. People are really fighting hard to pay their bills, and pay for basic survival needs, so those are some ways people can learn more and support the work that we are doing.

Nandini: Thank you for sharing that information. And thank you for sharing your powerful story and your positive energy. Do you want to give any messages to those who are abused on their own, how can they cope?

Amita: Yes, thank you for that. I would say to any people who were heartbroken by the family members they share blood with, just remember that when we say you get consent in your life, you get to have agency and autonomy in your life. To me that also means you get to consent to say to no to relationships that you've inherited by blood. There's a lot of love in the world, there's a lot of support, to be had, the concept of family and kinship is beyond blood family, that is a lesson I have learned every day by being a survivor and by being a queer person, that it's okay to walk away from blood family that does not know how to love you and treat you well, I haven't spoken to my father since I was sixteen years old, I haven't spoken to any of his family members except for a sister I have on that side who I helped get away from him, she's twenty years younger than me. Since I was sixteen years old, that was the best decision I ever made. So, you don't owe anyone anything, just because you share blood with them. Everybody should be earning their place in your life and it's okay to hold boundaries for your own wellness and healing.

Nandini: What a wonderful message. It is important to get love and be loved and give love. Thank you for guiding many survivors through the path of healing. Everyone deserves love and respect. Sometimes people, after suffering abuse and trauma, they sometimes suffer further, so you give them a lot of power and support so that they will understand that they need support and love, and they can then build a balanced life. Is there any message you want to our listeners regarding family violence because you have mentioned a couple of times that you people shy away and don't really want to help, they didn't help your mother when she wanted to have a divorce and wanted to get out of that abusive situation. Probably, if she had that support, she would get a different story. So, any message you want to give our community members.

Amita: I just want them to be more honest, right? The statistic I was talking about in the Indian ministry of women and children from 2007, that found 53% of children in India are sexually assaulted by the age of 18, that's 50% of our diaspora as well, so let's not pretend that if somebody decides to speak out as a survivor, that this is an unusual stigmatized exceptional experience, right? We're living within a diasporic culture that has a lot of healing to do, and it's everyone's work to do because whether you're a survivor or not, guaranteed statistically that many people you love are survivors so the work of ending rape culture is the work of every single person to you. Survivors deserve your support and not your shame and your stigma.

Nandini: Thank you, Amita, for sharing your personal trauma with me and hope with us. I'm sure your story will give strength and voice to many people out there. I think more people should share their stories of experiencing family violence without any gain so we can remove the shame and stigma. Abuse is never a victim's fault, sometimes many people forget that, and they think that it is the victim's fault, but no. abuse is never a victim's fault. So, thank you for sharing your story. Thank you so much, to you, for the work that you do with Maitri and thank you to everyone for tuning in and hearing about my work and my story, and thanks to you for Nandini and having this conversation.

Amita: It is our pleasure. It is an honor for me to talk to you. We should keep in mind that all survivors need compassionate support from their friends and family and community in their healing process. All of us can give some compassion. Yes, sometimes we don't know what to say, how to help, but we can say that I care, I believe you, I am here for you, so I hope all of you that share this episode, this important discussion with your friends and family so that together we can create a society where victims are seen, heard, and supported. I am your host Nandini Ray, signing off today, but we will be back with another discussion. As you know we have published over thirty interesting episodes of this podcast and if you have missed any episodes, please find all our episodes on SoundCloud, google, Spotify, and other podcast apps. Please follow Maitri's social media pages. Bye. Bye for now, stay safe, and stay happy, thank you so much.