

THE CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS OF TRAUMA

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Abstract: *Trauma work is also memory work, and the testimony of the survivor does not, in its articulation, determine meaning, and thus close a familial, cultural, or historical chapter. Rather, the speaking of the trauma opens meaning, is productive of meaning, and necessitates a willingness on the part of the listener to bear witness to the catastrophic event, to untangle the narrative knots, and to listen through the gaps and ruptures, which takes precedence over any desire for finality. Psychic trauma, far from being an unusual occurrence, is common, particularly for members of oppressed and disadvantaged groups, and it is only the members of a small privileged class who can reasonably expect to live their lives without suffering traumatic stress.*

Key Words: *Victims, Perception, Memories and Treated.*

1. INTRODUCTION :

The cultural representations of trauma including its representation in literary critical texts are contested sites, different groups with different politics have an interest in determining those representations. Although the definition of trauma was recently revised and no longer includes the claim that a traumatic event is one that lies outside the realm of "normal human experience," the pervasiveness of trauma is elided in most contemporary critical work. Laura Brown in essay "Not outside the range" suggests that Psychic trauma, far from being an unusual occurrence, is common, particularly for members of oppressed and disadvantaged groups, and it is only the members of a small privileged class who can reasonably expect to live their lives without suffering traumatic stress.

1.1 TRAUMA VICTIMS

Traumatized victims act out the horrors they have endured in nightmares in an attempt to master the break in conscious experience that results from trauma and regain control over their fragmented lives. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, however, Freud writes that artistic imitation of trauma carried out by adults for an audience do not spare the spectators (for instance, in tragedy) the most painful experiences and can yet be felt by them as highly enjoyable. This is convicting proof that, even under the dominance of the pleasure principle, there are ways and means enough of making what is in itself unpleasurable into a subject to be recollected and worked over in the mind. There is something hopeful about the reassuring ability to master trauma that appeals to audiences. It allows them the possibility of surmounting overwhelming matters in their own lives and enables them to feel more compassion as they relate to others. This desire to master the trauma through repetition has a profound impact on the victim's fragmented present which has been overwhelmed by external stimuli and wants to return to its previous, more ordered state. Freud writes of such an individual, He is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past.

By continuously repeating the traumatic material in the present, the victim is not able to get enough distance from the overwhelming experience to be able to work through and give order to the fragments by using hindsight. Trauma victims often do not have the luxury of categorically putting the aberrant experience in the past because it is an overwhelming experience that ruptures their understanding by dissolving their protective shell and draws attention to itself in the present. Being racked with memories, nightmares, and the desire to master the trauma transforms some victims into victimized victimizers, or perpetrators that were originally victimized before acting out the trauma on others.

Another glaring problem with trauma theory is the question of what constitutes victimization. Some trauma critics pose that we are all victims because we live in a hyper-complex, postmodern world. Such critics argue that trauma occurs whenever humans are not able to fully process or understand their experiences. Living in our postmodern world dictates that we are exposed to many stimuli that we cannot fully explain or comprehend, and that this experience is overwhelming and seemingly traumatic.

1.2 EXTRAPOLATING PERPETRATORS

This perception necessarily leads to relativism because it excuses responsibility for one's criminal actions if everyone is a victim. Extrapolating perpetrators lack of culpability ultimately leads to that particular society's willful resistance to the consequences that individuals and groups face as a result of legitimate trauma experiences. Not only is such an approach ignorant of the effects of trauma, it is also destructive to the victims healing because it undermines the validity of their suffering, and this, in turn, encourages victims to continue to assert their suffering instead of focusing that energy on healing.

Each of these authors articulates the belief that he or she is a storyteller with a mission; their responsibility as survivors is to bear the tale. Each one also affirms the process of storytelling as a personally reconstitutive act and expresses the hope that it will also be a socially reconstitutive act - changing the order of things as they are, and working to prevent the enactment of similar horrors in the future.

But the task of the traumatized author is an impossible one. For if the goal is to convey the traumatic experience, no second-hand rendering of it is adequate. The horrific events that have reshaped the author's construction of reality can only be described in literature, not recreated. Only the experience of trauma has the traumatizing effect. The combination of the drive to testify and the impossibility of recreating the event is one of the defining characteristics of trauma literature.

The goal of telling a story can be to hide information as well as to share it. People have many mechanisms to avoid assimilating disturbing information. They are self-corrective against disturbance, and if the obvious is not of a kind that they can easily assimilate without internal disturbance, their self-corrective mechanisms work to sidetrack it, to hide it, even to the extent of shutting the eyes if necessary, or shutting off various parts of the process of perception. Disturbing information can be framed like a pearl so that it doesn't make a nuisance of itself; and this will be done, according to the understanding of the system itself of what would be a nuisance. This too is something which is learned and then becomes perpetuated or conserved. There is a sort of subconscious but intentional ignorance in operation in human beings. We do not notice a great deal of what we do not want to notice. What is disturbing can be ignored until (and often well after) it becomes dangerous to continue to ignore it.

The clearest point of access for nontraumatized readers to the writings of trauma survivors is through an understanding of clinical analysis of the effects of trauma on survivors. Reactions to specific trauma, including Holocaust, combat, rape have been studied, catalogued, and discussed by the psychiatric establishment.

2. LITERATURE OF TRAUMA :

The theme of drawing together fragments into a whole is found again and again in the literature of trauma: piecing a shattered self. Many personal narratives and novels feature a moment of epiphany, when the protagonist describes this realization of his godlike power over life and death and glories in it. Women, by contrast, almost never control the tools of violence. Their traumatic experience - rape, incest, battering - is the most extreme form of the oppression visited on them by a society that generally reduces them to victims. Therein lies the most important difference between the writing of the men writers and the writing of the woman victim. Women view their trauma as a natural extension of their powerlessness. While Men are forced to realize the vulnerability of everything they have ever considered powerful.

In Freudian psychoanalytic thought, it is access to memory rather than the initial input or storage that is problematized. Memory is conceptualized as a force in conflict with the counter force of repression and as highly compromised by the encounter. In psychoanalysis, the compromise is often phrased as one between reality and fantasy; memory is the product of their mutual impress upon pliable screens that simultaneously conceal as well as reveal what is behind them. The past does not correspond to the present in any direct way since what we remember are memories-screens already impressed by the fantasies or distortions of a series of successive rememberings. Hence, memories like dreams are highly condensed symbols of hidden preoccupations.

3. MEMORIES ARE PRODUCED :

There is always a space, a distance, between the spectator and the narrator's memory, a space within which the lenses can be focussed and the memory recognized as distinct, emerging from the background.

Memories are produced out of experience, and in turn reshape the experience. This implies that memory is intrinsically linked to identity. However, this does not mean that one can access memory only through psychological or psychoanalytic methods. The anthropological method of accessing memory with the mediation of cultural means and social institutions does succeed in objectifying memory as a social and cultural practice, and therefore establishes the authority of collective memory.

Memory serves as a ground for determining identity and the means for explicit identity construction. When we search our memories in order to understand ourselves or when we offer particular stories about ourselves in order to make a certain kind of impression on a listener, although we may set up the ideal of an unambiguous self, in a narrative

devoid of obscurities, in our memories, ambiguity is the rule. So while memory should support the dominant view of our identity, the trouble is that it always threatens to undermine it either by obvious gaps and uncertainties or by the glimpse of a past that no longer seems to be ours. On the positive side, memory offers a certain scope for the kind of play or freedom that enables us to creatively refashion ourselves, remembering one thing and not *another*, changing the stories we tell ourselves, and others, about ourselves.

As memory emerges into consciousness, as it is externalized and increasingly objectified, it always depends on cultural vehicles for its expression. It also becomes important to look at the symbols, codes, artifacts, rites and sites in which memory is embodied and objectified; the coherence or fragmentation of the narratives, rituals, geographies, or even epistemologies it relies upon; and the way their authority changes over time.

In forging links of continuity between past and present, between who we are and who we think we are, memory operates most frequently by means of the threads of narrative. Life itself is a creative construction, and there is a point at which a person's life and the stories he or she tells about it begin to merge. However, stories require interlocutors and the right to establish authoritative versions never rests solely with the individual telling the story. Our memories are shaped in part by the narrative forms and conventions of our time, place and position. But as they do not appear to come to us in such a mediated fashion but rather seem to be simply what they are, convention is concealed.

4. COMMUNITIES AND INDIVIDUALS ARE TREATED :

When communities and individuals are treated as archives and the memories retrieved are new, unfamiliar versions of the concepts of the nation, citizenship, history and the past come into being. This is because memory is constructed in interplay with the constantly variable present that shifts positions influenced by several social, cultural, global, national and global forces.

The emphasis given now by social scientists, writers and thinkers to popular memory may be linked not only to the Marxist-inspired focus on class analysis and the recovery of subaltern or dissident perspectives, but is also directly linked to contemporary trends in the social sciences to retrieve the voice of archetypes- of the exiled and the marginal. Somehow these attempts assign to themselves the task of retrieving the voices, but in the process they often forget that by already assigning a category to the subject they are denying full moral agency to individuals or communities. Work on memory enables scholars to transect the old boundaries of the elitist representation in historiography and the voice of the marginal.

The inscription of trauma narratives may be a necessary, sufficient and compelling means of establishing recognition. At the same time, such identity politics can subjugate and immobilize victims in the very act of recognizing their suffering. Moreover, an act of remembering trauma or self-flagellating confessions if done by the majority community in a nation can result in politics of a vicious kind, leading to malevolent political choices. Needless to say, there have been no such earlier attempts. Right-wing groups all over the world thrive on the interplay of memory, history and identity. A multilevel political analysis of violence is necessary; however, in the Indian or rather the South Asian context, there are rarely absolute villains or absolute victims. The moral complexity of the situation would have ended if there was a clearly identifiable enemy such as a state that sponsored genocide. The complication deepens when the victims are often also the perpetrators at some point or the other. Even the ideological function of 'Partition' historiography has been very different from, say, that of Holocaust literature. The investigation has not been primarily concerned with assigning guilt to the opposing sides.

It can be safely assumed that memories are never simply records of the past, but are interpretive reconstructions that also bear the imprint of local narrative conventions, cultural assumptions, discursive formations and practices, social contexts and commemoration. When memories recall acts of violence against individuals or entire groups, they carry additional burdens such as indictments or confessions, or are regarded as emblems of a victimized identity.

5. CONCLUSION :

The recent debate about trauma in psychoanalysis serves to throw light on the problematic issues of truth, history and representation that circle endlessly around the subject of memory. Memory is, in a sense, a locus of struggle over epistemological issues. It may be seen as a problematic and perhaps exemplary site for dealing with the complex inter-linkage of reality and fantasy in representation and interpretation. Memory acts in the present to represent the past. Memories do not merely describe the speaker's relationship to the past but place the person quite specifically in reference to it. It is by no means a simple retelling, but rather a work of interpretation. Memories are acts of commemoration, of testimony, of confession, of accusation. It is not only important to acknowledge the fact that what has already happened cannot be changed, but it is also essential to recognize that the will is crucial in seeking to alter in any way what has already taken place.

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