Trauma and Fiction: Representational Crises and Modalities

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Abstract

Trauma involves a rupture in the temporal and symbolic orders at individual and collective levels. Fictional representation of trauma, therefore, is marked by a problem of referentiality, where mimesis fails and chronology breaks down. The article opens with a discussion on the disorientation in the co-ordinative links between the world, the self, and representational tools in the event of a traumatic experience, which results in the crisis of referentiality. The inadequacy of language as a representational medium on the one hand, and unacknowledgement of extreme events beyond "socially validated reality" on the other, constitute two of the major issues creative artists have to deal with. An extreme event leaves a mnemonic gap in the psyche of the traumatized individual, and the process of recovery involves the gap being filled in with narrative memory, suggesting an epistemological void. Narrative memory acts as the surrogate memory of the traumatic event, which is unavailable to willed recollection. This surrogate memory is compared to Jean Baudrillard's third order of simulation, where a false presence conceals the absence of any basic reality. Recognizing the referential and representational crises at work in rendering traumatic experiences in fiction, the article goes on to explore the ways of bypassing them and discuss the idea of indirect representation in Michael Rothberg's Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation. *Rothberg believes that an oblique rendition of traumatic events in fiction may be an appropriate representational mode within the conflicting demands of the documentation of reality, meditation on the formal limits by the creative artist, and risky circulation of images in the globalized world. This leads to a deliberation on Anne Whitehead and Laurie Vickroy's idea of the emerging genre of "trauma fiction" with its thematic and stylistic concerns. The article ends with a summary of the representational techniques likely to feature in fictions written on violent events.*

Keywords: *trauma, fiction, referentiality, representation, traumatic realism*

> Smile and others will smile back. Smile to show how transparent, how candid you are. Smile if you have nothing to say. Most of all, do not hide the fact you have nothing to say nor your total indifference to others. Let this emptiness, this profound indifference shine out spontaneously in your smile.
>
> — Jean Baudrillard and Chris Turner (*America* 34)

Though many might believe that a faithful rendition of traumatic events should invest any narrative on catastrophe with credibility, there is something fundamentally wrong about trauma being represented in the realistic mode as extreme violence is characterized by a break in the temporal and symbolic orders. Eugene L. Arva shares this view of the extreme as unrepresentable in realistic terms:

> Although realistic details may render images believable to readers, traditional realism usually stumbles at their transmission as reflections of rational, understandable

experiences. Slavery, colonialism, the Holocaust and war have constituted themselves as "histories" of extreme events hardly open to rational reflection or understanding. (9)

Psychoanalytically speaking, trauma is too overwhelming an experience to be grasped by the intellect and recorded by memory. It causes a void in time in which the coordination between the self and the world gets completely ruptured; and, a creative artist writing about a traumatic experience attempts to represent a world that has not been comprehended by the self and a self that has been alienated from the world. Mimesis obviously fails him/her as the connections in the representational chain – the world with the self and the self with creative tools (language, for example) break down. Survivors and bystanders of atrocity have often been observed to recount their extreme experiences in incoherent and/or fragmented narrative. This, again, implies a disturbed relationship between the world, the self, and representation, and points to the crisis of referentiality. This renders the linear narrative with causal and chronological links between events impossible. Consequently, realism has never been a preferred mode of the representation of calamity as most fictional works written on the apartheid, colonial oppression, the Holocaust, and the Partition of the Indian subcontinent explicitly exemplify. To be more specific, a traumatic experience causes a split within the self; the dissociated self is where images of violence lie, and these are inaccessible to the willed recollection of conscious self. Images of trauma have a haunting quality – they come back to the survivor or the witness like unlaid ghosts, whether in the form of flashback or nightmare or any other intrusive psychological element. Because of their resistance to willed recollection, these images do not lend themselves freely to verbal or written narrative.

Traumatic images are not two-dimensional; they have a third dimension as figures that dreams, for instance, are made of. Differing with Jacques Lacan who said that the unconscious is like language – a network of signs of endless difference and subject to slippage and spillage (Barry 106), Lyotard conceives of it rather as figural (Powell 20). Language being a two-dimensional system, its representation of extreme phenomena, therefore, tends to suppress some elements of trauma like screams in death camps which the Nazis would drown with loud music (Powell 20). Lyotard believes that any limit event, such as the Holocaust, should remain

> Immemorial – that it [should] remains [sic] being that which cannot be remembered – but also that which cannot be forgotten. Thus, any art attempting to represent the Holocaust should continue to haunt us with its inability to represent the unrepresentable, to say the unsayable. It should continue to haunt us with the feeling that there is something Other than representation. (qtd. in Powell 21)

Lyotard's concern is premised on a modified version of the Freudian concept of the unconscious, but trauma theory emphasizes that the (figural) images of any encounter with extreme violence lie in the dissociated or the split self, which the encounter has caused in the victim. Indeed, the inadequacy of language as a medium of representation has often been pointed out in trauma studies for reasons that are different from Lyotard's. A politico-historio-cultural medium, language falls short in representing trauma as it is an event larger than or beyond the scope of a reality validated by politics, history, culture, etc. It is a system of code that

follows certain rules fashioned by, again, politics, history and culture. Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* gives an account of the development of trauma studies through about one and a half centuries, where she points to the "socially validated reality" as the most significant imperative for any discourse on trauma to occur (8). So, Lyotard as well as trauma theorists are right to underscore the representational crisis of trauma, and this may precisely be the reason why realistic techniques seemed inadequate to creative authors writing on the Partition in 1980s, who denounced it in favor of the more experimental and postmodernist techniques.

The denotative aspect of language – one that assumes an undisturbed connection of language with the external world or referent – is predominant in everyday communication as well as realistic literature, not to mention in scientific discourses. Postmodern literature in general and literature on trauma in particular, however, tend to be based on the connotative – on the multifarious implications of meaning rather than reference. This demands an active and vigilant reading, where the reader explores the multidimensional and connotative textual implications while, at the same time, remaining aware of the pressures of trauma to be suppressed in language from within. Also, the reading of trauma texts needs an intensive use of imagination so as to enable the reader to explore a world that has been out of bounds, a reality beyond the ordinary. Arva uses the term "traumatic imagination" to describe "an empathy-driven consciousness" by which the author transforms trauma into experimental-postmodernist literature (more particularly, Avra refers to the device of magic realism) (5), and the reader actively, though cautiously, steps into a world of unknown phenomena, leading to his/her development of empathy for the traumatized. Each postmodernist text, however, has a world of its own, operated by its own physics, metaphysics and logic, which may or may not have any resemblance to the *real* world. The gravity-defying magic carpet or the return of the dead to life in García Márquez's *Hundred Years of Solitude* should illustrate what being operated by the logic of the world of fiction implies. The world of Newton and the one Marquez creates in his novel do not, therefore, have a referential connection, and the reader needs to be conscious about it. It is necessary to note here that the type of reading being talked about does not aim at vicarious traumatization, but empathy.

The problems of having knowledge about trauma and representing it or the epistemological and representational crises involved in violent events, it would be argued, have an ontological origin, which can be appreciated once the means of recovery from traumatic symptoms are closely looked at. The recovery from trauma starts with a reconstruction by the traumatized individual of his/her violent experience in language, weaving the fragments into a coherent story that can function as surrogate memory for the gap trauma has left in the psyche. This surrogate memory is meant to produce an illusion of consistency in the events the survivor has encountered, thereby restoring some sort of normalcy. The point to emphasize here is that the narrative reconstruction does not require or claim to be the truth – it is just a trick that works. Indeed, survivors' accounts are notorious for their factual imperfection. So, the surrogate memory of the constructed story is in no way mimetic and, for the same reason, not referential. A curious analogy can be drawn between the recovery from trauma and Jean Baudrillard's third stage of simulation as described in his famous essay "Simulacra and

Simulation." At this stage, an image conceals the absence of any basic reality underneath it and is a simulation of some other simulation(s) (170). In other words, a fake presence of reality is feigned when there is none just as the coherent story of the surrogate memory is made up to conceal the absence of the event in the consciousness. This is not the same as saying that the event has never taken place; it undoubtedly has taken place, but has not been registered in memory due to its overwhelming effect on the traumatized. Its reality is manifested in the symptoms of trauma – flashbacks, nightmares, and other psychological intrusions – where the literal and undiluted presence of images of the event are found. The simultaneous presence and absence of the event forms the fundamental paradox of trauma. This puts the accounts of survivors and bystanders always-already in question: their stories attempt to fill in the mnemonic gap, and they do so by borrowing the metaphors and other linguistic tools popular or common in the discourse about such events in their respective cultures. "Madness," "fratricide," and sexual "purity" of women and its "loss," for example, are words and ideas commonly used in discussing the senseless communal violence during and after the Partition of British India in 1947. When a witness uses these words and ideas in his/her account, a story gets fabricated with tissues already present in the social discourse, a simulation takes place with materials from other simulations. Therefore, trauma involves a breaking down of links between the ontological, the epistemological and the representational; this, to repeat the point being made so far in this article, results in the crisis of referentiality. It is exactly here – the crisis of referentiality – that trauma studies and postmodernism intersect.

A related phenomenon, one that Fredric Jameson would lament and Baudrillard would passively describe as the "loss of the real" in the crowd of images that characterizes the postmodern culture (Barry 81), has to be mentioned here. The stakes are high when it comes to an empathic treatment of trauma, for the late capitalist market conditions might very well shape violence into packages of sensationalism as scenes of rapes in the majority of South Asian movies featuring them or extreme violence in high-definition virtual games would confirm. Sensationalist and prurient representation of trauma would fall into the second stage in Baudrillard's four-stage order of simulation, in which the basic reality is perverted (170).

But is there a way of representing violent events of the past in literature by evading the many referential/representational crises outlined above? Indeed, revisiting the atrocious past is one of the major preoccupations of postmodern novelists, examples of whom include Günter Grass, García Márquez, Salman Rusdie, Amitav Ghosh, and others. Each of these novelists apply a combination of techniques, formal devices, and ideas particular to each fiction, but none innocently assume a direct referential connection between the external world turned pell-mell by catastrophe, unmediated or untextualized knowledge about it, and its representation. They revisit the past traumatic events, in Umberto Eco's terms, "with irony" (67). The implications of Eco's "ironical" looking back at the time bygone remains unclear until he offers the following example:

> I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows that he cannot say to her 'I love you madly', because he knows that she knows (and that she knows he knows) that these words have already been written by

> Barbara Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say 'As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly'. At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony … But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love. (67-68)

Eco clearly points out the intertextuality at work in the postmodernist authors' knowledge about the past. Originally formulated by Julia Kristeva and denoting the relationship between texts, especially literary ones, the term "intertextuality" has been expanded and transformed ever since its coinage in 1966 by other theorists. Linda Hutcheon seems to share Eco's idea of it in that both of them view history as textually constructed. She draws a crucial distinction between "facts" and "events" where the latter is the objective reality of any occurrence of the past while the former refers to the textually mediated version of the event that (in)forms latter generations perception of it (89, 119). In this account, having any unmediated direct access to the past is impossible; all that is available is the textually constructed knowledge of it. Therefore, any new text about the past – historical or fictional – has to take an epistemological detour through textual mediations instead of having direct access to the event, which is what both Eco and Hutcheon understand by approaching the past with irony.

Other than the concept of approaching history with epistemological detour through intertextuality, there are other means of ironical or, more precisely, indirect representation, as demonstrated by Michael Rothberg with his concept of "traumatic realism" formulated out of his commentary on American cartoonist Art Spiegelman's contribution to the magazine *Tikkun* titled "Saying Goodbye to Maus." *Maus* is Spiegelman's famous graphic novel serialized from 1980 to 1991, notable for its postmodernist representation of races as animals: Jews as mice and Germans as cats. In this contribution, depicting the artist (who is a Jew and, therefore, a mouse-like figure) looking at a "real" mouse on his palms while the Micky Mouse forms the background, Rothberg detects a parallel of representational demands of the reality or the objective truth of trauma on the one hand and the presence of market forces of image circulation in a globalized world on the other. Also, the artist's meditation on the mouse on his palms implies his reflection on the representational tensions of traumatic events:

Fig. 1. Spiegelman, "Saying Goodbye to Maus." Tikkun (1992) 44-45

To be more specific, Rothberg points to three conflicting demands in the representation of trauma: "a demand for documentation, a demand for reflection on the formal limits of representation, and a demand for the risky public circulation of discourses on the events" (7). Acknowledging the crisis of referentiality and the inadequacy of realism, he still sees a

> possibility of *indirect* reference through the self-conscious staging of the conundrum of representing historical extremity. The mouse that the artist holds in his hands is not the real itself, but it is an object of knowledge and effect of the real that points toward the real's foundational absence from representation. The abject and unsightly body of the mouse *moves us* toward the sight of trauma. (103-104, italics original)

Rothberg recognizes the paradox of the simultaneous absence and presence at the core of any traumatic experience. He also agrees with what has already been discussed as Baudrillard's third stage of simulation: the fictionality of the surrogate memory and its formation from the prevalent cultural discursive materials. Rothberg finally arrives at the conclusion that Spiegelman's drawing demonstrates his formulation of traumatic realism, highlighting its dual commitment: "[I]t seeks to present the real by representing the fictionality of the realist contract; and it recognizes realist discourse's production of the real as an accidental effect of representation. As such, this drawing is an example of ... traumatic realism" (105).

It is worthwhile at this point to discuss the new genre of trauma fiction and some of its representational modalities. To conceive of the idea of trauma fiction, according to Anne Whitehead, involves "a paradox or contradiction" (3); it refers to the fictionalizing and narrativizing of an event that is characterized by its epistemological and representational crises. However, the last three decades have seen an overwhelming interest in the violent past and its memory in academia as well as representational media. An important reason for this is the popular idea of the Holocaust as a unique "rupture" of human history and the demand to memorialize it (83). The Vietnam War and its consequences for the American society have also contributed to the so-called "memory boom" by creating an urgent political climate for ethical remembrance. All this has impacted the fictional medium, and Whitehead is right to identify the post-war legacy as one of the contributing factors for the proliferation of trauma fictions, the other two factors being postmodernism and postcolonialism.

In an attempt to "establish meaningful connections with the past," postmodern fiction undermines the metanarratives of history while appreciating the complex dynamics of memory as well (Whitehead 82). By pushing the limits of conventional narrative techniques, postmodernist narratives, especially trauma fiction, highlight the fragility of narrative conventions under the weight of trauma. On the other hand, trauma fiction shares with postcolonialism the urge to salvage the marginalized and repressed voices back to the public consciousness. According to Whitehead, "[W]ith an interior and private act of memory" or rather remembrance, heterogeneity of the accounts of the past replaces the often homogenous public memory (82).

Whitehead identifies a few stylistic features, namely "intertextuality, repetition and a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice," recurring in fictions on trauma (84). These features predominate among the formal devices, since they effectively mimic the symptoms of traumatic pathology in fiction. For instance, intertextual echoes between texts draw the audience away from the expressed to the repressed. In other words, a resurfacing of the previously silenced voices takes place through intertextuality. Another literary device almost invariably used in trauma fictions is repetition that may occur "at the levels of language, imagery or plot" investing a "symbolic aura" to whatever is repeated (86). This also mirrors the temporal disjunction at the core of any traumatic experience (86). The third strategy – a dispersed or fragmented narrative voice – signals the collective dimension of the experience of catastrophe; the multiplicity of narratorial voice suggests different experiential perspectives of trauma.

Laurie Vickroy characterizes trauma narratives (fictions, memoirs, etc.) in *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* as not only the linguistic representations of traumatic events, but ones that internalize their rhythms, processes and uncertainties (3). This requires an engagement on the part of the audience with "personalized, experientially oriented means of narration" that expand their range of awareness of catastrophic events and their individual and collective implications vis-à-vis each other by luring them into "uncomfortable and alien material, sharing victims' pain with readers, shifting between what can and cannot be revealed" (3-4). Personalized narration of trauma necessarily integrates non-linear and fragmentary features of testimonies on the stylistic level, bearing witness to the past through individual viewpoints that ultimately results in a collective witnessing as readers are engaged empathically (5).

Vickroy mainly concerns herself with the modalities of representation that she believes help engage readers narratively and stylistically. One authorial approach, according to her, involves the creation of dialogical interaction between testimonial elements and multiple subject positionings (27). Multiple voices of characters and narrators bearing witness to traumatic pasts situate the reader within the struggle for accounts of and responses to oppression, the responsible remembrance, and defensive amnesia, thereby giving them a sense of being within the traumatic condition. The complex internal conflicts may illustrate "a multiple view of self in reaction to extraordinary circumstances" (28). Putting the reader in the disoriented positions similar to those of the victim's through frequent "shifts in time, memory, affect, and consciousness," the narrative reveals the chaotic world of trauma that remains unseen by the reader, who is lucky enough not having to experience it first hand (28).

In the final analysis, a summary of the representational modalities of fictions dealing with extreme events in the light of the theoretical discussion above may be warranted here. These modalities include fragmented narrative, disturbed temporality, localized or alternative view of history, traumatic realism, and intertextuality. Firstly, the dissociation of ego by a traumatic experience may be represented with fragmented or dispersed narratorial voices. Secondly, traumatic re-enactment may manifest in fiction through temporal disjunction. The devices of repetition and the figure of the ghost, for example, may be used to imply the insistent recurrence of the past in the present. Thirdly, a profound skepticism to metanarratives may result in the celebration of the provisional and contingent, consequences of which may include the representation of alternative histories and localized views of history. Fourthly, events in the fiction may be represented through indirect means rather than "realistically" in the traditional sense of the term. The narrative mode of traumatic realism requires the author to take the fact into consideration that the knowledge of the events being represented is mediated. And finally, intertexts may bring out the memories and histories that are repressed in the dominant discourses. There may be an underlining of the intertextual elements so as to make the reader conscious of the act of revisiting history in fiction with irony, but not innocence. Fiction writers might use any one or, more often than not, a set of these techniques outlined above to deal with the representational crises posed by traumatic events.

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