

Contextualizing Fragmentation: An Analytic Study of Trauma Theory

Raj Sree M.S

Abstract: This article attempts to elucidate the experience of fragmentation from the perspective of trauma studies, an offshoot of psychology. This study originates as an inquiry into psychic trauma, a phenomenon that one cannot locate exclusively within the domain of the cultural, historical, and the personal, but at the crossroads between these realms. Trauma studies came to prominence in the early 1990s and moved away from medicine and psychiatry during the past half-decade. Trauma theory belongs to the tradition of post structuralism. Post structuralism demanded a new way of thinking about how events in the past return to haunt the present. Trauma theory, adhering to Post structuralism is analytical and speculative and attempts to work out what is involved in experiencing traumatic events, in its representation and the like. Trauma theory suggests ways of re-conceptualizing decisive directions in critical theory. It focuses on the rhetoric of poststructuralist and postmodern theories and their emphasis on decentering, fragmentation, the sublime and apocalyptic and seeks to explore the relation they have to the traumatic historical events as well as personal events. Thus trauma theory serves as a tool to analyze and resituate the experience of holocaust and foreground the aftermath of traumatic events. More over trauma narratives demand a new mode of reading and critical thinking. Current trauma theory, which draws heavily on nineteenth and twentieth-century psychoanalytic theories, emphasizes trauma as a psychic wounding, an encounter of the mind with violence and the crisis of meaning.

Keywords: fragmentation, trauma theory, diaspora, trauma, post structuralism, Post traumatic stress disorders, holocaust, cultural trauma

Cultural criticism and Post Modernism explains fragmentation in terms of cultural integration and the fragmentary existence of postmodern consumerist life full of hybrid identities and simulacrums. Post Colonialism and Diaspora Criticism view it in terms of

displacement and exile, acculturation and acclimatization. In this article, I attempt to elucidate the experience of fragmentation from the perspective of trauma studies, an offshoot of psychology. This study originates as an inquiry into psychic trauma, a phenomenon that one cannot locate exclusively within the domain of the cultural, historical, and the personal, but at the crossroads between these realms.

Over the past few decades, the crisis of recording and narrating traumatic experiences has been at the core of the literature on war, holocaust, riots, refugees and genocides have contributed to the birth of the genre of trauma theory. Nancy K. Miller and Jason D. Togaw suggest that the discourse produced by the Holocaust “has affected other domains of meditation on the forms the representation of extreme human suffering seems to engender and require” (4). Freud’s essay is considered the historical and intellectual antecedent of trauma theory, and his declaration that “through repetition a trauma from the past may eventually be recognized and mastered” (Buse 174) is considered the most compelling definition of trauma dynamics to this day as this entails an integration of the fragmented self. Ruth Leys proves that trauma “is fundamentally a disorder of memory” in *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2). The foundation of the discourse on trauma was laid by Freud but was later carried on by various theorists like Judith Herman, Cathy Caruth, etc. Psychologists and theorists like James E. Young, Eric Santer, Saul Friedlander, Dominick LaCapra, and Berel Lang have contributed to the field of trauma theory by investigating the trope of the unspeakable and the unrepresentable in relation to the Holocaust and debating about ethically necessary forms of representation that allow Holocaust victims to give voice to their experience. Trauma theory, according to Karyn Ball, became conspicuous to many academics in the 1980s and 1990s as it provided a nuanced way to maintain a claim on historical experience in the wake of poststructuralist challenges to naive alternatives to authentic experience. Trauma studies came to prominence in the early 1990s and moved away from medicine and psychiatry during the past half-decade.

The word, trauma, originates from a Greek word, *traumatize*, for a wound or an injury to the body, and has evolved to mean a wound to the mind. Its primary denotation is bodily injury but, with the work of Jean Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet, Joseph Breuer, and Sigmund Freud, it came to bear a more psychological meaning. The mention of trauma can be traced back to Herodotus in the fifth century and the myth of Er in Book X of Plato’s *Republic*. Epizelus, mentioned by Herodotus, is partly dead after he witnessed the death of his companions in war and Plato’s Er was cast out of the normal cycle of time and metempsychosis, and is like living dead among the living. In the late nineteenth century trauma theory developed to understand extreme psychic disturbances. The term trauma

actually refers to both the forces that cause a psychic disorder and the resulting psychic state. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 4th edition, Text Revision (DSM-IV-TR: American Psychiatric Association [APA], 200) defines trauma as Direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity: or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person: or learning about unexpected or violent death, serious harm, or threat of death or injury experienced by a family member or other close associate (Criterion A1). The person's response to the event must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror, or horror (or in children, the response must involve disorganized or agitated behaviour) (Criterion A2). (463)

Lenore Terr, a child psychiatrist writes:

Psychic trauma occurs when a sudden, unexpected, overwhelming intense emotional blow or a series of blows assaults the person from outside. Traumatic events are external, but they quickly become incorporated into the mind (8).

Van der Kolk makes a similar point about the complicated nature of trauma when he says, "Traumatization occurs when both internal and external resources are inadequate to cope with external threat" (393). The internal and external world of the survivor seems fragmented and fails to incorporate the external reality. The depiction of traumatic events and its aftermath opened new vistas after the 9/11 event. Now, trauma refers to the overwhelming impact of some violent or catastrophic event that produces psychological effects that are often devastating. Concomitantly and consequently, the meaning of recovery too shifted from a material notion of recompense, or restitution to an immaterial conception of cure or restoration. Laplanche and Pontalis point out that "...in adopting the term [trauma], psychoanalysis carries the three ideas implicit in it over to the psychical level: the idea of violent shock, the idea of a wound and the idea of consequences affecting the whole organization" (317)

Post structuralism demanded a new way of thinking about how events in the past return to haunt the present. New Historicism, fascinated by the ideological omissions and repressions of historical narrative, developed a mode of dissident or countervailing recovery of what had been silenced or lost in traditional literary histories. Finally, deconstruction, particularly in its American Yale School version, redirected its concerns with reference, representation, and the limits of knowledge to the problem of trauma, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman turned from work on the undecidability of

interpretation in literature to publish work on Holocaust memory and witness in the early 1990s.

Trauma theory belongs to the tradition of post structuralism. Post structuralism developed initially in France in the 1960s from the work of Derrida, Lyotard, Foucault, Deleuze and Baudrillard. While post structuralism shares structuralism's radical questioning of the problematic of the humanist subject, it challenges the way structuralism was elevated to the status of a universally valid theory for understanding language, thought, society, culture, and economy. Post structuralism can be defined in terms of both its affinities and continuities on the one hand and its theoretical innovations and differences with structuralism on the other. The affinities center on the critique of the humanist subject as rational, autonomous and self-transparent. Post- structuralism also shares with structuralism a theoretical understanding of language and culture as linguistic and symbolic systems. Both the movements point out unconscious processes, hidden structures and socio-historical forces that constrain and govern human enterprises. Finally, they share a common intellectual inheritance and tradition based upon Saussure, Jakobson, and the Russian formalists, Freud, Marx and others. Post structuralism's innovations revolve around the reintroduction and renewed interest in history, especially as it involves the 'becoming' of the subject, where genealogical narratives replace questions of ontology or essence. When it comes to trauma theory, it is the becoming of the trauma subject. Post structuralism challenges the rationalism and realism that underlies structuralism's faith in scientific method, in progress, and in discerning and identifying universal structures of all cultures and the human mind. Post structuralism explores the notion of difference which serves as a motif not only for recognizing the dynamics of self and other, but also contemporary applications in multiculturalism and immigration. Poststructuralism invokes new studies on power, particularly Foucault's analysis of power and the notion of power/knowledge, which differ from liberal and Marxist theory, where power is seen as only repressive.

Theory according to Jonathan Culler is 'interdisciplinary- discourse with effects outside an original discipline...Theory is analytical and speculative- an attempt to work out what is involved in what we call sex or language or writing or meaning or the subject...Theory is a critique of common sense, of concepts taken a natural...Theory is reflexive, thinking about thinking, enquiry into the categories we use in making sense of things, in literature and other discursive practices'. Trauma theory, adhering to Post structuralism, is analytical and speculative and attempts to work out what is involved in experiencing traumatic events, in its representation and the like. Trauma theory suggests ways of reconceptualizing

decisive directions in critical theory. It focuses on the rhetoric of poststructuralist and postmodern theories and their emphases on decentering, fragmentation, the sublime and apocalyptic and seeks to explore the relation they have to the traumatic historical events as well as personal events. However, a theory of trauma will intersect with other critical discourses like discourses of the sublime, the sacred, the apocalyptic, and the Other in all its guises and attempt to define its limitations. Drawing on the recent developments in Post structuralist theory, trauma theory enables a more critical reading of holocaust/genocides. Trauma theory provides “the necessary language and reading skills to produce a different political story, a story not tied to the individual as such nor a story told in the general terms of gender, patriarchy and power” (Kilby, preface xiii). Its blatant commitment to moral codes set it apart from the poststructuralist theories in which it has its roots. Having criticized about insignificance and indifference to ‘real-world’ issues like history, politics, and ethics because of its predominantly epistemological focus, this earlier, ‘textual’ paradigm was largely obscured by explicitly historicist or cultural approaches, like new historicism, cultural materialism, cultural studies, etc. In this scenario trauma studies can be regarded as the reinvention in an ethical pretext of this much maligned textualism.

Cathy Caruth, one of the leading figures in trauma studies along with Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra, counters the oft-heard critique of Post structuralism outlined above by arguing that, rather than leading us away from history and into “political and ethical paralysis”(Unclaimed 10), a textual approach can afford us unique access to history. It makes possible a “rethinking of reference,” which aims not at “eliminating history” but at “resituating it in our understanding, that is, at permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not” (11). There is something contemporary about trauma studies. Geoffrey Hartman claimed ‘reflecting our sense that violence is coming ever nearer, like a storm- a storm that may have already moved into the core of our being, trauma theory tries to turn criticism back towards being an ethical, responsible, purposive discourse, listening to the wounds of the other’. But if it is truly to do this, this point of convergence also needs to be the start of a divergence, of an opening out of theory to wider contexts. Critics view that trauma theory is intrinsically multidisciplinary and if it is to have a future, it needs to displace older paradigms and look into new configurations of cultural knowledge.

It is the task of trauma theory to analyze “The vexed, and often impossible, difficulties associated with remembering and understanding traumatic events” (Buse 174-75). Thus trauma theory serves as a tool to analyze and resituate the experience of holocaust and foreground the aftermath of traumatic events. “Trauma theory is mainly linguistic in

orientation, interested for the most part in trauma as it relates to literary and historical issues such as representation, narrative and truth” (Buse 175). This aspect of trauma theory, its connections with issues of representation and narrative, will be generated throughout this study in an attempt to prove that this is a helpful theory for our reading of not simply Holocaust fiction but all narratives on trauma. By bringing the insights of deconstructive and psychoanalytic scholarship to the analysis of cultural artifacts that bear witness to traumatic events like Holocaust, the critical practice on trauma secure access to extreme events and experiences that defy understanding and representation. Moreover, trauma narratives demand a new mode of reading and critical thinking. Current trauma theory, which draws heavily on nineteenth and twentieth-century psychoanalytic theories, emphasizes trauma as a psychic wounding, an encounter of the mind with violence and the crisis of meaning. According to Caruth trauma “brings us to the limits of our understanding” (*Trauma* 4). The emergence of trauma studies as an academic discipline in the 1990s has been largely credited to the work of Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, but of late a critical consensus has gathered around their work charging it with universal acclaim.

Trauma theory is a discourse of the unrepresentable, a discourse of the event or object that destabilizes language, consciousness and perceptions. Freud states that an overpowering event, unacceptable to consciousness, can be forgotten and yet return in the form of somatic symptoms or compulsive, repetitive behaviors. Laub adds:

Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect (69).

By the term fragmentation, I refer to these somatic symptoms and the related compulsive, repetitive behaviours which are classified under post traumatic stress disorders in trauma theory.

Trauma is registered through an apparent forgetting that occurs because the mind is unable to absorb the shock of the traumatic event. The subject does not experience the trauma at the moment it occurs, but only belatedly as the psyche re-experiences the event through flashbacks and dreams. Freud states:

the patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it. . . . 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 (18).

As such, trauma is constituted by the seemingly opposing forces of remembering and forgetting. Memory of the event, rather than a reflection of a distant past, comes back in ambiguous and fragmentary forms, causing traumatic symptoms to occur that disrupt and torment the present.

Thus, while Caruth and others might be accurate in formulating trauma as an experience that “brings us to the limits of our understanding,” the assertion “that the impact of the traumatic event lies precisely in its belatedness, in its refusal to be simply located, in its insistent appearance outside the boundaries of any single place or time” shifts attention away from the silent materiality of trauma and emphasizes instead the cognitive framing and understanding of it (*Trauma* 49).

Fragmentation is phenomenological and eludes easy definition. Unlike cultural criticism, which essentialised, universalized and celebrated fragmentation, psychological criticism acknowledged it as the condition of selfhood. It is a psychological dysfunction which involves a loss of connectedness of life. The fragmented persona experiences thoughts and emotions that seem to occur with complete randomness and a feeling of disconnected experience. The disconnected fragments can be emotions, physical reactions, behaviors or thoughts. Erikson defines integration in terms of wholeness. “Wholeness seems to connote an assembly of parts, even quite diversified parts that enter into fruitful association and organization” (Erikson 80). Integration is a state of an individual in which his various habits, perceptions, motives and emotions are fully co-ordinated, resulting in an effective adjustment. The integrated person acts as a balanced whole. He comprehends the various aspects of the situation that he faces, and relates them to appropriate past experiences. The disintegrated personality reacts in a fragmentary and partial manner, ignoring significant cues that should aid him in adjustment.

“The journey of the survivor is from fragmentation to wholeness, but the whole is marked by the struggle. The survivor works to integrate her [or his] experiences and her [or his] beliefs, to create a space in the world where her truths can be heard, to see rather than to merely look” (Tal 222). In the introduction to a recent book on trauma, Nancy K. Miller and Jason Tougaw note the force of discourse about the Holocaust for trauma studies: ‘If the Holocaust supplies the paradigm of modern, incommensurable suffering, many of the

ethical and aesthetic, moral and formal dilemmas involved in bearing witness to the horrors of the Holocaust reappear and are reconfigured indifferent national and political contexts’.

If Erikson and LaCapra presume an easy conversion from individual to collective trauma, Ron Eyerman, in his study of slavery and the formation of African American identity, claims that “there is a difference between trauma as it affects individuals and as a cultural process” and, that “as cultural process, trauma is mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of collective identity”(1). This theory of cultural trauma is further developed in Eyerman’s work with Jeffrey Alexander, Bernhard Giesen, Neil Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. They define cultural trauma as occurring “when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (1).

The cultural construction of trauma happens when a traumatic event is transmitted through dominant cultural mediators such as the mass media and religious, aesthetic, legal, scientific, and state institutions, which define and redefine the nature of the traumatic event, trauma and the victim. These cultural mediations institute the relation of the trauma far beyond the limits of its direct impact. As Barbara Zelizer sums up:

Unlike personal memory, whose authority fades with time, the authority of collective memories increases as time passes, taking on new complications, nuances, and interests. Collective memories allow for the fabrication, rearrangement, elaboration, and omission of details about the past, often pushing aside accuracy and authenticity so as to accommodate broader issues of identity formation, power and authority, and political affiliation. (3)

Cultural trauma refers not only to an experiential crisis in the lives of some, if not all, of a nation or community, but also registers a disruption in the symbolic order. Erickson wrote that individual trauma is “a blow to the psyche that breaks through one’s defenses so suddenly and with such force that one can’t respond effectively,” and “collective trauma, . . . [is] a blow to the tissues of social life that damages the bonds linking people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community” (32). “Cultural trauma” becomes a metaphor for the damage or wounding to the complex system of representations and meanings that the society weaves around itself to record and understand the experience. The response to this breach in the collective fantasy that mediates the nation’s identity and reality, then, is to garner the forces of cultural representation to position the event within a

causal narrative that would redefine the community and restore its sense of agency. In the contemporary scenario the concept of cultural trauma has emerged as a highly visible and expanding domain of discourses marked by deliberation, disagreement, and intervention for negotiating the wide range of traumatogenic events that marked twentieth century history, especially the holocaust, Iraq War, Terrorist Attacks, Ethnic Cleansing, Partition of India and the related murder and rape of lakhs of civilians, etc. The multifarious interpretations and representations of trauma in art, painting, film and literature is colossal. Growing out of traditions of ethnic and post-colonial writing, contemporary novels of historical and cultural trauma explore events from the margins of history and probe politics of power and cultural hegemony.

References

- Alexander, Jeffrey C., "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, eds. Jeffrey C. Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil J. Smelser, Piotr Sztompka. California: University of California Press, 2004. Print.
- Buse, Peter. *Drama + Theory: Critical approaches to modern British Drama*. Manchester: Manchester UP: 2001. Print.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. Print.
- . ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. Print.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2nd edition, 2011. Print.
- Erikson, Erik H. *Identity : Youth and Crisis*. New York: Norton, 1968. Print.
- Eyerman, Ron. *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2001. Print.
- Kilby, Jane. *Violence and the Cultural Politics of Trauma*. Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2007. Preface xiii. Print.
- Laplanche, J., and J-B. Pontalis. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. *The Language of*

Psycho-Analysis. New York: Norton, 1974.Print.

Laub, Dori. M.D. “Bearing Witness of the Vicissitudes of Listening.” *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Ed. ShoshanaFelman and Dori Laub, M.D. New York: Routledge, 1992. 57–74.Print.

Leys, Ruth. *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 2000.Print.

Freud, S.. *Beyond the pleasure principle*. Standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud (Vol. 18, pp.3-143). London: Hogarth Press, 1955. Print.

Miller, Nancy K. and Jason Daniel Togaw. eds.: *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*. Illinois: U of Illinois Board of Trustees, 2002.Print.

Tal, Kali. *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*. Cambridge University Press, 1996. Print.

Terr, Lenore. *Too Scared To Cry: Psychic Trauma in Childhood*. New York: Harper and Row. 1990. Print.

van der Kolk, Bessel. *Psychological trauma*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press, 1987. Print.

Zelizer, Barbara. *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust Memory through the Camera’s Eye*.Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.Print.