

Representing Trauma in War: A Comparative Study between Fiction and Testimony taking into account Svetlana Alexievich's 'The Unwomanly Face of War' and Remarque's 'All Quiet on the Western Front'

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Abstract

Svetlana Alexievich, a Belarussian journalist, and Erich Maria Remarque, a writer and former veteran have significantly contributed to World War narratives in the post-war years. Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front and Alexievich's The Unwomanly Face of War are critically acclaimed masterpieces. Yet, the mode of imagination and confession are two different approaches to this largely traumatic body of literature. This paper would compare the modes of traumatic discursivity and how it is through various literary devices in fiction and testimonies. The trauma is exuded through narrativization, linguistic culture, and traumatic memory of the subject. The paper throws light on the role of 'gender' in studying war narratives, which is mostly a hegemonic masculine space. Following this, through discussions foregrounded in the traumatic interventions, the present comparison and analysis would provide a cathartic conduit for trauma studies.

Keywords: trauma, narrativization, culture, traumatic memory subject, gender, hegemonic etc.

What is trauma? Starting from the *Nachträglichkeit* (belatedness) of 'trauma' in Freud to the Yale School of 'unrepresentable' function, trauma studies have come a long way. Cathy Caruth in her book answers to the above question "the difficulty of listening and responding to traumatic stories in a way that does not lose their impact, that does not reduce them to clichés or turn them all into versions of the same story, is a problem that remains central to the task of therapists, literary critics, neurobiologists, and filmmakers alike" (Caruth 7). In recent years, trauma is being mapped through various literary devices and has emerged as a separate genre of representation, especially when it comes to war literature. Trauma and memory are inherently correlated, and it is through subtle memorialization that trauma subsumes itself in the present.

To understand trauma, it is fundamental to delve into the modes of discursivity through which trauma performs and overwhelms the traumatic subject. These modes vary from genre

to genre in their implications. One may arrive at a question as to whether the language and rhetoric of trauma in testimonios is different from any fictional account precisely because it challenges the false memory and imagination of the same? Empirical or factual evidence is often not enough source to engage in a traumatic discourse. What is then needed is an understanding of civilian neuroses and the collateral concerns pertaining to the largescale traumatic event under which the subject has grown up or has been subjected to. Central to trauma studies is the comprehension that not all kinds of literary representation is a suitable outlet for trauma and this digression forms a pioneering concept in trauma studies. The methodology and approach to the digression, if at all a digression, is based on a psychological intersection with the soma. Given its interdisciplinary nature, memory poses an immediate challenge to the traumatic correlative. The question is, how can this memory be essentially captured through literature?

Svetlana Alexievich, a Belarusian journalist, has over a period of time collected mass interviews of people who had been survivors or witnesses to large scale traumatic events like the Second World War, Soviet-Afghan War or the Chernobyl Disaster. In one of her books, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, she "developed her own non-fiction genre which brings together a chorus of voices to describe a specific historical moment"(Alexievich 1), here being the Second World War. *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a novel by Erich Maria Remarque, describes World War I, another historical catastrophe, through the eyes of Paul Baumer, a German veteran. The need to contextualize a text to understand how war narratives vary in different genres is a critical factor in trauma theorization. While one enlists the experiences of women, Soviet women "who had fought in the Second World War but whose stories were absent from official narratives" (Alexievich 1), Remarque's novel primarily takes us through the experiences of German soldiers, written in a creative writing mode. The texts are situated inside the grand narrative of two World Wars, but they differ in their functionality and delineation. The apparent genre difference leads to a comparison as to how trauma is encapsulated in fictional narratives and how testimonials or interviews differ from them. The mode of confession and the mode of imagination are two different approaches to the body of literature, which is largely traumatic. At the beginning of his novel, Remarque confides to this, "This book is to be neither an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. It will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped shells, were destroyed by the war"(Remarque 48). Unlike this, Alexievich's approach is rather confessional, an oral and historical retelling of the War. In his review of the Alexievich's book for Evening Standard, Andrew Dickson aptly puts it, "Reading them is like eavesdropping on a confessional. This is history at its rawest and most uncomfortably intimate [...] The book is not merely a corrective to male-centred accounts of conflict; it is a shattering and sometimes overwhelming experience" (Alexievich 8).

Discussion

Language: In the post-war years, there was an urgent need to voice the personal as well as recuperate with the horrors of the affliction. In response to that trauma, one of the most knowledge-producing systems that became popular and resourceful are those that of testimonios. It has come to the fore through years of research that the psychic relief offered by such a process is not to be undermined. In her book *Narrative Analysis* by Catherine Kohler Reissman she provides the four probable question which determines the interview society, "(a) How the speaker organized the past, present and future time in the interview (b) the way the speaker described him or herself in relation to the past; (c) the way the speaker described, or failed to describe, interaction with objects or persons; and (d) the interaction of two sets of scripts, the analyst's and the speaker's."(Reissman, 33) These questions provide the principal framework through which testimonials function and interact with narratives of trauma. Interdisciplinary studies have also led to a mass influence of assimilating different discourses, which can only be done through narratives that engage the authorship and the readership into a direct medium. Rather than an analytical methodology, the tendency to lean towards an emotional one, one which sears the heart and takes into account lived experience forms a dominant base for traumatic interventions. "Thus a 'culture of confession' and a 'culture of testimony,' which Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak has defined "as the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression, to a less oppressed other" became one of the grounding principles governing trauma studies (Gilmore 2).

Memory: Memory is an integral part of oral narratives. In recent years the mode of confession has become surprisingly relevant because it has been thrown into an array of other concurrent fields as Cathy Caruth emphasizes on "the difficulty of listening and responding to traumatic stories in a way that does not lose their impact, that does not reduce them to cliches or turn them all into versions of the same story, is a problem that remains central to the task of therapists, literary critics, neurobiologists, 'and filmmakers alike'(Caruth 7). In a confession, the body of the subject is a text in itself. This body traces the nuances of the literary mode. Even when the testimonio is not a performance, it is the performance of the traumatic order of war. Alexievich essentializes this memory in a few words, "The tape recorder records the words, preserves the intonation. The pauses. The weeping and embarrassment. I realize that, when a person speaks, something more takes place than what remains on paper. I keep regretting that I cannot "record" eyes, hands. Their life during the conversation, their own life. Separate. Their texts"(Alexievich 94). Trauma, more than often, is caused by the immediate and the personal. Alexievich precisely engages us in what we might call a triologue: interviewer, interviewee, and us, the reader or the listener. Thus the sense of objectivity is dissipated through informal questioning. Often individual narratives sustain personal memory over the collected cultural memory of the war, as well as helps in locating different variables that are at work. It is imperative to understand war not through a

grand-scale narrative of the event but rather as an emotional upsurge gathered from pocket narratives. This emotional recollection and retention, which Alexievich potentially does through a series of interviews, are different from poetry or prose. Memoirs or testimonials, in themselves, speak the language of trauma because they focus on the subjective understanding of the occurrence rather than the objective distance provided by a fictional character. Any archive of a traumatic event however mainstream needs to build upon the communicative memory of the individual, which eventually forms the mass. Testimonials serve this extraordinary purpose. Oral narratives are different from fictional stories as there is a sense of 'being' suspended into the war reality through the voice of the speaker. Kavita Punjabi in her article 'The Testimonio in Latin America and India, Critical Contestations of a Collective Voice' mentions this difficulty of categorizing, "Hence the testimonio is not seen as a substitute for historiography, but as a work occupying a space distinct from the latter in terms of establishing a collective identity and consciousness, in terms of foregrounding voices that have to be heard, in a genre yet unnamed [...]"(Punjabi 6).

Narrative: The Wars present a bleak side of life, so much so that even fictional narratives tend to become informative and terse. There's a certain form of tediousness that evicts from the writing style, and there is more focus on the context than the content. On reading Remarque, a similar feeling emerges, the lack of aesthetics absent in the language of the text. One can also speculate that war fiction lacks the pontification of the personal as compared to a testimony. George Steiner, in his book *Silence and Language* describes this phenomenon in post-Holocaust writings, "We cannot pretend that Belsen is irrelevant to the responsible life of imagination. What man has inflicted on man in very recent time has affected the writer's primary material-the sum and potential of human behavior-and it presses on the brain with a new darkness"(Steiner 5). In a testimonial, because of its outreach, which almost reads like a personal diary, escapes narratorial boundaries even if it condescends to personal ones. Rather in fiction, the characterization is very professionally done, more than often losing out on the real. Even when it is based on a true story, it is a process in the making, from the real to fictional. Testimonios channelize emotions based on the raw understanding of the text as it has the nuances of a direct repartee with the audience. According to High, "Julie Salverson points out "By being attentive to the form and the structure of oral accounts, as well as what they have to say directly about the past, we can deepen our engagement with the survivors' remembered experiences. A significant element in the encounter with testimony is the unexpectedness, the shock of the collision between the world of the listener and the world of the event""(High 4). The promotion of personal narratives rather than fictional ones has been quite a recent practice. There are contextual similarities in both the texts, which is foregrounded by Alexievich's encounters with a censor when she is told, "Remarquism won't get you anywhere with us. A Soviet woman is not an animal"(Alexievich, 34). These encounters are unscripted and give us an insight into how censorship and publication works

and how the irony is played out through such invocations. In this particular collection, different conversations are brought into light reflecting the narratorial variety posited in the text.

Comparison: In archiving traumatic events, the socio-cultural changes, and the epistemological dimensions, the confessional mode has become increasingly important. War is seen as a movement or even a displacement, "Movements are not static; they should be seen as processes which are modified as they come into contact with everyday life, confronting politics and generally (but not always) the state, in a constant process of reflection, communication and negotiation. They generate certain social processes as they define and redefine themselves"(Weiringa 7). Alexievich and Remarque, both foreground the fact as to how emotions should be a part of every day and historical realities. Any form of narrative is sustained by the unities of time, place and action, except for perhaps testimonials, in which all three are located not in the text but in the rereading of the text, in going through the pauses and the tears, in listening to the tape recorders and silence. In Remarque's novel the narrative is a retelling of a historical event that is seemingly held through one narratorial voice and a first-person narrative. Barker and Last say of Remarque that "the novel represented a release or "Releasing" from the experiences of the war, a cathartic purging of the emotional residue of the front line. It enabled him to sort out within himself the tangled memories and emotions of the Great War and to come to terms with them"(Bloom 18).

In a way, 'All Quiet on the Western Front' is, of course, a period piece, but unlike Alexievich's testimonials, it does not actualize the historical moments of war, even if it does so it is only through a fractured retelling. Testimonials, on the other hand, is subject to a little or no sense of disentanglement that Remarque faced. In fact, it does precisely the opposite, as Alexievich remarks, " their astonishing memory(after all, forty years had gone by) preserved a great number of small details of war life" (Alexievich 185). There is no release but delving into the memories of the past and the present of civilian life forged by such a past. There is no single narrative, but a multiplicity of accounts all somehow cohered to form the gravity of war, even in a minute sob or a silence.

Interdisciplinarity is another important comparative aspect in which testimonials perhaps get the better of fiction. Testimonial literature has best served the purpose of interdisciplinary studies, as mentioned earlier. Gender Studies is a *leit motif* in War and Conflict studies. In the case of a large scale traumatic event like the World Wars, "for one thing, women's war roles vary considerably from culture to culture, including roles as support troops, psychological war-boosters, peacemakers, and so forth. Although men's war roles show less cross-cultural diversity, societies do construct norms of masculinity around war in a variety of ways"(Goldstein 2). as Goldstein points out. In gendered violence, memory is an essential tool to look forward to dialogues of intersection. Thus, in her book, Alexievich not only deals with questions of war, trauma, memory, and loss but also a 'woman question' underlying all

these facets. A censor of Alexievich's, says of the book "—Who will go to fight after such books? You humiliate women with primitive naturalism. Heroic women. You dethrone them. You make them into ordinary women, females. But our women are saints." (Alexievich, 31) Female psychoneurosis has been a marginal subject of interest for researchers. In a more general sense, it has been believed that women can be a part of violent realities only but passively and that the weakness ushered by the lack of masculine virility leads to them being too overwhelmed to act. Remarque's build is based on the grounds of such masculinity. In his article 'A Male-Conscious Critique of Erich Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front', David J Ulbrich points out, "Masculinity as a perspective is significant because war has been virtually monopolized by males at all levels from the battlefield to headquarters"(Ulbrich 230). The gender dichotomy is starkly visible in the case of wars, which leads to the inevitable question: How does trauma cut through both the genders? For decades, war has been considered a hegemonic masculine space. Remarque comments in the preface that "This book will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by the war."(Remarque 54). This makes women narratives of the war subaltern narratives or even secondary ones. In her book at one point, she asks one of her male interviewees, "So, in your opinion, women are out of place in war?" to which he replies, "But we men had a sense of guilt about girls making war, and it has stayed with me"(Alexievich 95). This establishes the male ego, which follows a certain sense of masculinity in which war becomes an entirely physical enterprise. People tend to ignore the question of emotion to view war through its utilitarian aspects, the death count, and the patriotism. This brings out yet another understanding of the literary mode of testimony — "The historian's ability to see the trauma endured by the psychically wounded is largely dependent on the work of specialists of the psyche. Until the end of the two world wars, the latter, as we have seen, emphasized the rehabilitation of "shell-shocked" veterans at the expense of undiagnosed, "concussed" veterans who also suffered as a result of their war experience. Many of them kept this suffering quiet, out of modesty or due to an inability to express or articulate it, or simply because there was no one to listen"(Leese 37). In order to voice experiences of trauma, where documented or recorded, the confessional mode is almost a clinical tool for the emotional and unheard. Women narratives of war tap into this emotional uprising through minute documentation of alternate realities, one away from the masculine order of war.

Conclusion: The truth of these testimonials can always be challenged even when it is self-reflexive. "Public and private life are interwoven in such a way that either legitimation or shaming is always possible. Within the volatility generated by representativeness, the private becomes ambivalent as it transforms into public discourse"(Gilmore 4). But in Alexievich, this representativeness is not singular, instead, it's a multiplicity of voices and an archive of polyglottal memory. Along with fictional narratives, testimonials have gained considerable

momentum in the literary field. The communicative memory of a person, as different from the imaginary one, helps build the collective cultural conscience of the traumatic event. Alexievich talks about this memory, "They all meet me and talk to me differently ... Some start telling their story at once, while still on the phone: I remember... I keep it all in my memory as if it was yesterday..."(Alexievich 99). In conclusion, it might be said that although fictional narratives have a broad readership, wider audience and tend towards the canonical, memoirs and testimonials cater to archiving and historiography for qualitative research practices to a certain extent.

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