Chapter 12

Testimony and Trauma in Sri Lanka’s War Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines Sri Lankan fiction against the country’s devastating ethnic conflict. It aims to re-read selected and contrasting texts, the recently released autobiography, A Long Watch: War, Captivity and Return in Sri Lanka, and the novel, Island of a Thousand Mirrors, as stories of trauma, examining their role as testimonies to what is unknown, or have been left unsaid, of the country’s war. Further, drawing on theories of trauma, it examines the notion of trauma as the experience of having survived a horrific event, placing the characters as witnesses. It argues that such texts, by giving voice to the unknown, disturbs the everyday.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter concerns Sri Lankan fiction set against the country’s devastating ethnic conflict that lasted for nearly three decades, resulting in unimaginable, and often unspeakable, loss, displacement and violence. It is an attempt, however, to re-read these fiction as stories of trauma, and ask, if they serve as testimonies to what is known and unknown – what is said and left unsaid – of the country’s war and political history. Further, in Sri Lanka’s post-conflict era where the wounds of war are yet to be healed, what is the place of such fiction – such ‘testimonies of trauma’ – in politics and the everyday?
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Against this overall mission, this chapter intersects and draws upon theories and understandings of trauma, testimony and witnessing, as well as the role of ‘war writings’ in politics and everyday life.

In her seminal work, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History, trauma, Caruth (1996, p. 4) argues, is “much more than a pathology.” In fact, the author asserts, almost poetically,

… it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language, (Caruth, 1996 p. 4).

The ‘wound’ here refers not just to the physical, but also to the psychological trauma, and in unpacking this assertion, Caruth (1996) puts forth a series of statements. It is these statements that frame the central questions of this chapter. How does literature speak about and speak through traumatic experience? How is knowing and not knowing entangled in the language of trauma and its stories? What is trauma – is it the encounter with death, or the experience of survival? And, how is trauma narrated – by whom, and who bears witness to such stories and testimonies of trauma?

The last sub-question is deliberate in its linking of ‘witness’, ‘testimony’ and ‘trauma’. And, it is here, through their association with each other, that a further mission of this chapter lies; that of understanding how the reader, the subject, and the writer of fiction, through their re-telling of trauma, interacts, creates and navigates within the spaces of the known and unknown.

Jacques Derrida argues that the individual who is offering testimony, “is the only one to know what he has seen, lived and felt” (Derrida as cited by Webb, 2011, p. 52). A concern here then lies in examining fiction as a form of testimony. While it is possible, perhaps, to place autobiographies within such a realm, a novel, even though it is narrated in the first person, instead provides, ‘imagined experiences’ (Webb, 2011). Yet, testimony, is an individual’s point of view, and fiction can be seen as opening up creative spaces and possibilities for ‘truthful testimonies’ (Yusin & Bahri, 2008). In fact, Derrida (as cited by Culler, 2005, p. 873) argues, “there is no testimony that does not at least structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, […] the possibility of literature”.

Thus, fiction, although is not a “testimony in the legal or historiographic sense,” does share “a commitment to making representations from point of view, from a position on an event”, creating “a sense of event, a feeling of what (might have)
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