



TRAUMA LITERATURE

Reflections and Ruminations



Editors

N. U. Lekshmi and Rohini K. Potti

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CHAPTER 14

Trauma Narratives and Herstories in K R Meera

Dr. Reji A L

The Greek trauma, or “wound,” originally refers to an injury inflicted on a body. But, in Freud’s text, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. The unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will – the experience that Freud calls “traumatic neurosis” – emerges as the unwitting re-enactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind. Literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet. Trauma narratives, does not simply represent the violence of a collision but also conveys the impact of its very incomprehensibility.

In the introduction of *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, Cathy Caruth says: trauma is a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a crisis of death and the correlative crisis of life: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.

Dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the person back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright. What one returns to in the flashback is not the incomprehensibility of one’s near death, but the very incomprehensibility of one’s own survival.

In its general definition, trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks,

nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena. The belatedness and incomprehensibility remain at the heart of this repetitive seeing.

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* was published in 1992, Cathy Caruth's edited collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* in 1995 and her monograph *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* in 1996 are undoubtedly the books which opened up the Humanities to Trauma.

In "Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics" Susannah Radstone offers a critique of trauma theory's model of subjectivity, and its relations with theories of referentiality and representation, history and testimony. The critiques of referentiality derived from structuralism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, semiotics and deconstruction suggest that representations bear only a highly mediated or indirect relation to actuality. Trauma theory also moves through and beyond that proposal. For Dori Laub, the absence of traces gives rise to his formulation of the aetiology of trauma as 'an event without a witness' (*Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* 75-92). Bessel A. Van der Kolk and others have argued in *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body and Society*, in the words of Ruth Leys, that 'the traumatic event is encoded in the brain in a different way from ordinary memory' (*Trauma: A Genealogy* 7).

Alongside an emphasis on memory and brain function, this 'postmodern' psychology includes also a strand that emphasises intersubjectivity and the role of the listener or witness in the bringing to consciousness of previously unassimilated memory.

For Ruth Leys, mimetic and anti-mimetic tendencies cannot be strictly divided from each other. Leys's account of the differences between the anti-mimetic and mimetic paradigms also draws attention to the question of the traumatised subject's relation to the aggressor. Whereas the mimetic paradigm 'posits a moment of identification with the aggressor (...) the antimimetic theory depicts violence as purely and simply an assault from without (TG 299).

Hypnosis (...) played a major theoretical role in the conceptualisation of trauma (...) because the tendency of hypnotized persons to imitate or repeat whatever they were told to say or do provided a basic model for the traumatic experience. Trauma was defined as a situation of dissociation or 'absence' from the self in which the victim unconsciously imitated or identified with the aggressor or traumatic scene in a situation that was

likened to a state of heightened suggestibility or hypnotic trance. (TG, 8-9)

In Caruth, and in Felman and Laub, it is the unexperienced nature of the event, which give rise to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Trauma distorts the power, common sense, and understanding of the traumatised person. Testimony refers to a relation of witnessing between the subject of trauma and the listener.

Trauma at Home: After 9/11 edited by Judith Greenberg analyses the wide-ranging reflections on understanding, representing, and surviving trauma after the terrorist attacks of September 11. Toni Morrison's *Home* depicts the siblings' traumatic memories of childhood abuse, also drawing into play the wider history of slavery and racist persecution and lynchings, as well as Frank's trauma as a veteran of the Korean war, and his many symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Human beings are in search of security, order, connection, certainty, meaning, identity, and love. Gender identity is characterised by the public expression of the gender role. K R Meera's novels critique the traditional female identities of 'pativratas' with counter narratives. It also challenges male identity and masculinity which create false hegemonic traits for males. Judith Butler challenges the performative trait of gender and also the relation of gender and identity in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

In *The Unseeing Idol of Light*, the narrative unfolds the realms of light and darkness through the philosophical underpinnings. Seeing is used as a metaphor. Prakash could not see the sufferings of others like Rajani.

What is there in a name? Even if it is Deepthi or not, the sufferings, angst and agony suffered by female psyche and body is undefinable and provides a traumatic experience throughout within the narrative space through the different female characters like Jyothi, Deepthi, Rajani, Shalini etc.

Characters' name, especially the central characters – Prakash, Deepthi, Jyothi, Sooraj – are synonymous with light, though some of them are struggling for sight. Trauma causes temporary or ongoing mental and physical health concerns in different individuals. Prakash lost his eyesight after the missing of his wife Deepthi. He suffers from trauma. The shocking, painful and distressing experience of

trauma here results in temporary or gradual losing of his eyesight. Sooraj is a blind orphan supposed to be the first-born child of Prakash and Deepthi. Jyothi, another version of Deepthi, lost her husband in a train journey. She was gang raped and left in the platform. She lost her new born baby as a result of the atrocities done to her body by a group of eighteen men. After hearing her story, Rajani asked why she didn't return to her husband. Jyothi retorts: "No woman who had accepted the sweat, saliva and semen of eighteen men in one night would be able to return to her first man..." (209).

In search of Deepthi both Prakash and Syam had to visit police stations, mortuaries and railway tracks several times. Some psychiatrists, such as Worden, argue that viewing the body helps to bring home the reality of loss, and that viewing helps in the grieving process, because bonds with the deceased need to be severed so that the survivor can make new attachments. Prakash wanted Shyam to identify the body. Identifying an unknown body in a mortuary makes a feeling of vomiting for Prakash's friend Shyam. They couldn't identify the body of Deepthi anywhere.

Meena Kandasamy says: *The Unseeing Idol of Light* is engrossing forensic, rich in complexity and intense in its sadness. K R Meera's prose is always a pleasure, a place where language becomes landscape. It is a haunting tale that explores love and loss, blindness and sight, obsession and suffering and the poignant interconnections between them.

The "black hole of desolation created by Deepti's departure" (4) glued on Prakash's face. The images used in the text are very powerful. "A thousand-odd bats, hanging upside down and frantically beating their wings" (4). Prakash's life too is hung upside down like a bat. The sky appeared swollen with rain clouds and the moss-infested roof of the next building gleamed demonically (6). The appearance of the woman in the shelter who suffered from dementia, was pathetic. She seemed devoid of life, unmoving, wearing a dress twice her size, exposing bones that jutted out of her emaciated frame. She did not look up. She is called by the inmates as Lily, but later identified by someone after viewing the newspaper advertisement as Suprabha.

The image of the suicide of his father haunted Prakash. Ravi, his father hanged himself from the huge mango tree beyond the canal. Prakash had been eight when his father died. At a glance, his father's

body, covered his head with judge's robe, hands uplifted, legs drawn apart resembled "a gigantic bat". It appears recurrently in Prakash's nightmares. After the death of his father, his Amma lost sleep and had a feeling that "someone is calling out from the gates... Someone!" (30) When the loved ones vanish, the nights of those who are left behind become choked with a dark emptiness.

Food is an effective trigger of deeper memories of feelings and emotions, internal states of the mind and body. 'Mambazhapulissery' brings home some painful memories for Prakash. The lone hint that Prakash's Acchan had given was his insistence on having 'Mambazhapulissery' for his last supper. Deepthi had conceived in September. Much before the news was confirmed, Deepthi had dreamt of feeding rice balls with 'Mambazhapulissery' to a little boy. During her pregnancy, she yearned for 'Mambazhapulissery'.

Prakash refused to purchase a TV in his home for a very long time, because before Deepthi had gone missing, they had talked about TV and Deepthi's laughter still resonates in Prakash's ears. So for Prakash, TV is associated with misfortune.

Rajani worked in a Blind School. When Shyam and Prakash entered the Blind School, they noticed one boy whose eyes were devoid of irises. The white emptiness, staring out from that winsome face was frightening for Shyam.

Self-injury is a harmful way to cope with emotional pain, intense anger and frustration. Rajani had the experience of sixteen suicide attempts in her twenty-three years. She had sentenced her body. When Deepthi is compared to a blazing lamp, Rajani is compared to a gloomy hurricane lamp. She had a bad childhood. Her Amma suffered a lot from her cruel father. She is compared to a butterfly that had metamorphosed back into a worm after losing its wings. Due to his sexual passion, when her father undressed and got naked in front of little Rajani, her mother threw kerosene over his body and lit a matchstick and set him on fire. Amma had hanged herself. After that she lived in the homes of different relatives. All those years, she continued her attempts to make better knots. But every time "her head slipped right through the noose like a greasy frog that eluded a catcher's grip" (40).

The narrative is caught in between past and present and progresses to future pages. Prakash tries to find Deepthi in Rajani. But when he comes back to present day reality, he is haunted by the

memories of Deepti. Prakash gratifies his strong desire in Rajani. At last deserted by everyone, she hanged herself after giving birth to a baby girl. She is the epitome of the exploitation and suffering and afflicted pain from the male world.

The Angel's Beauty Spots is a collection of three novellas. Angela was killed in front of her children. Her husband was the killer. "He thrust the knife deep into her fair-skinned, well-rounded belly again and again.... The chilling scent of blood filled the room. Like brooding storm clouds, fear filled the room with darkness and cold."

The popular Victorian image of the ideal wife/woman was 'the Angel in the House'. The Angel was passive and powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, and above all--pure. The phrase 'Angel in the House' comes from the title of an immensely popular poem by Coventry Patmore, in which he holds his angel-wife up as a model for all women.

Angela was expected to be an 'Angel', devoted and submissive to her husband, though he was aggressive, cruel and forced her to be a woman of the street. Virginia Woolf, wrote in 1931, "killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer." Taking these words to heart, in *The Angel's Beauty Spots*, K R Meera, as a writer, freed Angela from "the angel of the house" to a woman in search of love in others' door steps because she was more sinned against than sinning. It is a critique of the male dominant discourses and the creation of home as a holy space where he used to carry the idol of woman as a goddess. K R Meera's writing is powerful and frequently questions the traditional concept of 'man must be pleased'.

Angela once told Narendran: "This body is a huge liability. Very hard to lug *without* a job! And hard to find a job *with* it!" (12) Angela smiled when her husband Alex stabbed her. It did not hurt, because he had killed her long time ago. That day, Alex's friend swooped down on her and "played with her lifeless body like a cat slowly killing a mouse" (20). That was the day Angela had died.

"Mummy never cried" (21), Ann remembers her smiling face. She turned tears into laughter. One day or the other several men came and walked off in her life as the owner of the jewellery shop forced her to satisfy his lust in front of her children. She slapped him hard with her soiled hand and shouted at him to leave.

Angela admits once: "I know it is a sin to sell my body. But I don't sell my body, I sell empathy. I have only pity for him.... He knows that he'll receive love only for his money" (23). Her two children were separated. Ann was sent with Alex's sister. Narendran was going to send Irene, his own blood, to a poor home.

In "And Forgetting the Tree, I..." , ten-year-old Radhika, forgotten by her father on the road side, was raped by a woodcutter. That memory strikes Radhika "like a thunderbolt and hurls her to the floor. It pierces right through her brain cells, smashes them up..." (33-34). When the father and the daughter saw each other in the police station, she was naked, "the clotted blood clung to her small bony thighs, like dried, blackened moss staining the bark of a tree." She was raped again by Christy in the hotel room. When Ajith her husband said, on their very first night, that he had married her only and only because he had felt sorry for her, the soil under her feet came loose.

When Christy returned to her life one day, lightning tore through Radhika's brain. Her mind splintered. She lost track of time and space. "Their relationship was like a tree struck by lightning. He had sunk his roots deep into her.... its core turned into ashes, its roots stopped feeding on moisture, leaves stopped eating light, naturally the tree fell.... like an unidentified corpse..." (37).

The memory of her past came back again to Radhika. "Acchan. The town. Waiting. The shed. The bar named Peruvazhiyambalam. The pathos of a girl forgotten by her father" (41). Radhika shows a tendency to relive the past and to exist in the present as if she was still fully in the past, with no distance from it. She forgot all the points she had noted for a case. Finally, she lost it.

Radhika dreamt of the woodcutter one night. In the dream, she was pregnant. He tied her up on the cot with a strong rope. He raised the axe and brought it down on her swollen belly. She woke up screaming. This can be treated as a moment of PTSD.

When Radhika described the mishap with each and every minute details to Christy after ten years, she suffered that day all over again. She repeatedly acting out – the tendency to repeat something compulsively – the agony due to trauma. After that incident, her Acchan became neurotic, showing symptoms of madness. He wept, "Parvathy, my Parvathy." They are compelled to take him to Painkulam for shock therapy (49).

Radhika remembered her first meeting with Christy. Lonacchan and Thankamma made her to sell her body for money. When she struggled to escape, he pushed her down on the floor and raped her. He consumes her body many times after that. All these memories came flooding back. From Christy's brothers, she happened to know that Christy had been taken to Painkulam regularly for shock treatment. They said that it was a hereditary disease and could not be cured. The place called Painkulam had always made Radhika very uneasy and nervous. The headaches that had once troubled her had returned. She closed the door, bolted the windows, darkened the bed room and lay down (60). Once, when she started reading Christy's book, the letters inside gave her a burning sensation. Darkness rushed into her eyes. Her consciousness dimmed. She flung the books away, slammed her head against the wall, the skin on her forehead split open (66).

Christy's true self came out, when he came to know that his child was in Radhika's womb. He slapped and threatened to kill her. Then he appeared with a trick to ruin the child. He made her believe that they are going to be married in Kaipamangalam church. He pulled out a minnu and tied it around her neck. When they reached the graveyard, he turned brutal, beat her mercilessly, pushed her down, and drove his knee hard into her lower belly. After killing the child, he plucked the minnu from her neck (71).

The image of a tree is employed throughout the narrative: 'The raw scent of wood chopped by the woodcutter' (33); Radhika's 'huge memory tree'; and Ajith's love like 'paring off branch after branch and finally cutting the trunk'; Christy's love is 'a strange tree which sprouts from fallen leaves, fallen branches, fallen fruit; the outer shell may dry up, the core lives'; at last Radhika feels 'love is a strange thorn, a poisonous thorn, terrible pain when it pierces and is pulled out' (79) and 'the doctor plucked Aristotle Christy out with the forceps, leaf by leaf, shoot by shoot' (85-86).

In "The Deepest Blue", the narrator warns the readers that chaste wives (in the 'satisavitri' mould) and monogamous men (in the 'maryaadaapurushottam' mould) are advised against reading this account (101). The writer is expressing her defiance and rebellious attitude against the ways she is expected to follow.

The question of who and what is considered real and true is apparently a question of knowledge. For Foucault, Knowledge is Power. Knowledge and Power are not separable. One of the first

tasks of a radical critique is to discern the relation "between mechanisms of coercion and elements of knowledge" (50). K R Meera in "The Deepest Blue" disrupts the settled knowledge of family, wife, love and sex. She created a world of fantasy which pushes the boundaries of the real and questions the contemporary notions of reality. These practices of new modes of realities take place through embodiment where the body exceeds and reworks the norm.

The story's movement is like a serpent's movement upon a rock. The narrator 'I' describes her love "a languid serpent, an utterly venomous one" (103). Snakes appear in a number of different religions, taking on the roles of good and evil depending on the circumstances. Snake is used in the Bible as an instrument of Satan, sent to tempt Eve and encourage her to disobey God. These scaly creatures have evoked fear and awe in readers. Snakes often represent fertility in myth and literature.

"The unmarried have keener eyesight. Once you're married, it diminishes" (108). The narrator reminds that her husband wrote four or five whole essays about a small birthmark before marriage. But all stopped at once when the 'thali' tied around her neck as a noose. She felt uneasiness within the four walls of the house like "a snake stifled in a wicker basket" (108). She has bitten the hermit in the serpent grove and he turned blue completely. Gender norms are reproduced here by bodily practices. The narrator keeps on saying love is not only strange, but also painful. She revives the physicality and sensuousness of love through the performance of her body and defeats the hypocritical spirituality of love. As Butler pointed out gender is constructed through acts and traits and is exhibited by the body which is used as a weapon to reconstruct the gendered identities here.

Colours are symbolic of many inexpressible things and are widely used as recurrent motifs in the novels of K R Meera. The colour blue is used in the narrative as an icon of love, pain, loss and desire. It suggests free and liberated ideas, breaking away from the regular expected way of life. In this narrative the woman defeats the man, makes him a slave. She becomes his owner as against the traditional male superiority theory. She calls it "an honest burning silver of experience" (102) and compares her love to "the house freshly on fire" (129). K R Meera questions recurrently the structuralities of the familial discourses and breaks it in the space of an old 'nalukettu' which was tightly closed once, where lies the past memories of silenced female voices and utter darkness. She makes it open as the

light peeps in and the fresh air dances and gives 'the haunted spirits' salvation.

Tulsi in *The Poison of Love* mirrored lives and plight of many women. This world has produced devastated countless Tulsis. "My love was like a serpent that had swallowed its own tail. It twisted around in circles, trying to consume itself" (29). The travel and transformation from Tulsi to Meera sadhu was long and severe. It was an ordeal. Madhav loved Tulsi like a joke. But she realised it too late after being the mother of two children. She was one among her twenty seven lovers. Vengeance started inflaming her mind. "Madhav's love was an acid that corroded the vessel itself, her flesh burned, bones melted" (45). "Love was like the demoness Putana" (81). She gave poisonous milk to her children. Tulsi whispers: "we have to defeat your father... leave him before he can abandon us" (91).

The dissociation of unassimilated memories and a focus on the traumatic nature of unconscious associations frequently appeared in K R Meera's narratives. The complex configuration of love, hatred, and loss are intertwined. Meera weaves history, romance and the politics of the present into a narrative of incredible complexity. Each story invokes the inner violence of contemporary society in Kerala. Meera reveals how trauma as a catastrophe, either individual or collective, affects shockingly male and female characters' identities, so that their physical and psychological responses can be analysed in terms of diagnosis of the trauma and its aftermath.

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