Initiating Dialogues, Breaking Silences: Strategies for Redressing Historical Traumas

Keshab Sigdel

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Abstract

Historical traumas are carried forward into the present in the psyche and life not only of those who experienced the trauma directly, but also to the generations that follow. And in many cases, silence has been an important carrier of this unspeakable past. Revisiting the past becomes an effective strategy of interaction and dialogue in order to reconcile with the historical trauma. I discuss two texts which deal with the depiction of historical violence and the resulting trauma—Tara Rai's Chhapamar Yuvati ko Dayari (Diary of a Guerilla Girl) and Khuswant Singh's Train to Pakistan—and attempt to see how recovering memories of the past, as psychologist Ramsay Lieum claims, can contribute not only to understanding the lasting psychological impacts of intense social and political conflicts but also exploring prospects for personal and social reconciliation.

History records South Asia as one of the most conflict-prone regions of the world, marked by inter-state and intra-state conflicts. Such conflicts are not only long-standing and violent, destroying material, social and personal well-being and creating conditions of personal and collective trauma (Sonpar 2). The impact of such trauma extends into the future and spreads beyond individuals to the social and political life of the community.

Trauma, according to Summerfield, is a popular notion to indicate shocking, terrifying or overwhelming events and processes that have or are likely to have destructive effects on people's psyche and their relation to their surrounding world (cited in Richters 1-2). Violent conflicts contain many elements that can be traumatizing for people. A key element of today's political conflicts or wars is that organized violence used against the target population is aimed at disrupting or destroying the entire fabric of social, economic and cultural relations as well as subjective mental life. In such 'total wars' psychological aggression and terror is often an important weapon in the attacker's arsenal, leaving whole society and its members stunned audiences, suffering from fear, anxiety, distrust and despair.

In the South Asia region, we have witnessed many such terrifying and shocking instances of violence, leading to dramatic political changes. Independent India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were born amidst such violence. The Partition of India in 1947 was accompanied by extreme hatred and cruelty resulting into massive displacement and deaths. The riots of 1946-1948 saw the mass exodus of minorities, dramatically altering the ethnic demography of the region. Train loads of refugees were slaughtered, there was mass killing of women by their own family members to preserve their honour, and as many as hundred thousand women were abducted or

raped (Sonpar 5).The Bangladeshi war of independence in 1971 also took life of an estimated three million Bengalis, mainly the educated people and writers of the country. The Tamil insurgency in Sri Lanka since 1983 saw nearly a hundred thousand people killed and many more internally displaced. Similarly, Nepal has cost at least 15,000 lives, and thousands of displacements, during a decade long Maoist insurgency. Almost hundred thousand people in Bhutan are forced to suffer displacement and live a life of uncertainty as refugees because of the state's planned move for ethnic cleansing.

Memories of the Partition and other violence in the region, Nandy writes, are "selectively owned, disowned or reconfigured and survive in private and shared fantasies silently influencing the public life of the region" (cited in Sonpar 2). A study of survivors of the Partition showed that although these events took place decades ago, they remain alive in the present in both direct and subtle ways (Sonpar 3). These researchers found that many of them did not want to talk about those terrible past, but once they began to talk the flow of emotion and memory was unstoppable. Violence is not only physical wounding and death, but also the loss of homeland and culture and the humiliation of being refugees. The important question at this point is how do people survive, rebuild relationships and regain trust and hope? How do they deal with "poisonous knowledge" (cited in Sonpar 4) of their neighbours and kin? Is there any use of remembering and narrating these events? In the sections below, my discussion will make an attempt to respond to these questions.

We want to forget all the scars that history has left for us. And why do we still talk about remembering those pains and losses? Ramsay Liem provides an answer to it: "Personal memories of the past conflict and injustice have a role to play in reconciling that injustice" (111). He believes that recovering memories of this past can contribute not only to understanding the lasting psychological impacts of intense social and political but also to exploring prospects for personal and social reconciliation (112). Those who have become the victims of violence, those who are in need of rescue and care, the hope of being able to tell the story is sometimes the only hope. South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is a powerful example of how narrating the past trauma becomes an exercise in healing. In its final report the TRC frequently described the "therapeutic process" of "giving victims an opportunity to tell their stories," (144) and the "healing potential of telling stories" (112). In one section it described how survivors "approached the Commission almost in a foetal position" but after telling their stories "walked tall" (444).

But there are debates about the truth of such narrations of personal experiences of trauma. Addressing the complexity of concept of truth and its validity, the South African TRC identified four notions of truth: 1) factual or forensic truth; 2) personal or narrative truth; 3) social or dialogue truth; and 4) healing and restorative truth (cited in Liem 111). The creation of a -28-

narrative truth itself becomes an important act because it also contributes to the process of reconciliation by giving the voice to them who had been previously silenced or were voiceless.

Research on the Holocaust and Japanese American internment provides insight into how political trauma in the past can carry forward into the present in the psyche and life course not only of those who experienced the trauma directly, but also to the succeeding generation. But Liem observes that "in both instances silence has been found to be an important carrier of the unspeakable past— a medium harboring subliminal dread and fear, the object of projected assumptions and expectations, and a source of miscommunication among the generations" (113). So, he emphasizes on the need to penetrate into those silences that can "shroud and protect us from painful social conflict and trauma" (13). We remember the historical tragedies through public and private ways "in order not to forget," but "to maintain vigilance, and to strive to heal" (cited in Liem 113). We need to remember the past in order to move forward.

Now, I briefly discuss two literary works that describe the historical violence and the trauma in two different nations and in different historical time period, and try to see how the efforts to express the pain and losses of the past in these texts are also strategies of "creating truths" in order to reconcile with the historical trauma they've experienced as an individual or as a society. The first text is a recently published *Chhapamar Yuvatiko Dàyari* [Diary of a Guerrilla Girl] (2010), a memoir by Tara Rai about her experiences of being involved in "people's war" launched by Maoist Party in Nepal. The second text I have chosen is *Train to Pakistan,* a very widely read novel by Khuswant Singh, which was written almost 60 years back, and captures the violence and trauma of the 1947 partition of India resulting into the birth of Pakistan.

Chhapamar Yuvatiko Dayari is a memoir of a young girl, Tara Rai, who was the member of the cultural troupe of Maoist Party in Nepal. This book tells of how she runs away from home to join the troupe and her arrest by Royal Nepal Army after a few months of her joining. She narrates experiences of different physical and psychological states during her captivity. In one instance, Rai describes the trauma she went through after she became a captive of the security forces this way:

> After walking for just a moment they told me to stand still. I guessed that I was standing on a field terrace. From close by there came the sound of digging. My heart jumped and I went cold with fear. I thought: they are planning to bury me. If they kill me first that will be all right, but if they bury me alive I will surely suffer. A picture of my mother, father, brothers, sisters and friends came into my eyes all at once. Then I thought, the soil will come into my eyes, how hard it will be to breathe when I am buried under the soil. 'Dig quickly! This is the girl we have to bury, see her? What

> is your final wish, girl?' A voice issued orders to someone and then asked me this. (Rai 27)

Commenting on the memoir, Michael Hutt writes, "Despite being trenchantly Maoist in its analysis of Nepal's social ills, Tara Rai's *Diary* is generous towards the *dusman*, and particularly the men of the then Royal Nepal Army" (131). Hutt quotes Rai saying they too are "the sons and daughters of the poor" who belong to "the class that has to work to eat". Hutt further observes that as a Maoist cadre, she takes a very contradictory but humane position when she writes that whenever someone died in the conflict, whether they were a soldier, a policeman, or a Maoist guerrilla, "a mother's lap became empty" (Rai 28), that she could not think of them as "class enemies" and that it seemed to her that "it was the rulers who used them" (Rai 113). Toward the end of the Diary, she even shares her "warm feelings"
for the Army officers who she felt had protected her during the early days of her detention:

> The army's slaps and the army's love and goodwill woke me from a dream, had already woken me. Due to that brief period of living with the army, that closeness, I had understood the importance of life, the world and a handful of breath. Speaking truly with my soul as the witness, I found the meaning of living in the kind heart within the army. I never had bad feelings towards the army, nor do I now, I have watched from close quarters the army life that is caught up in obligation and powerlessness. Even today I still think the same of the soldier who is seeking his own and his family's life in the bonds of guns and barbed wire. I respect the soldier who cuts the steps of life on another's orders. Today in this present time I understand that soldier who slapped me. He was obliged to do that. Those same soldiers take pleasure in the parts of their rifles, but carrying such sorrow and suffering kept inside their hearts. The soldiers, they decorate all their happinesses inside the bunker and the trench. I have understood the reality inside a soldier, 'in my view the barrack is a temple and the soldier a priest,' a temple is always clean and pure but the priests can be changed. (Rai 153)

Hutt analyzes the *Diary* from the perspective of liberal metropolitan readers "that understand the motives of those involved on both sides and recognize their shared humanity. The *Diary* "demonizes neither the Maoist cadreship nor the ordinary members of the security forces, and thus offers the prospect of reconciliation between them" (137). In Hutt's opinion, those readers have assessed the memoir as "better" or "more honest" than other memoirs partly because of her expressions of doubt and the inconsistency of her political position. In this particular narrative by Tara Rai, the readers find some "reassurance" for a social reconciliation even after a decade long violence and hatred amidst a sharp ideological divide. To put in Hutt's words, Tara provides them with an example of a redeemable Maoist as they look forward to a future in which the Maoists have put away their guns and joined

the country's political mainstream. The act of narrating her pains and traumatic experience not only provides psychological relief to Tara, it also prepares her for a wider social reconciliation (137).

Khuswant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* was the first English novel to be written on the theme of Partition. It depicts a sleepy little village called Mano Majra, situated on the declared border between the still-to-be-formed nations of India and Pakistan, suddenly waking to unprecedented violence and horror on the eve of the Partition. The action covers only a few weeks and deals mainly with the predicament of a quite innocent and completely unpolitical people caught up in the whirlwind of the Partition. Rituparna Roy traces how there is a certain symmetry to the action depicted in that both at the beginning and end of the novel there are identical situations: a trainload of dead bodies (all of them Sikhs) comes from Pakistan at the beginning, and it is decided that a trainload of dead (all of them Muslims) should go over to Pakistan at the end. Only, in the latter case, this is prevented at the last minute by the cunning of one man and the sacrifice of another (Roy 34).

In *Truth, Love and a Little Malice: An Autobiography* published in 2002, Khushwant Singh tells about his visit to Sikh villages from where clients came as backgrounds for his stories. He also recalls how, on the eve of the Partition, he had narrowly missed being murdered on his way to Lahore from Abbotabad via Taxila, and how the day after he reached Lahore, he had learnt from the papers that the train by which he had travelled had been held up at the signal near Taxila station and all the Sikh passengers in it dragged out and murdered (Singh 108). It then becomes obvious that this novel is a product of violence and trauma that he experienced closely at least at a psychological level, though not bodily.

The novel begins with a reference to the summer of 1947 which prepares us for brutal situation to come:

> The summer of 1947 was not like other Indian summers. Even the weather had a different feel in India that year. It was hotter than usual and drier and dustier. And the summer was longer. No one could remember when the monsoon had been so late. For weeks, the sparse clouds cast only shadows. There was no rain. People began to say that God was punishing them for their sins. (Singh 9)

After a few chapters of elaborate descriptions of the images of hostility, violence, insecurity and distrust, the novelist very strategically describes how silence rules over the surrounding— " a heavy brooding silence descended on the village. People barricaded their doors and many stayed up all night talking in whispers" (84). But things have to move. And people need to find ways to cope with those pains, mistrust and insecurities. And those "talking in whispers" gradually grow into interactions leading to reconciliations. Twinkle B. Manaver has appropriately highlighted this fact:

> The dark clouds of suspicion and fear arise among the Sikhs and Muslims, who have lived together for centuries. Yet feelings of

> brotherliness have not disappeared, and they meet for consultation in a scene that is both intensely human and touching. (68)

It is clear that Khuswant Singh too sees no other way but dialogue and reconciliation to get the life move ahead.

On the basis of the two texts discussed above, I come closer to the same impression that Annemick Richters has developed: "The experience of violence has not only caused suffering … but also new possibilities to deal with…[it] and to rebuild changing ways of lives" (3). The cost of repressing the memories is even higher. Silence continues to transport the pain in many different ways. In those cases where people are denied access to truth and are forced to forget the violence, such pain "re-emerge[s] as physical pain" (10). Richters questions how such access to truth can be made possible in post-conflict societies when forgetting seems an act of salvation, when silence is still experienced to be the best survival strategy? Reading of *Chhapamar Yuvati ko Dayari* and *Train to Pakistan* gives us an impression that

"constructing narratives…is…a means of coming to terms with the events of the past and integrating them into their lives in a way that makes sense in the present" (10). The dialogue and reconciliation role of literature become more evident with these two examples.

According to Yael Danieli and others who have studied the intergenerational transmission of political trauma, the inability to speak of the past creates an "audible void" covering over foreboding and anxiety. As already mentioned above, wars do not only leave the scars, but also "newly found strengths and inclinations, active communication and discussion among survivors and with succeeding generations may be essential to fully liberate the present from the distortions of the past" (Liem 126). In the language of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, both narrative truth— each individual's subjective experience of the past as expressed in the two literary texts discussed in this essay— and social or dialogue truth are essential for achieving restorative or healing truth. But Liem warns us that knowing of the past alone, however, "may not be sufficient to liberate one from inexplicable dread or generational impasses" (126). We need to turn into action. The only way for reconciliation is to break the historical silences by initiating interactions and dialogues. Literary productions and/or cultural interactions are important devices for such dialogues.

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