

Vol. 8, Issue-II (April 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Sr. No. 40]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Of Memories and Memoirs: Interrogating the Interplay of Memory and Reality in Select Personal War Narratives

Ritushree Sengupta

Assistant Professor in English,
School of Arts & Humanities,
Reva University, Bangalore.

Article History: Submitted-29/03/2017, Revised-20/04/2017, Accepted-24/04/2017, Published-30/04/2017.

Abstract:

The history of literature depicting war has mostly been found to be comprising of various kinds of conflicts and paradoxes. Despite multiple forms of narratives of war, it has always remained as something not completely describable in absolute wholeness. The claims of veracity in terms of war narratives which includes novels, dramas, short stories, memoirs etc also maintains that no war narrative can be considered to be absolutely authentic in this respect. Memory and the interplay of memory and reality further complicate the gamut of war literature irrespective of space and time. *The Diary of Anne Frank*, a Jewish memoir of World War II gives a personal account of the holocaust era from the perspective of a 13 year old girl, while *Nitur Diary*, penned by Dipu Mahmud gives another such account in the form of a memoir of the violent war of independence in Bangladesh. The experiences despite their temporal and spatial differences harps upon certain similar complexities generated by the critical interplay of the memory and the reality and their gradual assimilation causing distortions and new constructs of memory.

This paper shall attempt to present a comparative analysis of the two different texts, considering their dissimilarities as well as their blatant similarities in terms of trauma, violence and the constructs of memory crafted as history.

Keywords: Holocaust, Trauma, Memory, Historiography, Violence.

“You have blinded me to hide from my eyes
Your evil deeds, but can you wipe out memory?
Rape and unrelenting rapine, ruined cities
Countless burnt villages, helpless refugees,
Can you uproot those from my eyes?” (Rahman, “Samson” 38-44)

There are losses which cannot be measured, but stored deep within the roots of our memory, ransacking the very cores of our conscious as well as the unconscious existences- divided by memory and history born out of it. Poet Shamsur Rahman in his poetic compositions repeatedly

evoked images from his memories, for his adult memory was much grossly shaped by witnessing the epoch of 1971 Bangladesh war of liberation. Many other poets like him who witnessed the national crisis could never revive their fond memories of home, a construct in itself unless with the liberation of the country welcomed with a jingoistic acceptance of the new era gradually causing either the erasure of the past, or construction of a different past through historical as well as personal narratives. It nevertheless contributed in the plurality of the history of Bangladesh liberation war, but again, there has been no war on earth that has not accommodated multiple layers of histories amidst the meta- narratives of genocide.

Parallel to the onset of the partition of India in the year of 1947, followed the creation of a completely new homeland for the Indian Muslims. The cartographic lines embarked on dividing the nations on the eastern and the western sections of the country naming it as the East Pakistan and the West Pakistan, basked in the glory of the newly evolved Muslim nationhood. However, the considerably prominent marks of difference were quite evident from the beginning of the uncanny transformation of nations. Not only there were topographical differences, but also in terms of linguistic and cultural unifications, there were huge fissures prevalent. Primarily, it was because of such stagnant discrepancies, West Pakistan could not bestow its trust on the Eastern wing, for religious allegiance alone was hardly a symbol of consistent support for them which they could agree to look upon as a souvenir of mutual trust and unification. Therefore, gradually various West Pakistani administrative, military, academic and civil controls amounted to nothing but a quasi-colonial repetition oppression to the East Pakistanis. It eventually led to the liberation war of 1971, which lasted for nine long months, out of which Bangladesh emerged as a newly created nation, liberated from the imposed orders of West Pakistan. But like every war stands witness to enormous inhumanity, this was no exception. In order to sweep over the Bengali revolutionaries, intellectuals and the commoners, the West Pakistani armed force along with their local standby accomplices, the *rajakars* created a horrible massacre by indulging into rape, murder, incendiary and destruction causing nothing less than another holocaust in the face of human civilization. The 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh, more accepted as the Muktiyuddho, has been an epoch making event for the nation, and stands as an epitomized event of national pride. This eulogized narrative of the liberation war has been represented by various creative minds from different genres, heralding from Bangladesh. Such endeavours emphasize upon the political, cultural and military oppression prosecuted by West Pakistan with allegiance from their East Pakistani accomplices and also the strong resistance on the face of their tyranny shown by the enraged mass of East Pakistan. Such narratives highlights the brutal violence enforced in the form of physical as psychological oppression such as killing, looting and rape which were jointly conducted by West Pakistani Army and the *rajakars*, and also the strong fight which earned the East Pakistanis their long desired liberation from the domination of West Pakistan. Anthony Mascaren has, in his book *The Rape of Bangladesh* articulates:

“1 March 1971 started off as just another day in the life of East Bengal... Then the bomb fell. To Bangla Desh it was more shattering than Hiroshima... Astonished foreigners, West Pakistanis among them, were witnessing a spontaneous outburst of anger the like of which could not have been achieved by a thousand anarchists spouting venom from a thousand soapboxes. The events in Dacca were repeated elsewhere in the province.

Bangla Desh was born that day in the hearts of its angry people.” (Mascarenhas, 90-91)

Despite the apparently holistic structure of grand narratives, there too are moments of fissures behind them, and even the narrative of Bangladesh liberation war, 1971 is not an exception in this regard. What is striking about the very oeuvre of the narrative is that it marks not just political or cultural loss, but it eternally laments the personal and filial losses it experienced during the massacre. Other than brutal murders, multiple rapes and mutilation were instigated by West Pakistani armed forces leaving millions of traumatised and devastated women. Liberated Bangladesh at the very beginning of its progress towards future, gave them the status of birangana or war heroines in order to save them from socio-cultural apathy and further seclusion or alienation from the main stream. But not all of them could be saved by such uplifting, while some had no other choice but to take residency at brothels, many others committed suicide by failing to come to terms to their situation. The local conspirators were found to be participating in corrupting the mainstream politics and igniting religious fundamentalism to destroy the former secular ideals, causing huge trouble to the common mass. But no matter how sincerely one tries, it is not possible to capture history altogether, for it bears the fissures along with its course where memory plays in.

A traumatised nation that has experienced a brutal episode of barbarism might fumble to produce accurate narratives, but there has to be alternative ways of looking of the available to ensure a broad understanding of the actual events. Ranabir Samaddar in his essay titled, “Interperations of the the Bangladesh War”, addresses the issue that even “In the year of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the nation, Bangladesh still does not have an authoritative and exhaustive history of the Liberation War.” Observing the probable causes, he emphasizes on the possible insufficiency of documents, the problem of classification of the documents and of course the problem of the incompetent historiography. Taking a nearby lead Sarmila Bose asserts in *Dead Reckonong: Memories of the 1971 Bangladesh War* that it must be considered that Bangladesh has collectively failed to present a well-researched and documented historical account of 1971 which is still needed to ensure the credibility of the entire barbaric affair that took place in 1971 causing a bitter holocaust to live with eternally. It is this failure, which if corrected could affect world opinions at large towards the country.

However, if not the discourse of historiography based merely documents and evidences, there are indeed other sources from which one can chisel out the truth and examine it for all its credibility and fissures. Among all the other forms of narratives, autobiography or diary or personal journals

are the ones that often serve as a telescope to look into the past. But again, one must be careful to be objective, for personalized accounts do have their own shared mixture of reality and memory which might play very craftily upon the trope of authentic history which demands veracity, authority and universal acceptance of it.

The politics of historiography has been equally intense in case of the holocaust of World War II. The mass destruction of the Jewish population in the Nazi concentration camps in the name of race purification was not only inhuman but a fracture on the very surface of civilization. One must acknowledge the prevalent anti-semitism in Europe which later developed into a sheer hatred for the Jews that knew no stop. The Holocaust, which is also called Ha- Shoah in Hebrew language marks the time period from 30 January, 1933, which marked Adolf Hitler's promotion to the position of the chancellor of Germany to 8 May, 1945 which officially marked the end of the Second World War. It was during this period that the Jews in Europe, mostly in Germany were subjected to severe oppression and torture, both physical and psychological which finally led to the annihilation of 6,000,000 Jews, among which 1.5 million were children. It has also been found that 5000 Jews communities were being totally destroyed in this period. They were not among the world war casualties, but their death was the result of the systematic planning, a brainchild of Adolf Hitler who advocated for the annihilation of the entire Jewish population of Europe, the plan as he called was Endlösung or Final Solution.

It was in 1941, when four mobile killing groups were being formed to exterminate the Jewish population. These groups assembled Jews from every town to be marched, stripped, humiliated and killed with automatic weapons. The dead would fall into pits and buried in mass graves. These mass murders were conducted in eastern Poland, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. While the Nazis murdered other national and ethnic groups as war prisoners, it was only in the case of the Jews that the systematic process of killing was organized by various means such as death by poisonous gas, often referred as "Special Treatment". The Nazis had organized several death camps such as: Chelmno (Kulmhof), Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Maidanek and Auschwitz. To support these death camps, there were other assisting camps and all of them were equally brutal and barbaric.

However, even in the face of such terrifying oppression, the Jews did show a certain degree of resistance. Some managed to escape, while some lived within the camps but kept on practicing Jewish religious behaviours. In later days, Jews also participated in armed revolts in the camps of Bialystok, Cracow, Warsaw and a few others. But even their resistance was violently destroyed by the Nazis, mostly by burning ghetto after ghetto.

Many perished in the camps, several of them did not even make it to the camps and died early, but the survivors of such atrocities always lived the life of terror even after their emancipation. The construct of history gets blurred between the poles of fact and memory in this case because,

not much documentation were made available of the holocaust, and the few remaining which were mostly personal documents were all history had to be constructed from. An entire race was on the verge of being washed off the face of earth, which finally did not happen. But the remaining population was too small to be considered as a growing race. The holocaust had not only killed the Jews, but also murdered all the future prospects of the entire community vehemently. The Jews do not have several means to construct their history that would satisfy the claims of authenticity and universalism. They may depend upon their memory of sheer misery and pain and create narratives describing the haunted era or they can also be content with the available documents which indeed are very few in numbers. But again, the question arises that how would we really define history in these cases. It is acknowledged that history must maintain veracity, but what again is veracity the question remains. It is nothing but what is believed to be true by the ones who has been through the holocaust for it is there experience upon which we have to rely, and for once emphasize upon the humanitarian grounds over the quasi-authentic ones offered by office records, for tainting a black and white series is much easier than tainting the memory of the victims who have experienced the whole of it.

The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation war despite its broader prospects of framing a better organized or systematic history is still possible, for there are civilians still alive all over the country who either took part directly or indirectly in the war, or were affected like many others as a part of the horrifying genocide. The prospect of a wider discourse of Bangladesh war history would be possible however, if we consider the personal memoirs with quasi-equal weight even if a total verification of the narrative remains unattained or impossible. It is this claims of authenticity or veracity that to a great extent differentiates history with narrative, but where the choice is limited, it is not quite possible to do away with private memories for even the micro-narratives are as crucial as the meta-narratives in the era of postmodernism confirming Lyotard's assertion in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979). It is very significant that the conflict between the meta and micro narratives is evident even among the writers of such memoirs or authors producing such memoirs with affirmative declarations, as Dipu Mahamud does in *Nitur Diary 1971* :

“I do not remember Sister Nitu. At times I faintly recall her image. It gets lost in the way of recalling. May be her image has been shaped by my fantasy. While reading her probably, I have created a picture of her in my mind.

This diary was given to me by sister Mitu, who was the elder sister of Sister Nitu. It was a hard bind notebook. On the top of it, sister Nitu had written with her own hand ‘Nitur Diary’. I have only corrected a few spelling and punctuation errors. Other than that the diary has been kept entirely the way it was being written by sister Nitu in 1971.” [My translation]

The claims of accepting a broader discourse of history is further supported by Michel Foucault's argument in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* where the traditionally manifested inclination of the historian is to accept authentic and straight narratives of history as the more valid source of knowledge is pointed out. Foucault writes,

"For many years now, historians have preferred to turn their attention to long periods... the great silent, motionless bases that traditional history has covered with a thick layer of events."

He further asserts that one should not just emphasize on the larger frames of time but look through ruptures and discontinuities. Foucault further proposes that to know a period we must know it through its different pasts,

"several pasts, several forms of connexion, several hierarchies of importance, several networks of determination, several teleologies..."

The domain of micro narratives very subtly offers a temporary refuge from the violence of the external world. As writes thirteen years old Anne Frank in her autobiographical diary:

"I hope I will be able to confide everything to you...and I hope you will be a great source of comfort and support."

This refuge is actually imagined, an imagination much needed to cope up with the greater reality in the world outside, as Lacanian studies on psyche suggests.

Coincidentally, the two protagonists or writers of two absolutely different kinds of individuals are of the same age. Both of them are thirteen years old and it is the onset of their adolescence that makes them even more vulnerable, for their psyche now must transcend, accept and negotiate with the symbolic order in a fuller way, and in the process they can only have access to the assistance of language which they manage to find. While one finds it in a compartmental hiding, the other finds it in a nation ransacked by intruders.

Anne's diary in its process of dealing with the reality unaccustomed to her since childhood reveals a past that deserves serious attention on just not political but intense psycho-social grounds. Despite their Jewish identities, their family along with the Van Pels family were initially helped by certain staffs of the Otto Frank company but they were betrayed after some time and had to die parted from each other. From the beginning of this horrendous journey, Anne managed to give a glimpse of her complexly hard realization of the changing reality. Before leaving her house, she looked back and wrote:

"My happy-go-lucky, carefree school days are gone forever."

A similar kind of helplessness is found in the diary of Nitu as she writes,

"My brother said, 'the war has started.' Many people die in war. War is not a good thing to happen."

[My translation]

Nitu's disturbed psyche, born out of the war reveals how such atrocities haunts one's conscious as well as the unconscious selves:

"I keep on thinking about a lot of things...Lying on the bed; I think that I have joined the war. I am fighting. Pakistani army is coming towards our village. A group of muktijoddhas are going to resist them. I am in that group...I have been shot...I have been surrounded by the Pakistani army. They have weapons in their hands. The weapons are pointed at me.

Then I can't think anymore. Will the Pakistani army kill me or I shall kill them all?"

[My translation]

The brutality of such accounts lies in the fact that it compels us to realize that war is not just a socio-political event, but its consequences penetrate way deeper than that affecting the psyche of budding adults to the core. However, Anne transforms into a matured individual and resists the aggression of violence at least in her mind for she retains her faith deep down, which becomes possible only because of her age which is seen to be negotiating the inner and outer reality throughout.

"I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness, I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too, I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more."

But their innocence as well as their lives is lost amidst the chaotic destruction. While Anne dies at a concentration camp after being caught with her family from the secret annex, Nitu gives in to her ill health and the lack of proper medical help, totally unavailable due to the national war.

The interplay of memories and memoir gets gradually complex because of certain critical issues. Primarily, the construct of the memoir depends totally on the experience of the narrator or the writer and there remains a chance of neglecting objectivity. Secondly, if it is a narrated memoir, which however does not apply to either of the focused texts, there is a chance of authorial intrusion between the lines. Thirdly, there remains not much scope to verify any of the accounts due to obvious reasons. However, one must learn to comprehend the complexity of the situation and the unavailability of many alternatives but to depend on personal histories or narratives, for state imposed violence does not leave behind all the records of misdeeds. Politicised events do get attention because they are a part of the main stream events, but the innumerable pocket events are not taken into account because of their marginal position in the broader discourse of national politics or world politics at large. It is not through mere documents that we can bring before us the real history; we must learn to enlarge our domain and consider history in its true humane sense. It is only then we might reach an understanding with the past and do justice to the human race.

T.S. Eliot in *A Note on War Poetry* writes,

“War is not a life: it is a situation;
One which may neither be ignored nor accepted,
A problem to be met with ambush and stratagem,
Enveloped or scattered.

The enduring is not a substitute for the transient,
Neither one for the other. But the abstract conception
Of private experience at its greatest intensity
Becoming universal...”

Eliot maintains the necessity to acknowledge the ‘private experiences’ as becoming ‘universal’ because of their sheer intensity. Such affirmation propels us to locate similar possible alternatives of creating histories. The interplay of the reader and the author in such intense samples of autobiographical narratives brings out the best in both the participants. While the dead is made alive, the living passes through death. It is this temporary experience of death in life and life in death that retains the potential for the novel history. A thorough reading of literature through the lines peculiarly remains the most holistic option for the scholars or readers for it must be accepted that a particularly blind interpretation of the documents can barely ensure absolute justice to the historiography bespeaking of genocide or any other kinds of human catastrophe.

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