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MEMORY, TRAUMA AND HISTORY IN SVETLANA ALEXIEVICH: A THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

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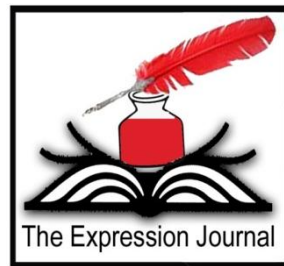
Abstract

Traumatic memories are the memories which get foregrounded when human understanding responds to individual and collective traumas. The literary representation of trauma and memory entails a “crisis of representation” that becomes a historical crisis in cases where memory is the only witness to the trauma under censored history writing. As such, historical narratives and literary narratives based on historical events can be re-read and reinterpreted by enhancing historical discourses through a reading of traumatic memories. The Belarussian writer Svetlana Alexievich foregrounds the complexity of the memory processes and addresses traumatic memories in her work. Her narratives weave individual and collective memories of trauma as a reading of the socio-psychological milieu of the Soviet Union that spans different historical traumas that the Soviets were subjected to. The paper presents an overview of the interplay between memory, trauma and history as Alexievich intertwines them in her works.

Keywords

Alexievich, Historical Narratives, Memory, Trauma, Traumatic Memories.

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Introduction:

Trauma theory has become a key area of study within literary theory since it emerged on the scene during the 1990s. With insights from psychology, neuroscience, history and other fields of enquiry, trauma theory today has branched into an important field of enquiry in literary and cultural studies. The term 'trauma theory' in literary studies appeared in Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), and since then there has been a proliferation of the use of this lens in approaching literary texts. Caruth defines trauma as an experience that becomes "unclaimed" but despite being left awry, unclaimed and suppressed by the conscious mind, it reveals the need "to represent the other within the self that retains the memory of the "unwitting" traumatic events of one's past." (*Unclaimed*, pp. 8). In this context, trauma becomes a vehicle to uncover the repressed or traumatic memories which could in themselves hold substantially nuanced perspectives and shed fresh light on the past.

The recollection of trauma is situated in the recollection of the memory of trauma which unlike other memories does not form a linear and unproblematic memory. For Caruth too, "Perhaps the most striking feature of traumatic recollection is the fact that it is not a simple memory" (*Trauma*, pp.151). The problematization of traumatic memories stems from the fact that by their very nature they refuse to be incorporated linearly into the memory systems. Therefore, trauma and memory become deeply intertwined concepts as trauma works through memory itself. Trauma has become a critical marker for memory studies, and debates on trauma and memory are becoming crucial to the academic understanding of both reciprocally. Both attempt to unravel the core human cognitive abilities that, despite attempts by psychoanalysis or even neuroscience to map them, cannot be objectively described or narrativized.

Apart from memory studies, trauma theory has also become a useful tool for the psychoanalytic unravelling of historical narratives. It has analysed narratives lost to official histories which talk about factual histories. For example, the quantitative measures of deaths and injuries and other losses in large historical tragedies like wars that are given a historical quantifiable measure are now re-read also for the psychological pain and unquantifiable trauma and grief. The ensuing suffering becomes a reading text and the listening act for the

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discourse of the past. Dominick La Capra, who wrote about history and trauma rightly, points out:

“It is astonishing how little historians recognize the significance of individual and collective trauma even when they write of events and processes in which it is prevalent, such as genocides, wars, rape, and various forms of victimization and abuse both of humans and of other animals. It is more difficult to document psychic trauma or post traumatic effects than it is to count numbers of dead or wounded” (LaCapra, Preface ix-x).

Thus, trauma theory has become especially relevant as it attempts to bring out historical violence and structural traumas of larger historical moments of trauma. The psychological dilemmas of history writing and a reimagination of history can be sought through readings of trauma and memory in their individual and collective manifestations. Political and historical studies that shed light on violence can be brought to deeper scrutiny by reading received narratives through the lens of trauma. As Michael Humprey says in *The Politics Of Trauma*, “The idea of trauma has become a key theme in contemporary politics because of the way it brings violence to the surface of history”. Therefore, the trauma narratives of pain and grief are being re-read and they can become complex texts that reveal more. Texts previously deemed mere emotional outbursts become case readings in trauma studies.

The experiencing of trauma may be an individual experience but it also becomes a collective experience. The collective memories arising out of the collective traumas create a shift in the group’s identity. An event’s perception and discourse get profoundly impacted by the public myth surrounding it. The public discourse transforms into the collective memory of the event. Any analysis to study or deconstruct historical memory necessarily takes recourse to the collective memory. It becomes a way to inform a group’s collective identity as it provides for the overarching myths that inform the collective experiences. Ron Eyerman notes, “Collective memory unifies the group through time and over space by providing a narrative frame, a collective story, which locates the individual and his and her biography within it, and which, because it can be represented as narrative and as text, attains mobility” (pp. 25). The impact of the traumatic experience shapes the whole discourse of the group as a victim and very few times even of the perpetrators.

The Soviet Union becomes an interesting case study for studies of trauma and memory. The many countries of the erstwhile USSR had their experiences, especially with Stalin-era Soviet Union. The many atrocities, the primary image being the Gulags and Stalin’s terror. Known for her unique literary method, Svetlana Alexievich wrote about many such traumatic histories. Alexievich was born in Ivano-Frankivsk in 1948. The majority of her life has been spent in the Soviet Union and modern-day Belarus, with extended periods of exile in Western Europe. She studied journalism and began her career as a journalist before going on to create her own books where she uses oral storytelling via interviews. Her unique non-fiction genre assembles a chorus of voices to describe a certain historical period or event via interviews with people who lived through them. Her works include *Chernobyl Prayer* (1997), *Boys in Zinc* (1991), *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1985), *Last Witnesses* (1985), and *Second-Hand Time* (2013). She has received numerous accolades from throughout the world, including the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature.

Alexievich’s works cover deeper explorations of traumatic memories of individuals in different historical moments spanning historical tragedies such as World War II to the

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environmental disasters of Chernobyl. Trauma and memory are intertwined in Alexievich and become tools for her to explore her subjects and their histories. For Alexievich, memories, especially traumatic memories become critical markers and both memory and trauma remain a fundamental concern. Memories of war, of repressions of the Soviet experience of Communism etc., inform her poetics at a deeper thematic level. Her attempt is to put forth the inherent complexity of such traumatic memories. Her characters often present their own doubts about their past. Their memories are questionable, as traumatic memories ought to be, but through this apparent chaos of memory, she highlights the trauma that manifests itself because of such confusion. Memories of violence and large-scale traumatizing events become crucial makers or “memory sites”. For Alexievich, the historical moments of the Soviet Union such as the World War II, the Soviet-Afghan war, Chernobyl, and the fall of the Soviet Union become these “memory sites” from which each of her books speaks. Memories of individuals for Alexievich become case histories of an era and a memory site.

Through Alexievich’s interviews and witness narratives, a polyphonic narrative takes shape that voices the traumas of different historical moments. The multiple voices of the interviewees showcase an entire era and its different people who came from the same era but lived and continue to live with different memories and thus different traumas. Alexievich’s polyphonic narrative, however, showcases many paradoxes. As each character tells their own story, each has his/her own relationship with their trauma and thus their memory. This becomes peculiar especially when the case of collective historical memory is highlighted. The memories of trauma remain not just individual occurrences but in the case of Alexievich, they become collective memories. While each interview presents its own nuances, a shared sense of collective memories and thus collective trauma also gets reflected. A portrayal of the collective memories of the traumatised individuals is revealed.

Alexievich’s work is more representative of traumatic experiences because it does not attempt to speak for or personify the traumas of characters but rather just explicates the narratives of individuals and lets us perform our own analysis of what each voice means. Each character is a whole story in and of itself, there is also no seemingly singular political or moral standpoint that Alexievich is trying to push the reader towards in this river of voices. She just lays bare the multiple complexities that each individual has, even when no two people feel the same collective trauma in a similar way.

Representing the past, especially a traumatic past bears a complex burden. Individual memories of historical moments do not find ample space in history writing and even collective historical memory often becomes synonymous with the memory of the state. Alexievich questions the historical memory, in her works where individual memory and collective memory of the state clash with each other, that site is where the grand narratives of collective remembrance give way to real individual stories or truths which never found a way out. The Soviet repression, thought control apparatus and other propaganda tools are now well-researched. A crucial aspect of ideological repression was the mass censorship of writing.

Literature was left to the mercy of the writers who were approved by the Soviet regime. Many writers had to flee the Soviet Union or get published underground. As Svetlana Alexievich’s interviews in her books reveal, the Soviet people were so fond of reading that many described to her the desperate need to get their hands on books even when they had little to eat. Writers on the other hand were subject to cruel censorship which in turn led to many events being significantly lost. When the political state attempts to obliterate the narratives it dislikes, the memory becomes the site where a direct confrontation with political

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authority occurs both at the individual and at the social level. Where history writing is censored memories of individuals hold a redemptive value.

The little information that people of the Soviet Union had about their leadership is also presented in the many interviews. As one of her interviewees describes her memories, she says "Now, on TV, they show you things like...My images are different...My memories aren't like the photos..." (*Second-hand Time*, pp.147). So clearly a witness is narrating history, a history which is very different from the history being televised. Here and in numerous other instances, we see memories of witnesses becoming counter-narratives to state history writing. She begins her book on the Chernobyl Nuclear Disaster, *Chernobyl Prayer* with "Some historical Background" where she details about the incident's journalistic historicity before moving on to look at the incident from the perspective of the victim's memory. She describes through her interviews the tragic tales of radiation exposure and the human suffering that ensued and the narratives become the revelation of trauma through the memories of traumatic historical events. Each individual tells their story through their memory. The past is reconstructed by each individual through their own perspective on memory. Despite everything, the wars, and the other catastrophes no one can really be told what to remember and what to forget.

Conclusion:

Reading and analysing a trauma discourse in the literary and cultural narratives of historical eras becomes a revisionary re-reading of histories. This also becomes relevant to understand the embedded socio-political legacy inherent in any social discourse surrounding trauma. A lens informed with trauma brings out the tragic human cost of pain more to the surface. Therefore, Alexievich's narratives reveal traumatic memories as crucial representations of history and of trauma. Through writing about and also through traumatic memory, her interviews explicate how collective memory and collective trauma can become under structures of history writing and can be used as tools to further understand both history and its traumas.

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