

Call for Papers

3-day International Seminar

on

*Literature and Trauma Studies:
Theory, Narrative and Representation*

from

26-28 March 2019

The contemporary world is replete with conflicts and the temporal fabric of its history is riddled with violence. The two World Wars, the Holocaust, the Partition of the subcontinent of India in 1947, several wars with China and Pakistan, chemical attacks on innocent citizens in Syria, the Arab Spring, the refugee crises, brutalities against the Rohingyas, secessionist movements that are stifled with brute state force, communal riots and lynchings are some of the traumatic experiences that form a part of the collective memories of communities living in the world. These events have impacted the formation of cultural and collective identities, further compounded by their continuing intergenerational aftereffects.

According to Cathy Caruth, any encounter with/ experience of a violent and gruesome event splits the survivor/witness into two selves: the conscious and the dissociated. The images of the actual event, however, sink into the dissociated self to raise their head in the form of nightmares, flashbacks and other psychological intrusions with all their literality and exactness. Derrida's 'hauntology' points to something similar. It describes ontological disjointedness as a result of the apparent presence of being replaced by a deferred non-origin that makes it almost impossible to locate the origin of history or identity. Using the metaphor of a ghost, Derrida describes "haunting as the state proper to being as such." Since trauma too exists in the past, it can be represented by "the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive." While Derrida's reference to linguistic disparity between the past and present helps expound the challenge of incomprehensibility inherent in trauma, Freud is seen taking recourse to the fragility of memory. According to him, memories masquerade as thoughts, feelings, and images but never truly as themselves. They may therefore range on a continuum between relatively meaningless to consciousness-overwhelming vivid remembrances of the past. Memories are therefore alive, independent sometimes alien and occasionally dangerous representations of the past that may either overwhelm one with their intensity or do the exact opposite and lead to contentment. All this leads not only to a questioning of the veracity of traumatic experiences that remain inaccessible to the cognitive sequence of events and active recollection but also diminishes the intensity of the individual traumatic experience when verbalized and mediated. Therefore, trauma as a subject of scientific study poses a challenge to the psychoanalyst in trying to evince information regarding the event as it actually occurred. In this attempt, the psychoanalyst tends to depart from the truth and this proves the failure of psychoanalysis in grappling with trauma.

Silence also insidiously wriggles its way between violence and trauma. It intensifies the impact of the trauma which then goes unwitnessed, unspoken and unclaimed. It acts as an impediment to grieving considered to be necessary to heal the traumatic event. For example, the lack of memorialization practices, such as museums and statues, around the event of the Partition implies a deliberate attempt not to revisit the traumatic past. Apart from the apathy of the states, many survivors of Partition violence preferred silence to articulation as noted by Urvashi Butalia, who compiled oral narratives of the partition survivors in *The Other Side of Silence*. Similarly, in cases of violence against women, silence remains more or less the norm despite the rampant awareness about the frequency and consequences of crimes like rape, domestic violence, sexual harassment at home or workplace, child sexual abuse etc.

However, recently in many parts of the globe women have spoken about their sexual harassment by powerful men at workplaces. Thus repression over a period of time has led to an unprecedented reprisal as evidenced in the '#MeToo' movement. Many argue that the

decision of women to break their silence after so many years has been enabled by social media. This argument is consistent with Judith Herman's observation that trauma narratives require a conducive political climate for articulation.

Literature, undoubtedly, surpasses psychoanalysis in engaging with experiences that are necessarily and inherently incomprehensible. One such instance is Toni Morrison's *Beloved* which reflects the impossibility of getting at the truth of the traumatic event through the loss of linguistic and epistemological control in its narrative technique. The fragmented monologues of the novel capture adequately the trauma of slavery and its impact on intergenerational identity and behaviour. All major trauma theorists –Sigmund Freud, Judith Herman, Cathy Caruth, Soshana Felman and Dominick LaCapra—put their faith in literature since its representation of trauma helps in avoiding the distortion of traumatic events. This ongoing interaction between literature and trauma studies underscored by Anne Whitehead has led to the emergence of the relatively new genre of trauma fiction. Trauma fiction strengthens the systematic framework to trauma studies put forth by Cathy Caruth, Soshana Felman and several others to salvage literature from the ethical sterility/malaise of the post-structuralist ontological paradigm. Trauma fiction not only dramatizes the experiences of the survivors but also provides for the cathartic effect of rehabilitation of trauma victims and community healing. The former is achieved through the restoration of the dignity of the victims and the latter by raising consciousness of the public.

While Durkheim's theory of 'collective consciousness' explains how individual trauma takes on a cultural dimension through language, Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'post memory' implies the transmission of traumatic memories from witness generations to subsequent generations through stories, photographs, behavioural patterns that they assimilate during their lives. Both concepts highlight how stories of individual trauma enter into the cultural space and eventually become an integral part of cultural discourse. This calls for interrogating and revisiting memory, historiography and, of course, identity. Challenging the intransigent official denial and/or repression of traumatic memories, Trauma fiction offers alternative histories to nationalistic metanarratives and thus contests dominant historical discourses.

The present seminar serves as a platform to explore the collective dimensions of traumatic events right from the beginning of this century which caused violent disruption in community cohesion and solidarity. It gains significance in the light of the new wars, new forms of exploitation, modern variants of slavery and the surfacing of domestic and sexual violence. It can help examine the intersections between history, politics, culture and literature for the configuration of a healthier society and explore individuals' encounter with trauma across cultures.

The proposed seminar hopes to address the following themes in addition to the ones outlined above:

- The development of Trauma Studies as an independent area of research, and a critical examination of its fundamental tenets.
- The close affinity of Literature with Trauma Studies for understanding literature as a creative medium for representing trauma and for reworking collective memory and identity formation.

- The representational modalities that writers employ to render the violence of the two world wars, the Holocaust, Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the atrocities on the Syrians, the large-scale displacement of Arab refugees, the Partition of the subcontinent, communal riots and lynchings.
- The fundamental characteristics of traumatic experiences and the referential and representational problematic in rendering these experiences in literature.
- To examine how Trauma fiction contests dominant historical discourse by providing alternative histories.
- The intersections between trauma studies, postcolonialism and feminism to understand the cultural dimensions of individuals' encounter with trauma across cultures and genders.
- The Eurocentric bias of Trauma Studies and the subsequent success/failure of the Theory of Trauma to live up to its promise of cross-cultural engagements.

Venue: The seminar will be held at the University of Kashmir which is 10 Kms from the main city, Srinagar. Kashmir is linked through road from Jammu and up to Jammu by train, road and air. It has several low-priced flights from Jammu and Delhi. Participants are required to book their tickets well in advance so that they reach Srinagar on 25 March and leave by 29 March. Participants coming from outside Delhi/Jammu will be paid train/bus fare from their home towns to Delhi/Jammu on the production of tickets.

Foreign Delegates: Participants outside India shall be provided airfare to and fro from within India to Srinagar. The department will also be responsible for their accommodation in the University Guest House.

Accommodation: As far as possible, participants will be accommodated in the University Guest House and on shared basis. TA/DA to University/College teachers will be paid as per the University rules. There is no room for spouses to be accommodated. *Research Scholars* desirous of participating will have to fend for themselves.

Food: Participants will have breakfast and dinner at the Guest House itself. However, lunch will be served at the Seminar venue which will contain both vegetarian and non-vegetarian items.

Climate: Kashmir can be slightly cold in March. Outstation participants must carry warm clothing with them.

Presentations: Research papers are invited from scholars. An abstract of not more than 200 words should be sent to the seminar director, Professor Lily Want, by post or by email at lilywant@yahoo.co.in by 1 February 2019. Full papers should be emailed by 28 February 2019. No submissions will be accepted after this date. All submissions should be original having a certificate attached that the paper has not been presented in any seminar before and/or published in any journal within and outside India.

Each participant will be given 20 minutes for presentation which will be followed by discussion for about 10 minutes. Registration Fee of Rs. 2000/- by way of a DD drawn in favour of the Head, Department of English must be send by post along with the full paper by 28 February 2019.

For queries write/contact:

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