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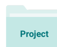


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# DOCUMENTING PAIN: DISRUPTING MINDS

Emelia Noronha*

## ABSTRACT

*Pain and misery is found universally, the intensity may differ; the methodology of infliction may vary and the victims – heterogeneous. But traumatic experiences disrupt all those who come in contact with it. This paper tries to understand the affect of the visual documentation of trauma in an attempt to give 'others' a worldview of reality; the so-called 'slice of life'. This paper attempts to critically analyze the impact of the photograph or images on all those engaged in the production and the consumption of the document. The concept of the 'gaze' is crucial in understanding this process.*

**Keywords:** *trauma, photograph, gaze, voyeur.*

Trauma relates to any deeply distressing or disturbing experience; from the psychological perspective, an event is designated as traumatic "if (a) an individual's perception of the events results in negative consequences (i.e. physical pain, injury, or death), (b) he or she perceives the sudden onset of the event as an immediate threat, and (c) the individual perceives the event as out of his or her control" (Johnson et al., 2012, p.103). Whereas, from the sociological perspective, situations such as war, famine, natural disasters, etc. that threaten "safety, attachment, justice, existential meaning, and identity /role" often result in traumatic experiences (Johnson et al., 2012, p.103). For Caruth (1996), trauma is "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomenon" (p.11). Works of fiction, verse and dramatic renditions abound in the portrayal of traumatic experiences that endeavour to bear witness to the pain and suffering borne by either individuals or are testimonies of collective trauma. But the problem with capturing one's pain is an elusive one. Laub (1995) talks of three distinct levels of witnessing, with reference to the Holocaust, – firstly the writer being witness to the painful experience; secondly participation in witnessing the accounts given by the "real" first-hand witnesses, thereby experiencing the trauma at a second level as an interviewer; and the third most important, "the process of witnessing is itself being witnessed" (p.62).

Literary narratives have the potential to be powerful first person testimonies of suffering that survive for the benefit of posterity. But the problem of penning down the testimony is a tremendous psychological warfare. Balaev (2012) reiterates this fact that registering of trauma is not done adequately by the memory thereby leading to a fragmentation of sense of self and "producing a type of memory with pathological symptoms in which the experience is inaccessibly frozen and unrepresentable" (p.xiii). On the other hand, Balaev (2012) asserts that for pluralistic models of trauma memory is fluid and engages in selective processes of interpretation; therefore remembering "can be influenced by multiple internal and external factors such as individual personality traits, family history, culture, geographic location, place, and historical period that shape the meaning an experience" (p.xiv). Thus the process of interpreting and evaluating the experience is a complex process.

Baer in *Spectral Evidence* brings together trauma theory and the importance of the photographic image. For Baer (2002) photographs "beckon viewers to interpret them, trigger narrative impulses, invite us to make sense by treating each shot as a building- block in a longer story. . .

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Photographs can capture the shrapnel of traumatic time" (pp. 6 - 7). This paper critically looks at visual documentation of trauma and its impact on the subjects involved in its production and consumption. Baer (2002) notes, "photography, with the camera as totemic object of all that is disastrous in modernity, not only reveals the world's inherently fractured constitution but, in fact, causes the world to shatter" (p.8) and this is evident in the case of Kevin Carter the veteran war photo-journalist who won the world famous Pulitzer Prize in 1994 for the photo of a vulture perching near a Sudanese girl collapsing from hunger; a picture that became an "icon of starvation" (Kleinman, 1997, p.4). The consumers of the photograph questioned Carter of his ethics and morality – whether he had helped the little girl by shooing off the vulture and helping her survive the famine or had he merely used the situation to aid his professional commitment of documenting the harsh realities of the famine as an 'outsider'. This corroborates with Baer's contention that behind every photograph is the suggestion that the scene depicted is not merely an event, but "an experience that someone lived through." Therefore the startling effect of the impending danger is thereby questioned. The photograph, the document that has captured the trauma unnerves and startles the viewer who is witness to the trauma, albeit the affect is deferred. We are not sure if the subject photographed, the little girl, will be in a position to tell the tale of her trauma. Through the photograph the traumatic experience reached a great number of subjects unrelated to the historic experience, thereby managing to recreate the trauma at multiple levels. The editor of *The New York Times*, "mindful of readers' sensitivities, published a note on the fate of the girl: 'Mr. Carter said she resumed her trek to the feeding center [and] he chased away the vulture'. This seems like wishful thinking . . . a piece in the *Guardian* reported no such intervention" (Taylor, 1998, p.135).The suicide of Kevin Carter on 24 July 1994, barely few months after receiving the prized award shook the media fraternity. Trauma had worked its way and victimized the witness. "The cumulative effect is devastating" (Sontag, 2004, p.42); one can only say, "Bringing home the first hand evidence of mass suffering can have a destructive effect on the messenger" (Taylor, 1998, p.135). Voicing the stream of thought in Ken Oosterbroek's mind, when shot accidently by a bullet, while documenting the South African apartheid movement for *The New York Times*, are the following lines: "Suddenly a sensation of utter calm washed over me. This was it. I had paid my dues. I had atoned for the dozens of close calls that always left someone else injured or dead, while I emerged from the scenes of mayhem unscathed, pictures in hand having committed the crime of being the lucky voyeur" (Marinovich, 2001, p.2). Thus trauma takes a heavy toll on its witness, irrespective of whether the witness is primary or secondary.

Caruth (1995) clarifies that trauma may not traumatize everyone equally, the "structure of its experience or reception" may differ, "not be assimilated or experienced fully at the time but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it"(p.4). Traumatic experiences when kept bottled up may be more harmful as they become bearers of trauma. The world famous photograph of Sharbat Gula, who at the age of 12 became the face of the Afghan terror, published on the cover of *National Geographic* in June 1985, is a case worthy of analysis. Sharbat Gula's piercing green eyes mesmerized the educated, democratic, "outsider" world that was trying to understand the turmoil of war in Afghanistan. The fixed "gaze" of the questioning green eyes pierces the "gaze" of the onlooker. To "gaze", implies "more than to look at – it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze" (Schroeder, 2005, p.58). The concept of "gaze" first introduced by Lacan and later by film theorists extensively, is a concept that opens up varied levels of transactions between the spectator/reader/viewer/audience and the figure upon which it is transfixed. Feminists have used it extensively to map the politics of power that emanate through the male gaze. When the viewers engage with Sharbat Gula's photograph, one can feel the eyes uncannily staring back at us, our sense of empty pride of trying to decipher her, mirroring our emptiness, our lack, or as Lacan more precisely states referring to *The Ambassadors* of Hans Holbein, it "reflects our own nothingness" (Lacan, 1998, p.92).

Recent writers too insist on turning the gaze upon ourselves, as viewers/spectators/voyeurs so that we "see" ourselves as we gaze. The identity of the person engaging in the gaze is very crucial as it relates to the identity of the one who engages in the gaze and the object of the gaze. "The concept of the gaze connects what is looked at with who is doing the looking, the aesthetic with the political, and the

internal contents of photographs with the external world" (Schroeder, 2005, p.59), whereas, "The rest of us are voyeurs, whether or not we mean to be" (Sontag, 2004, p.42).The haunting/haunted green eyes of Sharbat Gula are akin to the gaze of the woman in the photograph titled 'Sharecropper's wife' discussed by Olin (1996), "Even before we begin to gaze: when we look at the image we look at the woman. Just as important the woman in the image appears to look back at us" (p.320). Sharbat Gula seems to question the stranger's authority, right and audacity of shoving the camera at her face and capturing her, though we are told that the photographer, Steve McCurry, took her permission before taking her picture.

Years later, after much hardship, Sharbat Gula was arrested in Pakistan; was detained for two weeks, facing up to 14 years of imprisonment and a fine of 5,000 dollars. Her well known face was the culprit as she was made the pawn to shame the Afghanistan government (Levangie, 2018). Caught between the power politics of the two countries, because of her popularity, she became, "a symbol to Afghans and also a symbol to Pakistan . . . The way she was parading in front of the media by Pakistan felt like humiliation of the Afghan Government: Here is this woman who had to flee your country for ours. The Afghanistan government responded by ostentatiously welcoming her back. The message was: We can take care of our own people" (Newman, 2002).

"The gaze it seems destroys" (Olin, 1996, p.324) and this is evident in the case of Qutubuddin Ansari, who was photographed during the Gujarat Riots of 2002. In the photograph, he stood pleading with folded hands, his light checked shirt stained with dried blood, and his faintly bloodshot eyes, "a disturbing study of fear and helplessness" became the defining image of the communal post-Godhra riots that led to looting, killing and arson in Gujarat in March 2002 (Biswas, 2012). The unsettling photo was splashed across all media, though the actual moment was a life saving one for Qutubuddin, his life later was never the same. The trauma of the horrendous atrocities that the state witnessed and the fear of the hapless victims captured by the photograph made it one of those images that "bypass painstaking attempts at contextualization and deliver, straight up and apparently across the gulf of time between viewer and photographically mummified past, a potent illusion of the real. The illusion of a slice of time . . ." (Baer, 2002, p.2). Ansari, like Sharbat Gula was haunted by the gaze that his photograph had garnered. After the riots having lost his anonymity, Ansari was haunted by the spectre of violence he was a witness to; people recognized him and did not empathise with him. The documentation of one traumatic moment of life had left him scarred forever. The fear until today stalks him in the Kafkaesque manner. Ansari confesses,

"I live in mortal fear of my face being identified . . . "I am recognised in the local buses, I feel there are people watching out for me. . . . I was terrified when two people pointed me out on the Ahmedabad AMTC Bus . . . I live a life of fear, in dread of being recognized" (Setalvad, 2003).

Mr. Arko Datta, the photographer, in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal,* reacting to the devastation caused by his photograph, stated, "I was only doing my job, but it does create difficulties also. . .You see so much pain, so many emotions and when you come back you aren't the same person you were before," (Sahni, 2012). Perhaps, the accumulated pain of others was too much for Kevin Carter to handle.

In the recent years the notion of collective trauma that is transmitted and experienced virtually, immediately, has been on the increase. The coverage of the 9/11 attack, the Mumbai Terror attack, the Covid 19 Pandemic, has managed to spread terror and fear in every soul thanks to the infiltration of the digital audio-visual mass media. In these circumstances, the trauma is witnessed by a heterogeneous audience. The persistent media commentaries on the traumatic events, the rescreening of images of the devastating events, keep fuelling the collective trauma of the masses. The Covid 19 pandemic that hit the entire world, and the sudden declaration of nationwide lockdown, left thousands of Indian migrants stuck in cities with no option but to walk back home. The media replete with stories of migrants trying varied ways of reaching home went viral via smart phones, further endorsed by television channels. The photograph of the youngster Yaqoob, sitting by the roadside cradling the head of a visibly ill Amrit, his friend, in his lap, (Sarkar, 2020) and the heart wrenching video clip of a little child on the Indian railway platform trying to wake its dead mother went viral on social media in May 2020 (Kumar, 2020). The viewers/voyeurs who were following the lockdown orders to "Stay Home, Stay Safe"; being glued to

their screens, constantly consumed and forwarded theses videos, photographs and stories of the migrants attempting to reach 'home'. The larger impact of the constant beaming of images of migrants walking/riding bicycles, carrying their ailing ones home, pushing their pregnant wives on makeshift carts, children being towed on suitcases, all images of devastated migrants trying to return home against all odds, meeting with tragedies as they plod their way home is yet to be studied. Smelser (2004) puts forth some of the following implications of the September 11 trauma, "reaction of shock, disbelief, and emotional numbing, . . . fear, anxiety, terror, and some evidence of mental disturbances . . . the widespread feeling that year 2001 was a scarred or ruined year, that the world must be regarded as having a pre-September 11 and post-September 11 reality" (p. 266) seems to be repeated this year, 2020, due to Covid 19 Pandemic. We hear cries of distress from all over regarding the year being a doomed year and that the world would be certainly different in the post Covid era from the pre Covid era. Since we are in "media res" it is difficult to grasp the intensity of the trauma inflicted upon the witnesses of the pandemic; no one is spared the privilege of not being affected by the fear that has spread its tentacles directly or indirectly. Whether one would be sucked into the "trauma vortex" or negotiate ones way precariously to the "healing vortex" (Levine, 1997), time will only tell.

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