On Horror and Helplessness
After Peshawar

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The horror of contemporary terror attacks and warfare is the conjoining of vulnerability with helplessness. What contemporary horror achieves is the utter and complete annihilation of the structures that constitute the sustaining world of the truly helpless.

The nature of both war and terrorism has shifted in radical and horrific ways: Malala Yousafzai shot in the head at point-blank range for going to school, Boko Haram kidnaps hundreds of school girls, Taliban mercenaries massacre 130+ schoolchildren in Peshawar and, preceding all this, innocent teenagers and young men arrested, incarcerated and tortured in Abu Ghraib in the “war on terror”. While ancient and modern wars have always targeted civilian populations — “collateral damage”, that nightmarish phrase that reduces human beings to “collateral” — there is a whole new ruthlessness manifest today in the above examples.

The shift in the nature of brutality has been summarised as a shift towards soft targets — civilian populations rather than just soldiers at the front. But this formulation seems woefully inadequate to describe the kind of atrocity perpetrated on the war on terror’s bombing of refugee camps and International Red Cross facilities, Boko Haram’s kidnappings of girls and the newest instance, the Peshawar killings.

There are four key points I wish to make here.

Structural Helplessness

My first point has to do with the making of structural helplessness. The philosopher Adriana Cavarero proposes a point that while all humans are vulnerable, some are helpless: the disabled, the old and children. The helpless is the one who is “awaiting care, and has no means to defend itself against wounding” (2011: 20).

The horror of contemporary terror attacks and warfare is the conjoining of vulnerability with helplessness. Vulnerability is a biological condition, the result of our corporeal nature that makes it possible for us to be open to injury (“vulnerability” comes from “vulnus,” meaning “to wound”). That we are all equally vulnerable in the age of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction — not all of which are owned by totalitarian regimes, as the United States (US) would have us believe — is a truism. It is no longer biological vulnerability that is the focus, but helplessness. Soldiers in war are vulnerable, not helpless, but schoolchildren are both vulnerable and helpless, and contemporary horror has shifted its attention to the latter condition.

Cavarero reminds us that it is “only in the newborn, where the vulnerable and the defenceless are one and the same” (Cavarero 2011:20). But the defenceless are the ones who need active care, whose constitutive relationship with the world is one of dependency. This dependency generates trust, a certain faith that “things will be taken care of” — embodied in the child’s confidence that, when thrown up in the air, the adult will catch her/him, the child with the hand clasping the adult’s as they cross the road, the child looking neither left nor right, assuming that is the adult’s job. Contemporary horror destroys this sense of a dependable world by tearing apart the constitutive relationship the child has with the environment. The school, in the case of Boko Haram, Malala and now Peshawar, earlier the dependable environment where “things are taken care of” becomes the site of vulnerability. That is, the school becomes the site of structural helplessness, where the inhabitants are rendered open to injury, maiming and death. The locus amoenus (literally, the “space of amenity”) where socialisation
and trust are first nurtured in children, becomes the site of helplessness, as evidenced by the children in Peshawar.

The true horror of the school massacres and kidnappings is the making of structural helplessness through the inversion of the scene of socialisation and trust into the site of death and wounding.

**Fungibility of Victimhood**

The second point, not unrelated to the above, has to do with what Judith Butler has spoken of as the shared precarity of contemporary lives (2004, 2009). The “precariousness of a body’s generalised condition relies on a conception of the body as fundamentally dependent on, and conditioned by a sustained and sustainable world,” writes Butler (2009: 34). What is now established is that for the helpless, such as the girls kidnapped by Boko Haram, the young soldiers of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam some years ago, the adolescents picked up by American soldiers in Baghdad and now the schoolchildren in Peshawar, there is no (and will not be a) sustainable world. This shift has nothing to do with natural disasters that reshape their environs in fundamental ways. Rather the shift is related to human intervention in the structures around them, physical (buildings), social (relationships) and psychological (witnessing atrocity, to which I shall return later).

What contemporary horror achieves is the utter and complete annihilation of the structures that constitute the sustaining world of the truly helpless. Butler makes the point that survival depends on the “constitutive sociality of the body” (2009: 54). But in the case of the examples I have cited this is precisely what is overturned: the constitutive sociality of the body is simply a constitutive precariousness. In Peshawar, school teachers, surrogate parents to the children in the school, guardians and carers, were burnt to death before the eyes of the children. Children who witnessed their classmates or siblings being kidnapped, beaten or killed, those who understand the nature of the threat (being shot for going to school, the impossibility of being an adolescent male in a Baghdad occupied by the US troops, the danger of being a girl child in north-east Nigeria) discover the fungibility of victimhood: “I am, or might be, next.” This fungibility of victimhood now becomes the constitutive relationship the helpless has with the world. Fungibility is also a desired objective, one could say, of those seeking to instil terror.

My third point has to do with the survivors of such heinous acts. Every act of kidnapping, arrest, maiming or murder is a form of horrific communication, from those who terrorise and those who are terrorised. Malala’s friends who saw her being shot, those who witnessed the Boko Haram kidnappings and the children in Peshawar who saw their classmates massacred received a message in the violent act. Not only did they discover their own fungibility but they are also now in the position of bearing witness. “Eye-witnessing” is the result of being physically present at the time and place of an event, while “bearing witness” is about “a truth about humanity and suffering that transcends those facts” (Oliver 2004: 80), about interpreting an extreme or horrific event, about bearing witness to the unspeakable. The child-witness to these events will now be forced to carry the burden of understanding not only her or his fungibility, but also to the inverted nature of their historical position and constitutive sociality with the world — from dependency to structural helplessness. The bewilderment or shock at the sights they witness merges with the recognition of their vulnerability and the utter absence of a sustainable world. This too is the nature of contemporary horror.

Cavarero argues that what makes contemporary war and terrorism “unwatchable” is the sight of (1) prolonged, excruciating suffering and (2) the dismembered bodies. This brings me to my fourth and final point. The events around Abu Ghraib, Boko Haram and Peshawar do not gesture only at senseless violence, but at the extended, extendible and continuing trauma in the lives of the helpless. The events are not singularities within the time and space, but prolonged in terms of complete absence of knowledge as to what happened to the kidnapped and the incarcerated, the tortured and the “disappeared.”

As the protesters of the Argentinian disappeared, the “Mothers of the Disappeared,” there has been no finality, have repeatedly drawn our attention no closure to the continuing trauma of the 1970s and 1980s. As writers such as Alicia Portnow (The Little School) and Lawrence Thornton (Imagining Argentina) have noted, the trauma is without end.

The events cited here could constitute, therefore, a new era in contextualising childhood studies, but also a shift in our perception of what true horror really means. True horror, as evidenced by Abu Ghraib, north-east Nigeria and most recently Peshawar, is when man-made forces conjoin natural vulnerability to socially-crafted helplessness.

**REFERENCES**


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**EPW Index**

An author-title index for EPW has been prepared for the years from 1968 to 2012. The PDFs of the Index have been uploaded, year-wise, on the EPW website. Visitors can download the Index for all the years from the site. (The Index for a few years is yet to be prepared and will be uploaded when ready.)

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