SOUTH ASIAN REVIEW

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SOUTH ASIAN REVIEW

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South Asian Review, a fully refereed journal, welcomes submissions on all aspects of South Asian literatures, arts, and culture from any theoretical or critical perspective. Articles, which are meant for an audience from various disciplines, are to be written in clear and persuasive prose. Manuscripts, ranging between fifteen and twenty-five pages of double-spaced text, should be prepared in accordance with the latest edition of the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers. Articles can be sent by mail or transmitted electronically.

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Trauma, Testimony, and Human Rights:  
Women’s Atrocity Narratives from Postcolonial India

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In the course of their groundbreaking work on narratives and human rights, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith suggest that personal and collective storytelling can become a means for people to “claim new identities and assert their participation in the public sphere” (19). Further, in what is an important move for genre studies, Schaffer and Smith propose that published life narratives are only one site of personal storytelling and that such narratives can also include collections of testitimonies, reports, and other such “forms” (32, 35). This essay reads a variety of women’s life writing from India as atrocity narratives that deal with individual and collective trauma and act as witnesses of oppressive social structures before emerging as narratives that call for and assert agency and advocacy. These are, I argue, less victim narratives than survivor tales that demand what Schaffer and Smith term an “ethics of recognition” by altering the configurations of the public sphere itself, intervening in the very notion of the social and the political through their archive of trauma. My texts are the autobiographical memoir of a Dalit woman (Bama’s Karukku), the memoir of a sex worker (Nalini Jameela’s Autobiogrophy of a Sex Worker), the memoir of a domestic worker (Baby Halder’s A Life Less Ordinary), and accounts of female victims of domestic abuse (Rinki Bhattacharya’s Behind Closed Doors).

Focusing on a variety of genres—life writing, accounts collated by activists, interviews, and reports—and grouping them under the rubric of the “atrocity narrative,” I propose a framework for reading them. Admittedly, these narratives have been produced, circulated, and consumed in particular historical, political, and cultural contexts—the
Dalit movement, NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) work with disenfranchised people, the attempted unionization of the unorganized sector (of domestic servants, for instance), and affirmative action for Dalits and disempowered groups, among others. To place a Dalit woman’s autobiography (such as Bama’s) on the same plane as Karuna’s account of domestic violence (recorded by Rinki Bhattacharya) and the memoir of a sex worker in Kerala (Nalini Jameela’s) might run the risk of erasing very different particularities. Class, regional, linguistic, and caste differences inform their narratives, as do their access to a reading public, translations, and publishing. Each story-testimony is told at a different time and a different place, has its specific form, and therefore appeals differently. It is not the intention of this essay to elide such crucial class and social differences between the confident, economically stronger Jameela and the impoverished Halder. What this essay does, perhaps violently, is appeal to and examine a register of horror, oppression, anger, and trauma that resonates across all such writing. There exists, this essay assumes, a register of truth and trauma that is beyond the geographical, regional, or social category, a register one could (with trepidation) term “universal.”

In order to read such a register of trauma, this essay, drawing upon the work of Burns Weston, Richard Falk, Joseph Slaughter, and Anthony Langlois, assumes that human rights can only be theorized about and conceptualized after arriving at a universal and fundamental notion of human subjectivity and dignity. In the larger discourse of human rights, formal and informal networks of domains exist. These domains are “webs of alliances” (Schaffer and Smith 8) within and among varied groups—minorities, women, aborigines, environmentalists, and dispossessed communities. Networks of human rights discourses often work with connections between these people and transcend national, ethnic, racial, and gender categories. This essay locates atrocity narratives within such a larger network of narratives that demand justice. It recognizes that every story is very different. This also means regarding atrocity narratives as generating a comparative and comparable history of trauma where human rights and dignity have been denied to women from different backgrounds and in varied contexts.

Trauma and Narrative

Trauma serves as a useful critical-conceptual category for analyzing women's writing and experience even when the victims (or survivors) belong to different social and economic classes. Trauma, as theorized by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Cathy Caruth, and Anne Cuhil, takes specific forms of articulation, even when that articulation is silence. The understanding of trauma cannot be restricted to the psychology of the individual sufferer because it involves relevant social and cultural processes (Suárez-Orozco and Robben 1). My comparative history of trauma in the Indian women’s atrocity narrative focuses on specific domains in which the individual’s suffering, pain, and oppression are experienced and articulated but which are rooted in these larger social and cultural contexts and processes.

Childhood

Sobha Venkatesh Ghosh points out that for an inclusive understanding of domestic violence, we need to take into account the “very real practice of child and elder abuse within the home” (57). All atrocity narratives by women carry at least one section on childhood. The child, the epitome of the trauma victim, is at the center of the early sections of almost every narrative. Halder describes how her father abandoned the family for months on end when she was a child. Her record of the sufferings from this period explicitly links trauma with the father’s absence (1–4). When Halder—by now their mother has left the home for good—reports that there is no food in the house, he beats her up “so badly that it was three days before [she] could get up and many more before [she] felt able to go back to school again” (4–5). Years later, recalling her childhood, Halder mourns that she never received affection or appreciation in her father’s home (38–39, 41). Bama opens with an account of her childhood when she first was witness to the caste-based oppression in school and in the village (16–23). Jameela is a minor when she is first molested (11). Neela’s account of her childhood underscores how she was beaten every day by one or the other parent (Bhattacharya 141).

In each case, in addition to the physical abuse, the child undergoes emotional abuse. From the anxiety of financial distress in Halder’s childhood, an important trope in “emotional abuse” discourse (Shill 1678), to caste-determined discrimination in the case of Bama and both caste and poverty in the case of Jameela, who hails from a so-called lower caste, the child is a trauma victim. In other words, what we see in most of these cases—exceptions are women’s atrocity narratives that describe a pleasant childhood but a traumatic marriage—is a personal continuum of suffering extending from childhood to adult life.

The Body of Suffering

The extent and intensity of suffering can arguably best be captured via what Michael Rothberg refers to as “traumatic realism,” a rhetorical form that covers both the production of the atrocity narrative and its consumption where it disorients the readers. This traumatic realism focuses, first and foremost, upon the body, for “trauma” in the original
Pramod K. Nayar

Greek sense of the term means injury inflicted on the body. This realism relies on intensification—of suffering, hunger, pain, and abuse. Bama opens her preface with a corporeal analogy:

Not only did I pick up the scattered palmyra karikkā [a kind of leaf with spikes] in the days when I was sent out to gather firewood, scratching and tearing my skin as I played with them... The driving forces that shaped this book are many: events that occurred during my stages of life, cutting me like karikkā and making me bleed. (xii)

Bama’s first recognition of caste discrimination is based on a visual image: the difference in bodies. The upper-caste women, Bama notes, would pour out the water [for the Dalits to drink] from a height of four feet, while Paatti [her grandmother] and others received and drank it with cupped hands held to their mouths” (14). When she enters school and her classmates turn to look at her, an “untouchable,” lower-caste girl, she “wanted to shrink into [herself]” (17). On buses, Bama notes that other passengers found them too “gross,” and she recalls: “They look at us with the same look they would cast on someone suffering from a repulsive disease. Wherever we go we suffer blows. And pain” (24). Jameela discovers that her body is the center of hard labor, unwanted attention, and a possible locus of suffering when as a child she works in a clay mine (9) and later is groped by a teacher (11). She is beaten up by policemen (21–23), threatened by men she calls “bandits of Chambal” (24), and kidnapped by thugs (75–77). Halder, married off at the age of twelve, is forced to submit sexually to her husband and is severely traumatized as a result (37–38). Akash, Aruna, Bina, and practically every woman in Bhattacharya’s collection of domestic violence narratives record their beatings and torture at the hands of their husbands and in-laws.

The “body of suffering” here marks the woman’s “embodied subjectivity” (I adapt the term from Jeannine DeLombard, who used it when discussing the narrative of Frederick Douglass). The first recognition of their own marginalized subjectivity comes from the physical pain that their bodies experience. The absolute singularity of this pain is something all narrators try to capture and articulate. However, this trauma, I propose, is precisely what links all the women.

Transgenerational Trauma

Anne Cubillé has argued that “truth” in atrocity testimony exists in the interplay between the terrifying physical experiences the survivors relate and the things they had seen (242). Thus, the atrocity memoir shifts between intense personal, corporeal suffering and that of the community as a whole. Bama, having described her own individual suffering, locates this in a larger context when she describes the trembling, abused bodies of older Dalit men and women (14–15). Halder recounts how when her father was diagnosed with tuberculosis, her grandmother accused his wife, Halder’s stepmother, of being the cause (44).

The body of suffering in women’s atrocity narratives takes on another specific form: transgenerational trauma, identified by Ann Kaplan as a category (106). It is through this transgenerational linkage of suffering that the narrative suggests a commonality and a community of sufferers. Halder describes how her sister-in-law, ostracized within the family, toiled hard to make ends meet (76). Jameela is concerned that her young daughter, Zeenat, might be molested (51) and therefore focuses her efforts in securing a safe place for them both to reside. Bama, as already noted, witnesses her grandmother being insulted and abused for being a Dalit (14–15).

Transgenerational trauma at once frames (limits) and exceeds that of the individual. This trauma is predominantly cultural. It is the name for experiences of “socially situated political violence” (Cvetkovich 3). When Halder declares that it is always the “women who were judged differently” (80) or when Bina describes her sister-in-law’s suicide attempts as a result of harassment (Bhattacharya 86), we are asked to move beyond the singular narrative into a collective one. The suffering described in each of these cases is not simply inscribed upon the individual’s body but proceeds from a systemic condition and affects the social body of a community—Dalits and women, for example. This also means that to treat trauma as purely a psychological phenomenon from which a “healing” must take place is to reject the very influential social, cultural, and economic contexts of trauma. “Healing,” as Janice Hakken observes in “The Recovery of Memory, Fantasy, and Desire,” is a term often used in trauma discourse and psychologizes the contexts. Social inequalities produce such suffering bodies as Bama’s or Halder’s, whose trauma is rooted in a structural social flaw. In the case of atrocity narratives by abused women, the legal system colludes with patriarchy to ensure that women are continuously oppressed and denied their rights. What we see from these narratives is a set of cultural conditions—patriarchal ideologies and discourses of masculinity—that, in conjunction with economic contexts, deprive the woman of any independence, dignity, or happiness.

Transgenerational trauma also carries a different valence other than that of the woman’s suffering. Just as the atrocity narrative opened with childhood, subsequent sections of the narratives focus on child-rearing and the suffering of children. Halder’s entire memoir can be treated as an account of traumatized motherhood because she recounts how she worked and suffered in order to care for her children. Nalini Jameela,
separated from her young daughter, who does not even recognize her (18), tries to guard Zeenat, whose life is fraught with danger, poverty, and sadness.

Poverty, social discrimination, oppressive law-and-order mechanisms, and economic and social inequalities frame the atrocity narrative’s transgenerational trauma.

Performance

“Performance” enables the creation of a politically edged narrative in such testimonies as Bama’s or Halder’s. Linda Marie Brooks’s reading of the testimonio genre has proposed that the staging of suffering is an integral component of atrocity narratives. “Performance” here is not an artifice. Rather, to return to its etymological foundations, it is a fuller representation of a situation to, in Victor Turner’s expression, “bring the data home to us in their fullness” (100). This performance of atrocity has two main components: staging and fuller representation.

Staging

Staging is the paratextual setting of the narrative, and includes framing statements by editors, the author, translators, and others. Every atrocity narrative is accompanied by at least one of these statements as antecedent to the actual first-person narration of the trauma. The editor or translator frequently draws attention to the legal, social, historical, and biographical contexts of the ensuing narrative. Shirin Kuchekkar’s foreword to Behind Closed Doors expresses her hope that it will “encourage other women who share the same plight to resist or break away” (9). Bhattacharya’s introduction (13–33), as well as the essays by Anwesha Arya (35–49) and Sobbia Venkatesh Ghosh (51–66), focuses on multiple aspects of patriarchy, family structures, the legal complications of child custody and property rights, and Hindu traditions and notions of the family. J. Devika’s introduction to Autobiography of a Sex Worker argues that there are clear “political implications” of Jameela’s narrative (xii). Mini Krishnan’s editorial preface to Karukku declares:

Breaking a silence that has lasted for more generations than we can count comes Bama’s Karukku, a text which though structured like a novel, is not fiction. . . . Part autobiography, part analysis, part manifesto, Bama’s is a bold account of what life is like outside the mainstream of Indian thought and function. (v)

Such a staging often addresses questions of form. Should such texts be read only as personal autobiographies? Or should they be treated as political propaganda? Would they constitute resistance literature?

Finally, staging often incorporates authenticating devices. Critics have noted that a central problem with the testimonial narrative is its “truth value” (Felman 6; Laub 59–63). Biographical information is given to us, and the editor or translator inevitably mentions personal interaction with the author in order to ground the ensuing narrative and attest to its authenticity. Devika mentions the “spirit of friendship” (xiv) in which she translated Jameela’s narrative, while Bhattacharya describes how she interviewed the women (26). Authorial authenticating devices include the mention of backgrounds. Halder mentions her illiteracy (“Dedication”). Jameela mentions her inability to “move beyond a few sentences” (v). Bama first mentions “the driving forces that shaped” Karukku and then acknowledges the people who helped her write (xiii–xiv).

The references to personal settings, personalities, character, and contexts of interaction (between editor or translator and author and interviewees) lend a certain air of reality to a context that is an otherwise alien situation of caste discrimination, the private suffering of abused women, and the world of domestic workers.

Fuller Representation

For the framing sections of these atrocity narratives to be effective, staging requires a “fuller representation” later in the text (Brooks’s term) of the trauma. This is the second stage of “performance” in atrocity narratives. “Fuller representation” here is the affective narrative of abuse and trauma. This involves a detailed representation of the emotional content of the traumatic experience for the sake of the audience. Halder opens her account with a description of the hunger pangs that she and her siblings experienced every day (4–5). Throughout her memoir, she carefully describes her emotional responses to her sister’s death (64), her father’s attitude (38), her marriage and childbirth (55–60), and her separation from her children (92). Nalini Jameela opens with her hysteria over being prevented from going to school, recalling: “When the school emerged in sight, I’d break down. I would howl and bawl and make a big commotion. . . . A huge sense of loss rises up in my mind when I remember how I used to walk away” (2–3). Bama recalls her experience of caste discrimination in vivid emotional terms: “The tears started welling up in my eyes, and I wept . . . when I entered the classroom, the entire class turned round to look at me, and I wanted to shrink into myself as I went and sat on my bench, still weeping” (17).

The register of authenticity, a serious problem if we are to assume that these narratives represent the voice of the subaltern, is one that must be seen as beyond the mere factual. Registers of truth—and conventions of “truth-telling”—can also be psychological and
experiential. Finally, they are, as we can see in the cases discussed here, irreducibly affective. This is the affective register of the subaltern’s voice, and one which must be granted the “value” of authenticity.

It is imperative for the political purposes of the narrative to “perform” grief to its fullest. What the woman’s atrocity memoir, like those of Holocaust narratives, seeks and generates is an affective relation with the audience. This requires not a simple narration of a major accident or traumatic (life-changing) incident but the fuller representation of the trauma in everyday life.

The grounding of the extreme—hunger, pain, beatings, abuse, and terror—in the everyday in Bama, Jameela, and Halder can be captured only through traumatic realism that evokes an affective response. Fuller representation is the attempt to demonstrate the sheer heterogeneity of the extreme—of these lives—without neutralizing it. What these atrocity memoirs reveal is the survival of the extreme.

For people like Bama, Jameela, and Halder, whose voices and stories have never been part of mainstream cultural production or consumption—and therefore of the public sphere—the truth of a historical wrong—caste, patriarchal, and social inequalities—can only be delivered through affective narration. The affective narration of fuller representation and traumatic realism, however, often makes a remarkable shift: from individual voice to collective biography, from singular experiential suffering to witnessing.

Agency and Advocacy

A striking feature of atrocity narratives by women is that they are not mere victim stories. True, they foreground oppression and enormous suffering—physical, emotional, psychological, economic—but they do not restrict themselves to this foregrounding. Most memoirs conclude with triumphalism (at least of the spirit), a sense of individual identity, freedom, and purpose.

The protagonist of the woman’s atrocity memoir does not seek victim status. What is interesting about these narratives is their movement from victimhood—in the exploration of their trauma—to that of agency and advocacy. However, it is not this sense of individual dignity that interests me. Rather, what fascinates me is the ascription of agential purpose to oneself that I see in each of these narratives. This agential purpose takes the form of a discourse of witnessing and testimony.

Witnessing and testimony are etymologically linked (“witness” is connected to “testis,” which is also the term from which “testimony” derives). Women’s atrocity narratives often position the narrator as a witness, where the narrative functions as a testimony to suffering. Here, however, the position of “witness” gets quite complicated.

I have noted how the performance of the protagonist underscores the corporeal trauma of the individual and foregrounds the affective elements. She delivers us her experiences, to which her body has been the (sole) witness. This makes the atrocity memoir a highly personal narrative that, by talking of individual experiences in the public domain (print and interviews), breaks down the barrier between private and public.

However, no atrocity memoir that I know of is confined to this autobiographical account. Every atrocity narrative functions as a witness to someone else’s suffering. Bama declares in an interview:

The story told in Karukku was not my story alone. It was the depiction of a collective trauma—of my community. . . . I just tried to freeze it forever in one book so that there will be something physical to remind people of the atrocities committed on a section of the society for ages.” (“Recognition”)

In Karukku she writes: “We who are asleep must open our eyes and look about us. We must not accept the injustice of our enslavement by telling ourselves it is our fate, as if we have no true feelings: we must dare to stand up for change” (25, emphasis added). Jameela describes how a young sex worker was brutally murdered (75–76) and relates the stories of Ammu (77–79) and Sabira (80). In each of these stories, Jameela serves as the only witness, the readers’ only access to the trauma of the other women. The other women are constructed as knowable objects only through Jameela’s narrative.

The testimony here is a witness account of someone else. In the case of Bama and Jameela, it becomes a collective biography—of an entire community—of Dalits in the case of Bama and of sex workers in the case of Jameela. In fact, in the last sections of Jameela’s memoir, we see the narrative space (93–94, 95, 96–97, 120–22, 123–26) roughly equally divided between her life story and biographical details of other sex workers and their colony.

Atrocity narratives as testimony, I suggest, are critical interventions in the public sphere.

Public Culture and the Archive of Trauma

The public sphere, as influentially theorized by Habermas and his followers, is the space of rational, logical debate preliminary to informed consent and democratic social order. This notion automatically excludes sentiment and affections. This means women who wish to articulate their sentiments, about “domestic” and “private” concerns like the family, their children or their siblings, as Aruna, Katy
or Karuna (in Bhattacharya), Bama, Halder, and Jameela do, will not find the space to do so because the very nature of public debate disallows emotion. Any woman’s (I do not use the term feminist here) appropriation of public space must necessarily constitute a counterpublic based on such “rejected” aspects such as sentiment—as Ann Travers, discussing feminist appropriations of cyberspace, argues. If “public” constitutes a “social totality” and a space that comes into being through the circulation of texts (Warner 49–50), then the term “counterpublic” describes those groups, cultures, or individuals who do not belong to or whose texts have been marginalized from this “totality” and mainstream “public.” This public is a counterpublic, a space generated by the dissemination of women’s atrocity narratives.

A public culture is being formed in and around women’s trauma. Testimonials and witnessing are political acts. They demand an ethical engagement on the part of the reader and spectator and seek a reconfiguration of social spaces. A trauma narrative, linked with advocacy and agency, is a disruption in the mainstream narrative. Trauma, as Ann Cvetkovich suggests, “forges . . . connections between politics and emotion” (3). What we can see emerging in Indian writing is a culture of trauma of Dalits, of disempowered women, and of victims of abuse. The public disclosure and documentation of what often—as in the case of domestic violence and Halder’s suffering or private realities of suffering—contribute to an archive of trauma. This archive, I argue, is central to the reconfiguration of not only the canon of literary texts (i.e., cultural production) but of the practices in the public sphere itself. For the latter to occur, we need to situate these atrocity narratives in the context of other genres: newspaper reports, state and NGO studies of violence against women and Dalits, and inquiry commission works.

Publics, whether counter- or mainstream, are formed through cultural archives. The texts discussed above constitute “new,” by which I mean “now visible,” cultural spaces. Stories of trauma, feelings, and anguish such as the ones discussed above constitute a public culture that is not yet solidified into institutions, organizations, or identities. Affect, as embodied in these atrocity narratives, must be worked through for the reconfiguration of the public sphere.

I have suggested that forms of affective and personal memory are public in the sense of accessibility, that they are available to memory and sustained through a collective activity of documenting, editing, archiving (production), publishing (circulation), reading, and legal-social-institutional action (reception). In short, we may see an implicit connection between cultural production, the public sphere and politics where testimonies generate a “crisis of truth” (Felman 6) in contemporary cultural narrative beyond the immediate confines of the text. It points to a historical and social occurrence, caste and gender oppression, that demands recognition and restitution. In the words of Schaffer and Smith, with the repetition of the “ur-story” of atrocity and suffering, the “agency of the individual women fades, and the differences in their experiential histories become blurred” (137). This blurring is not an erasure of particular oppressions or sufferings but a template from which and with which a common-demand recognition and restitution can be launched.

A cautionary note is sounded here concerns the role of intermediaries and their contribution to the archive of suffering. Editors, translators, and publishers—many of whom are not members of the disempowered classes but are academics, metropolitan journalists, and activists—play an important role in making visible these atrocity archives. If the archive, as Jacques Derrida has argued, is intimately linked to power—where the topos of the archive is inextricable from the authority of the “archon” to interpret—then it is a matter of concern as to who regulates the circulation and interpretation of these testimonies. John Beverley admits that the intervention by intermediaries is a problematic theoretical point (15). What is the role played by the often upper-caste, upper-class intermediary in letting the subaltern speak, in translating the voice of the subaltern? Who facilitates the subaltern’s “translation” into English? It is important, as Smith and Schaffer have argued (5), to pay attention to the contexts of production, including translation, and the circulation of life stories. They see tribunals, activists, national inquiries, media broadcasts, and state-sponsored publications as structures of power within which these life stories are embedded. This also means that particular forms of circulation—the difference between, say, state-sponsored publications and activists’ work—govern the expectations of the teller (victim), the structure of the narrative (life story and deposition), and responses. Intermediaries inform, regulate, and govern the purposes to which these accounts can be put and the consequences they may have. A few victim narrators such as Sharankumar Limbale have argued that the work of publishing such memoirs forges a solidarity between the victim and the upper-caste, upper-class editor or translator. Limbale argues that there is a “need to bring together the Dalits and the progressive savarnas [non-Dalits and upper-castes]” (152). The intermediary’s task is to make visible that which has thus far kept the archive of suffering invisible. The task is a political agenda to reveal the lie of mainstream ideologies and discourses of—in the case of India—“development,” “progress,” or “unity in diversity” by showing how none of these accounts for the marginalized within India. Barbara Harlow proposes an antiauthoritarian relationship between the narrator and compiler of the narrator’s accounts. The genre alters the traditional structure of
these atrocity narratives function as testimonies to a context where a section of society has been denied rights, identity and dignity. When Jameela says that “we [sex workers] were always cast out from society” (125), or when Bama constantly draws attention to the marginalization and oppression of Dalits, what they articulate is not just a victim’s story but a survivor’s demand on the reader and society. Bama asks: “Are Dalits not human beings? Do they not have common sense? Do they not have such attributes as a sense of honour and self respect? Are they without wisdom, beauty, dignity? What do we lack?” (24, emphasis added). Here Bama aligns Dalit demands with a larger global movement for human rights and thus moves from the personal to the community to the global.

Having given readers an account of the subaltern’s life, the atrocity memoir claims a space of representation in the public sphere and therefore a particular kind of response to their narratives. These atrocity narratives must be seen within the context of social movements against caste oppression, media reportage of atrocities against women, and campaigns for workers’ rights. In such campaigns, inquiries, and juridical demands, atrocity narratives, I propose, serve as testimony. Atrocity narratives, to adapt Felman’s reading of testimony, must be treated as a “point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can penetrate us like an actual life” (2, original emphasis). It calls out to us through its affective narrative, and we have to respond. It does not approximate to a legal document or political tract and therefore does not fall within the ambit of rational debate that defines the conventional public sphere. However, it is through its affective narrative that it lays claim to a space within the public sphere—and this reconfiguration is something we have to facilitate.

There is, I argue, no possible neutral or apolitical reading of the atrocity memoir. To be a survivor entails having one’s suffering recognized and to be entitled to special forms of social support that would be otherwise not available (Hasken 1084). We have to assume that the atrocity memoir we read stands for several silences, of those who did not speak but suffered. Testimony’s “truth,” argues Cubišić, is an interplay of consciousness, memory and community, of their physical experiences, the sights they saw and the actions they had taken as part of a larger group (242–43). The narrator is a metonym who stands for an entire community, caste, and class.

Atrocity narratives reveal the deep fissures and faultlines in the Indian body politic. Even when they document individual suffering, they reflect a social and historical trauma, and they are rooted in the effect of traditional social institutions like the family or caste and notions of labor—the last is the reason why Jameela constantly uses the term sex worker—which, as observed by Kaja Silverman, disrupts the
narratives that bind a society (Novak 302). The society then has to address this disruption. Atrocity narratives fuel rights campaigns by becoming a mode of consciousness-raising but could also serve, and this is my thesis here, as testimonies for action. Admittedly, these narratives are not “plugged into” the national mainstream cultural production or discourses of national identity or politics. But that is because their very mode—affective, performative, autobiographical, collectively biographical—ensures that they do not fit into the conventional forms of narration in a nation. They are at once singular and collective. It is in the singular trauma as narrated by Bama or Halder that gives specificity to a whole historical period, cultural context, or national discourse. They are outside the apparatuses of institutions and generic codes. To adapt Lauren Berlant’s pithy description of trauma narratives, these atrocity narratives by women claim the “authority of self-evidence as opposed to the authority bequeathed by institutions and consenting audiences” (42). They constitute a radical departure from sanctioned civic and public discourse, which is caste-based, class-driven, and patriarchal.

This requires the attribution of truth-value to these narratives by a community of readers. The sympathetic and empathetic recognition of the claims forwarded by these atrocity memoirs heralds such an attribution and reception. This means an “ethics of recognition” on the part of the reader; readers become what Dominick LaCapra terms “secondary witnesses” (699) to the document of atrocity. We have to acknowledge the persistence of the extreme, that trauma is an everyday feature. The atrocity memoir is to be—has to be—located between regimes of truth where it disturbs what has been accepted as the “truth” about the family or the convent or Hinduism. Incorporating them into the mainstream cultural production in pedagogy, for instance, means that traditional ways of reading national culture or the public sphere are disturbed. Once these accounts of individual suffering are made public, the violence and trauma become—or ought to become—a collective social experience. Never again, after such narratives, will Indian culture or the traditional Hindu family be looked at with equanimity or pride. It is this intervention that can become the start of something larger.

I have proposed that such atrocity narratives embody a comparative and comparable history of trauma. This means the narratives of individual trauma can circulate globally as part of the general discourses on human rights and self-assertion. Schaffer and Smith’s work, for example, compares testimonies as diverse as prison memoirs from the USA, post-Tiananmen narratives from China, and indigenous narratives from Australia. Bama, Jameela, Halder, and the women in Battacharya’s volume can therefore be a part of a larger women’s movement extending beyond India. Focusing on trauma as a critical category enables this insertion into a global discourse of human rights because trauma cuts across castes, classes, locations, and professions. Trauma narratives generate an object of knowledge by constructing the access, even via affective narration, to a previously unknowable existence, object, and life: that of the Dalit woman, the sex worker, the wife, or the domestic worker. Therefore, as Michael Rothberg argues about traumatic realism, the “stakes” of these narratives are at once epistemological and pedagogical (67). This simply means: the larger stake of the atrocity memoir is not private but political.

**Notes**

1 I am grateful to the referees and Deborah Weigel for perceptive comments and useful suggestions on the earlier draft of this essay. Sections of the argument on testimony and witnessing draw upon my essay “Bama’s Karukku: Dalit Autobiography as Testimonio.”

2 “Dalit” comes from the Marathi word, “Dala,” meaning “of the soil.” It also suggests “being ground down.” The term now refers to the socially oppressed castes in India. On the Indian caste system, see Louis Dumont and Sagarika Ghose.

3 Anthony Langlois suggests that the claim of human rights to universality presupposes a narrative or philosophical tradition (that defines what it means to be human) to which we appeal, and which provides the substantive content for my arguments. Joseph Slaughter has demonstrated how human subjectivity, even one which is under threat of fragmentation in say, conditions of torture, demands a narrative for representation. The right to narrate, suggests Slaughter, is the right to control representation (37). Burns Weston proposes that if a right is assumed to be a human right it is “quintessentially general or universal in character” (17), and the rights of an individual are circumscribed as much as a community’s rights are to be protected. Richard Falk’s focus is on the processes by which human rights instruments are produced, and he clearly sees human rights as emerging in a competitive struggle for rights by various groups and individuals.

4 Cathy Caruth’s study of trauma analyzes in considerable detail the psychological processes of memory, forgetting, and affect. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s work on trauma examines the pedagogic imperatives of testimony narratives, where the effect of the testimony upon viewers/listeners contributes to a better understanding of the political and ethical implications of the genre. Anne Cullot’s work shifts the focus to communal trauma and looks at historical, social, and communitarian structures that silence the victims. In a similar mode Ann Cvetkovich is interested in social trauma, locating the individual’s suffering within a social body.

5 This means, in effect, widening the scope of trauma studies in Indian families to look at victims of child abuse, documented by organizations like RAHI and in volumes like Pinki Virani’s Bitter Chocolate.

6 Critics have demonstrated that women’s autobiographies put greater emphasis on the protagonist’s emotional states. See Bauer et al.
There is no female/feminine equivalent to this gendered etymology of testis/witness to describe witnessing, and hence one is alerted to the irony of using the term to speak of the woman's trauma narrative. I am grateful to the referee of the original essay for pointing this out.

Michael Warner defines "counterpublics" as "scenes [that] have organized themselves as publics, and because they differ markedly in one way or another from the premises that allow the dominant culture to understand itself as a public, they have come to be called counterpublics" (81).

Petar Ramadanovíc has argued that the singular trauma is linked to a larger historical or structural trauma because it provides specificity (113–14).

Works Cited


