Cultural Memory in Catastrophic Time: Trauma, Temporality, and the Reconstruction of the Psyche in Partition and 9/11 Fiction

Abhirup Sarkar

Independent Research Scholar,

Old Kapasdanga, Kazir Bagan, P.O. & Dist.- Hooghly,

Pin: 712103, WB, India.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to postulate the idea of 'catastrophic time' as a vast psychic split in the cultural memory framework. The 1947 Partition of India and the September 11 attacks are two major catastrophic incidents that upset the flow of subjective time, identity and remembrance violently. Using memory studies, trauma theory and cognitive literary models, this paper will illustrate how fractured historical ruptures give rise to devastating internal conflict and emotional turmoil. These modes may be belated survivor testimonies, compulsive repetition or dissociated stream-of-consciousness narratives. A close comparative reading of Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* reveals that both use child-centred consciousness as a mode of capturing the raw immediacy of trauma. The study sheds light on different memory regimes: Partition literature struggles with corporeal displacements, intergenerational silence and absence of historical records that haunt collective psyches, while 9/11 narratives manoeuvre through media hyper-presence, visual hyper-reality and endless replays that trap characters in grief loops. Thus, these texts employ novel literary forms as instruments for

psychic reconstruction and bibliotherapeutic healing while strategizing narrative fragmentation and cultural trauma. Finally, this paper asserts that literature is an essential reconstructive technology that restores agency, emotional topography and mnemonic unity to disparate imaginaries of the human psyche across historical epochs.

Keywords: Catastrophic time, Partition of India, September 11 attacks, Memory studies, Trauma theory.

Introduction

Catastrophic events are so much more than mere transitions of geographical and political terrain. They fracture into the continuity of time through which people and communities look at themselves. Upon disruption of historical congruity by violence, the psyche is forced to face a crisis of past, present and future narration. The answer to such disruptions is cultural memory, which helps piece together the shattered flow of time into a narratable format (Assmann 15-16). This paper conjectures such incidents as exemplars of 'catastrophic time', a situation where the narrative rationality and subjective continuity are shattered over any moment of time by trauma. By a comparative reading of literary reactions to the Partition of India and the September 11 attacks, this paper contends that literature becomes a space where cultural memory engages with ruptures in time. 9/11 literature focuses on media-influenced immediacy and obsessive repetition, whereas Partition narratives archive displacement and delayed testimony. By manner of reconstructive labour, literary forms arbitrate between historical disaster and psychological survival.

Catastrophic Time and Cultural Memory

Instead of merely injecting moments of violence into the flow of temporal time, historical catastrophe tears apart the foundation of times lived and told. According to theories of memory studies,

cultural memory is a process of temporal organisation in effect rather than being a passive recollection. It maintains collective identity by electing, coordinating and circulating prior experiences (Assmann 15-16). However, memory breaks down by itself when the extent of rupture surpasses the existing capacity of frameworks of representation. This creates suitable ground for the appearance of catastrophic time.

Catastrophic time is a temporal disorder caused by profound violence. As a result, linear advancement breaks down to either tardy collapse or compulsive reiteration. The psyche wavers between silence and hyperbole. It does not try to put past experiences in a meaningful narrative order. Trauma interrupts continuity: the past comes to haunt in unpredictable ways, the present is deferred and the future forbidden (Caruth 17-19). In such situations, cultural memory records fluctuations by balancing obliteration and surfeit. It does not instantly stabilise identity.

Catastrophic events show various temporal forms that make it easy to distinguish between them. Large-scale displacement, collective violence and chronic diasporic fragmentation have been the results of the Partition of India. The memory culture of Partition is one of tardy testimony, intergenerational transmission and archival deficit (Hirsch 23, 32-34). Here, catastrophic time takes the shape of belated verbalisation: trauma is often experienced in retrospection by means of the arbitration of silence, partial narratives or displaced spatial memory (Caruth 1-5). The fracture appears as misalignment, and narrative attempts reconstruction after the fact.

On the other hand, the September 11 attacks happened within a highly mediated international backdrop. Pictures of the incident went into circulation immediately and with replication. This process etched trauma within visual surfeit. In this context, catastrophic time is delineated by hyper-presence instead of silence. The incident is replayed, documented, broadcast on television, and replicated digitally, which in turn creates a temporal condition that is organised around immediacy and obsessive return

(Huyssen 16, 20). Spectacle and memory get intertwined, and narrative battles excess rather than absence.

These different psychic formations are results of grooming of incongruous temporal managements. When archives run scarce, memory must reorganise what is repressed or displaced (Ricoeur 80). When media saturates, memory must trickle, accommodate and reinterpret the surplus of representation (Huyssen 16,20). In both these cases, literary narrative becomes an important arbitrator. It reorders the temporal disarray of the catastrophe, translating dislocated or saturated memory into narrative form instead of recounting the story. In this way, fiction arbitrates between gaps in history and psychic survival as a reconstructive technology of cultural memory.

Therefore, a comparative study of Partition and 9/11 literature divulges distinct structures of remembrance instead of a common trauma. Catastrophic time is seasoned through history and is not a singular entity. Paying close attention to the ways in which narrative form betrays belatedness, repetition, displacement and visual saturation, one can trace the methods in which cultural memory recasts the traumatised psyche in different geopolitical settings.

Deferred Catastrophic Time and Displaced Memory in *Ice Candy Man*

Ice Candy Man depicts disaster as a partial perception instead of an immediate understanding, when set against the backdrop of violence of the Partition of India. The novel uses the child Lenny to showcase mass violence, kidnapping and breakdown of communities through a consciousness that resists full comprehension of the historical moment. This partial centring is the bringing to life the logic of deferred catastrophic time, instead of being a simple literary device. Trauma is revealed in fragments, like overheard

conversations, abrupt disappearances, altered bodies and shifting allegiance, rather than appearing as a cohesive historical explanation.

Spatial fractures are the hallmark of Partition in Sidhwa's novel. Lahore turns into a disjointed area, and the civic space turns into a divided geography of suspicion and escape. The psychological aspect of this disjunction is displacement. Homes turn into temporary residences, communities disintegrate, and a sense of belonging becomes precarious. The catastrophic time in this context is delayed. Violence traverses beyond the constraints of present narratives, and memory makes sense of it after the fact. Lenny's narrative, although immediate in tone, is informed by the knowledge of the past. The outlook of the adult informs the child's experience. This temporal stratification mirrors the structure of cultural memory in the discourse of Partition. Trauma emerges in the form of reconstructed narrative, intergenerational recall, and testimony that is deferred to a later moment.

Silence turns into an important marker of deferred memory. For example, the abduction of Ayah becomes a wound around which language hesitates (Sidhwa 183-84). A psychic gap results from witnessing the event without fully comprehending it. Cultural memory in this case is haunted by the lack of images (Assmann 15-16). This lack of archival evidence about everyday Partition violence adds to the burden of narrative reconstruction. So, narrative fiction becomes a work of compensation, filling in the silences, representing the unspeakable, and recasting displacement into narrative form (Lacapra 43-44, 181-82).

In *Ice Candy Man*, catastrophic time is marked by fragmentation, spatial perplexity, and belated narrative. Memory becomes a process of retrospection and recovery. The novel's structure alternates between historical awareness and innocence (Sidhwa 183-84, 194-95). The aim being to depict the gradual psychic reconstruction of a broken social world. Narrative is the vehicle through which dislocation is

reinscribed into cultural memory, enabling trauma to enter the collective consciousness without healing its rifts.

Instant Catastrophic Time and Repetitive Memory in *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*

Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close faces disaster in a setting of visual excess. From a post-September 11 attack perspective, trauma is presented in a media-saturated world where images shift globally and instantaneously. Here, catastrophic time is imminent and omnipresent rather than postponed.

Oskar Schell's compulsive search for the solution to the puzzle left by his father is an excellent example of compulsive repetition as a time-relevant response to disruption (Foer 44-46). His journey through New York City is about going in circles around the truth. Photographs, typographic innovation, and torn documents dominate the novel (Foer 58-63, 115). This highlights the role of arbitration in memory. The falling body, the unanswered phone calls, and the unresolved question of survival exemplify how trauma is experienced through replay (Foer 230). Spectacle and memory become inextricably linked.

Foer's text struggles with saturation, while Sidhwa's story exhibits silences and gaps. The challenge of recounting an already predominantly represented event is staged in the novel. Hyper-presence is a manifestation of catastrophic time. Based on visual presence, the past refuses to sink into a stable memory. The mind, faced with overrepresentation, turns to repetition as a means of stabilisation. Oskar imposes order on a temporality characterised by shock and replay through his rituals and lists (Foer 58-63).

However, even in saturation, there is a narrative attempt at reconstruction. Intergenerational complexity is portrayed through the addition of the grandparents' traumatic experience in the war. This connects 9/11 to other histories of violence (Foer 208, 273). National narratives of innocence complicate

when memory transcends a single spectacle. Thus, literary form arbitrates between reflective remembrance and media immediacy. Through the insertion of visual fragments into textual narrative, Foer's novel reclaims interpretive space from spectacle.

In *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, catastrophic time is organised by repetition, hyper-visibility, and obsessive return. Fiction serves only to filter the excess. In a society characterised by instantaneous representation, narrative allows psychic survival by rearranging saturated memory into a communicable structure.

Comparative Memory Regimes and the Temporalities of Catastrophe

A comparative close reading of *Ice Candy Man* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* indicates that catastrophic time is a historically mediated one, structured by specific regimes of memory. Even though both novels speak of mass violence and community destruction but they produce different ways of remembering these events, with each text creating different ways of creating memory through space and time.

When seen through the lens of the Partition of India, catastrophic time is produced by displacement, silence, and belated testimony. The trauma created by migration and communal violence as it relates to a loss of location creates a situation of incomplete narration, or retrospective narration that creates gaps in the memory of where things are. Thus the psychic trauma is created by gaps in archives, family narratives and through the firsthand accounts created from an intergenerational transfer of storytelling (Hirsch 32-34). Cultural memory in this case is a process of recovery, seeking to restore that which was repressed and displaced. Narrative here is a process of deferred articulation, attempting to comprehend meaning from the fragments.

In contrast, the memory culture of the September 11 attacks is characterised by the politics of visibility and media proximity. trauma has been continuously replayed in electronic and televised recorded history and is etched in digital and video archives. Catastrophic time is hyper-visible. The past continues to be violently present (Huyssen 158-64). In times such as these, the challenge to the psyche is containing movement. Memory endures a process of filtering, interpreting, and reorganizing the excess of representation. Narrative reconstruction seeks to reclaim interpretive meaning from the spectacle as arbitration.

The differences among the temporal factors lead to different kinds of psychic negotiation. The literature of the Partition negotiates subjectivity through displacement and belated witnessing. But 9/11 fiction does it through repetition and obsessive return. Both demonstrate that cultural memory is dynamic temporal labour (Assmann 15-16; Ricoeur 80). It reconstructs historical rupture into a format that is available to narrate, and constructs meaning from catastrophic disruption.

Any unitary model of trauma is muddled upon comparison (Alexander et al. 1, 10). Catastrophic time indexes the technological, archival, and geopolitical conditions under which violence is remembered. Trauma reconfigures the temporal space in which memory operates (Caruth 17-19, 24). It rebuilds the psyche by making the rupture narratively habitable.

The study, using comparison, shows that cultural memory operates in a different manner according to whether there is a lack of archives or a saturation of media. But, the form of narrative is crucial to the reconstructive work in both instances (LaCapra 181-82; Ricoeur 80). Literature becomes the safe space where catastrophic time is mediated, refashioned, or partially mediated and constructed within the collective consciousness.

Conclusion: Cultural Memory and the Reorganization of Catastrophic Time

Comparative analysis of *Ice Candy Man* and *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* has shown that catastrophic events fragment not only national histories but also the temporal fabric that supports subjectivity. By calling this fracture as 'catastrophic time', this study argues that cultural memory is always situated in particular temporal regimes moulded by processes of displacement, mediation, and technological context. Memory culture of the Partition of India highlights belated testimony, archival lack, and intergenerational transmission, in which reconstruction of narratives become a way of overcoming silence. But, memory culture of the September 11 attacks brings to fore hyper-visibility and visual saturation, in which narratives have to intervene and reinterpret overwhelming immediacy.

Notwithstanding these differences, both novels attest to the reconstructive nature of cultural memory (Assmann 15-16; Ricoeur 80). It is all about reconfiguring rupture into narratability. Literary accounts arbitrate between fractured temporality and its re-inhabitation. In case of gaps, fiction fills in what history left unsaid. In opposite cases, it reclaims depth from spectacle. Nevertheless, narrative reconfiguration stabilises the psyche in both types of situations.

This study makes a significant contribution to the field of memory studies by showing how catastrophic time is historically conditioned and narratively negotiable in highlighting temporality as the pivot of trauma and remembrance. Literature becomes a contact zone where cultural memory reframes wounded subjectivity, moulding historical rupture into temporal survival.

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