



EXPLORING WOMEN'S TRAUMATIC TESTIMONY

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Article Received: 30/12/2019

Article Accepted: 28/01/2020

Article Published online:
01/02/2020

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.8.1.118](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.8.1.118)

Abstract

Traumatic testimony can be defined as a form of a personal retelling of a memory that is often tied in with the hope of healing from that memory. It shapes a representation of a past historical event in order to make sense of it and venerate a collective experience. Giorgio Agamben suggests that the notion of witnessing has two core meanings:

In Latin there are two words for "witness". The first word, *testis*, from which our word 'testimony' derives, etymologically signifies the person who, in a trial or lawsuit between two rival parties, is in the position of a third party (*terstis*). The second word, *superstes*, designates a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it (17). The paper highlights the various aspects of traumatic testimony with special reference to female survivor's testimony. The paper recognizes women's testimonial literature as an empowering and powerful, feminine mode of resistance against patriarchy.

Key Words: Testimony, Traumatic, Testimonial literature, patriarchy, witness

Discussion

The experience of a traumatic event from its beginning to the end includes not only the personal but also the collective experience. Agamben's first definition of "witness" as *terstis* connects the personal to the collective through the judgement that it may pass on the past events. Hence, personal testimony helps to judge the collective experience as well. Further, testimony is defined as the process by which the survivor reclaims his position as a witness. Also, repossessing one's story of life through giving testimony is itself a form of change, which is necessary in order to complete the process of survival after liberation from the traumatic event. The traumatic event must be reclaimed because even if successfully repressed, it can never play any constructive role as it will come back to haunt more

often. Further, a testimonio is defined by Beverly as, "a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first-person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts and whose unit of narration is usually a "life" or significant life experience" (12). Beverly shows that the personal experience that is narrated must be a significant life experience in which the narrator/author was personally involved and which is described in a particular manner. One of the most important characteristic of testimony is its great sense of immediacy and urgency which focuses on the lived experiences of the writer or narrator.

According to Dori Laub's exploration of testimony suggests that, "narrating traumatic

memories challenges language to represent what the traumatised subject finds hard to understand, let alone to explain to another" (287). Further, one of the problems of narrating traumatic and painful memories is that a narrative imposes coherence on a disjointed memory, potentially rendering the representation false. However, testimony to trauma has been seen in Freudian terms as a "talking cure," a way of purging of traumatic memories. Also, Laub suggests that art can cure through creating narrative that is simultaneously in dialogue with its own unspeakability (993). Cathy Caruth while commenting on the testimony suggests that "it has to incorporate what seems like two contradictory experiences: both the event itself and its absence in memory, its impossibility" (9). According to her, "traumatic memories challenge not only language but understanding itself, as the event then returns to haunt the victim through repetitive and intrusive memories. Thus, making the victim a "symptom of a history they cannot entirely possess"(2).

The history of testimonial genre dates back as far as the voyage diaries of the Spanish explorers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. However, as a specific field of critical study it did not come to fruition until the rise of widespread political unrest in Latin America and Europe in the mid-twentieth century. Testimonial literature as a distinct genre was first officially highlighted by scholars after the publication of Miguel Barnet's *Biografía de uncimarrón* in Cuba in 1967. The testimonial text is perhaps one of the most difficult and complex genres to study, analyze, and interpret. Combining theories of memory, trauma, history (both written and oral), psychology, sociology, autobiography, gender, and cultural studies, it has proven to be rich in complexity and bursting to the brim with various interpretations. Testimonial literature always signifies the need for an individual as well as general social change. According to Beverley in a testimony, "the presence of the voice, which we are meant to experience as the voice of a real rather than a fictional person, is the mark of a desire not to be silenced or defeated, to impose oneself on an institution of power like literature from the position of the excluded or the marginal" (17). Further, he suggests that "Testimonial literature or testimonio

represents an affirmation of the individual subject, even of individual growth and transformation, but in connection with a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression and struggle" (23). The testimonial events are told in the first person which are representative of the people who suffered and were unable to write or tell their own testimony. Therefore, testimonial account needs to be valued for what it expresses and the concern is for its collective social change. The narrator of these texts wants to evoke a response and a reaction from the readers which will invite them to renounce the oppression and join in solidarity with the survivor. Testimonial works are often controversial because the narrators normally write from memory after a considerable time gap from the original traumatic incident. The author/narrator later describes the events, selecting what to detail and what to dismiss.

Testimonial literature differs from fictional narratives as the events described by the survivor are more important than the manner they are described. The literary aesthetic value is not as important to the authors as the information expressed in the testimonial text. Also, the author's suffering is representative of their community's or gender's suffering. The main purpose of author is the acceptance of the account as truthful rather than fictional constructs.

The testimonial mode has often been used as a subversive tool by women to bear witness and to justify their being in the world and to speak out against literary and political hegemony. It also helps the women to write their own histories and to fill in some of the cultural and historical gaps plaguing their communities in general. It helps them to create a rich web of voices that challenge "official" history and the idea of a single, whole truth. With the testimonial mode, women are able to tell widely unknown stories and at the same time challenge the patriarchal, abusive and repressive practices. Therefore, these testimonial texts act as works of resistance that resist the generic restrictions that have restrained them. Further, testimonials serve as both personal accounts and socio-political critiques aimed to combat oppression, exploitation, and violence. They flourished during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s when the international human rights and

feminist movements were beginning to thrive, and as postmodernism began to question old literary forms and usher in new ones. Many of the most widely read testimonials are women's. Some prominent names include: Carolina Maria de Jesus (1960), Domitila Chungara, Doris Tijerino, Ana Guadalupe Martínez, Rigoberta Menchú etc. Indeed, as Georg Gugelberger and Michael Kearney affirm, "It can be said that aside from three notable male producers of testimonial discourse, namely Barnet, Cabezas, and Marmol, testimonial literature is powerfully gendered by the voices of women" (8). The majority of twentieth-century testimonialists were women. In many cases, the absence of men (through death, war, imprisonment, abandonment, and so on) demanded, or at least facilitated, their involvement. These women recognized testimonials as powerful weapons to use in their fights against brutal patriarchal practices. As John Beverley comments, "Testimonios/ testimonials [...] are not only representations of new forms of subaltern resistance and struggle but also models and even means for these" (90). The women writers while telling their personal stories, hoped to raise awareness of and build solidarity for the collective struggle of an entire group of people. Hence, by producing their testimonios, women appropriated a literary mode that had been dominated by men for many generations. They reveal abuses and inequities that women suffer in their societies: physically, mentally, and economically repressive acts which often results in a trauma. However, what is more interesting about their chosen subjects is precisely their exercise of resistance through the act of narrating, and the headstrong projection of the protagonist who they shape as an agent in their own life story. As Caruth (1996) emphasizes, "the act of witnessing cannot but involve a sharing, a taking in, of the difficult story one has heard. Caruth writes of the idea of a "speaking wound"—a trauma borne by another that speaks to the wounds of the hearer" (7). Caruth comments:

The testimonial voice is not only the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may

lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound (8).

Further, she adds:

It is the plea by an Other who is asking to be seen and heard, this call by which the other commands us to awaken. . . that constitutes the new mode of reading and listening that both the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand (9).

The constructs of testimony and witness have been central to the field of literary trauma studies, an area that seeks to understand the presence and role of trauma in literature. As such, it is not clinical, nor does it seek to "heal." Instead according to Hartman, trauma studies "operates on the level of theory, and of exegesis in the service of insights about human functioning" (554). The descriptions of testimony and witness are often evoked to describe the relation of reader to a text that contains accounts of trauma. In their germinal book, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, literary theorist Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992) write about the crucial role of witnessing testimonies of trauma. They are particularly interested in literature that testifies to large-scale trauma and the witnessing role of readers who encounter trauma. The literary testimony described by Felman and Laub (1992) contains stories told of personal experiences with significant traumas. Felman and Laub's approach to trauma and testimony builds is based on three underlying assumptions: (1) that testimony is the written record of an experience; (2) that the reader has some emotional distance from the testimony being offered in the literature; and (3) that the confrontation with immense trauma such as the Holocaust demands that the reader serve as witness. Hence a reader's witnessing might involve empathetic emotional responses that acknowledge the weight and importance of the stories of trauma survivors.

While commenting on the importance of testimonials for women, Craft writes, “[o]ne of the primary purposes of this text is the denunciation of injustice and the defense of society’s marginalized or excluded [...] by those same people” (5). Moreover, as a “resistance narrative,” “the testimonial novel has been translated and widely disseminated for political and cultural reasons—often reaching a public far greater outside than within the region” (3). Due to the atmosphere of fear in many of the authors’ native countries, earlier testimonial novels were not received with a lot of overt attention. But later these texts provide evidence for human rights offenses as well as causes for action. Another prominent critic Sternbach notes the ripple effect of women telling of their experiences:

Women’s participation in revolutionary struggles witnessing murders of loved ones, suffering disappearances, rapes, tortures, and perhaps most poignantly, women’s specific resistance to military rule, all attest to their own condition [...] which propels them to insure that their story is heard, written, and read.(96)

For women, anonymity and passivity are not valid reactions to a traumatic event. Hence, women’s testimonial literature is acts as a powerful, feminine and feminist, mode of resistance against patriarchy. These works then, may be seen to possess a type of double (or even multiple) voice, vacillating between or simultaneously representing unique personal struggles alongside collective ones with the intent of challenging hegemonic representations of women.

Dori Laub while highlighting the devastating effects of trauma on an individual, she underscores the importance of the testimonial process as a means of working through the psychological and emotion trauma:

What ultimately matters in all processes of witnessing, spasmodic and continuous, conscious and unconscious, is not simply the information, the establishment of the facts, but the experience itself of living through testimony, of giving testimony. The testimony is, therefore, the process by which

the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness: reconstitutes the internal “thou” and thus the possibility of a witness or listener inside himself (85)

Many great scholars have analyzed testimonial narratives in terms of their ability to work through trauma on an individual level. However, few studies have also focused on the testimonial writing process as a unifying method whereby survivors are able to re(write) history in such as a way as to find identity restoration on both individual and collective levels.

Conclusion

Dominick LaCapra’s work on trauma, suggests that, “ when the past becomes accessible to recall in memory, and when language functions to provide some measure of conscious control, critical distance, and perspective, one has begun the arduous process of working over and through the trauma” (90). The form and content of a testimonial narrative, then, is of equal importance and both are needed to understand the complex meanings communicated within the text. Therefore, a testimonial narrative is a subjective, lived account that is dynamic, genre-bending, and rebellious in its attempt to narrate traumatic events in various ways.

Testimonial literature of women is vital because it gives a voice to the voiceless and oppressed. Testimonios are often brought to the attention of writers because the survivor women protest what occurred and refuse to allow the atrocities to be forgotten. The female testimonials have played a vital role in the emergence and growing international concern for human rights, as they document the brutality that occurred to them at various levels in different forms.

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