

NEGOTIATING PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE MEMORIES OF LOSS AND DESTRUCTION IN TRAUMA NARRATIVES: A CULTURE STUDIES PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Surviving a catastrophe is an intense traumatic experience for a human being. Once the event is over, the individual then fights with his psychological demons as well as his socio-economic conditions which would have been severely altered in the catastrophe. A study of such a situation reveals a complex relationship between the social and personal spheres. Personal and public aspects of the trauma reveal several complexities and hence narratives that deal with it are often dense and complicated. Film as a form of narrative is extremely popular and often depicts social issues with a very sensitive perspective. As a trauma narrative, it captures the several possible perspectives without losing sight of the deep psychological issues at hand. The visuals help in this process. As a trauma narrative, *Parzania* seems to have captured every aspect worthy of being discussed in this context. *Parzania* is a film that deals with the Gujarat riots and its aftermath. My paper will make an attempt to look at this cinema from a Culture Studies perspective. I will focus on the sociological and psychological dimensions in this narrative using the tools of Culture Studies methodology.

Keywords: Culture Studies, Trauma Theories, Film Theories

Surviving a catastrophe is an intense traumatic experience for a human being. Once the event is over, the individual then fights with his psychological demons as well as his socio-economic conditions which would have been severely altered in the catastrophe. A study of such a situation reveals a complex relationship between the social and personal spheres. Personal and public aspects of the trauma reveal several complexities and hence narratives that deal with it are often dense and complicated. Film as a form of narrative is extremely popular and often depicts social issues with a very sensitive perspective. As a trauma narrative, it captures the several possible perspectives without losing sight of the deep psychological issues at hand. The visuals help in this process. As a trauma narrative, *Parzania* seems to have captured every aspect worthy of being discussed in this context. It is a film that deals with the Gujarat riots and its aftermath and looks into the socio-political dimensions and the psychological impact of the trauma on the individual from a Culture Studies perspective.

Trauma narratives are often recollections of a painful past and help in preserving personal or collective memories from assimilation, repression or misrepresentation. They not only deal with the personal or public experiences of trauma but they also speak of the relationship to memory and forgetting within the complex interweaving of social and psychological relationships. Traumas remind us of the frequency of its occurrence – its importance as a multi contextual social issue, as it is a consequence of political ideologies, colonization, war, domestic violence, poverty and so forth. It also helps us understand man's ability to confront death and loss and fragmentation.

Cinema being a popular medium which can give a varied sensuous experience with the audio-visual images leaving a stronger impression on the viewers, takes on an arduous task when it narrates a trauma and its impact on the populace. At the core of trauma narratives is this oscillation between a crisis of death and a correlative crisis of life: between unbearable pain of loss and fragmentation and the nature of survival. *Parzania* narrates such a tale of human suffering and intense pain that a family of four has to endure and the story of their survival.

Parzania, the name, suggests heaven and hell on earth. The story begins with a glimpse into a personal heaven, the home of Cyrus Pithawala and his wife Shernaz and two children, ten year old Parzan and his younger sister Dilshad. The kids are always cheerful skipping along, chattering about the wonderful fantasy world of Parzan which he has named Parzania. The love, devotion and passion shared by Cyrus and Shernaz and the warmth and comfort the children experience in this home attracts the attention of Allan, a man from America who has come to Gujarat to complete his PhD on Gandhi. But Allan does not seem to have internalized the Gandhian principles in his life since he depends on hooch in a land where liquor is prohibited. The family of Cyrus lives in a residential area where Hindus and Muslims live peacefully, sharing their happiness and sorrows and living out the simple pleasures of life. Then Godhra happens and trouble starts brewing. The retaliation by VHP topples the happy world of Parzan. Their mansion is attacked and Parzan is missing. The last image we have of him is the frightened helplessness in his eyes. Thus begins the search for Parzan. For Cyrus, Shernaz and Dilshad the hellish nightmare begin and their world is torn apart. Communication becomes difficult and they drift apart, each languishing in their own private hell. Dilshad counts the day when her brother will return. Shernaz the strongest of all seeks the help of the media and is tormented watching Cyrus falling apart. Religion is her strength. Cyrus complaints at the police station – and we see a meek, intimidated and puny Parsi lost in a corrupt, heartless world of bureaucracy. His money is snatched from him but he gets no leads on Parzan. Finally he turns to religion with the fervent hope that by self-purification through isolation and fasting for nine days, he will get the answers. He subjects himself to this self-torture and fears that his Parzu is dead. They finally go to the National Human Rights Commission and testify against the perpetrators despite threats over phone. Shernaz in an impassioned manner speaks or rather relives the whole experience and leaves the sentence hanging in the air – the hope of Parzan's return is still there for her.

The story of Parzan is based on a real life incident that happened during the post-Godhra riots. A boy named Azhar Mody went missing on 28 Feb 2002 during the Gulbarg society massacre and has still not been traced. The director of the film Rajiv Dholakia belongs to Gujarat, although he was in US at the time of the riots and personally knew the parents of Azhar, Mr. and Mrs. Dara Mody. The film was made in order to seek help in finding the missing boy. Rajiv Dholakia has been a keen observer of the dynamics of power and the unholy nexus between politics and religion in the state. This helped him in the making of this cinema. The cast

included Nazeerudeen Shah, Sarika and Corin Nemec in pivotal roles and several others like Parzan Dastur, Raj Zutshi and Asif Basra. The film was critically acclaimed and won accolades.

Gujarat is a wealthy state with dynamic enterprising people. Industries thrive in this state but the irony lies in the fact that this prosperity does not get reflected in the general well-being of the state. Social indices indicate its backwardness. There is a wide imbalance in the male-female ratio with the marginalization of women as well as Dalits. No social revolution has happened in this state. Prohibition is in effect but illicit liquor trading is rampant. Wealth and education seem to have helped in widening the communal divide. The land of Gandhi seems to have forgotten his values and communal violence is one of the major socio-political evils in this state. In 2002, the State witnessed bloody episodes of communal violence and hundreds of people were killed, houses were burnt, women were raped and lives were destroyed. A train was set on fire at Godhra by a group of people supposedly Muslims. In retaliation, Muslims were targeted in an attack by Hindu fundamentalists on 28 Feb 2002. The ruling Government and the police administration silently supported the miscreants. The incidents were widely condemned and the Human Rights Commission conducted a hearing to bring out the truth.

Trauma narratives are concerned with human-made traumatic situations and are implicit critiques of social, economic and political structures that perpetuate trauma. Jeffrey C. Alexander states:

Representation of trauma depends on constructing a compelling framework of cultural classification. In one sense, this is simply telling a new story. Yet, this story telling is, at the same time, a complex and multivalent symbolic process that is contingent, highly contested and sometimes polarizing. For the wider audience to become persuaded that they, too, have become traumatized by an experience or an event, the carrier group needs to engage in successful meaningful work. There are four questions to which a successful process of collective representation must provide compelling answers: The nature of the pain, the nature of the victim, relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience, attribution of responsibility. (12 -14)

The nation is strongly built on familial structures and the audience responds strongly to the pain of Pithawalas. They are a close-knit family of four, a typical representation of an Indian family which is a cultural stereotype endorsed by the nation in order to promote population control policies. The victim in the film occupies a unique and delicate position as a Parsi family. Their religious affiliation makes them vulnerable but it also makes them victims with whom both the Hindu and Muslim community can sympathize with.

India as a nation has experienced communal violence since colonial times. The identity of a nation is formed through such traumas and communal disharmony lies at the very foundation of this nation. The post-Godhra riots were not a spur of the moment retaliation but were part of the sentiments, the mistrust that can be understood as part of the collective memory of the nation. When the film begins, Parzan is in a class room where the teacher teaches about India and Pakistan and the partition. She refers to India as 'the great secular democracy of India'. While the happy middle class women lend and borrow among each other and are happy gossiping and cooking, the world outside is rapidly getting ready for a confrontation. The morally corrupt hooch trader and the police man Shankar who gets a ride on Cyrus' scooter everyday is part of this world. The policemen in this land of prohibition get illicit liquor and the corruption and rampant moral degradation even among the law-enforcing agency sets the trauma in motion.

Violence at the moment is only a distance commentary over the radio but soon it reaches their home in the form of petrol bombs. Anxiety and fear works on the psyche of these helpless victims and the social fabric is burnt and destroyed when families move to the refugee camps, when fear stops the Hindu family from protecting the children of Cyrus, when Nikhet and Asif move out of the refugee camp to a place where only Muslims are allowed, where Shankar refuses to help Cyrus, where the policeman takes money out of Cyrus' wallet to help find his missing son.

Parzania has a Parsi family undergoing the agony of loss and uncertainty. The use of their Parsi identity is meaningful in this context due to their position of liminality. Parsis, as a community do not occupy centre stage when it comes to the religious character of India. They are neither Hindus nor Muslims nor are they a major component among the Indian population. They form a minority, who remain at the margins when religio-political dimensions are concerned. As Shernaz explains to her children about their Parsi identity, she speaks of the Parsis integrating themselves into the country, 'like sugar in a glass of milk'. They remain an unobtrusive but sweet presence in India's social structure. The use of Parsi identity helps the film maker highlight objectivity in the narration to a certain extent and highlight the process of victimization to a larger extent. They get caught in this violent pogrom and lose their happy world that almost resembled the fantasy world of *Parzania*.

Another aspect which lends an element of objectivity to the narrative, is the presence of Allan, a man from USA who has come to Gujarat to complete his PhD on Gandhi. The film uses Allan's perspective to narrate the events – an outsider, sympathetic and vociferous while denouncing violence of this kind. Allan's conversations with Jayaraman, the Gandhian also explains the sidelining of Gandhian values amidst all the violence. Gandhian values are the most appropriate ones with the ability to handle this situation. As Jayaraman say: "An eye for an eye will make the world go blind". Nikhat reiterates this moral value when she tells Asif that they must not retaliate with swords. But ironically, Jayaraman remains passive, in his white clothes of purity, this bespectacled man takes no positive action to help the people. Allan, although he resorts to drinking and swearing, seems to have embraced Gandhi's values and ideals. His words on the typewriter are a way in which the film maker gives vent to his anger and frustrations but sadly this is not possible for his characters.

The trauma, in this case, reveals the strength and weakness of religion. While the complex political ramifications of religion are the cause of this trauma, it also offer solace to Shernaz who is shattered by the trauma and its consequences. In a land of plurality, maintaining harmony and peaceful coexistence is essential for sustaining the social fabric. Religion plays a complex role in the political structure and political discourses find the presence of religious affiliations unavoidable. With globalization, national identity and national culture seem to be giving way for heterogeneity, with regional identities and religious identities occupying centre stage. As Amartya Sen says in his work *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*: "Religion is not, and cannot be, a person's all-encompassing identity" (83). Unfortunately, Indian social structures seem to have misunderstood the role of religious identity.

The film clearly portrays the disruption of social life following the trauma. There is large scale devastation and lives are lost. Houses are set to fire and the screen gets covered in smoke. Out of the smoke what emerge are the soot-covered religious symbols and the home destroyed irrevocably. The victims turn to the State seeking justice and protection but in vein. Jeffrey C. Alexander states:

When the trauma process enters into the state bureaucracy, it can draw upon the governmental power to channel the representational process. Decisions by the executive branches of government to create national commissions of inquiry, votes by parliaments to establish investigative committees, the creation of state-directed police investigations and new directives about national priorities – all such actions can have decisive effects on handling and channeling the spiral of signification that marks the trauma process By arranging and balancing the participation in such (blue ribbon commissions) panels, forcing the appearance of witnesses and creating carefully choreographed public dramaturgy, such panels tilt the interpretative process in powerful ways, expanding and narrowing solidarity, creating or denying the factual and moral basis for reparations and civic repair. (19)

Parzania focuses on the nature of the intervention by the State machinery. The film unfolds to reveal the social discourse as being influenced by the bureaucracy which seems callous and insensitive to the victims. Help is sought by Shernaz but her plea remains an impassioned plea. There is no solution offered, no solace for the victim and Parzan still remains missing. Though the family has found its identity which is now altered irrevocably, the social environment remains turbulent and uncertain. A new identity is forged over the existing one. Once the trauma is over, "the new collective identity is rooted in sacred places and structured in ritual routines"(23). Cultural images drilled into the social psyche like that of the burnt train compartment help forge new definitions in social relations. The film, does give sharp images of the socio-political dimensions of the trauma and the forceful impact of the mass media with the chief minister's image on several TV screens giving a heavily coded speech about Godhra. New icons are created in a radically altered social realm.

Jeffrey C. Alexander says: "The aim (of trauma narrative) is to restore collective psychological health by lifting societal repression and restoring memory. To achieve this social scientists stress the importance of finding – through public acts of commemoration, cultural representation and public political struggle – some collective means for undoing repression and allowing the pent-up emotions of loss and mourning to be expressed" (7). *Parzania* narrates a trauma that leaves its indelible mark on the collective memory and on the personal selves of the victims and their lives are radically transformed. Traumatic events shock the survivor to such an extent that the unconscious emotional fears and psychological defense mechanisms distort the memory of the event. This also results in distortion of truth and responsible action. Trauma creates untreatable wounds on the psyche and hence the event remains unassimilated and comes back as nightmares and repetitive actions to torture the survivor, making him relive the experience. The family of Cyrus has lost their home as well as the power to communicate their feelings of fear, uncertainty and pain. Dilshad smiles to make her mother happy. Cyrus turns away from Shernaz and forgets to renew his wedding vows, which has been his habit for years. Shernaz emerges as the stronger of the two, and she moves on with her faith in religion. Cyrus is shattered and holds on to religion in an irrational manner. Shernaz seeks the assistance of the media and prefers to keep Dilshad grounded on reality about Parzan's return and the uncertainty surrounding it. Cyrus goes into nine days of seclusion, fasting and sleeplessness in an act of purification. He strongly believes that it will show him the fate of Parzan and end the torment. The family is suspended in a space where hope still persists, where closure is not possible. Perhaps, psychologically, this is the most damaging and terrorizing space to occupy for any

person. Offering solace to the individual in this context would be a narration of the events which would release some of the pain and agony from the system. Although the film adopted a subdued style of conversation (except for Allan's expressions of anger), we find Shernaz testifying before the Human Rights Commission in a passionate, emotional manner. It is justifiable considering her psychological state and it acts as a release which is essential for her survival. For Cyrus, the vision that he projects on to the screen helps him confront the possibilities about his child's condition. For the community that suffered the trauma, reliving their experience before Human Rights Commission and their hopes of a retribution helps them survive the memory.

The film when understood from a postcolonial perception seems to have a Eurocentric point of narration. The narrator is a white man who although is depicted as psychologically disturbed due his personal traumas, seems to have a better control of the situation. He does not stay an impersonal observer, but becomes the protector of Cyrus' family. His vision seems clearer than everyone else, except perhaps Jayaraman, but unlike the Gandhian, is a man of action. He also has a better understanding of Gandhian values compared to the Indians in the film. The use of language is also problematic in this sense. The language used predominantly is English but Hindi becomes the medium when the character adopts a rude and crude inhuman being. Jagan, the hooch trader speaks Hindi throughout the film except in front of the Commission when he decides to speak out the truth.

India having been a part of the colonial empire is a nation that has experienced and reshaped itself by the experience of colonial trauma. It is also a nation of plurality and hence has had to readjust and redefine itself through several processes of conflicts and assimilation. Trauma plays a major role in building national identities and innumerable number of memorials and similar cultural symbols stand testimony for this. *Parzania* as a trauma narrative opens up several possibilities of discussion in the area of trauma theory in the Indian context. With a culture distinctly different from that of the West, the handling of trauma and its narration would be an interesting choice for research.

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