

Influence and Implications of Fragmented Narratives: Culture Perspectives

Dr. S. A. Thameemul Ansari

Professor of English Brainware University, Kolkatta. WB

Abstract

Narratives are essentially understood as ‘stories’, but they have a role which is more complex and more engaging in creating conditions for consciousness. In this globalized world, it has been made possible to establish a global economy at a larger scale thanks to the force of science and technology. The political events that are shaping our perspectives today have made us accept and reconcile with the fact that that even global political calculations are also made possible. But, it is still impossible to have a global political consciousness. This paper proposes to look at the reasons from diverge perspectives why it has been impossible to create a kind of global consciousness in political level. Towards creating a global political consciousness, we need to encourage narratives from multiple perspectives. Narratives are not merely story-telling, but a cultural way of understanding, analysing, critiquing, debating and more specifically questioning issues and matters related to life, society, politics, State and its apparatus which regulates our lives and our modes of thinking in subliminal levels. Fundamental questions of race, belonging and community that are raised through narratives help us develop consciousness which is needed to have a humane understanding of the world beyond the boundaries. But, it is also important to realize that narratives are not just what has been narrated. There are also narratives which go un-narrated, suppressed, unknown and silenced. These suppressed, fragmented, unorganized, illogical and deeply confusing narratives can be understood only from the points views of the contexts which rendered the victims voiceless or mute. This paper examines the scope of such narratives in creating consciousness and it also explores why narratives can’t be understood from universal perspectives.

(Key words: Narratives, culture memory, fragments, race, community and belonging)

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Narratives are not merely stories, but they are reflections of cultural understanding of the contextual realities. They create conditions which contribute to building the foundations of our lives. ‘They are cultural practices which underline the transactions that occur in our society in different patterns and they create in subliminal levels collective consciousness of the nation’ (Homi Baba.2004). The fictional realities that we create are through the process of storytelling that happen every day through interactions in personal, social, cultural and political levels. This process happens deeply below the level of consciousness and this results in forming sediments for cultural values. The world of realities is interpreted through the stories that we create and narrate. These narratives form the very basis our values and foundations of our lives. The perceptions about the world and influences that provoke us to action are deeply connected to these narratives.

‘Narratives are cultural ways of understanding, critiquing, debating and more specifically questioning issues related to life, politics, state and its apparatus which regulate our lives.’(Homi Baba. 1990).

Fundamental questions of race, belonging and community are raised through the narratives and these questions and interactions form the basis of our culture memory. The book *After Empire: Chinua Achebe and the great African Novel* Edited by Ruth Franklin (2008) observes :

‘Literature is replete with narratives and that makes it eternally relevant. Literatures are not just luxury for us. It is a life and death affair because we are fashioning a new man’. Arundathi Roy in her *Capitalism : A Ghost Story* stresses that a fiction can say what can’t be said otherwise’. Narratives, in Arundathi Roy’s words are ‘ the simplest ways of saying the most complicated things’. This process creates conditions for exploring ‘ a third space’ , which in the words of Homi Baba in *The Location of Culture* (1994) ‘ a luminous’ space through which differences can be negotiated. This process is essentially a social construct and this eventually leads us towards protecting cultural, political, economic, ethnic and religious rights.

‘Narratives are not always expected to be linear, clear, coherent and understandable’(Partha Chatterjee. 1993) . They are at times deeply confusing, incoherent, complex and complicated. There are gaps and pauses and jumbled up sequences which make narratives a hotchpotch. The readers are challenged to hop back and forth in the timeline to understand the deeply embedded structures. Arundathi Roy’s *Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is a text wherein the author has exploited the structures in such a way to offer clues to the readers to understand the inner world of confusion and chaos. Sedic Chrombe , a South African author of the book *My Journey from Apartheid* underlines the complexity in his rendering of personal stories of suffering and torture.

Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) which was established to look into the cases of violation immediately after apartheid came to an end in South Africa, records the testimonies of the victims, and those records are ‘narratives disfigured and dis-narrated’ in the words of Sedic Chrombe. ‘Of the countless number of victims, only a very few have turned up to narrate their stories in their collective responsibility, and those narratives too have full of gaps and pauses, but they still become part of culture memory as they carry the sediments of the culture consciousness.’(Romy Clark. 1997).

But, there are also stories untold. When in a context victims don’t come forward to narrate their stories for the obvious reasons of fear, disorientation or deep psychological wounds, does it still make a story? When a victim does not narrate her story, the victim, herself becomes a story.

Such stories are to be identified and debated for creating consciousness for better world. Sometimes, victims are dead and gone, but the traces of their lives such as bones and tombs do the narration. Examples of such un-narrated stories are found in the fictions which were written based on Truth and Reconciliation Report. Michael Ondotje’s ‘*Anil Ghost*’, Boris’s *The Book of Bones*, David Paker’s ‘*Truth Commissioner*’. Zoe Wocombs’ *David Story* ‘and Gilian Slovo’s ‘*Red Dust*’. All these fictions emerge out the deep and complicated narratives which were recorded in the TRC Report.

Achilles Mbembe , Cameroonian political theorist, talks about such stories of oppression in his research and brings to light a pattern that abusive powers would employ to suppress the voices. For example, *Anil’s Ghost* , which is set in Srilankan Civil War contexts, *The Book of Bones* , which deals with Rwandan Massacre, *Truth Commissioner*, which explores multiple truths , *David Story* which touches upon post-apartheid conditions, and *Red Dust* which narrates fictional tale based on true events are fictions which fall under different categories of fragmented narratives. Achilles Mbembe uses his socio-political theory to discuss at length such narratives. Some narratives are reconstructed by ‘reading bones’ as in the case of *Anil’s Ghost* , some other narratives are reconstructed by ‘reading the tombs’ as in the case of ‘*The Book Bones*’ and a few other narratives are reconstructed by ‘interpreting the

silences' and 'reading the marks of injury' on the bodies of the victims. While examining the cause of death by recreating their lives, an argument about the nation is made. The State which is a larger power body, engages in political management of human population through their exposure to death. Achille Mbembe, in his theory of Necropolitics brings to public consciousness the dangerous process of political management of life and death done by the States.

Necropolitics is a socio-political theory which identifies and makes arguments against the use of socio-political power to dictate how some people may live and how some people must die.

Achilles radicalizes Foucault's *Biopolitics* and goes to the extent of remodelling his theory in line with existential realities. The political calculation of life and death by creating categories of people is what defines the core of his theory. Narratives are suppressed when voice is stifled and when movement of large groups is restrained. This leads to control of space and pauperization and precarization of people. These two strategies are adopted to create conditions of poverty and uncertainty in people, which will eventually result in death and destruction. Apart from these, wars, genocide, refugee camps and ecocide are also adopted to carry out large scale destruction. This arbitrary power that regulates human life by advancing death is very dangerous as it leads to total elimination. The question that has to be raised here is that how positive power over life that States can enjoy become a deadly form of power. Achilles attempts to answer this disturbing question by stating that human masses are eliminated in the name of protection and survival of a nation or a people or a class or a civilization.

Fragmented narratives offer us clues to understand the context of victimization and abuse of power. But, unfortunately such narratives are not heard for the obvious reasons. The oppression experienced by the displaced and disgruntled people are expressed in language which is incoherent and deeply confusing. This is because of the failure of structural semblances in linguistic levels which clog the experience and expression.

Homi Bhabha in his *Location of Culture* touches upon this condition and asserts that the first condition of categorization is exclusion of those 'unwanted or hated' for political reasons. Those are termed as 'possible dangers' or 'threats'. Security is the lens through which it will be seen if a person is an insider or an outsider. Again, the differences and identities are formed through the lens of security and so security has become inadvertently a cultural apparatus. The subjugation of life to the power of death, biological division of human species and offering justification of the extermination of those considered inferior are angles that are to be explored in the fragmented narratives.

Achilles, in his 2003 *Lecture on Necropolitics*, argues that creation of death-worlds or according the status of living-dead are processes through which political management of life can be effectively done. There are three factors which determine the creation of death-world namely Necroeconomy (market forces deciding our lives and death), necropolitics (political masters or the State which decides the 'space' to be granted) and production of death in a large scale (read as State terror). In this large scale production of death lies so many untold stories and dis-narrated narratives. Political and social contestation will be viewed from the point of view of 'interference' on the administration of state. In his *Exit from Democracy* Chapter 'Relations without Desire', Achilles talks about this dangerous phenomenon in detail. When States can't tolerate political and social contestation, they will encourage 'shared violence' by which weapons and licenses maybe given to agencies and people to kill. In a society possession and non-possession of weapons defines one's social value, social bonds are understandably destroyed and power can be acquired and exercised only at the price of another life. In *Anil's Ghost*

Michael Ondotje portrays this trend by relating the State's excesses to 'helpless enforced conditions' to silence people in order to accord to them the status of living –dead.

In *'Truth Commissioner'* and *'Red Dust'*, one can find the instances of predation of natural resources, which is also one of the processes of production of death in large scale. The exploitation of natural resources and displacement of indigenous people, the advancement of different modes of killing and offering of different moral justification are ways in which small doses of death that structure the everyday life of individuals towards elimination of human population are carried out. In this context, we ask ourselves if the era that can think and understand has come to an end. We need to explore different ways of talking about these violations. Compartmentalization has to come to an end and it reduces the importance of real problem. There is a connection between climate change and caste, capitalism and internationalism, caste based violence and economic diversity, history and politics and silence and violence.

Now the question of how such experiences of oppression can be narrated. The narratives which are linear are not capable enough to carry the expressions which are deeply disturbing. Achilles captures this view in his lecture when states that 'dis-narrated' narratives narrate the experiences in a language which is beyond the boundaries. But, it is also argued in *Critique of Black Reason*

that there are cultural imprints which determine the nature of narratives. Negotiation of differences in a language which is mutually intelligible and with values which are commonly shared are conditions which might facilitate resolution of conflicts. The cultural way of understanding is crucial and this understanding is highly complicated as different cultures view 'narratives' in the framework of their own cultural moorings.

Michael G. Barnhart in "*Getting Beyond Cross-talk*" refers to certain aspects of narratives which normally go undebated. Narratives do have some underpinnings that are to be culturally appreciated. Cultural way of understanding calls for culturally sensible arguments. But, again this goes against the spirit of universal understanding of narratives. If universal values are to be negotiated in the context of conflicting cultures, we need to create scope for a third space, which is not only imaginary but also transitional. In this context, narratives are to be subjected to cultural contexts which act as forcing functions. This suppression can also be called

'fragmented' narratives. Gayatri Spivak is of the opinion that the third space that we create to interact, relate and connect is transitional in nature. The liminal and imaginary space has to be creating conditions for interaction which is to be culturally limiting.

'Fragmented narratives are expressions beyond oppressive forces.' (Ranajit Guha. 2000) . Paul Smit in his essay 'Political Responsibility of Teaching Literature' raises the question of 'narratives' which are subjected to cultural interpretation. He quotes the context of literature teaching and puts forward some fundamental questions about the purpose and values attached to the teaching process in general and literature teaching in particular. He says that teaching is essentially a part of system of reproduction for society. It depends on the agent's ability to hierarchize, discriminate, by way of reading recognizing, appreciating various legitimated cultural markers and symbols. The novels *Anil's Ghost*, *The Book of Bones*, *Truth Commissioners* and *Red Dust* are examples of the cultural contexts which frame our understanding of these novels. Paul Smit quotes Gayatri Spivak when he talks about the how text has to be negotiated in a classroom. A text is a cultural code which has the power to influence and alter the social relations which subsist in the classroom. When a text is negotiated in a foreign pedagogical situation, it naturally assimilates into that cultural capital and this assimilation is 'very natural' for the

fact that the cultural interactions between the conflicting cultures decide and influence ‘the understanding’ of the readers. A text has to be looked at not only from the point of view of cultural historian, but also from the point of view of literary critic and both these roles interact and critically interrupt. In other words, when a foreign text is brought into a classroom, it has to be necessarily alienated.

Any text is not at home is a pre-requisite to understand it. When a text is negotiated in the classroom, we create scope for secondary literature, which is not just a receptive activity, but a productive process in compelling sense. This production of secondary literature is what is technically called ‘fragmented narratives’ in the words of Gayatri Spivak. This has been possible because of the force of ‘resistance’.

Resistance to the text that informs us and elides our social relations is an act of agency. The subject position that a text enjoys has to be replaced with the contexts of reading and the participants in the process of meaning making. They co-create the meaning by drawing wealth of experience from their own social and political lives. This also results in ‘reacting to the texts’ through writings which are not only critical but also deeply reflective. This is how structures of the texts are fragmented to subvert the ‘the all-powerful texts’ to a process of compelling interpretation. This implies that there is no universal narrative. A text has to be grounded to the context of interaction, and here to contextualize a text is not to go the context which has created the text in focus, but to bring the text to the present context where it has been placed, read and interpreted. Pedagogy of humanities as an arena of cultural explanation has to be compelled to question the explanation of culture.

To sum up, narratives are influenced by factors which are social, political, religious, cultural and ethnic. Humans weave stories and through which they create fictional realities. These fictional realities determine our lives and hopes, and all our interpretations of the world of experiences are based on the fictional reality that we have created. Every text has a narrative and often the most powerful narratives are the ones which have not yet been told. Even untold and un-narrated narratives too have significance and impact in our lives. In human history, narratives that are told are layered in several underpinnings. We seek the help of theories to understand the narratives so that we can guard ourselves off from the ‘all influencing’ totalizing narratives. Universal narratives are impossible as we are limited by cultural understandings of specific contexts. It is because of this factor; we can’t have global political consciousness. Although, global political calculations can be achieved through common discourse practices, global political consciousness is still an impossibility. No attempt to globalize our narratives shall be permitted. Let our narratives be always limited by cultures which can be incoherent, illogical, unclear and complex. These limits that culture imposes on our narratives make our stories ‘our own and real’ and ‘ever compelling’. Any act of insertion of the global into the fabric of fragmented narratives will create partial and ‘incipient de-nationalism’ as system of representation interact and interrelate in opposite direction.

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