

Testimonio the Subaltern's Thunderbolt

Nazira Begum.A,

Asst. Professor of english, government arts college for women, salem-636008

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ABSTRACT: Testimonio is an egalitarian literary genre born in 1970's. It is the voice of the marginalised and the clarion call of the subaltern. Testimonio is the expression of traumatized experiences. It gives to the subaltern the much needed social-literary space. The metonymical and polyphonic voice of the testimonial narrator nourishes the dead souls of the subaltern. The resurrection of the victims of authoritative regimes has become possible with the arrival testimonio as a literary genre. This paper titled Testimonio: The Subaltern's Thunderbolt explores the merits and relevance of the genre Testimonio in the 21st century.

Key words: Testimonio, hierarchy, subaltern, trauma.

I. THE ORIGIN

Literature is a beautiful manifestation of human efforts to freeze time and perpetuate memory. Literary genres are inventions of human mind to give myriad forms to those memories. Among these genres few are canonized. Many are stated as the media of the upper class and few as the vehicle of Bourgeois but none is labeled as the genre of the suffering subaltern. A genre was born in the turmoil of cold war in the Cone of South America. It is Testimonio, the genre of the Subaltern. The genre originated in Cuba and was institutionalised there in 1970 with its own category in the 'Casa de las Américas' literary prize. A genre principally committed to convey the experiences of the oppressed. It is described as

An authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (e.g., war, oppression, revolution etc.) Emphasizing popular oral discourse the witness portrays his or her own experience as representatives of a collective memory and identity. Truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or exorcising and setting aright official history (Yudice p.44)

Testimonio emerged at the height of a widespread struggle against state violence and

terror in Latin America. It was born in a specific place and time at which there was a need in the society to express oneself or a need to hear and read stories cast as authentic and politically engaged. Therefore, testimonio gained momentum as a form of narrative distinct from fiction and ratified as supposedly more politically efficacious than the novels of the Latin American Boom.

TESTIMONIO, VOICE OF THE VOICELESS

Testimonio pays attention to the voices of voiceless victims. It has become the voice of those who have been kept completely silent by the iron fists of authority. Where ever there is exploitation and repression humanity is in crisis there. The exploited world of the subaltern is brimming with woe which is caused by physical and physiological effected crimes. It is a world cursed with military and police excess that resulted in assassinations, massacres, torture, disappearances, forced displacement, dispossession, sexual violence, illicit recruitment, landmines, sabotage, and terrorist attacks. In such a land where human rights are crushed with insensible giant shoes and sensible voices are muted by indifferent hands, the voice of justice becomes feeble. It could clearly be seen the role of Testimonio as Nance states it

1. To articulate and publicise life stories of those historically excluded from canonical literature conventional politics;
2. To testify to situations of (often officially denied) state violence and repression; and lastly and perhaps most importantly,
3. To be representative and metonymical.(Nance p.2)

TESTIMONIO, VOICE OF THE PRIVILEGED WITNESS

Testimonio is the voice of the privileged witnesses. The muted, unheard voices can be silenced but cannot be buried. They resurrect and become witness to the martyrdom of the sacrificed .The privileged victims survive to tell the horrors of inhuman crimes to which they are subjected. They find their echoes in the conscience abiding psychologists, journalists, and social workers.

They narrate personal accounts of violence with the purpose of recognizing and reconstructing individual and collective memories to extend the life of the buried and to demand justice.

TESTIMONIO, THE VOICE FROM THE MARGIN

Testimonio is the voice from the margin. The hands of authority muzzle the voices of the people who try to talk across the margins. The marginalized need a representative voice. Testimonio is the voice of the marginalised and the people who are kept away from the power centers with ruthless force. It unveils, as Burciaga says in first person, the political, social, and cultural accounts of individuals on the margins of society with the intent to promote social movement and positive change in the lives of others. Testimonio challenges the compelled silence of the subaltern with the voice of his own. It reclaims a voice and a space which is declined and ignored by the centers of power.

TESTIMONIO, THE VOICE OF JUSTICE

Testimonio is the voice of justice. Barbara Harlow in her argument in favour of the importance of testimonio over literature writes in testimonio: "Rather than acting as gatekeepers to the halls of learning authors and other 'professionals,' often the 'traditional intellectuals' in the Gramscian sense of the term, become instead amanuenses in a new collaborative project enabling the 'voices of the dispossessed' to penetrate international media circuits and information networks" (Harlow p.72)

TESTIMONIO, THE VOICE OF THE SUBALTERN

Testimonio is the voice of the subaltern. John Beverly in his work entitled "Against Literature" creates a binary opposition. He associates testimonio with the subaltern, the real and the new left which is contrasted with middle class or even upper classes, fiction and an out dated politics.

The hierarchically constructed society has its rule to decide and dole who should be heard, to whom should be addressed, which voices are authorized to speak, in what capacities, under what conditions, and about which experiences. But Testimonio has broken this hierarchical ladder and given a common platform to the subaltern.

Narratives from the margin attract because they tell facts which are hidden. Testimonio is a form of narration that captures the voice of the subaltern, created by the subaltern. But it is not

only meant for the subaltern, it is an imperative and important communication meant to be understood and acknowledged by all. The testimonial narratives are unique as they are not represented by the upper-class authors; they express the subaltern struggle and their role in the fight against oppression. They challenge the literary strategies of the elite and its cultural norms. Testimonio becomes a voice for the subaltern resisting atrocities committed by the state.

Beverly in his essay *The Margin at the Center* states that "the roots of testimonio go back to the importance in previous Latin American literature of a series of nonfictional narrative texts such as the colonial crónicas, the costumbrista essay ..., the war diaries ... of, for example, Bolívar or Martí, or the Romantic biography, a key genre of Latin American liberalism" (Beverly p.25). At the same time Testimonio joins hands with anthropology and ethnography as it manifests the voice of the subaltern. Often the subaltern's voice is the voice of the marginalized like the mine worker, indigenous peasants and urban poor.

TESTIMONIO, THE MOST DEMOCRATIC FORM

Testimonio is the most democratic form. Testimonio is a form of narration that challenges, critiques and overthrows social and literary hierarchies alike. It shatters or at least shakes the authority of the center. It is the counter voice that narrates the reverse side of the society which is as equal and important as the obverse side. It questions the motives of the exploiters and brings into limelight the exploiters strategies. It is true when George Yúdice states that literature did not allow just anyone to narrate their tales, but only "certain classes of individuals": writers like "Neruda or Gabriel García Márquez, trained within the institution, have had no trouble performing in the literary sphere"; others, however, were "deemed nonliterary" and "assigned to the genres of other disciplines— oral history, ethnography, and so on—or to substandard discursive forms— folktale, gossip, legend, and so on" (Yudice p.47).

Doris Sommer states: "novels seem unobliging today, given the sheer intellectual difficulty of important Latin American fiction since the 'boom' of the 1960s and 1970s. Testimonials promise more warmth." (Sommer p.132) Testimonio is thus perceived as a form of narration that has the potential to challenge and change.

TESTIMONIO AND THE WOMEN NARRATORS

Testimonio though not a Gyno-centric genre it facilitates the women narrators. Testimonio foregrounds the narratives of women and indigenous people struggling against oppression. Testimonio tells different version of stories which are unheard and untold and forced not to tell. It challenges the records of the officials and their narratives. Its main focus is more on subaltern lives and their struggle. In her essay, "Remembering the Dead: Latin American Women's Testimonial' Discourse," Nancy Saporta Sternbach points out that "[m]ilitary repression and authoritarian rule are no newcomers to the Latin American political scene, but women's open and direct opposition to them is" (Sternbach p.91)

TESTIMONIO AND POLITICS

Literature of modern times cannot escape the upheavals of socio political changes. It is not a genre to please. It is a genre to perform socially. The political importance of the testimonio is very overt. Zimmerman calls it an ideological/political tool; and Pratt focused more on testimonial's role in academia. As Pratt asserts: testimonios seek to correct what is often called the 'sanctioned ignorance' of metropolitans, an ignorance produced by the cooptation of the media, by ideological mystifications, systematic information gaps, by psychic displacement, alienation, denial, and self-interest, and by the generalized diffuseness that characterizes power in the metropolis. (Pratt p.65)

TESTIMONIO AN ICONOCLASTIC GENRE

Testimonio is iconoclastic. From the cited views of experts it could be understood that testimonio is celebrated as a new form of narrative that challenges the existing situation in literature and the narratives to be told to the world. It is iconoclastic. It challenges academia and its canon construction. It questions the frame work of the canon formation. The arrival of Testimonial has reconstructed the norms that dictate what books and stories should be discussed in the academic institutions. Institutions of higher education impart certain kind of knowledge to its learners; with the advent of Testimonio they are compelled to revamp the concept of knowledge. Testimonio challenges the conceptions of history, culture and politics. The reception to testimonio is mixed. The radical and the broadminded celebrate and welcome the new ideas with open arms. The narrow conservative minded people are skeptical about the new form of narrative and its canonization as a genre.

- is told and reported in first person
- has a sense of political or social urgency

- is generalizable to others; we learn about the conditions of many from the story of one
- carries a desire for social movement and change,
- in contrast to oral history helps to retrace, document, and organize our political, social, and cultural histories

II. TRAUMA AND TESTIMONIO

Testimonio is Trauma literature. Subalterns have been often been the victims of horrendous experiences beyond blessed human experiences. The wretched people of the earth are compelled to suffer as they happen to be the "the other". Testimonio records pain and memories that are causative factors of pain. Trauma results in pain. The pain never becomes the past. The traumatic past is not dead it lives in the present. Especially the traumatic past throbs and aches. Neither individuals nor societies could overcome the bitter memories of sexual harassment, violent deaths of dear ones, war, displacement and genocide. Their painful scars do not get erased by time. No river of Lethe could make the human heart to forget the traumatic memories of the past. Testimonio helps these memories to be culturally mobilized and transmitted

In a military regime prisons have become places where horror, perversion, and the total distortion of human relations were common currency. The tortures inflicted there include the following: forced physical exercise, the deliberate attempt to deny the person's identity through the assignment of codes, sensory deprivation and stress positions, the brutal conditions of abduction, mock executions and having to witness the torture of loved ones, forced nudity and sexual violence, and food and hygiene deprivation. Testimonios meticulously record the inhuman practices of prison. Testimony has also been a way—though not the only one—for survivors to exert agency in response to brutal state violence meant to totally erase their subjectivities and ability to resist

Grief, loss, and trauma permeate the narratives of women survivors. Testimonio has given them a powerful socio-literary space to assert their voices in defiance of silence and oblivion. The politically initiated and socially active women are victimized more for their socio political commitments. Their political experiences do not make these women any less victims of the brutal state repression they suffered in the clandestine detention centers (CDCs). But these martyrs by their sufferings and reliving those sufferings do offer a window into the radical political projects that the military regime tried to annihilate.

The women witnesses are doubly courageous. First they have the courage to act against the repressive regimes. Next when they are arrested, detained and tortured or lose their everything and everyone do not get intimidated. They know very well testifying can potentially mean returning to conditions of threat and bodily harm. The dictatorship is intent on silencing civil society, and most particularly those targeted through physical torture and disappearance. But they break the abnormal silence imposed by authority. Breaking the silence was both an individual and a collective process. They speak for themselves and for the entire oppressed society and for the future.

Testimonio delves deep into their memories of victims of the state terror. It shows how women conceptualize the torments and torture they have endured. Their accounts help to visualize the indelible and imprinted marks of the traumas they have experienced. These experiences are beyond the narrow definitions of torture known to ordinary people who enjoy the safer side and gifted not to see the seamy side of life. The traumatic women survivors grappled with memories of unimaginable cruelty find a social space to speak out in testimonio. Testimonio poses troubling questions about the human condition, particularly as they try to make meaning of the perpetrators' actions. Trauma leaves physical and psychological scars. The first is visible and the later is invisible. The traumatic testimonial account reveals us the subtle form of sufferings that cannot be evidenced by the brutal inscription of violence on the body. These devastating stories convey the untold miseries, a sense of woe filled responsibility for actions that implores the significant question what it means to be human.

Anne Cubilié argues that generally survivors of atrocity become deeply uncomfortable signifiers for the post atrocity societies within which they live, excessive to structures of normality that privilege forgetting, getting over and getting on with things through the denial of the terror of death, especially the possibility of mass death. Survivors have come to be figured by us in the form of "ghosts" who haunt our cultural imaginary. Configured as the uncanny [. . .] and vested with a power and wisdom that have literally been brought back from the realm of the dead, they are valorized, memorialized, and heroized, but we cannot—will not—hear them. (Cubilié p. xii)

The testimonies of women survivors emerge from a place of profound loss and suffering stemming from state terrorism. It includes torture and disappearances, repression, the appropriation

of babies of captive women, theft of property belonging to detainees and their families, slave labor by kidnapped persons, continued intimidation and threats even after their release, births and abortions in deplorable conditions, and sexual violence, among others. Their bodies become the archive of painful memories. Their bodies are not just a bag of flesh and blood. They are transformed into suffering bodies, witnessing bodies, maternal and sexualized bodies, resistant and resilient bodies. In other words, bodies have become sites and vehicles for voice. They become the voracious tongues of bleeding bodies and souls, and that is Testimonio.

Testimonio has given to its privileged women witnesses the voice to narrate their sufferings. Their sufferings include violent threats, inhuman beatings, monstrous tortures, harassment and extended sexual violence. The privileged survivors' testimonies demonstrate how at last women speak out, even the more hush, hushed topics like sexual violence. Testimonio has given them resilient bodies with strength to express their, "telling terror" to family, friends, judges, human rights organizations, and the general public. Many survivors recognize the social value of testimony and see that it can also be personally beneficial in terms of processing traumatic experiences and fulfilling justice goals. Testimonio empowers the women to shoulder the responsibility of revelation. In giving testimony, women survivors have claimed the position of witnesses of the painful past and a constructive future. Parin Dossa points out that "becoming a witness means taking the responsibility of stating what happened" (Dossa p. 67)

III. CONCLUSION

It would be suitable to conclude the paper with quotes of Kimberly Nance who clearly defines the genre testimonio.

... testimonio can be defined with "the tripartite combination of a first-person narrative of injustice, an insistence that the subject's experience is representative of a larger class, and an intent to work towards a more just future." (Nance p.2)

If testimonios are taken seriously by the readers and the rulers it will inspire solidarity. This solidarity will help to build a society which will be egalitarian and humane. It will be an alternate to the Western, patriarchal cultural norms and capitalist or neoliberal political and economic structures which is the root cause of all woes and misery to the subaltern class whose predominant members are the wretched women.

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