

Testimonios: An Indian Perspective

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Literature is usually produced by members of the dominant classes in society and represent ideas as seen from their social as well as cultural position. Subaltern people have long been relatively powerless in presenting themselves in the literary world. They have not been better represented, rather socially and politically misrepresented. Georg Gugelberger has noted that critical theory and research is being created on the margins between literary theory and anthropology and that in its exploration of literature, it is involved in the “construction of differences that are the necessary cultural dimensions of empire- differences which make it possible to distinguish the colonized from the colonizer”(4). Gayatri Spivak calls this kind of Western writing as the “othering discourse”, a mistaken belief called “error-as- truth” syndrome. Gugelberger also points out that the educational system needs to be aware of the hegemonic fabrication of such literatures.

John Beverley suggests that the best way to approach the subaltern is through testimonial literature. Gugelberger considers Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart published in 1959, as the originating point of testimonies. According to him the writing of the novel set up the nailing of the canonical literature as a “misrepresentation of African reality”(5) by creators of literature from the “centre”. Achebe's work is considered a “corrective effort”(5). Testimonial narrative has come a long way ever since and it does not write to the past but with the future. Latin American testimonial discourse was born in Cuba in the mid- and late 1960's with Miguel Barnet's The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave in 1967. This form of expression soon developed in Mexico, Bolivia, Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Honduras. Miguel Marmol is one very significant testimonial writers from El Salvador. Testimonial literatures alter the balance between the centre and the periphery reconfiguring the global cultural differences pushing the margins to the center. Third world liberation activities have helped the production of this genre, to produce thought and action in the west since testimonial discourses have to be located in the cultural spaces, like the Cuban Revolution.

George Yúdice defines Testimonial literature as “an authentic narrative, told by a witness who is moved to narrate by the urgency of a situation (eg. war, oppression, revolution, etc.)”. Yúdice also explains: [...] the testimonialista gives his or her personal testimony “directly,” addressing a specific interlocutor. As in the works of Elvia Alvarado (1987), Rigoberta Menchú (1983), and Domitila Barrios de Chungara

(1977), that personal story is a shared one with the community to which the testimonialista belongs. The speaker does not speak for or represent a community but rather performs an act of identity-formation that is simultaneously personal and collective(15).

According to Gugelberger,

The situation of narration in testimonio has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on.

For him the testimonio emphasizes the popular oral discourse, the witness portrays his or her own experience as a representative of a collective memory and identity and “truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or exorcising and setting aright official history”(17).

A testimonio may include all categories considered conventional literature such as autobiography, autobiographical novel, oral history, memoir, confession, diary, interview, eyewitness report, life history, novella-testimonio, nonfiction novel, or “factographic” literature. Gugelberger draws the differences between testimonials and autobiography. According to him autobiographies are “writings by selves which are impressed by their own feelings of unique significance”. In contrast, testimonials show that the self cannot be defined in individual terms but only as a collective self engaged in a common struggle. The erosion of the central authority of the first person author who is replaced by a collective “we” effects a displacement from the bourgeois individual toward the community of the witness,...(9)

Women’s testimonies are considered the only “true” account as opposed to testimonies in general. Writers like Nancy Saporita Sternbach has even claimed this genre to belong exclusively to women making a strong case for the “mutually constitutive relationship of gender and genre”. She notes that women’s testimonial literature is a response to the military repression of the 970s and places it within the context of women and resistance in Latin America that also sparked political consciousness. Nancy Sternbach in her essay “Re-membering the Dead: Latin American Women’s “Testimonial” Discourse”, refers to René Jara’s etymological study of the word ‘testimonio’. According to her “testigo” is derived from “testes” which manifest the exclusion of women both “legally and anatomically”. As there is no feminine form for “testigo” in the Spanish language, women are excluded in the language discourse as well. To draw the idea that testimonial literature is more female gendered, she highlights three important traits shared by women’s discourse and testimonial literature as noted below:

1. the vindication and use of oral history as a means by which to obtain a narrative

2. the use of the paradigm of female slavery as the cause of the testimonio
3. the understanding of the personal as the political.

While the testimonio of men is defined as an “epic”, of the literary discourse women remain “marginal”. Their works are never recognized and their testimonios are uncategorized. Sternbach considers testimonial discourse as the site of nexus between the personal and the political. While personal refers to a “private, domestic, or intimate sphere”, the political is the “public, historic or collective one”. The writers express that the personal is political by familial terms such as a “mother” where as a testimonial subject she enters into the public domain. Sternbach from the interview “No me agarran viva”, where a woman states,

Having children is the most beautiful and most revolutionary experience there is.... As a mother, I can't just watch out for one child, there are millions of children in the country.... Maternity has a historical dimension and not just an individual one.(92)

Margaret Randall calls testimonial literature “resource literature”. It is a forum for transforming the former object into the subject. Collective identity is revealed in female gendered testimonials as in I, Rigoberta Menchú :

I'd like to stress that it's not only my life, it's also the testimony of my people... My story is the story of all poor Guatemalas. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people.(1) Black, Asian American, Native America, and other feminists of color have shown how important it is to write about one's experiences. Beginning in the 1970s, Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, Maxine Hong Kingston, Leslie Marmon Silko, and many others inspired us and legitimized subject matters and modes of writing that were previously ignored or deemed unacceptable. They brought to print oral traditions, dialects, and characters that conveyed experiences which, with rare exceptions, had not been documented before. The work of women of color inspired many academics of color to expand the "ethnic" and feminist canons. Anthologies such as Life Notes(1994), Double Stitch(1991), Making Waves (1989), and All-American Women (1986) brought the voices of women of color narrating their daily experiences into our purview. These texts and many more modeled possibilities of combining reading, writing, and social activism. They illustrated the possibilities of collaborative visions, creation, and production that bridged community and academy. The paths established by women of color also helped construct coalitions to negotiate differences among themselves as they moved toward significant moments of solidarity.

Testimonial is a crucial means of bearing witness and inscribing into history of those lives realities that could otherwise be erased. Testimonio has been critical in movements for liberations in Latin America, offering an artistic form and methodology to create politicised understandings of identity and community. Testimonios or women's stories show how personal experience contain a larger political meaning. It can be a powerful method for feminist research practice. It contests the exclusion of questions of gender and sexual discrimination in ethnic studies curricular or political agenda. It includes the idealised notions of ethnicity familia and community. Testimonios bridge different histories and origins , building cross cultural coalitions and personal relationships. It is also a site of intersection of ethnicity, nationality, race, class, gender, sexuality, age and other markers of diverse identities and communities.

The emotional force and intellectual depth of testimonio develop a spring board for theorizing about 'latinidades' in the academy, in the communities and in their personal lives. Testimonios created spaces for Latina feminisms, confronting established and contested terms, identities, frameworks and coalitions that have emerged in particular historical contexts. Women writing testimonios are charting their own course through these contesting terrains, creating their own social and discursive space. Writers of testimonios come from line of workers, activists, theorists and writers within the community.

Latinas engaged in developing methods a political praxis, having contributed to empowerment efforts through literacy and giving voice, documenting silenced histories. Not only political but also in the literary and artistic activity around these movements- teatro and floriculto (street theatre, poetry and music festivals) testimonios provide a language to celebrate cultural identity. These Latina women, writing testimonios are proficient oral historians, ethnographers, literary scholars, creative writers, psychologists and testimoniadoras but who had never explored their diversity. They have said that although they had professed in the classroom about the connection between life experience and new knowledge constructions, but has never made their own lives. In addition, they were all accustomed to engaging other Latinas of Latin American women in giving testimony, while many of them had not participated in public renderings of their own life stories because for many years women were not prepared for the intensity, despair, poetry and clarifying power of one's own testimonios.

Testimonios is a site of knowledge enhancing multiplicity of experiences. It shows how knowledge of and from everyday lives is the basis for theorizing and constructing and evolving political praxis to address the material conditions in which the women live. It is a new type of intellectual used to reveal complexity of identity. In testimonios the

women tell it like it is. It is the account of their lives. It offers inspirational and important theoretical perspective. It is the stories of their lives revealing their own complex identities, and contemplate thoughts and feelings so often in isolation.

Telling To Live (1983), one of the few documented testimonios, is a manifesto of the color and gender of epistemology and on the plurality of "reason" and "rationality". It brings to lives in papers, rendering testimonios through autobiographical narratives, short stories, poems and dialogues. It hasn't always been easy to negotiate a space where Latinas can elaborate to build scholarship and community. The process of creating oppositional discourses, social spaces, anthologies, or collaborative projects among contributors. In the preface to the second edition of This Bridge Called My Back (1983), for example, Cherrie Moraga noted, "The idea of Third World feminism has proved to be much easier between real live women." It is important to acknowledge the new hierarchies that may develop within these projects and one must constantly negotiate the differences.

Telling To Live is divided into four sections and an introduction, and consists of personal essays, poems, short stories, and sometimes family photo graphs. The introduction, titled "Papelitos Guardidos" or "Secret Little Papers," takes its name from the idea that each woman has had to keep guarded secrets, secret roles, tucked away in safe and secret places. This metaphor pervades the work, for a basic assumption which informs this collection is that sharing out or talking through such closely-guarded places (sometimes anonymously, most times not) leads to healing through consciousness-raising, or according to Aurora Levins Morales, "collective testimonio" (28). The women detail their coming to education through the hard work and, sometimes, progressive or even socialist standpoints of family members. They owe their deepest debts both emotionally and intellectually to their families, and especially to their mothers, sisters, abuelas (grandmothers), and tias(aunts).

Indian Dalit testimonios bear witness and testify life experiences. M.S.S. Pandian considers testimonio as a "strategy of erasing specificities by masking them with a veil of anonymity lifts the narrative from the local and turns it into a universal statement about oppression". The Dalit women draw theory in lived experiences and foreground the geographical, historical, and especially racial and class differences between and amongst them. Their personal testimonies bring about the "points of resistance and recovery" and "begin the healing process" (14). writing caste/writing gender: narrating Dalit women's testimonios (2006) by Sharmila Rege, is a collection of Dalit testimonios writing against the establishment interspersed with essays and dialogues in translation. It consists of discussions on gender, class and caste discrimination movements in Maharashtra. The writer outlines the

different eras of the movement beginning from Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, pro-Ambedkar and post-Ambedkar. It gives an insight of the caste structure and the consequent struggle in Maharashtra.

Many Dalit women have already embraced this corpus of writing. While caste is used to subjugate and dehumanise others, this form of literature has been taken up to challenge caste and also male dominance. Bama's Karukku is no longer considered an autobiography. M.S.S. Pandian argues that Bama verbalises her own life story, depletes the autobiographical "I", which he calls an "outcome of bourgeois individualism ... and displaces it with the collectivity of the Dalit community". The story is not her own but that of others too.

In Bama's case nobody can interpret her story. It is something that is very personal. Her life is related to her people. What happened to her could have happened to many of her people. She had the opportunity to tell something that others in her community did not have. She documents the reality of the whole people of her community who were not allowed to voice their own story. In Karukku, the "absence of the self" and the presence of the "collective 'we'" is evident. Bama's text instead of privileging her own voice, functions as a site for the criss- crossing of multiple voices from within her community.

She places every detail in the context of Dalit life. She gives detailed generalised description of life in her village, the activities and jobs the men and women perform. The act of naming is considered as an exercise of power. So she deliberately does not name her village, the priests, schools and colleges, the nunnery, the Dalit headman etc. The lack of distinctiveness harmonises better understanding of the message. Bama's text is also marked by absence of adherence to grammatical rules. She conveys a sense of remorse and guilt when she talks about the material benefits she had enjoyed, an elusive dream for others in her community. Bama's shared testimonio typically unfolds her growing up story in episodes, and throughout she displays indomitable courage, conquering the dominant forces.

Before Karukku (2000), Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine recorded a Dalit Woman's history in Viramma: Life of an Untouchable in 1995. This text raises the question of testimony in textualizing the history of life of this woman. These authors suspect the very notion of the 'self' in collecting the episodes of Viramma. In these episodes, the readers may find "a true sensitivity to beings and things" (273). The narratives of Bama, Viramma, K.A. Gunasekaran and that of Marathi Dalit writers' autobiographical discourses of Madhau Kondvilker, Daya Pawar, Laxman Mane and others help the readers to probe for testimonial narrative sequences for understanding "the decisive process of internalization of oppression, the major obstruction on the road to emancipation". These narratives pluralize their selves for becoming allegories of many

memories of their cultural epistemologies. As Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine pinpoint:

“What is true for testimonies on the tragedies of History is valid as well for more “ordinary” life histories ... As is true for subalterns around the world, they have to be heard. And so much the better if, in oral life histories, the listener and the reader, be they historians or not, happen to find from time to time Levi-Strauss’s necklace ...”(277)

Testimonio is an instrument of “retrieving and registering” the presence of the subaltern. Ranajit Guha, one of the principal founders of subaltern studies and an academician, in his landmark essay “Chandra’s Death”, reconstructs the testimony of judicial discourse. Ranajit Guha examines the testimony of 3 people connected with the death of a subaltern woman in 1842 patriarchal Bengali society. The relatives of the dead woman give a testimony of the events that had happened but the documents fail to authenticate the events. The narrative event does not seem to have a context; it is torn, fabricated and fragmented. The document is dismembered give way to questioning the meaning and intensions of those testifying.

The text was derived from a book of an official archive. The truth here is the crime itself. The testimonies become a set of judicial experience. When this form of discourse on crime enters history then according to Guha,

it is the function of the judicial discourse as a genre to cut off that path by trapping crime in its specificity, by reducing its range of signification to a set of narrowly defined legalities, and by assimilating it to the existing order as one of its negative determinations (140).

He considers the ekraras or testimonies as simply a process of “detaching an experience”, an empty affirmation. One can readily identify the text interspersed with the authorial voice of the law and the disparity of truth in the document.

[T]he narrative in the document violates the actual sequence of what happened in order to conform to the logic of a legal intervention which made the death into a murder, a caring sister into murderess, all the actants in this tragedy into defendants, and what they said in a state of grief into ekraras. Construed thus, a matrix of real historical experience was transformed into a matrix of abstract legality (141).

In “Chandra’s Death”, Ranajit Guha details the modes by which historiography and the law work together to structure the past in ways that do violence to the “plenitude of historicity”. The conflict is between the law’s structuring of events and subjective experiences of self and history. The law is exposed to be incomplete and the legal modes seem to be over determined in its structure.

The emergence of testimonial discourse in Latin America, Asia and other Third World countries could be considered or could be closely associated with revolutionary developments in literature and culture. The autobiographies, in subverting the earlier master narratives, also undergo a kind of Bakhtinian “novelisation” as the Afro-American slave narratives underwent. Bakhtin finds a “revolution” in literature at every stage of its development. Talking about the poetics of African American autobiography, William L. Andrews observes:

If we take Bakhtin’s version of literary history seriously, we should see that all narrative forms since the rise of the novel have been undergoing repeated revolutions, or “novelisation”. The novel is not only an inherently revolutionary genre but also one that ceaselessly novelizes i.e., revolutionizes, the form and content of other narrative types-such as, autobiography closely allied to it (85).

In the Latin American and Indian context, the rise of the testimonial writings can be considered as a “novelization” or revolution since these writers make use of the Native wisdom and prevent the literary piracy of the writers from Center. While transforming the day-to-day experiences into art form, the narratives rewrite the forms or uniquely blend the traditional forms of expression with their own way of telling. Andrews says:

Under the influence of “novelization”, traditions and generic standards of narrative form undergo constant revision. Nothing from the past remains wholly privileged; the novel forces all narrative forms into ‘a’ living contact with unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality (the open ended present) (85).

The process of “novelization” along with cultural influence from the Latin American and Dalit Autobiographies and these subalterns have four important features: free oral storytelling, self-expressiveness, truth-based narration and memory recalling. These testimonios subvert the conventions and established discourses of the writings of the Centre.

Teaching Students Testimonios in Indian Classrooms

- Teaching needs make students have a realistic identification of the reader with the social and personal problems set forth in the work of art.
- Must give the students a knowledge of themselves.
- Bring face to face with choices of values and actions that are a daily reality in life.
- Enhance self- discovery and personal development.
- Make them realise what the community wants to convey to them.

- To create an affirmation of life.
- Further reading by individuals and groups, and class activities that would allow exchange of ideas and sharing of reading experiences.
- To re-evaluate the context of the testimonio and its content.
- To encourage discussion and arrive at some values and aims in common.
- Make them understand the sometime provocative language, explain the writers deepest convictions about their community and its ills.
- Help them focus on the problem rather than the aesthetic elements.
- To provoke discussions of key problems and find solutions.
- A more personalized identification of literature and life than hitherto thought possible.
- To produce and construct contexts of repression and site of resistance.
- Primarily study the approach of students, then, critically use the tools of discourse analysis and narrative theory.
- Teach students to analyse representation and comprehend concepts.
- Foster a high sense of integrity and social responsibility.
- Initiate and introduce a “multicultural” perspective and “cultural democratization”.
- Construct and reconstruct the cultural representation of subaltern groups, and explain the incomprehension and misunderstanding of subaltern social subjects by previously dominant academic methodologies and disciplines.
- Explore the role of university in cultural transformations, academic pedagogy and research agendas.
- Enhance “subalternist perspective to the formation of a new pedagogy in the humanities and social sciences based on the incorporation of the "other," with its manifold implications for interdisciplinary research, teaching, textbook publishing, and the like.

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