Why Gerbner's Communication Model in Trauma Studies?

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Abstract

The paper[1] delineates further the attempt of scholars like Stef Craps, Gert Buelens, Roger Luckhurst, Michael Rothberg, Irene Visser, Michelle Balaev, and a few others to borrow interdisciplinary insight and formulate alternative framework in trauma studies so as to continue vibrancy of trauma studies. The author of this paper had argued for a potential to formulate alternative framework in MPhil thesis, "Trauma of Maoist Insurgency in Literature: Reading Palpasa Café, Forget Kathmandu, and Chhapamar ko Chhoro." The possibility was expounded deductively in another article "Thinking through Media Theories: Understanding and Furthering Trauma Studies." Following the call and the idea forwarded firstly in *Bodhi: An Interdisciplinary Journal* and later in *Continental Journal of Arts and Humanities*, the paper argues further that borrowing Gerbner's communication model can be useful in formulating alternative framework to analyze trauma rendition.

Keywords: interdisciplinary insight, trauma rendition, alternative framework, Gerbner's communication model

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Trauma discourse: Currency

I begin my discussion[2] with a quote that not only presents précis of trauma theory but also shows the futuristic concern for the theory:

> Trauma theory tries to turn criticism back towards being an ethical, responsible, purposive discourse, listening to the wounds of the other. But if it is truly to do this, this point of convergence also needs to be the start of a divergence, of an opening out of theory to wider contexts. Trauma is intrinsically multidisciplinary; if this criticism has a future, it needs to displace older paradigms and attend to new configurations of cultural knowledge. (Luckhurst 506)

Luckhurst's observation in *Literary Theory and Criticism*, which has been given detail treatment in *The Trauma Question* (2008), points at a central argument in trauma studies, i.e. the need to explore the field from other than seductive model envisaged by Freud. For Luckhurst, the field demands examination of multiple aspects of 19th century Britain and France like military psychiatry, pension agencies, and neuroscience, among others to make scholarship in trauma studies more dynamic. Luckhurst's argument, seen in larger context, presents symptomatically the voice of revision that has cropped up after around one and half decade's hegemonic history of trauma studies in humanities. Balaev's caution speaks the same:

> A central claim of contemporary literary trauma theory asserts that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity…. However, a discursive dependence upon a single psychological theory of trauma produces a homogeneous interpretation of the diverse representations in the trauma novel and interplay that occurs between language, experience, memory, and place. (149)

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[2] This is an edited version of article published in *Spark: Multi-lingual, Multi-disciplinary & Multi-media eJournal*.

Taken together, these arguments, on the one hand, spotlight the contour of trauma studies to demonstrate the domination of psychoanalytical model and, on the other, call for broadening the field beyond dominant paradigm. Such an urge aims to accomplishing at least two interrelated tasks: i) carry legible potential to extend notions in the field to analyze traumatic experience having their base elsewhere, and ii) maintain the aura of being, what Visser calls, "one of today's signal cultural paradigms" (270). That is to say, the call aims not only to make the existing theories "more comprehensive" but also "to expand trauma's conceptual framework" (Rothberg 226; Visser 279). The dissent voices speak how prominent the project for alternative framework has been.

The paper, following on the call for alternatives and expounding the idea forwarded in earlier two articles, attempts to justify the necessity to review canonical theories of trauma[3]. The attempt is made by setting some of the canonical theories against Gerbner's communication model. While doing so, the paper also explicates reasons for revision in our understanding of trauma as phenomena "not experienced as it occurs" or "registered rather than experienced" during its occurrence (Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 4; Hartman 537). Similarly, a few observations are made over the assumptions in canonical trauma theories such as trauma as aporetic or therapeutic[4].

The hindsight

Scholars in trauma studies in particular and in literary studies in general, despite slight departures, agree that trauma was ushered in its present critical formation by Sigmund Freud in *Studies in Hysteria*, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*[5] through the foregrounding of notion like incubation period. The term in Berger's reading of Freud's notion "signifies

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[3] The statement, however, does not intend at all to advocate abolishment of canonical trauma theories

[4] Trauma as aporetic posits that trauma defies narrative whereas trauma as therapeutic assumes trauma narration as possible direction for working through.

[5] E. Ann Kaplan in her succinct discussion on Freud's contribution to trauma theory observes his ideas gradually growing complex and precise from the early *Studies in Hysteria* to *Moses and Monotheism*.

how memory of a traumatic event can be lost over time but then regained when triggered by similar events" (570).

The concept of psychological trauma, despite its wide recognition and application in the field, had not been successful to convince medical science for a very long time. Medical science had warded off psychological notion from its domain. It can be seen from the latter domain's incorporation of Freud's idea only in 1980s in "The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual" (DSM) under the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The newly redefined medical nomenclature typically in Freudian sense admitted that the stressor is "outside the range of usual human experience" due to the fact that the violent and terrifying texture destroys the normal neurobiological process (American Psychiatric Association 250).

It is a good corollary that scholars in literary theory found themselves comfortable with trauma. The appropriation of PTSD was started by the scholars practicing deconstruction (Felman and Laub; Caruth; Hartman; LaCapra). Later, trauma proliferated to be a key perspective for investigating multiple issues related to traumatic experience such as memory and history[6]. The most recent undertaking is postcolonial experience. Scholars pioneering this campaign inquire whether and how trauma studies can break from Eurocentricism by deploying alternative methodology.

Their resort to deductive approach grounds on the assumption that "the novels that bear witness to the suffering engendered by colonial oppression," provide a better avenue to the nature of trauma during the era. Some scholars arguing along this line such as Stef Craps and Gert Buelens aim to address the issues such as "dispossession, forced migration, diaspora, slavery segregation, racism, political violence, and genocide" (Craps and Buelens 2-3).

Why an Alternative Conceptual Framework?

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[6] The nexus of the two is comprehensively argued by cultural trauma theorists such as Jeffrey Alexander, Kai Erikson, Ron Eyerman, among others.

It cannot be denied that scholarship in trauma has addressed numerous issues raised after different events in history ranging from Holocaust to trans-Atlantic slave trade, from Colonial experience to Vietnam War. Nonetheless, the existing postulations concede the function of a few elements in trauma whereas experience of people with violence comprises multiple components that exist between traumatic event to its expression and finally to its affect. The selective foregrounding thereby maps out a large number of contingent factors that lie within the domain of context, selection and other external constraints.

If we agree that trauma narratives falls in the domain of literary criticism and the task of critique is to understand underlying factors in trauma narration, the existing theories do not comply for three reasons. Firstly, they foreground a few elements and thereby elide many by making comprehensive analysis questionable. Secondly, they regard trauma as either aporetic or therapeutic which, however, is fallible. Thirdly, it is anachronistic to import theories based on specific experience such as Holocaust and Trans-Atlantic slave trade to analyze any of the texts having their foundation in different contexts. It sounds so mainly due to the differences in the ontology and epistemology of the experiences.

The argument so far is applying any of the canonical trauma theories as a tool to literary texts having their foundation elsewhere fails as it necessarily assumes homogeneity among all the traumatic events. If not discontinued, the practice of import resists necessity to inquire into other pertinent issues in specific contexts. Hence, an alternative to canonical theories is required not only to accept the fact that the rendered experience is heterogeneous but also to open up space to ask why any traumatic event finds diverse representation. For it, two options are visible: first, inductively developing a framework either from indigenous experience that is exemplified by the discourse of postcolonial trauma theory; second, deductively resorting to inter-disciplinary borrowing. The paper, based on the proposition forwarded in earlier two articles, finds taking the second recourse

appropriate, i.e., "Gerbner's model can be a stepping stone in formulating an alternative framework" (Acharya, Continental Journal of Arts and Humanities). I forward two reasons to substantiate the argument: a) Gerbner's model comprises individual components foregrounded fragmentarily by canonical trauma theories which are equally pertinent in other contexts; and b) attempt to formulate alternative theories through individual case analysis have also resulted in identifying elements shown in Gerbner's model. Hence, the selection bases on both cogency of the model to incorporate already identified relevant elements, and potential equilibrium of the model with any formulation based on inductive procedure. Besides, an explanation to why not other than Gerbner's lies in comprehensiveness of the model compared to the existing models of Lasswell, Shanon and Weaver, Osgood and Schramm. Compared to them, Gerbner's model incorporates elements point to all the stages of communication process ranging from cognition to transfer of message. The model is shown in below (see fig 1):
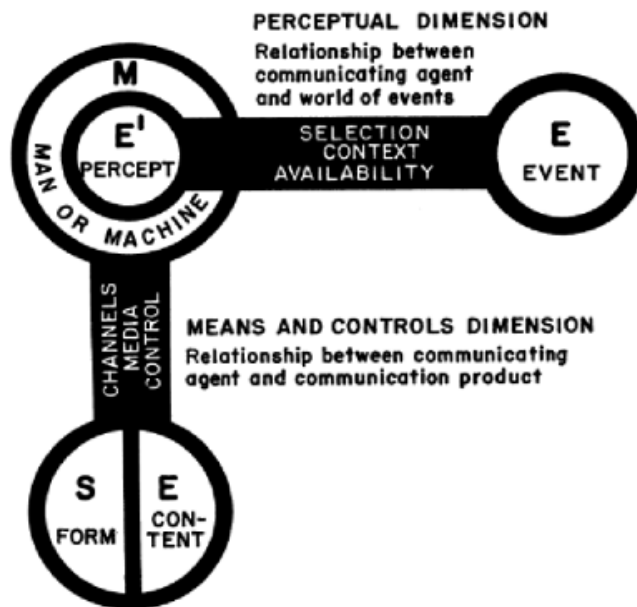

Figure 1: Basic generalized graphic model [Source: Gerbner 175]

The model below, which is a contextualized and modified version, demonstrates the next step in the process. The model is to be read from left to right, beginning at E (event) which is perceived by human beings or machine as E1 (percept).
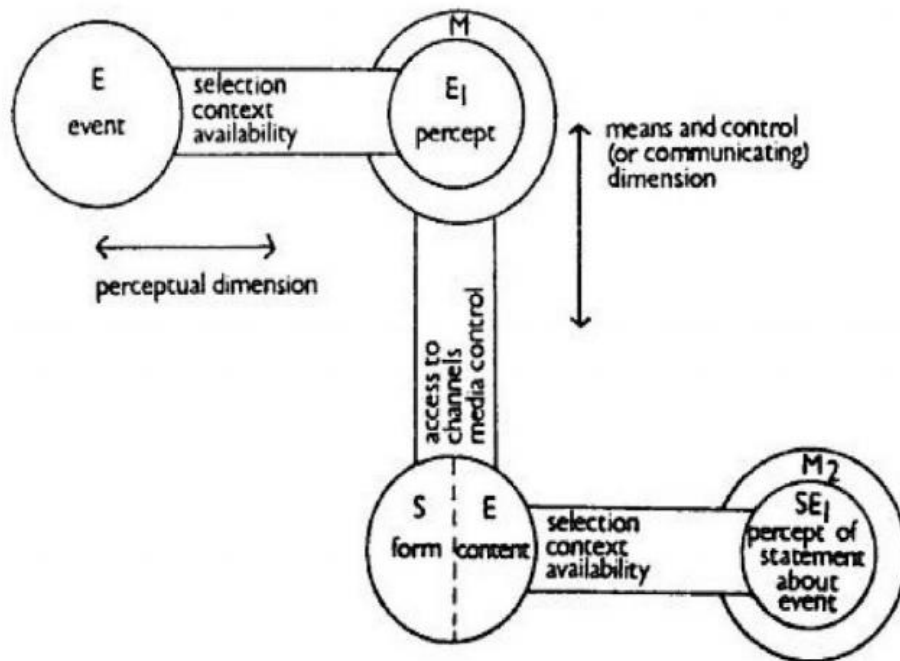
Figure 2: Gerbner's general graphic model [Source: Fiske 25]

The model (fig. 2) when contextualized in trauma studies appears as shown in figure 3. In the contextualized model, E (event) of figure 2 stands for traumatic event, and E1 (percept) refers to the perception of E by a traumatized person. The perception depends on various factors like selection, context and availability. The registered experience generally remains latent to take the form of written discourse, i.e., when appropriate conditions – access to communication channels – are met. Then, it constitutes form and content to take the structure of trauma narration. The narration, which is also conditioned by factors like selection, context and availability, is infectious as it carries potential to traumatize M2, the equivalent of which in figure 3 is experience/memory of the second person.
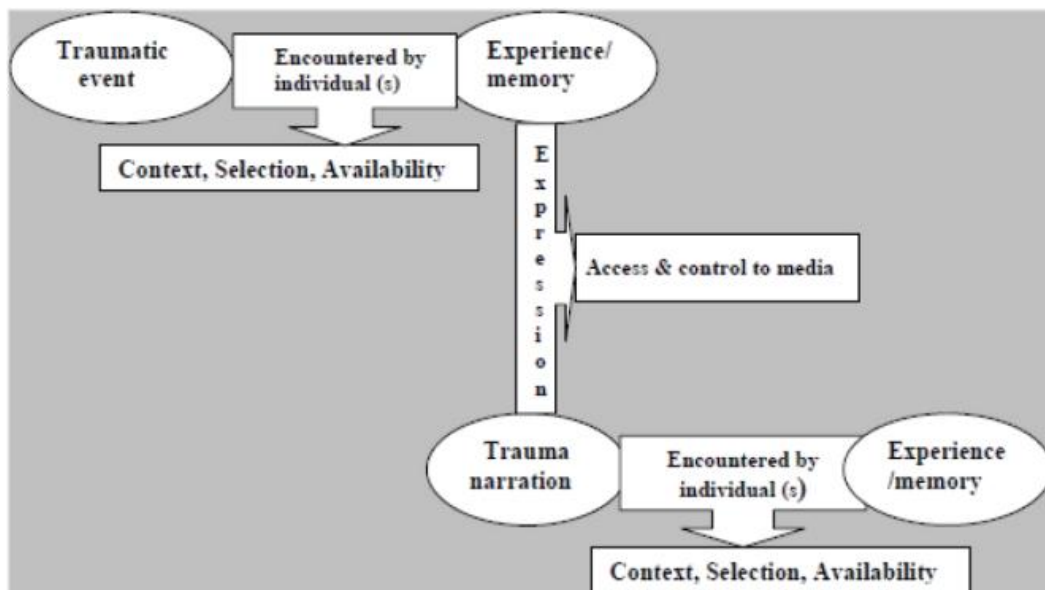
Figure 3: An alternative framework to analyze trauma rendition (Source: Acharya 2012)

Trauma Theories in the Light of Alternative Framework

An analysis of canonical theories of trauma in the light of this framework not only demonstrates limited focus of the canon but also problematizes the practice of uncritically exporting any of the desired models to study trauma narration. It does so, as already elucidated, by illustrating the limitations of existing models: it demonstrates that any of the existing trauma theories spotlight on one or two of the stages in the trauma process. In this sense, the strength of Gerbner's framework lies in its acknowledgement of the contingent factors of trauma. In the section below, the paper demonstrates how various theories of trauma have foregrounded certain elements in their postulations by examining Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Cathy Caruth, Kali Tal and some cultural trauma theorists.

Felman and Laub, who are considered the pioneers of trauma studies, stipulate on the need to construct testimony of the Holocaust in their work, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*. Assuming that "Holocaust is an event without a witness", Felman calls for urgency to narrativize. Seen in the light of element in figure 3, it can be

found that Felman places emphasis on the third and the fourth step. By mapping out all the variables between traumatic event and trauma narration, she argues that the listener of traumatic experience can reenact trauma of a real victim. In other words, she endows an uncritical responsibility of bearing witness to any person who can feel something akin to the pain of holocaust survivor. Almost in the same vein, Laub emphasizes on the role of listener. In his words,

> The listener is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma … includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time. (57)

Laub, in the quote above, makes it clear that the listener, as a witness, plays a crucial role in testimonial narrative.

In contradistinction to Laub and Felman's emphasis on traumatic testimony, Caruth's theory is wider in its scope as it seems to account larger number of steps as shown in figure 3. Firstly, it foregrounds the issue of traumatic event and its experience when the theory says that the victim's mind fails to register the event. Secondly, as she implicates that traumatic experience must be rendered through narration in order to alleviate psycho-traumatological suffering, the theory seems to encompass many of the components in Gerbner's communication model. A critical consideration, however, reveals that Caruth fails to inculcate the role of context and selection. It can be observed in her notion of traumatic experience as an intrinsic phenomenon of "traumatic experience and memory". The relation of the two, to borrow Balaev's assessment, remains at odds with the acknowledgement she credits to the other constituent elements in the trauma process (150). Ruth Leys' demonstration of contradiction in Caruth's argument also reveals how she has mapped out many elements in trauma process. Caruth's commitment to empirical claim – "traumatic symptoms, such as traumatic dreams and flashbacks, are veridical memories or representations of the traumatic event" – according to Leys, elides the epistemological-ontological assertion

that "traumatic symptoms are literal replicas or repetitions of the trauma and that as such they stand outside representations" (229). To state it simply, Caruth, on the one hand, accepts traumatic reoccurrence as exact reproduction of the original event and on the other calls trauma an un-assimilable.

Other theories of trauma also do not succeed in taking into account elements in the trauma process. We can examine, for instance, Kali Tal's framework. It grounds on the philosophy of purity, i.e., it claims that the narration of trauma by other than the victim distorts essentials of the experience. The reservation – denial to the authenticity of any other narration than that of victims' own account – in turn, limits the corpus of study within the agent and secondly to the reason for trauma rendition. And, if critics want to analyze trauma narration, they must first confirm whether it is written by original victim, and if not, they need to claim that the writing suffers from interpolation.

Similarly, the theories that base their arguments on emotional spread of trauma symptoms due to a close and extended contacts with traumatized individuals have many loopholes. Before, I point to the blind spots, I present reading of some. Theories in this category comprise of rubrics like vicarious trauma, secondary trauma, cultural trauma, intergenerational trauma. Most prominent and comprehensive in this variety is cultural trauma posited by Jeffrey Alexander. Taking trauma of this type as a tear in the hole of the social fabric, Alexander delineates that cultural trauma concerns "how and under what conditions the claims are made, and with what results" (9). The notion has double edge: firstly, it concerns the "dimension of representation" – the nature of the pain, the nature of the victim, relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience and attribution of responsibility; and secondly, it inquires into influential cultural agents: religious, aesthetic, legal, scientific, mass media and state bureaucracy (12-19). Notwithstanding such a wide spectrum, the theory also fails to incorporate the elements in trauma which is shown in figure 3. A major problematic, which confines the theory to the elements within the third and fourth step of the figure, is the dedication for the homogeneity of

representation so as to construct "sufficiently persuasive narratives" (27). Another serious error in the theory exists at conceptual level – cultural trauma emphasizes on epistemology as the only domain of study and denies its ontological aspect. Hence, it separates two complementary factors – experience and effect – to impair the scholarly inquiry. Hence, it fails to make what Laurie Vickroy calls, comprehensive inquiry into trauma discourse (14).

Conclusion

Comprehensive examination of trauma narration, i.e., analyzing the rendered experience in terms of elements which shape the nature of traumatic experience, is not feasible with the existing theories due to their foregrounding of certain elements. An alternative that bases on the principle of comprehensiveness and cogency, as the paper has proposed, is borrowing Gerbner's communication model to intersect with trauma studies. The proposed framework acknowledges that the literary rendition of trauma is relational and emerges relative to various factors that exist in perceptual as well as means and control dimension. Thereby, it accepts the multiplicity of representation and makes both the underlying and apparent factors its domain of inquiry.

An assessment of trauma narrative in the light of elements in the framework's perceptual dimension offers an opportunity to examine both personal conditions and social environment that existed during traumatic event. Researchers can inquire into why any individual internalized traumatic event the way it has appeared in written account. More specifically, researchers can analyze the nature of the event's availability, the context and the selection. While doing so, the researchers can find insight from existing propositions useful. Dori Laub's finding can be used to facilitate understanding of physiological procedure during traumatic event. His thesis that the victim's proximity with the event largely determines the magnitude of trauma registration can be used. He says that the proximity phenomena are of three types: "being a witness to oneself within the experience", "being a

witness to the testimonies of others" and "being a witness to the process of witnessing itself" (Truth and Testimony 61). Another insight derived from Anne Kaplan, which suggests that trauma experience depends on the process of brain function during the event, proves equally useful. Her finding on brain functions, which are of three types, "the dissociation function", "both dissociation and cognition" and "seduction" provides another dimension to study trauma narration (38).

The study of trauma narration in the light of elements in means and control dimension also invites scholars to appraise the role of ideology and ideological state apparatus, to borrow Luis Althusser's term. Pertinent aspects to study through these elements would be the interrelationship between media access and the nature of the control over trauma discourse. Finally, studying trauma narration in terms of elements in the third and fourth step would facilitate understanding of the dynamics in various types of trauma like secondary trauma, vicarious trauma and intergenerational trauma.

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