

Narrative, Text and Discourse: Complexities in Representation of Violence

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Abstract

This paper attempts to look into the complexities and challenges surrounding representation of violence in literary texts by examining the inter-relationships between narrative, text and discourse. Most writers who deal with violence in their works narrativize violence with an attempt to eschew violence and its damaging effects on human beings. But it is also a debatable issue whether their narratives always achieve their desired effects as a theoretical analysis of the nature of language, text, and discourse highlights the complexity of any narrative. Just as discourse legitimizes certain ideas and delegitimizes some others, language itself operates as a discursive agency. Within this theoretical paradigm, this paper attempts to shed some light on the challenges and complexities involved in narratives that deal with violence and trauma.

Keywords: narrative, text, discourse, representation, violence

Narrative is as old as the history of mankind. It exists in variety of forms throughout all places and societies. Narrative is present in all forms of representations such as myth, legend, fables, tales, short stories, epics, history, newspapers as well as other audio and visual mediums. Roland Barthes expresses that narrative is a part and parcel of human society and is present in multiple forms and states that “it is present at all times, in all places, in all societies; indeed narrative starts with the very history of mankind; there is not, there has never been anywhere, any people without narrative; all classes, all human groups, have their stories...” (237). In literary representation, narrative becomes a crucial site of contestation and debate as it is a significant defining factor through which the human subject makes meaning out of the experiences. Experience and memory of incidents are organized by the human subject through narrative. Therefore, narrative is not generated by logical and scientific procedures but is subject to the human subject, which in turn is subject to various cultural and ideological influences. Even autobiographical narratives cannot claim to be representation of one absolute reality. “Self-representations and acts of self-narrating are always located, historical, subjective, political, and embodied” (Smith and Watson 375), and there cannot be life stories that articulate unified coherent selves. Within the domain of literary representation, narratology occupies a significant area of study as it “both attempts to understand the components of narrative and analyses how particular narratives achieve their effects” (Culler 83). Narrative or the act of narrativizing is closely related to issues of power in society, and this complex mechanism of power will be looked at in terms of discourse. According to Roger Fowler, ‘Discourse’ is speech or writing seen from the point of view of the beliefs, values and categories which it embodies; these beliefs etc. constitute a way of looking at the world. An organization or representation of experience-‘ideology’ in the neutral non-pejorative sense. Different modes of discourse encode

different representations of experience; and the source of these representations is the communicative context within which the discourse is embedded. (Quoted in Mills 6)

Thus, discourse could refer to all statements with meanings, both in speech and text which have an impact on the real world. Michel Foucault, who is most strongly associated with the term discourse, views it in terms of the relations between power, knowledge and truth. Foucault's interest is not simply analyzing the discourses that prevails in a society at a particular time but attempts to show the arbitrariness of the nature of these discourses which often appear familiar and accepted as norms of a given society as "Discourses structure both our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity" (Mills 15). Reality is often constituted through discourse that operates within discursive structures. These discursive structures legitimize certain statements or views and delegitimize some, as our perception and interpretation of events or objects happens within discursive structures.

Discourse also constructs certain events and sequences of events into narratives which are recognised by a particular culture as real or serious events... the only way we have to apprehend reality is through discourse and discursive structures. In the process of apprehending, we categorise and interpret experience and events according to the structures available to us and, in the process of interpretation, we lend these structures a solidity and a normality which it is often difficult to think outside of. (Mills 53-54)

Narrative about violence has always been a significant part of literary representations of not just contemporary literature, but is overwhelmingly present throughout the ages from folklore and myth to lullabies and nursery rhymes. Representation of violence is a complex issue because the question arises on whether, in representing violence, the narrative succeeds in eschewing violence, or it instead helps in giving violence a bigger platform.

Images of violence in art (verbal or visual) are potentially so potent that they may serve only to demonize and dehumanize the perpetrators of the violence and dehumanize the reader through the reader's reception of a kind of extreme pornography. (Priebe 48)

Scholars and critics on trauma studies have also become increasingly concerned about a trauma story being reduced to mere sensation or spectacle that evokes the reader's pleasure. According to Miller and Tougaw,

[I]n a culture of trauma, accounts of extreme situations sell books. Narratives of illness, sexual abuse, torture or the death of loved ones have come to rival the classic, heroic adventure as a test of limits that offers the reader the suspicious thrill of borrowed emotion. (2)

In their book *Trauma Texts* (2009), Whitlock and Douglas observe the surge in narratives about trauma that makes easy consumption in the twenty first century. Their work attempts to explore academic works on trauma with concerns about the ethics of testimony and commodification of traumatic story due to the politics of recognition that is involved in this field of writing.

The culture of confession in the mass media further elicits personal narratives of trauma, suffering and recovery. There is now a market for personal story and a proliferation and innovation in genres of creative non-fiction that expands those with stories to tell, and those with the desire to read life writing. (Whitlock and Douglas 2)

Despite this concern by critics and scholars, creative writers do continue to reflect and portray violence and trauma which have become even more widespread in recent times. With regard to depiction of violence in art, Joyce Carol Oates states that "Serious writers, as distinct from entertainers and propagandists, take for their natural subjects the complexity of the world, its evils as well as its

goods...The serious writer, after all, bears witness” (Oates 35). This process of bearing witness is a complex one, and the demand for literature dealing with violence seems to be on the rise in recent times. It is important for a writer to create narratives that do not succumb to sensational representation of violence. While narratives on violence can have a negative effect, it can also build up a discourse that subverts violence and the societal structures that contribute to violence. According to Foucault, Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 100-101)

It is a challenge for creative writers to create narratives and discourses which not only subvert the forces and institutions that facilitate violence, but balances it with the theme of transformation, reaffirming the concept that “Great literature will always transcend the horror with insight into sublime wonder at human possibility” (Pribe 49).

One of the most significant aspects of narrativizing violence is the role of language. Language and speech form a discourse on violence, and the role of language in violence as well as in human existence as a whole is more complex and crucial than the general conception of language as a means of human communication. Language is in itself a site of contestation of opposing claims, and it can be used to instigate violence as well as to counter violence. Judith Butler states that when we claim to be hurt by language, we ascribe agency to language and a power to injure and this could possibly mean that we are constituted within the terms of language.

Could language injure us if we were not, in some sense linguistic beings, beings who require language in order to be? Is our vulnerability to language a consequence of our being constituted within its terms? If we are formed in language, then that formative power precedes and conditions any decision we might make about it, insulting us from the start, as it were, by its prior power. (Butler 1-2)

This notion of language would imply that discourse on violence through narrative could take up a life of its own, beyond the purview of authorial intention. Narrative dealing with violence has the potential of having a negative effect, even if the author’s intention is to narrativize against violence. According to Judith Butler, “Language that is compelled to repeat what it seeks to restrain invariably reproduces and restages the very speech that it seeks to shut down. In this way, speech exceeds the censor by which it is constrained” (Butler 129). But this does not mean that all violence should be censored and omitted from representation for fear of the narrative promoting violence. In fact, violence of all kinds needs to be addressed, represented and voiced through language because the act of voicing through language constitutes power. The role of language in narrative, especially violent languages are so damaging that writers like Toni Morrison considers it not just as violent utterance but the very language violent in itself as she states that “The systematic looting of language can be recognized by the tendency of its users to forgo its nuanced, complex, and mid-wifery properties for menace and subjugation. Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge” (Morrison). Most writers who deal with violence in their works narrativize violence with an attempt to eschew violence and its damaging effects on human beings. But it is also a debatable issue whether their narratives always achieve their desired effects as a theoretical analysis of the nature of language highlights the complexity of any narrative. Just

as discourse legitimizes certain ideas and delegitimizes some others, language itself operates as a discursive agency. It is a mechanism that operates within certain parameters of censorship. Butler expresses how every text is preceded by censorship because the author of any text follows a process of selection that “rules out certain possibilities, and realizes others” but this happens within the larger censorship imposed by linguistic possibility itself as “the speaking subject makes his or her decision only in the context of an already circumscribed field of linguistic possibilities” (129). At the same time, a text always escapes censorship and “effort to constrain speech cannot fully target or capture the polysemy of language” (Butler 129). Hence, one cannot rule out the possibility of a text inciting violence as often “the text in question takes on new life as part of the very discourse produced by the mechanism of censorship” (Butler 130). Apart from this problematic nature of language and text, reader’s responses to texts also problematize authorial intention of eschewing violence further. According to Terry Eagleton, “the reader makes implicit connections, fills in the gaps, draws inferences and tests out hunches... The text itself is really no more than a series of ‘cues’ to the reader, invitations to construct a piece of language into meaning” (Eagleton 76).

An interesting concept in representation of violence is aestheticization of violence wherein violent events are represented in “a manner as to replace the reality of the violence with language or images that allow for a freedom of interpretation of those acts and events, or for a blurring of the real nature of those acts or events, that would not be possible if such act or event was witnessed in reality” (Thompson 29). Though all artistic representations could be argued to be aestheticization, aestheticization of violence is a literary technique employed by authors to avoid extreme disgust and repulsive reaction from the readers when dealing with horrific and graphic representations of violence. But what qualifies as aestheticization of violence is not clearly quantifiable, and it depends on certain parameters out of which the author’s intention and use of language are significant factors. This figurative representation of violence as opposed to factual and graphic representation delimits understanding and interpretation of violence and renders the violent experience subjective and inter-subjective. It is this aestheticization of violence that renders violent experiences into an art that conveys the damaging effects of violence that could evoke a sense of empathy and has a transcendental nature. When violent incidents are represented without aesthetic renderings, the effect is often horror and repulsion on the reader and it fails to have an empathic effect and nuanced understanding of the incident. According to Priebe,

In fiction, unlike real life, we are given a sense of distance and control, and it is a basic aesthetic principle that those things that are most threatening in real life give us pleasure when encapsulated in play (artistic) form. The unthinkable, the unimaginable, the unspeakable can be thought, imagined, and spoken in literature with an impunity not granted us in real life, yielding an understanding we find hard to abstract from real events. (50)

Aestheticization is in a sense legitimization of violence through an artistic lens, and it relies heavily on the craft of the writer not to succumb to sensationalized representation of violence. Especially within the domain of films, graphic representation of violence has become rampant, possibly due to the fact that it is a visual medium. According to Zillmann,

Presumably because of its ability to present violence in compelling images, cinematic storytelling has embraced barbarian heroes and villains who slash, shoot and machine-gun their way to the things they want, all that without accepting societal impositions or moral curtailments that restrain normal mortals... There can be little doubt that slaughter of this kind has taken centre stage in the movies. Highly destructive violent encounters are featured with ever-increasing frequency. (180)

In case of testimony and witness narratives on violence it become even more compelling and easy to be moved by the horror and graphic representation of violence as the narrative is shrouded with immediacy. It is not wrong to be moved by accounts of sufferings and violence, but the artistic representation would not endure if it was only sustained by its shock value. Thus, it is important that the narrative has the ability to transcend the images of violence and pain, which lies in the hand of the artist. With regard to the power of art in transcending painful experiences, Kwame Dawes writes,

Great writers have discovered that the poem about suffering is really one about finding beauty in suffering. The poem about incarceration is really a poem about freedom. The fact is that the poem, by its very nature, defies the baseness of suffering. By becoming the vehicle for the expression of horror, the poem forces the horror to be something else, to be managed, to be transformed into something beautiful. (Abani 17)

Thus, in representing violence it is a huge challenge, a complicated and tricky task for a writer to build up a discourse that effectively condemns and delegitimizes violence even as it dominates the narrative. The narrative must have a transformative value that reaffirms humanity even in the face of inhumanity and violence.

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