

Trauma, Memory, and the Idea of Nation: Literary Testimony in S. Ramakrishnan's "The Smell of Kerosene"

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Abstract

S. Ramakrishnan's "The Smell of Kerosene" offers literary testimony that explores the psychological trauma and social scarring caused by caste-based violence in contemporary Tamil society. The short story presents the painful personal experience of a young man who survives an attempt to be burned alive during caste conflict. The lingering smell of kerosene becomes a symbol of the narrator's trauma and reminds him of the fear and suffering he experienced. This article also examines the idea of a nation, often based on values like equality, justice, unity, and respect for all people. However, this story portrays the nation as lacking a unified identity. The text exposes the invisible web of violence everywhere in society, even in schools and offices. This fractures national unity and turns neighbours into enemies.

This article explores how individual memory preserves collective trauma, transforming private suffering into public testimony. It examines the relationship between trauma, memory, and the idea of nation in Ramakrishnan's narrative. It draws on Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma and Dori Laub's theory of literary testimony. This study reads the story as both a personal account of survival and a literary record preserving memories of caste oppression. By preserving marginalised voices through literary testimony, the work records the pain of a wound that remains unhealed. The narrative preserves memory and challenges readers to rethink nationhood in relation to social justice and human compassion.

Keywords: Trauma, Literary Testimony, Invisible Web, Idea of nation, memory, caste, violence.

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Introduction

Literature is one of the means of expressing human experiences, emotions, and social realities. It entertains readers and has increasingly become an important medium for documenting the lived experiences of marginalised communities. Many contemporary Indian writers use literature to highlight issues such as caste discrimination, social injustice, violence, and inequality. Some writers use literature not only to tell stories but also to preserve experiences that are ignored in official histories. These works are significant because they amplify the voices of individuals whose pain is often overlooked.

S. Ramakrishnan is an important contemporary Tamil writer whose literary work has made a major contribution to modern Indian literature. He has written a wide range of novels, short stories, travelogues, children's literature, and screenplays. His major works include *Nedunguruthi*, *Yamam*, *Urupasi*, *Sancharam* and several collections of short stories. Among these works, the novel *Sancharam* won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2018. "The Smell of Kerosene" appeared in his short story collection titled *The Man Who Walked Backwards and Other Stories* (2018). Prabha Sridevan translated the book into English from the original Tamil text. Most of his work can be categorised as literary testimony, using personal narratives to represent social and historical trauma. The story outlines the traumatic experience of a young man who managed to survive an attempt to be burnt alive during caste violence. Although the events happened years ago, the character continues to relive the episode in his dreams. The story also raises important questions about the idea of a nation. India is often celebrated as a nation based on equality, democracy, and unity.

The idea of a nation is built upon the promises of shared identity and safety for all citizens. The twentieth and twenty-first centuries have witnessed comparable forms of violence, including world wars, genocides, communal riots, ethnic conflicts, caste oppression, forced migration, and political persecution. These catastrophic events have profoundly influenced literature, leading to the emergence of trauma studies as an important interdisciplinary field. Literature reveals truths about violence and suffering that ordinary historical accounts cannot fully express: "Trauma is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (Caruth 4). This paper analyses the short story "The Smell of Kerosene" using Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma and Dori Laub's concepts of literary testimony.

Theoretical Framework:

Trauma theory and literary representation

Trauma can be understood through literary works. Literature and trauma are interconnected. The term 'trauma' is a widely used concept in literature. Trauma theory helps readers explore experiences in plays, poetry, novels, short stories, and other literary forms. The word 'trauma' comes from the Greek word meaning 'wound'. Trauma theory is an interdisciplinary approach that draws on psychology,

psychiatry, sociology, public health, history, and literature. Trauma theory emerged as an important field in literary and cultural studies during the late twentieth century. “The definition of trauma usually refers to an extremely stressful life experience. However, this definition does not reflect one aspect: the person’s experience as a subject of the situation” (Şar 4). Cathy Caruth is one of the leading scholars in trauma studies. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), she defines trauma as a devastating experience that cannot be completely understood when it occurs. Instead of disappearing with time, trauma returns repeatedly through memories, dreams, and flashbacks even after years: “When the force is that of other human beings, we speak of atrocities. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning” (Herman 25).

According to Caruth, trauma is not only about what happens when someone is hurt. It is also about how a bad experience keeps returning in the person’s life. The survivor still has to deal with what happened and how it affects daily life. A survivor may continue to live with the effects of trauma as memories of the experience return without warning. For survivors, this can mean reliving the experience again and again, even when they do not wish to remember. Fear, anxiety, nightmares, and emotional distress become part of daily life: “Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 4).

This theory is closely relevant to “The Smell of Kerosene”. The protagonist survives an attempt to burn him alive during caste conflicts but is still mentally bound to that moment even after sixteen years. In the opening scene, the protagonist wakes from a nightmare, thinking kerosene has once again been poured over him. This scene illustrates that the experience has not fully left his mind. Throughout the narrative, the smell of kerosene, the sight of torchlight, and memories of the bridge repeatedly bring back the horror of that night. These recurring memories illustrate Caruth’s idea that trauma is an experience that returns again and again instead of remaining in the past.

The study also draws on Dori Laub’s theory of testimony. In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), Laub argues that testimony is an act of bearing witness to traumatic events. Survivors share experiences; through this, private pain becomes part of collective memory. Laub says, “A ‘life testimony’ is not simply a testimony to a private life, but a point of conflation between text and life, a textual testimony which can penetrate us like an actual life” (2). In “The Smell of Kerosene”, the narrator performs exactly this function. By presenting his experiences, he transforms his personal suffering into a public testimony against caste-related brutalities. Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub’s theories together provide an effective framework for understanding the relationship between trauma, memory, and nation in Ramakrishnan’s story.

Analysis and Discussion:

Dreams and the Return of Trauma

S. Ramakrishnan's "The Smell of Kerosene" is about trauma as an unending psychological wound. In a psychoanalytic perspective, only in this way do the ghosts of the past lose their pathological power over present thoughts, feelings, and actions, opening the door to sustaining change for the analyses and – which is why "remembering can be considered one of the core characteristics of psychoanalysis in contrast to other psychotherapeutic schools" (Fischmann and Leuzinger-Bohleber 759). The narrator is an unnamed M.Sc. graduate, twenty-four years old, teaching mathematics at a local tutorial college when his life is permanently altered by a 'life-shaking incident' on June 14, 1997. The narrator awakens from a nightmare and instinctively utters, "They have poured kerosene on me" (Ramakrishnan 78). The story opens sixteen years after the incident, yet the narrator remains imprisoned within the traumatic past, believing that kerosene has once again been poured over his body. This shows that the effects of trauma continue even after many years. Fear lingers after he wakes up; he immediately checks his body. He smells his hand and looks into the mirror to convince himself that he has not been burnt alive. His actions reveal that trauma affects both the mind and the body. Even ordinary activities trigger anxiety because his body still remembers that attack. "In traditions developed by some of the first peoples of North America, for example, Hurons or Iroquois, the first business of the day for the whole community involves sharing and tending to important dreams" (Jones 7).

Cathy Caruth argues that trauma is characterised by its 'belatedness', in which the victim does not fully experience the event at the moment of occurrence but continually relives it afterwards. The narrator cannot distinguish between dream and reality, suggesting that traumatic memory functions independently of rational understanding. "The process changes from one allied to a dream of expression and repetition to a dream of communication and thence to a dream that enables the trauma to be communicated and actively engaged with in images and enacted improvisations" (Jones 8).

Caste violence and the invisible web

The narrator repeatedly acknowledges that he escaped death but failed to escape from memory. The sentence "Every time I see light from a torch, I feel a shiver pass through me" (Ramakrishnan 79) illustrates how ordinary objects acquire traumatic associations. The torchlight becomes a memory trigger that simultaneously recalls death and rescue. The narrator observes, "The town was connected in an invisible web of violence" (Ramakrishnan 81). The metaphor of an 'invisible web' deserves special attention. The narrator states that caste divisions gradually penetrated every aspect of people's lives. Educational institutions, government offices, public transport, marketplaces, and neighbourhoods were no longer neutral spaces where people interacted as equal citizens. Instead, these institutions are now stamped with caste identity.

The Bridge as a Site of Trauma

In the short story “The Smell of Kerosene,” the bridge is not simply a geographical site; rather, it serves as a metaphorical site where the narrator’s ordinary life is violently disrupted. The bridge acts as a space of transition, marking the transition from safety to danger, from innocence to trauma, and from belonging to alienation. Before the caste conflict incident, the bridge was a public space where people crossed without fear. The bridge was once a symbol of youthful friendship, freedom, and hope. Initially, the bridge functioned as a space of innocence. The narrator and his friends gathered every evening to discuss love, cinema, and dreams about the future. The narrator recalls:

During the day, the bridge never looked appealing. It was the evening that gave it its charm, and then it looked beautiful. The bridge was a big part of my life. If I was away from town, I would ask the others and find out who came to the bridge on those days when I was absent, and what they spoke about. (Ramakrishnan 79)

After the violence, the place becomes dangerous. The narrator recalls that while returning home on his bicycle, three young men stopped him on the bridge and questioned him about his caste identity. At this point, violence begins, and the bridge becomes a symbolic border where the narrator’s identity is reduced merely to his caste. The narrator recalls, “That was true in my case till that fateful day. But that June 14th destroyed all my fantasies about the bridge. It was a Sunday, and that was the last time I ever sat there” (Ramakrishnan 80). The attackers tie him up, pour kerosene over his body, and prepare to burn him alive. His humanity is erased, and he is judged according to social hierarchy rather than individual existence: “If one saw a person on the road, the mind automatically wondered what caste he belonged to” (Ramakrishnan 81).

Trauma and the Idea of Nation

The traditional public gathering space of ‘Tilakar Thidal’ also becomes a place where caste identity is enforced. It is the same location where one of the narrator’s students confronts him and declares, “It was people from your caste who cut up our man. What do you have to say about that?” (Ramakrishnan 82). The accusation is significant because it demonstrates how violence destroys ethical relationships between teacher and student. The narrator’s subsequent response exposes the absurdity of caste essentialism. He angrily reacts, “Have I ever shown my caste learning?” (Ramakrishnan 83). Yet the student’s immediate reply reveals the deeply internalised nature of caste prejudice: “But it runs in the blood, doesn’t it?” (Ramakrishnan 83). This exchange reveals how caste operates through inherited assumptions rather than rational evidence. The ideology of blood transforms caste from a social institution into a biological destiny. The climax of the story occurs when the narrator himself becomes the target of mob violence. While sitting alone on the bridge, three strangers approach him and ask a single question: “Which caste?” (Ramakrishnan 85). The question cuts deeply, and the attackers never ask

about his name, profession, or character. Caste alone becomes a sufficient justification for murder.

The subsequent assault represents one of the most powerful literary portrayals of trauma in contemporary Tamil literature: “Son of a bitch! Just set him aflame, and we will move on. . . Bring the kerosene tin, brother... One went to get the kerosene tin... I tasted kerosene for the first time as it flowed over my face. Then it spread under my shirt and over my legs” (Ramakrishnan 85). This passage shows how the narrator experiences trauma as a lasting memory that resists the passage of time. The story concludes with one of Ramakrishnan’s most profound reflections on caste identity: “I cannot live with caste pride. But I also cannot shrug off my caste identity completely. . . I will never be free from the shackles of caste” (86).

Conclusion

This article describes the ways in which the concepts of trauma, memory, and testimony are related and how they question ideas about the Indian nation. It claims that the story should be interpreted not only as an account of survival but also as a chronicle that upholds the moral principles of justice, equality, and dignity and preserves the histories of the marginalised.

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