

Act of remembrance of Genocides

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Abstract

The title of this paper, “Act of Remembrance of Genocides,” highlights the word *act* as a deliberate signifier of agency, the conscious choice of how a community chooses to remember, construct, or forget its past. Moving beyond individual involuntary memory, this study examines the collective consciousness of traumatic historical pasts and the social mechanisms at work in their remembrance. As trauma permeates from direct survivors into intergenerational trauma, it transforms into a collective historical identity that dissolves into the cultural background. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur’s exploration of the reciprocal relationship between memory and selective forgetting, this paper investigates who decides what to remember and what to discard. By comparing the spatial displacement at the Gusen Memorial in Austria with the silence surrounding the 1943 Bengal Famine, the paper explores how society determines the hierarchy of suffering and questions the shelf-life of traumatic memory.

Keywords: Collective Memory, Genocide Remembrance, Cultural Trauma, Selective Forgetting, Historical Memory

The title of the paper reads, the act of remembrance of Genocides. The word *act* here, a verb, is a deliberate signifier of the agency in the hands of the one remembering, to remember what they want to, or rather, they would like to, and how they would like to remember the memory. It is the case for all memories in general, except for involuntary autobiographical memory. Involuntary autobiographical memories are memories of personal events that come to mind spontaneously, with no conscious initiation of the retrieval process.

Voluntary memory, on the contrary, is characterized by a deliberate effort to recall the past. It is this voluntary memory which is being referred to in the phrase- Act of Remembrance.

The Collins dictionary defines 'act of remembrance as an uncountable noun, and the definition reads, If you do something in remembrance of a dead person, you do it as a way of showing that you want to remember them and that you respect them. For example, it uses a quote from a random article from the Sunday Times. It reads, "around me, the largely grey-haired members of the audience wept noiselessly, their individual sorrows melding into a profound communal *act of remembrance*". The example reaches the crux of the meaning implied in 'the act of remembrance' in the context of Genocides. Memory, in the case of a traumatic historical past, is a collective consciousness of the event.

Collective consciousness or collective memory of trauma differs from individual memory. It persists beyond the lives of the direct survivors of the events and is remembered by group members that may be far removed from the traumatic event in time and space.

The paper deals with the collective consciousness of a traumatic past and the mechanisms at work in remembrance of such memories. The trauma permeates from the survivors and the families of the survivors to an intergenerational trauma of the said community, transforming into a collective historical trauma that permeates through the community into society as a whole. It assimilates into the identity of the community and dissolves in the cultural background. Trauma has an uncanny way of surviving through putting up different masks and taking up different forms. We will get back to it later in the paper.

Paul Ricoeur's landmark work in philosophy, 'Memory, History Forgetting', examines the reciprocal relationship between remembering and forgetting. He also talks about overly remembering something at the expense of forgetting others. Interestingly memory present can be something absent, and something that is often overlooked is the fact that forgetting is a necessity as a condition for the possibility of remembering.

So, the process of remembering is embedded with an ongoing process of constructing the memory. The important part here is to understand that memory is a construct based on a social and cultural context. In that sense, it becomes evident that a lot of picking and choosing

is involved in the 'act of remembrance, but the question is who decides what to pick? What to remember and what to forget?

In this line of thought, I would like to bring in an interesting example of the Gusun Memorial situated in Linz, Austria. It was formerly known as Concentration camp Gusen and was operational between 1939-1945. It is estimated that at least seventy thousand individuals were imprisoned at the Gusen Camps, belonging to twenty-seven different nationalities. More than thirty-six thousand of them died. Soon after the liberation in May 1945, the structural remnants of the Gusen concentration camp began to disappear. It was because of being very close to a bigger and more infamous concentration camp called Mauthausen. Mauthausen was the deadliest concentration camp in Upper Austria, now a large museum. There are pieces of evidence in the form of letters exchanged between the officials, that the remnants of Gusen Camps were tried to be done away with for practical reasons. The reasoning given was the existence of such a large memorial as Mauthausen in the near vicinity. The few buildings still in existence are today used for private purposes. In the late nineteen fifties, a housing estate was erected on the grounds of the former camp. In an effort to keep the memory alive, international prisoner associations during the sixties initiated the erection of the Gusen Memorial near the crematorium furnace.

Gusen Memorial sits in the middle of a residential area, questioning our criteria for deciding the hierarchy of suffering. At the same time, it is a fact that the atrocities against humans by humans in cases of wars and ethnic or racial clashes are innumerable, and it is impossible to commemorate each one of them. So, is it wrong to turn a former concentration camp into a residential area? Gusen Memorial presents visitors with such complex questions. The memorial guide narrates his experience by asking such questions to the visitors. He says he asks people to position themselves on a scale of one to ten on whether they think it is right or wrong. Then he goes on to change the question. Is it right to make a house at the site of a former concentration camp? Is it fine if it is made for low-income labourers? He keeps changing the questions to a point where most of the visitors end up standing in between the scale of right and wrong because they don't know anymore. The most recurring response recorded was, "it is too soon to let go of the remnants representative of the cruelty inflicted on the community." This takes us to question the shelf-life of traumatic memory. How long is long enough? When does a traumatic memory stops being a traumatic memory and becomes just a memory? And whether even it ever happens?

Neuro-biological studies show that it is not by chance that negative or traumatic memories are most fixed in our brains in comparison to pleasant memories, and there is an evolutionary reason for it. It was important for humans to remember unpleasant encounters to make predictions about dangerous situations and avoid them, and thus our brain gives precedence to unpleasant memories. It is a survival mechanism. Trauma never leaves; instead, it embeds into the fabric of the identity of the community. For victims, the memory of trauma may be adaptive for group survival, but also elevates existential threat, which prompts a search for meaning, and the construction of a *trans*-generational collective self. For perpetrators, the memory of trauma poses a threat to collective identity that may be addressed by denying history, minimizing culpability for wrongdoing, transforming the memory of the event, closing the door on history, or accepting responsibility.

One such example is the Bengal Famine of 1943. A memory abandoned as much by the survivors as by the perpetrators, but trauma has an uncanny way of surviving. Studies uphold that remnant of famine continues to exist in the food habits and immorality associated with food wastage in the regions. Sharanya Deepak investigates the same in his work, "A Forgotten Holocaust". More than 75 years after the death of millions of Bengalis, the Famine lives on. Kochu shaak, googli, and watery khichuri resonate in family memories and appear in kitchens today. Aditi Sen, a historian based out of Queensland University, Cannada, recounts memories of her grandmother in her work, "Memoirs of Hunger".

"No wonder thakuma was obsessed with reducing wastage. She lived in rural Bengal, and her life must have revolved around food shortage, even though she never really talked about it. She told us stories about ghosts who stole leftover food from plates or ghosts who raided the larder. There were endless tales of offending the goddess Annapurna, who punished little girls who didn't eat everything that was on their plates. We were always afraid that Annapurna or some ghost would find out that we had secretly thrown away some food and she would punish us. We were made to associate wasting food with immorality".

"Fain," or "rice water," is the most well-documented memory of the Famine. It appears in *Ashani Sanket*, a film by Satyajit Ray, and in paintings by Chittoprasad Bhattacharya of hungry families waiting in corners of Kolkata for food. "And we are left sleepless," wrote poet Birendra Chattopadhyay about those who had travelled to the city, "Praying, the night long, swathed in a whiff of intoxicating rice."

Many such accounts of the Bengal Famines of 1943, notoriously famous for not being actual famines, but a disaster caused by bad policies, and intentionally aggravated shortages of food, exist, but a similarity present in all these accounts is the silence of the survivors. These were not literate people; they did not document. And also, these were memories associated with shame. “Why would they want to relive them again and again?”

Starvation “is not the characteristic of there being not enough food to eat,” the economist Amartya Sen wrote in *Poverty and Famines*, “but of some people not having enough food to eat.” Death due to hunger is a failure of society, there is a sense of shame affiliated with the survivors and the victims of Famine, a sense of shame associated with poverty which in effect subjugates the desire to commemorate the deaths due to famines.

The lack of an "Act of remembrance" associated with the Bengal Famines of 1943 is also very political in its making. Over six million Jews are estimated to have been systematically killed by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1941 to 1945. Three million are estimated to have died due to Bengal Famines between 1943 to 1944. The situation is somewhat similar to the Gusun camp next to the Mauthausen concentration camp and it brings us back to the same question, how do we decide the hierarchy of suffering? But there is also a pivotal difference in this situation. Holocaust is seen as the proof of Axis Powers being the evil side of the war, the bad guys. Bengal Famines of 1943, in that sense, is the proof of heroes not being heroes. It is an apt example for Paul Ricoeur's overly remembering something at the expense of forgetting others. History has always tried to categorize good and evil, victors and losers and incorporated selective amnesia to maintain the fabric of the narrative. Coming back to the fact that forgetting is a pre-requisite to remembering, maybe it has been enough of forgetting and now it is time to remember.

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