

The Search for Meaning in Memory in the Aftermath of Genocide: The Construction of Êzîdî Identity

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Abstract: The 2014 Êzîdî Genocide caused a rupture in the social fabric of the Iraqi ethno-religious Êzîdî minority as a whole, disrupting a sense of *self* on an individual level and identity on a collective level. A search for meaning in the aftermath of such violence has caused a group of poets, which I label *memory makers*, to understand the causes of the event by partaking in *memory work* through the composition of Arabic prose poetry. A narrative analysis has been used on a selection of poems written and semi-structured interviews conducted with five poets, and I investigate their *trauma process* through adopting the theory of a *cultural trauma*, viewing 'trauma' from a social constructivist point of view in an attempt to advance and challenge trauma theory and position the importance of investigating memory in terms of collective healing after violence. With a focus on the nature of the suffering, the nature of the victim, and the attribution of responsibility which this theoretical lens provides, I attempt to move past narratives of 'victimhood' which often pervade after violence, and definitions of trauma as event-based which lend to obscure the understanding of those who have not experienced the event.

The poets write in sharp and defiant words choosing not to become passive victims of genocide, but instead use poetry as a means for repairing the social fabric of their community through reconfiguring a collective Êzîdî identity while advocating for justice in order to heal the wounds of the present through engagement with their memories of contemporary violence. I view memory work as serving a similar role to development education in its power to address the issues which have led to suffering and advocate the utility of exploring cultural production as an avenue for further learning in development education.

Key words: Êzîdîs; Genocide; Poetry; Memory; Cultural Trauma; Representation; Development Education.

Introduction

“To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today” (Adorno, 1983: 34).

Stemming from the remnants of thinking which stretches as far back as the marker of atrocity in Western memory and culture, the Holocaust, Theodor Adorno’s statement draws attention to the ‘unsharability’ of traumatic experience when pain ‘does not simply resist language but actively destroys it’ (Scarry, 1985: 4). However, the denial of the possibility of accessing traumatic experience and memory has contributed to a culture of victimology (Eser, 2018) and at times has led to an incomplete picture of political violence and its causes. Investigating the effects of violence on individuals and communities requires an exploration of how violence is implicated and encoded in the collective memories and, therefore, narratives of individuals in the aftermath of dismal events. Attempts have been made to reserve the idea of trauma’s unnarratability to present a more holistic view of trauma which pays attention to complex forms of trauma as well as the dismissal of a hierarchisation of suffering.

With a discarding of the notion of the Holocaust’s uniqueness in recent times, the field of memory studies has moved away from a focus on trauma as it was formulated in a post-structuralist context, in relation to its unrepresentability and the death of the subject. In this article, I consider the contribution memory work can make to transitional justice by focusing on its informal expressions, outside of the state apparatus and processes. By invoking the term, I urge the recognition of the informal contribution of those engaged with memory in social justice beyond the

imperative to redress particular events but as a process of building and securing social justice. Through focusing on Êzîdî poets engaged in the production of memory in the Êzîdî community, who it can be argued speak on behalf of others in the community, development educators can gain an insight into the suffering and healing of the community.

The Êzîdîs in Iraq

The Êzîdîs in Iraq have long lived on the margins of society as a result of both their relatively small numbers and their heterodox religious beliefs. Despite being a monotheistic religion with belief in seven archangels, the chief of these Tawus Melek, the Peacock Angel, they are viewed by the majority Muslim population as ‘worshippers of the devil’ and are not regarded like Muslims and Christians as ‘People of the Book’. Throughout their early modern history, Êzîdîs have been subjected to massacres and displacement. During the Ottoman Empire, Êzîdîs were defined as renegades and were continually targeted for forced conversion and attack, so much so that the Ottoman Turkish word *ferman*, meaning order or decree, has become synonymous with genocide and has been incorporated into their Kurdish language to mean just that.

The strategic importance of Sinjar has made it both an internal and external battlefield since the formation of the Iraqi state during the time of the British mandate and has resulted in the region having weak ties with the rest of the Iraqi state (Fuccaro, 1999). During the Ba’thist Arabisation campaign of the 1970s, national homogeneity in Iraq was developed through a state policy ‘of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic cleansing’ (Moradi and Anderson, 2016:122). Êzîdîs were again subjected to forced displacement, the destruction of villages, and resettlement in collective towns or *mujme’at* in Sinjar. During the Arabisation campaign, Saddam Hussein, military leader of Iraq, used a narrative of Êzîdîs as descendants of Yazid Ibn Muawiya, a Sunni Muslim, providing grounds for an Islamic origin for the community in Ummayyad decent (Kizilhan, 2017: 334). Since the creation of the autonomous Kurdish region but specifically

since the political restructuring which followed the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, Êzîdîs have been forceably undergoing a process of 'Kurdification'. The Êzîdî's origins have been made malleable to contemporary Kurdish political agendas with parties suggesting that Êzîdîs are the 'original Kurds'. Furthermore, due to the Iraqi Constitution's grounding of Islam as 'the official religion of the State' and as a 'foundational source of legislation' (Constitution of the Republic of Iraq, 15 October 2005, Article 2) the Êzîdîs have been vulnerable to social and systemic violence stemming from the denial of their rights as a distinct religious minority with a disparate identity.

On 3 August 2014, the Islamic State (IS) entered the district of Sinjar with the specific aim of targeting Êzîdîs on the basis of their religious identity declaring them infidels or *kuffār* and subjecting the group to mass murder, forced conversion and slavery. IS brutally attacked Êzîdî collective villages and towns with the south of mount Sinjar being particularly affected. Abandoned by Kurdish *Pêshmerga* forces in the early morning hours, those that were in the position to flee to the mountain did so. Up to 3,100 Êzîdîs died over the course of a few days in August while many of those who fled to the mountain died from starvation, dehydration, or injuries inflicted during the IS raid (Cetorelli et al., 2017). An estimated 6,800 Êzîdî women and children were captured, forced into conversion, sold into slavery and for young boys, forced to be child soldiers (Cetorelli et al., 2017). Those who survived on the mountain were evacuated between the 9-13 August when a safe corridor was opened by Syrian Kurdish forces, allowing Êzîdîs to flee through Syria, into the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The attacks resulted in the Êzîdî ancestral homeland of Sinjar and approximately 85 of its villages, as well as the Êzîdî majority populated area of Bahzane and Bahshiqā, being emptied completely of their Êzîdî, Christian and Shabak population. As of 2018, 3,000 Êzîdîs remain unaccounted for and 69 mass graves have been found around the Sinjar district (Yazda, 2018).

Violence, memory and trauma

It is in the aftermath of atrocities, such as those experienced by the Êzîdîs, that society is most in need of social order and coherence, which is often gained through the formation of memory via state-led commemoration. Violent events can easily be manipulated by those in positions of power, in order to perpetuate conflict or organise communities around it and as such, a competition between various meta-narratives often ensues, which contributes to the marginalisation of certain voices. Much literature deals with the ways in which post-conflict societies deal with the past, with most looking at the macro nation-state level and the anchoring of identity through memorials, commemorations and anniversaries (Gillis, 1994; Winter, 1998; Jelin, 2003) as well as monuments and museums (Parr, 2008; Jacobs, 2000).

Often studies focus an inordinate amount on violence and its legacy (Rigney, 2018: 369). Gutman in her introduction to *Memory and the Future* writes:

“For those who study memory, there is a nagging concern that memory studies are inherently backward-looking, and that memory itself – and the way in which it is deployed, invoked and utilized – can potentially hinder efforts to move forward” (Gutman et al., 2010: 1).

Scholarship has thus tended to evoke the ‘traumatic paradigm’ which has produced an unquestioned focus on theories of trauma, witnessing, and the politics of representation, focused on traumatic pasts related to twentieth-century violence (LaCapra, 2001; Caruth, 1996; Alexander et al., 2004; Felman and Laub, 1992). In fact, trauma theory has become the dominant mode through which to analyse the process of transmitting experiences of catastrophe (Radstone, 2011: 116). However, the theory’s focus on the unspeakable and the unrepresentable, fails to give proper attention to local repertoires of witness and tends to monumentalise

trauma as a singular event in time without the acknowledgement of traumas experienced by minority groups. Stef Craps has suggested that 'the traumas of non-Western or minority groups must also be acknowledged on their own terms' (Craps, 2013: 3) and such a movement towards the decolonisation of trauma theory requires an approach which includes the lived experiences of subordinate or subaltern groups. Whigham (2017) notes that a positive potential for the memory of genocidal violence exists, in its capacity to mark the starting point for new conversations which lead to empathy and understanding through the creation of 'new narratives that counter the dangerous incitements of the old narratives' (2017: 68) which provide a preventative capacity to violence. The importance of memory on reconciliation or 'reparative remembering' (Rigney, 2012) in aiding the construction of new hopeful futures out of nostalgia (Radstone, 2011) has been noted, as well as the possibility of new forms of solidarity emerging through practices of remembrance, forms of solidarity which are not confined within ethnic, religious or national boundaries, but are global and based on demanding justice.

Following the lead of those who call for a decolonisation of trauma theory, I propose the utility of working with *memory workers* in the aftermath of catastrophe, with the aim of highlighting the complexity of political violence, genocide and war. Memory workers are defined as 'people in the creative class who become occupied with questions of how to memorialise...war through social and artistic activities' (Haugbolle, 2010: 8). The memory workers focused on in this article are a group of Sinjari poets, the majority of whom fled to mount Sinjar on 3 August and now survive in camps scattered throughout the Dohuk governorate. Those involved in *memory work* wrestle with structures of power in order to engage with meaningful societal transformation. The term is often used together with 'transitional justice' when referring to contexts in which activists are dealing with past human rights violations, injustices and war (Gould and Harris, 2014: 2). I see an investigation of memory workers and

their cultural production as providing a similar means of understanding as development education for peacebuilding which conceptualises violence at both local and global levels (Smith, 2010). Development education, according to the work of Galtung and Freire, see conflict as a matter of injustice which arises through structural violence and direct conflict (Harris, 2004). The memory workers presented here focus on their experiences of 'slow violence' and the implication and interconnection of suffering within a globalised world.

By focusing on the intricacies of memory work, it is possible to come an understanding of belonging and identity being articulated through the production of memory, providing space for the articulation of alternative histories and through using the theoretical lens of *cultural trauma*. Cultural trauma, a theory put forward by Jeffrey Alexander provides the guiding interpretative framework for this study and offers a sociological model for understanding trauma. For Alexander:

“Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental ways” (Alexander, 2012: 6).

This constructivist understanding of trauma sees it not as a naturally occurring response by a community to a cataclysmic event, but rather as a cultural process which is 'mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory' (Eyerman, 2001: 1).

Exploring the Êzîdî case provides the opportunity to challenge hegemonic definitions of trauma, namely its monumentalism and the 'eventness of the event' as somehow 'arbitrary, fortuitous, contingent, aleatory, unforeseeable' (Derrida, 2002: 82), and gain a greater

understanding of the historical context which resulted in a genocide. Through approaching the experience of trauma via those who are involved in the making of its memory, a revised understanding of trauma can be expanded to (post)colonial conditions and new forms of response to collective, everyday forms of traumatising violence considered. This article calls attention to the mundane everyday details of traumatic experience and addresses the goal articulated by Craps regarding trauma theory, that it 'need not be abandoned altogether but can and should be reshaped, resituated, and redirected so as to foster attunement to previously unheard suffering' (2013: 37). It is of vital importance to both our understanding of violence and the integrity of those we research to investigate narratives which diverge from 'victimhood' and give space for alternative narratives to emerge which promote collective awareness and the capacity of healing.

Methodology

Poetry and cultural artefacts broadly speaking, create an 'alternate public space for articulating and recounting experience silenced by officially sanctioned narratives' (Das et al., 2001: 3). A combination of semi-structured and informal interview data was analysed with a selection of poem texts from each poet. This interviewing technique allowed me to conversationally guide the participants through their accounts of the genocide, displacement, their poetic writing process and the impact on their lives, while granting participants complete freedom to respond and providing the flexibility to ask follow-up questions. All interviews were recorded with the permission of participants and transcribed for analysis. Interviews were carried out between October 2017 and May 2018 with five participants writing poetry since, and for some before, the genocide in 2014. The poems presented in this article are direct translations of poems written in Arabic which is the language of choice for these poets. These poems are some of the first representations of the genocide found in poetic verse.

Findings

In line with the components of the theory of cultural trauma, I will detail the main collective memories narrated through the trauma process by the poets obtained through both interview data and excerpts from poems.

The nature of the pain

One of the most dominant narratives that emerges from the data is that of the 74th *ferman*, an originally Turkish word meaning Sultanic decree, which has become synonymous with genocide due to the Êzîdîs' history of attacks against them. In Sarmad's poem (2015), which takes the form of an identity card, he refers to '74 stabs in the back':

*“Place of birth: Sinjar, which means the beautiful side
Religion: Êzîdî and the overwhelming pain is confirmed
Visible Disabilities: 74 stabs in the back
Eye colour: Salty water
Face colour: Blood splattered”*

Saad (2015) directly refers to this master narrative while also taking a similar form to Sarmad, through his investigation of some basic aspects of his identity:

*“I live genocide number 74
I'm Saad Shivan – this name is my short name,
My permanent address is Bersive Camp 2, which bring me
depression, loneliness, and shit
Sometimes I drink beer at the cost of what my little brother brought
from his work in the apple field
My mother is being treated for kidney stones, my mother, who has
resisted all the wars so far,
is only defeated by our tears
Unemployment bites like a dog and it is not enough to scream”*

Both Sarmad and Saad refer to a continued persecution, the last of which made the 74th attempt at elimination, a narrative which has come to redefine the Êzîdî identity through a shared sense of trauma that has emerged out of continued religious persecution. This is most clearly narrated in this excerpt from Emad's poem (2015), '*Belonging*':

*"Sinjar, my soul
To you I belong
My blood is a sacrifice
And in you, healing"*

The nature of the victim

In searching for the nature of the victim, the poets look to how the pain of structural violence has affected Êzîdîs specifically. A decade previous to the 2014 genocide, the United Nations placed overall deprivation in Sinjar at an extreme level and among the least developed districts in Iraq with noted weaknesses in the lack of education, basic infrastructure and housing, all leading to a form of long-term suffering which has often been ignored in many accounts of the genocide. These conditions contributed to feelings of marginalisation which Saad deals with while reflecting on his childhood in Sinjar (2016):

*"We were accompanying the coffins which went out into the streets
Wrapped in a blanket and not the flag of the country
At the time, we didn't really have a country; at least we did not feel
like we did
They were speaking about the money that could be earned
One of them from border smuggling cigarettes and gasoline
And in the morning, the names of the detainees and the bullet
wounded are announced
We did not betray anyone; I mean we did not have a country"*

Saad points to the precarious nature of employment and security in Sinjar during his youth, where due to its location as a hinterland of sorts, the poet feels he did not have 'a country' to identify with. The area suffered from a lack of employment opportunities which as the poem shows, resulted in cross-border smuggling being the most viable form of employment for many living in the north of mount Sinjar.

The 'disputed' nature of Sinjar has led to the underdevelopment and systematic negligence in public investment and service provision in Sinjar city and its collective villages. The human security that should have been provided by government and state institutions to develop economic, social and political lives of society in Sinjar were neglected with the security and well-being of the Êzîdî population suffering. Certain structural arrangements embedded in the political and economic organisation of society in Iraq, regarding minority religious status in a Muslim majority country, conspired to constrain individual agency and led to Êzîdîs being left out while areas of Kurdistan in particular progressed following the invention of the autonomous region, and the reaping of oil wealth. Saad (2016) deals precisely with this issue in one of his most poignant poems:

*"I am from a miserable minority, it's called the Êzîdîs
We have many holidays and our believers do not wash on
Wednesday
No oil wells in Sinjar where we were living
but I assure you, we are rich in mass graves"*

Relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience

The poets revise and reconstruct their collective Êzîdî identity in relations to wider audiences, both Kurdish, Iraqi, and the international community through memory work and the re-remembering of a collective past in which suffering prevailed and through which a distinct identity is produced. Zedan, in his poem, *Non-Broadcast News* (2016), discusses

specifically the relation of Êzîdî's trauma of displacement to wider Kurdish society. Through positioning the victim in relation to the camp authorities, journalists, and emergency services, he shows the marginalisation of the community who are confined to camp spaces where their suffering goes unrecognised:

*"There were no causalities the camp manager told a local channel
What about the child that had just been born and burned in his
cradle?
It is true that he cried out once or twice but he did not produce any
tears
His eyes were not yet open,
He did not hear the lulls or a similar sigh of his mother,
He did not carry enough pain for them to say that he was displaced,
The journalist shouted at me
How can we write in the news bar with a lying heart 'One person
died as a result of a fire in two tents?'
Where are the human losses if it is a displaced person who dies?"*

While the poets do speak specifically of the suffering of the Êzîdî community, they do not limit themselves to this narrative only but contextualise their suffering within a greater history of war, pain and suffering within the borders of the nation of Iraq. In doing this, the poets move beyond 'ethnicised memory' or notions of justice, reconciliation and peace filtered through an ethnic understanding and speak of the suffering of Iraqis in general, relating themselves to the wider Iraqi citizenry. In Musafir's poem (2017), he speaks exactly of this:

*"Every day we make sure that death becomes easier
We see each time the news bar expands more on the screen
At the beginning of every hour, the news anchor tells us in a soft
voice,*

*that there has been an explosion or the discovery of a mass grave,
and such news does not surprise us Iraqis,
Simply put, we turn our faces from the television, we gather for a
picnic and we eat sectarianism together”*

The attribution of responsibility

The theory of cultural trauma implies that through identifying the cause of the trauma, members take on moral responsibility for it and through doing so, a group defines their solidary relationships compelling them to share the suffering of others. Interestingly, the poets do take some responsibility on behalf of the community for their suffering. An expression often repeated to describe the Êzîdî community used by Êzîdîs themselves is ‘simple; we are simple people’. The poets often speak of seeing themselves as part of a new generation which bear the responsibility of advancing the development of the community as a whole. Through identifying the sources of suffering in structural violence and inequalities which led to threats to the human security of the Êzîdî community and the ultimate devastation; genocide.

Through their memory work, the poets assign responsibility which is an important part of transitional justice and reconciliation efforts. The poets illuminate neglected domains of social responsibility and political action and frame their opposition to the continual identity politics and sectarianism of Iraq and the Kurdish region by taking control of the narration of their experiences of genocide and displacement and the formation of their identity in relation to these events. In doing so they expand the circle of ‘we’ to all who have suffered genocide in the hope of repairing their society and building an inclusive Iraq which can prevent genocide. As Musafir (2017) has said along with many others, they see themselves as ‘humanist poets’:

“I write for any person, any persecuted person, any person like us, [who is] displaced, who lives like us in a camp and far away

from his area. Any person, it's not conditional to be a Êzîdî, Christian or Muslim..."

The poets write in sharp and defiant words choosing not to become passive victims of genocide, but instead use poetry as a means for repairing the social fabric of their community through reconfiguring a collective Êzîdî identity while advocating for justice in order to heal the wounds of the present through engagement with the past. The poets call on ethical and moral principles and human values of equality, mutual respect, justice, non-violence but most importantly recognition for their suffering. However, until the underlying issues pertaining to human security in Sinjar are actually addressed, the community will not feel a desire to return to their homeland. While recognition of their suffering on an international stage has led to many positive developments for the community, with survivor Nadia Murad being awarded the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize, healing within Kurdish and Iraqi society is slow. While memory work has been vital for these poets in their investigation of the root causes of their suffering, future talks within the Kurdistan Region and Iraq need to focus on specific aspects which gave rise to the genocide, and issues in human security need to be addressed such as lack of sufficient services and safety concerns related to social tensions in the Sinjar area.

Conclusion

The portrayal of the previous religious persecution, marginalisation and exclusion on the basis of their religion reflect a separatist trend in the Êzîdî community. The emerging Êzîdî identity is anchored in their collective memory and set apart from discourses of Kurdishness or Iraqiness. Instead, the poets strive to express their self-perception in order to determine their communal identity through cultural trauma. It is clear that the cultural trauma has articulated a group membership which identifies the genocide and the collective memory of former persecution and processes of 'othering' as solidifying both the individual Êzîdî identity and their collective identity. It is the alternative space which poetry

presents for articulating and recounting experiences often silenced by official narratives which has enabled these poets to write and shows that the narration of trauma does not always have to reflect victimhood but allows competing interpretations of suffering to emerge.

They address inherent inequalities in society and in doing so demand a transformation in ways of restructuring the state and economy in order to redress inequalities raising a collective awareness of painful memories and situating the capacity for healing and action. Similar to development education, the poets address the issues which have led to their suffering and in doing so become active promoters of peaceful, tolerant and inclusive societies. The utility of exploring the arts and cultural production as an avenue for further learning in development education is evident, as it allows for the exploration of nuanced narratives of complex situations. Through the narration of their experiences in poetic form, they educate about their experience of genocide, while also giving hope that the prevention of violence is possible, despite the pain felt. They give voice to pain and turn victims into agents and tragedy into an opportunity to repair the Êzîdî social fabric.

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