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Conference Submission: Trauma Narratives

15th August 2013

The Complicit Camera: Ethics of Attending to Survivors and Trauma Narratives

This paper seeks to look at the ethical issues inherent in the space of representation with regard to trauma narratives specifically looking at witness testimonies that speak or are trying to speak about an event/events on camera. Using Jacques Lacan's understanding of trauma as the "missed encounter" I look at the documentary "Inshallah Kashmir", that explores the situation in Kashmir, to question and investigate the traumatic effects of gaps, ruptures, silences that putting a camera by an outsider, with power, in such a field produces within representation. If trauma, according to Lacan, inhabits the field of the unrepresentable and the unspeakable then what are we as spectators, as the other, being allowed to see, what are we being allowed to hear and what is it that becomes inaccessible? How does the filmmaker then, standing in a position of power, through his own voice and control over visual representation, use the difficulties inherent in the speaking of trauma to render his own interpretation of the event as the only true interpretation, an interpretation that then produces the conditions that keep the status quo rendering the frame itself complicit in the perpetuation of violence? I will also do this by exploring the insider/outsider binary through a reading of *5 Broken Cameras*, a documentary based on footage shot by a resident of Bil'in which saw a Palestinian resistance to Israeli occupation. Looking for an ethical way of addressing of trauma in visual practice I use Judith Butler's work on images of Abu Ghraib and the idea of circulation, of images, as resisting official narratives to read images/sounds/music that exist elsewhere, made by witnesses impacted on by the violence, and which circulate as testimonies, as evidence, as readings of the events that make up Kashmir. These will be

explored as an attempt to come as close to retelling trauma as is possible through the use of different kinds of visual and sound practices.

“Inshallah Kashmir”, a ‘documentary’ is the stringing together, of video testimonies of those at the receiving end of State and militant violence in Kashmir, through a coherent narrative carried through by the voice of the director, supported by voices of authority/knowledge that seek to explain/contest/reiterate/legitimize what those who seek to testify utter. “Inshallah Kashmir” was made from the refuse, the debris, the footage, that Kumar says was “straining at the narratives of ‘Inshallah, Football’” (Joshi), that never made it into his earlier film. What started off as a reece for a feature film and an accidental run in with a football coach resulted in 400 hours of footage from which these two films were made. These interviews/his stated motivations set him up to be the receiver of images, an objective, open Indian citizen who through his accidental meetings rips apart the haze of what he calls in his film “government and corporate media”.

The film sets out to interview primarily those who have been subjected to violence – torture, rape by the armed forces, a kidnapping by the militants, people caught in between subjected to life threatening violence as well as those who witness such violence happening to family members including enforced disappearances. The interviewees are asked to recount and bear witness in an effort to understand the Indian occupation of Kashmir, a land that has seen by “some estimates [as of 2012], enforced and involuntary disappearance of at least 8000 persons besides more than 70,000 deaths, and disclosures of more than 6000 unknown, unmarked, and mass graves.” (IPTK, *Alleged* 10) Kashmir is not a story situating itself in the 90’s with a comfortable narrative that revolves around Pakistan. It is not an event that has happened. Kashmir and the occupation of Kashmir is in the present. “The overwhelming presence of the military, para-military, and police, of their guns and vehicles, of espionage cameras, interrogation and detention centres, of army cantonments and torture cells, orders

civilian life. Kashmir is a landscape of internment, where resistance is deemed ‘insurgent’ by state institutions.” (P.Chatterji 95)

Trauma is defined under DSM IV under the title of post-traumatic stress disorder as an experience, a witnessing, a confrontation of an event that involves a threat, a threat to survival. It also defines the response to be one of “fear, helplessness, or horror.” (“Post Traumatic Stress Disorder”) Jacques Lacan borrowing the word *tuché* from Aristotle defines trauma as “essentially the missed encounter” with the Real. (Lacan 55) The Real is that which cannot be symbolized, put in language, unrepresentable, the unrealized. Trauma inhabits this space as such becoming extremely difficult to access through the Symbolic, that which works within the space of language, already constituted, something we are born into. It makes its presence felt through absences, in a stumbling and a stuttering through words. It appears and disappears. It returns and repeats. How can we start to read the testimonies available to us in the film with what is not said, with what is absent? How do we learn to read its presence through “the screen that shows us that it is still there behind”? (Lacan 55)

The film opens with a segment that concentrates on testimonies of torture experienced by those speaking it. Zahoor Ahmed Hajam, named as an ex-militant, speaks of being made nude and hit with his own slippers on his face as well as being set on fire during the torture. He also speaks of having electrodes put on his penis and in his mouth and he says of the experience “I didn’t know where I was, what was going on.” (Kumar, *Inshallah Kashmir*) The inability of Hajam to put into words what he has experienced or what that experience means enables the film maker to continue to frame Hajam as distant and within the frameworks of how we come to see torture as necessary to the maintenance of civil society and the Nation State. The tussle over the pronunciation of the word ‘penis’, in this interview as Hajam describes the torture, betrays Kumar’s absolute indifference to the testimony he is hearing. Kumar’s disinterest in picking up words that point to the horrors of torture like the

physically coercive and shaming act of being stripped naked betrays his discomfort at pointing to the demand for accountability that the State ought to be answerable to.

Kumar's questions around torture reveal a very distanced cold interest in the logistics of the torture system. The questions provide a space for words that will continue to keep the distance. And then in this segment something appears, as if by chance, that seems to break the distance, the distance between the audience and their untortured bodies. In answering Kumar's question "What happens when they put petrol in the body?" (Kumar, *Inshallah Kashmir*) Bashir Baba puts forth a way. He asks Kumar to put some petrol on his hand and smell it and then imagine what it might be like to have it in the filmmaker's body. By putting forth the torture in this way Baba's words point to a space that can only be imagined, a space that cannot bring itself forth in words, a space that rests outside of the frame in all its horrors.

Lacan in his understanding of the psychoanalytical process places emphasis on the concept of a master signifier. This is what is the foundation of meaning making of one's place in the world, the creation of a personal myth. At the point of trauma this basis, this foundation of a person's being, is questioned or falls away and there is the work of recreating meaning, recreating one's personal myth. Through torture and resulting trauma the beliefs and understanding that structure the world and lives of torture survivors is shattered. What one is left with are images of the self and the body receiving the torture, experiences that resist being spoken about, being put in words, becoming the unassimilable resisting its integration into the symbolic order.

"These foreign images can result in confusion, bewilderment and disorientation as the person has incorporated something alien, which does not correspond to their previous self-image. The person is haunted by foreign images that replace the former self-representations. The ego is unable to make these images its own. The imposed images are more real than imaginary, they are indelible." (Harper)

The testimonies of the torture continue to function within the realm of what is allowed to be spoken and how it is allowed to be spoken. Asking the interviewees to account/tell for traumatic events enables this film to stay safe without even touching upon the kind of effects that such torture might have on the psyche and the social fabric as this is perpetuated on an entire population.

Although the film frames itself around killing and torture of non-combatants with reference to the discovery of mass graves, the video testimonies focus primarily on torture experienced by ex-militants, the violence of militancy and the violence that people get caught up in. There are very few ‘innocent’ victims in his film. The film asks us the audience to see it within a certain frame that already exists in our understanding of torture as deserved if they are in the wrong like in the act of taking up arms against the State.

“...if their very bodies are construed as instruments of war or pure vessels of attack, then they are already deprived of life before they are killed, transformed into inert matter or destructive instrumentalities, and so buried before they have had a chance to live, or to become worthy of destruction, paradoxically, in the name of life.” (Butler, *Frames* xxix)

The film goes on to make simplistic deductions on the reasons for the turn towards militancy and most importantly an implication of it as personal choice.

“...to take the self-generated acts of the individual as our point of departure in moral reasoning is precisely to foreclose the possibility of questioning what kind of world gives rise to such individuals. And what is this process of "giving rise"? What social conditions help to form the very ways that choice and deliberation proceed? Where and how can such subject formations be contravened? How is it that radical violence becomes an option, comes to appear as the only viable option for some,

under some global conditions? And against what conditions of violation do they respond? And with what resources?” (Butler, *Explanation* 65)

The idea that Kashmir and its resistance is and continues to be linked to Pakistan structures the film informing choices about interviewees, the glaring absence of the 2010 Intifada and Shopian, the drawing of the map, the focus on events around the time of the armed militancy, the interviews with the women at Dardpora, the presence of Pakistani militants in Kashmir, the selection of graffiti etc. As Abunimah states in his response to the discovery of mass graves in Kashmir,

“Hindutva nationalists and Zionists often try to reframe the “conflicts” not as ones over human and political rights, sovereignty, consent and self-determination, but as being caused by irrational and implacable “Muslims” and “Islamists” who if not confronted and stopped will take over the world. In this context, all the repression and state violence to which millions of people are subjected is justified...”

“Military-talk and dominant political speech state that the Indian Armed Forces are in Kashmir to protect citizens, and justify civilian suffering and killings as collateral damage in a war on terror... There is no way out of the contradiction that India's military is the protector of Kashmiris who are also potential enemies, as long as military suppression of Kashmiris is understood as crucial to defending India.”
(IPTK, *Military*)

The testimony of rape survivors from Kunan Poshpora in the film is one of the most telling examples of how the interviewees and their testimonies have been constructed to fit into a narrative and viewpoint that is the film maker’s enabled by the difficulties inherent in speaking of traumatic experiences. Here the women’s faces are seen and one of them named. Mainstream representations around rape always hide the woman’s face and yet reporting from conflict zones never do that. The question is not so much whether one’s face should be

hidden or not, but what for me points to the usual lack of informed consent that plagues war reportage or reportage that covers the vulnerable especially when the quest for justice means dangerous repercussions are a very real possibility. Two unnamed rape survivors, speak to a camera (held by a man according to the credits) through a male translator with another man seated next to him. Their narrative and that of Sameera Begum's, another rape survivor, are introduced through Wajahat Habibullah, the man who led an enquiry with representatives of the security forces. She and the two unnamed women are asked to recount details of the night. Putting the women again into the space of speaking of that night, becomes a way to put her and her words up for judgment again which is subsequently seen in Habibullah's outrageous statement that the act of yanking the men out of their homes and going into the households where only women were present would have been offensive to Muslim communities. This narrative situates it within the context of religion rather than the framework of rights that women ought to have and is provided for by law. These testimonies are juxtaposed with Habibullah's words and filter through him thereby asking the viewer to interpret it within the framework that the filmmaker sets up for us. It is terribly ironic that proceedings have been asked to be initiated against Wajahat Habibullah for covering up the crime. (Rashid)

The seeing of rape as a stain on the woman is implied in the question posed to Begum about her relationship with her husband. He asks "How is your husband's attitude towards you now? How is his behaviour with you?" Her answer to that as "He knows what violations occurred that night" in a way refuses to answer the question posed to her. In refusing to answer what Kumar asks of her she points to a space, an area that is out of bounds, something almost unspeakable heightened by the absence of her husband, his body and voice in the interview. In asking her to address ideas around defilement, acceptance/non-acceptance of women who experience rape, within a space that is obviously not safe and that will be open

for the world to see, Kumar comes across as someone for whom the video testimonies only matter not even so much in terms of the telling but just about managing to get a face, a body, a voice to speak. There is no thinking about the living or for that matter no attempt is made to look at what this mass rape means within the overall structuring and execution of the violent occupation. Rape is part of the disciplining procedures used by the State. “Discipline is effected through surveillance and punishment, in order to exact fear and obedience.” (P.Chatterji 99)

When asked whether he worried about the safety of his interviewees this is what Kumar states: “These people when they spoke on camera were like: “What more can we lose?” They had come on camera to make a point.” (Kumar) Juxtapose this with the statement by IPTK who published the report on the existence of mass graves, “SHRC has relied on statements from persons who, fearful of reprisal, wish for their testimonies to be placed on record anonymously. Given the nature of the issue, and the heightened risks involved in offering testimony, utmost care and caution should be exercised in securing witness protection, following international protocols and standards.” (*Re: Unknown and Unmarked*)

Kumar’s articulation of his positioning is made amply clear in the disclaimer that opens the film which states that the views of the interviewees are their own and viewers are responsible for their viewing. The disclaimer disclaims the words, the sounds of the interviewees as something that they own, in a sense setting up an implication that the director of the film may not agree with/ seeks to be neutral about what the interviewees have to say. Although disclaimed by the maker of this film, for us as viewers the claiming could and ought to come from listening, from attending to, attending to moments that haunt this film by their absence, by their gaps, by their ruptures and by their pointing to what cannot be spoken of in words. This distancing from the voices could be read with, or asks to be read with

Kumar's own proximity to the institutions whether they be the Army or the Government which is seen in the visual access to space that his camera has. A scene in the documentary where Kumar lapses into something remotely sounding like poetry the camera is positioned on a military vehicle. It offers us a view of what it might look like from the position of the gun barrel, elevated, looking down upon, surveillance. It reminds one of another scene in another country, a Bradley Manning/WikiLeaks leaked US military video, a camera positioned within the instruments of war, becoming it and implicating the ones who stand behind it. ("Collateral Murder")

Can we look at the absences, in this film, of the effects of the occupation on day-to-day life and most importantly the resistance that has been coming together over the past few years as pointing to narratives that disrupt the way we are asked to view Kashmir? In particular I refer to the coming together of the village of Shopian around the rape and murders of Asiya Jan and Neelofar Jan in the same year Kumar was shooting in Kashmir which stands questioning its non-inclusion.

“Beginning May 30, 2009, throughout June, until July 16, 2009, for forty-seven consecutive days, protests continued in Shopian town, led by the Majlis-e-Mushawarat and other groups, seeking justice, joined, in solidarity, by others across Kashmir. Daily life remained interrupted, economic and social life overrun. Through non-violent means, civil society continued to dissent the horrific events that transpired, the relationship of these events to military and paramilitary forces, the actions and impassivity of security forces and institutions, and those of the state.”
(IPTK, *Militarization* 2-3)

I also refer here to the summer of 2010 called the Intifada, which saw a call to 'Quit Kashmir'. A time and a space where Kashmiris were getting louder, reclaiming what agency looked like, putting their bodies in the line of fire with the finding of stones, music, words

and not guns. Kumar's calling of the curfew imposed by young people which he encounters, in "Inshallah Kashmir", as a "storm in a teacup" and that they didn't know why they had imposed the curfew only betrays his own absolute condescension towards people, especially young people, living with the occupation. This is also seen in the way the voice of Khemlata Wakhloo, describing the militants, is imposed on to visuals of children and young people in Kashmir. Her words "with beards and horrible weapons under their pillows" imposed on to a visual of a young child and "My God, are these the militants?" imposed on to two young boys on the road explaining that the militants did not look like militants but like innocent young children. This editing aligns itself with narratives of war and how children are converted into objects of war, as potential 'terrorists', by the State as seen in Kashmir 2010 and in Palestine. If one were to see stone pelting in "5 Broken cameras" and how Emad Burnat introduces his children to the resistance in Bil'in, a Palestinian village, one starts to understand how the conditions call for a resistance even by those as young as five. This is accompanied with the comprehension of the horror of seeing such young people put their bodies in the line of fire and the subsequent persecution of these young people by the Israeli armed forces. This film moves from the particular, a man with a camera documenting his family and their everyday life in Bil'in, to addressing the larger question of the occupation and physical erasure of Palestine by Israel. As Burnat records over five years the effects of the occupation, the camera becomes his constant companion, revealing nuances that point to the structural conditions of violence. A scene in "5 Broken Cameras" where Gibreel, his youngest son, has just come back from a protest and acknowledges the fear he feels to his mother as well as his acknowledgement to the camera/father about why he is off to the protest offers us a glimpse into a more intimate nuanced world of occupation and how children/young people comprehend and cope and live with it finding their voices and their anger. It asks the viewer to interpret within a different framework those resisting the war. The

voice over in the film also has Burnat questioning the actual physical presence of the camera in this field and what it means for him to film. This is seen for example in a scene where he is filming the arrest of his brother, his father climbs on to the police jeep to stop it and Burnat continues to film acknowledging that it was important for him to continue filming. Another scene in the film the camera literally takes a bullet saving Burnat's life.

Reading "5 Broken Cameras" with "Inshallah Kashmir" is also about looking at what and how voices impacted upon by violence can produce and how different a 'we' and a 'they' look and speak and dream and live. A camera held by a person affected by the occupation, witnessing the occupation is allowed and moves freely within the space it seeks to explore. The camera can be used to offer a different frame within which one can start to understand the sufferings of war. As the camera becomes a part of Burnat's family and friends and his body the concept of collateral damage ceases to exist. Death and injury cannot be explained away by the State that perpetuates violence as needed for the common good.

Taking over images and putting them together to offer a voice from Kashmir that isn't heard in the rest of India is seen in "I Protest" a music video that appeared on YouTube as a response to the killing of 112 (Kak xviii), mostly young people, by the Indian forces in the summer of 2010. The video is a collection of images portraying, sometimes, extreme graphic violence and enormous human suffering. The pixilated images also contain photographs of the dead or their funerals as well as and very importantly their names. There is a demand that these names be heard, not as statistics, but as individual lives lived and killed by the State. The erasure of names is part of the war effort that keeps the war at a distance enabling it. These collected images, re-circulated within a new context, construct a new framework for viewing. "Circulation reanimates intentions in new ways, exposes the image to new animating conditions, and often ends up producing effects that turn back on those whose

control is supposed to be reflected back and solidified through the circulation itself.” (Butler, *Frames* xiv)

Naming not just the bodies of those killed but the occupation and the violence of the occupation offers the viewers a space that brings the war home. It is a way of bringing in the voice, bringing in the name, the singular, wrenching it from the Lacanian real into the symbolic. A symbolic that points to the conditions of precarity constructed for an entire population. It reframes the discourse enabling the apprehension of losses and the space for a grieving of those losses. It also sets up the viewer to listen to the valley not just as the receiver of violence but the valley as articulating a voice that protests, the protesting becoming a sign of life, of human-ness, of a being asked to be taken into account. Being distributed online also enables the creation of an accessible space that questions the hegemonic ideas of nationhood and the constructions of citizenship. These images provide for the possibilities for political ramifications through a coming together, an organizing, a memorializing and a space for grieving together. ‘Open grieving is bound up with outrage, and outrage in the face of injustice or indeed of unbearable loss has enormous political potential.’ (Butler, *Frames* 39)

It is imperative that one comes to understand and grieve for those young men who made one of the loudest statements possible about India. It is imperative to not look beyond the torture and death meted out to these young bodies. The summer of 2010 brought the occupation in Kashmir home. The aligning of that summer with the struggle in Palestine, the movement from guns from Pakistan to stones from Kashmir has to be accounted for. “Inshallah Kashmir” sets out to mourn and grieve for Kashmir casting most of its population as victims with no agency. But as those of us who have grieved know, grief comes with anger, with rage. A rage that tears the very fabric of meaning making processes, a rage that threatens to break the body in its unspeakability. A rage that asks to take into account bodies

and bodies within a space as they lay claim to a livable life, as they are claimed by untimely torturous death. The Indian occupation of Kashmir not only marks the lives of those the nation state seeks to disclaim, it also simultaneously marks the bodies it seeks to claim as its own injuring it while constructing it. It is in this marking that one is asked to answer to a name, an identity based on citizenship, to a rage, to account for what is done in one's name. It is a space where one has to fight for a shred, an ounce of what it is to call something your own, of what it means to lay claim and what one can claim to. It is in this space, this space of refusal, of resistance to the war effort that one can finally speak in one's name.

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