

Lydia's silence: Representation of trauma from an ex-centric position in Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*

Vipasha Bhardwaj

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9466-3870>

Pub Kamrup College, Baihata Charali, Assam

Abstract

South Africa, a place long caught in the crosshairs of hegemonic violence and racism, provides a fitting case study for the imbalance and marginalization of the traumatized individuals who lived through the fascist apartheid regime. Achmat Dangor's celebrated novel *Bitter Fruit* (2001) is a tragic story of the coloured family of Silas Ali set during 1998; when Nelson Mandela's presidency was gaining momentum in South Africa. It was a period when the violent and discriminatory apartheid regime was coming to an end and a fledgling democracy was still testing its wings in South Africa. The narrative of *Bitter Fruit* is centred around the silenced memory of Lydia's rape, Silas's wife, by a white security policeman called Francois du Boise. The novel begins with Lydia's suppressed traumatic past erupting into the post-apartheid present when Silas accidentally encounters his wife's rapist at a mall in Johannesburg thereby bringing back the traumatic memories of the past. Nineteen-year-old Mikey Ali, who is a child conceived in shame and terror, is the figurative 'bitter fruit' in the novel born of miscegenation and apartheid abuse. Lydia's trauma haunts the family in complex ways ultimately leading to the disintegration of familial bonds. These personal experiences of trauma take place against the backdrop of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a famous but controversial reparative model of justice.

The proposed research article aims to understand trauma from the ex-centric position of a coloured woman who refuses to allow her personal experiences of trauma to be undermined and defined as merely wartime 'collateral damage'. Lydia resists the reductionist approach that the members of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) had adopted while dealing with cases related to violence and human rights abuses. In the beginning, dialogue and discourses on trauma centred mainly around extremely unusual events but now trauma theories have infiltrated contemporary history, literature and culture. Traumatic memories are incoherent and it often lacks verbal narrative. Writing about rape or inscribing it into literature is ethically a complex action because trauma, by nature and context, is distinct to human beings. Remembering the truth and bearing witness to it is in itself a daunting task for the victim as well as the listener. The paper shall foreground the complexity of personal experiences of, and responses to trauma as expounded by trauma theorists Sigmund Freud, Judith Herman, Cathy Caruth and Dori Laub to understand how the trauma of Lydia's rape during the apartheid period

can be understood only in the context of South Africa's politically charged and changed atmosphere during the 1970s and 1980s when the country was going through a rough transition from being an apartheid state to a democratically volatile nation.

Keywords: Rape, trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, South Africa, post-apartheid, coloured experience.

The novel *Bitter Fruit* begins at the dawn of a new millennium in South Africa; at the crossroad of the end of Nelson Mandela's presidency and the report of the human rights abuses submitted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The representation of personal and collective trauma in the novel exposes the gory acts of violence played out on the body of a coloured woman called Lydia Ali, an unsettling reality that is in stark contrast to the state-sanctioned narrative that had ruled out any such possibility to keep up with a conciliatory facade. In the context of the novel, rape could be read as a metaphor for understanding slavery and colonialism perpetuated by the mechanisms of the apartheid regime. During any period of invasion or warfare, sexual violence is a conscious policy adopted by the perpetrators to manifest their power whereby sexual transgressions is considered to be an offence against the community to which the victim belongs. The mutilation of the woman's body also sends a message to enemy men: that they are incapable of protecting their women anymore, a message that symbolized emasculation and destruction. Violence is also a form of entitlement because those who are fuelled by the desire to inflict pain are protected by the apparatus of the state and neither the nature nor the consequences of their actions are seen as punishable. According to Vicky Heap in the book *Revisiting the 'Ideal Victim': Developments in Critical Victimology*,

...rape culture is derived from rhetorical patterns that are entrenched in conscious or unconscious hetero-normative, White male, privileged traditions. Thus, in a rape culture, rape and other forms of sexual violence are common but the prosecution and conviction of these acts are not (230).

When Lydia recounts the memory of her rape by Francois Du Boise and when she learns that her rapist had applied for amnesty for several sexual assaults including one on her, she could not help but mock derisively at her husband's cowardice to avenge his wife's rapist. Having her modesty outraged and her body violently assaulted at the hands of Du Boise, Lydia believes in violent retribution; a desire for vendetta through blood and death rather than words and official hearings:

If you were a real man, you would have killed him on the spot...splatter his brains against a window, watch his blood running all over the floor...He took your woman, he fucked your wife, made you listen to him doing it. I became his property, even my screams were his instrument... (Dangor 17).

According to Herman "Feelings of rage and murderous revenge fantasies are normal responses to abusive treatment" (104) and the sexually abused victims "often lack verbal and social skills for resolving conflict, and they approach problems with the expectation of hostile attack." Nineteen years later, in a post-apartheid South Africa, Silas Ali and Lydia Ali are suddenly made to confront their tormentor and the suppressed traumatic past when one day Silas spots Du Boise at a mall in Johannesburg. Horrific memories of the past strike the Ali family with renewed viciousness and this time, the family disintegrates irrevocably. Following the rape, Lydia and Silas had been trapped in a loveless and non-communicative marriage drifting away from each other emotionally and physically. Any attempts by Silas to come physically closer to

Lydia were thwarted due to her traumatic experiences of rape. Her previously established sexual patterns with her husband were disrupted and she wished to withdraw from any physical contact.

Herman explains the reason behind this evasive response towards bodily contact and writes,

Because of entrenched norms of male entitlement, many women are accustomed to accommodating their partners' desires and subordinating their own, even in consensual sex. In the aftermath of rape, however, many survivors find they can no longer tolerate this arrangement. In order to reclaim her own sexuality, a rape survivor need to establish a sense of autonomy and control. If she is ever to trust again, she needs a cooperative and sensitive partner who does not expect sex on demand (65).

Their daily conversation revolved around inconsequential matters related to mundane details rather than any substantial communication: "...he and Lydia spoke very little these days, and when they did, it was about something practical, the car needing a service, the leaking taps, the length of the grass at the back of the house" (7). Their unspoken trauma all through these years debilitated the familial bond and it deeply soured their relationship with Mikey, a child born out of Lydia's rape during the apartheid regime. There is an implacable coldness in Lydia's demeanour and her anger had hardened into something impenetrable. As the years went by, her trauma aggravated so much so that she could not form a meaningful relationship with her husband and son. In 1980 for the first time, the American Psychiatric Association recognised post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a condition of real diagnosis. PTSD has been defined as the response to an event that is "outside the range of usual human experience" (236). One of the cardinal symptoms of PTSD is 'constriction' which Lydia exhibits in the novel till the end. Constriction is articulated through a state of surrender when the traumatized person feels completely powerless and the system of self-defence shuts down. Lydia had dissociated herself

from the actual moment of trauma because the memory of the physical act of rape was too gruesome to evoke in her mind. She did not want to share her trauma with her parents or her husband because she knows that they would demand a forgetful silence from her. But silence is not the appropriate alternative in smoothing the rough edges of traumatic memories because it entails repression and absolute forgetting. As Geoffrey Hartman has remarked: "Literary verbalization...still remains a basis for making the wound perceivable and the silence audible" (259). Lydia did not believe in the Christian way of confessing either because the rape was a sin committed against her and confession would only mean coming to peaceful terms with her past trauma which she vehemently rejects. Society gives little attention and permission to women who want to express their feelings or withdraw from societal obligations. In an effort to be protective, lovers, friends, the family sometimes disregard a survivor's need to regain a sense of autonomy. They believe it will be penance enough if they suffer on the survivor's behalf. By choosing their course of action in dealing with the survivor's pain, the family members may ignore or override the survivor's wishes, thereby once again disempowering her. Contrarily, the ones we love the most might end up making us feel more anxious and debilitate our will to live. Lydia's trauma had left her with a feeling of emotional numbness, irritability and a growing sense of helplessness. In the novel, Mikey describes his mother as a solitary figure, relegating into her cocoon: "But his mother's distance bothers him, the feeling that she is detached from her surroundings, that she is burrowing into her pain for comfort" (28).

Silas Ali's life is defined by the anti-apartheid struggle and Lydia's rape can also be seen as wartime reprisal in the light of Silas's involvement as a freedom fighter in the MK, the rebellious armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC). Both Lydia and Silas had kept Lydia's rape hidden from Mikey until one day, in their absence, he stumbles upon Lydia's diary

kept away carefully hidden in her drawer. Soon after Mikey realises his problematic racial involvement in his mother's traumatic history. Diana Adesola Mafe writes, "His birth is an act of creation so traumatic that his mother thereafter refuses her body its right to bear more children" (114). Unlike the typical mulatto figures in American fiction or, for that matter, South African fiction, Mikey experiences redemption towards the end of the novel. He succeeds in waging a rebellion against his white rapist father, commits patricide but also escapes from any judicial trial against him that is typically conducted against a mulatto man. He comes across his mother's diary and is forced to confront the unwelcome fact that he is "the child of some murderous white man...a boer, someone who worked for the old system, *was* the old system, in fact" (131). Mikey mediates his tragedy by taking revenge on his mother's rapist, something which Silas was incapable of, and becomes a mulatto superhuman. As I explore, Dangor has endowed Mikey's character with almost superhuman qualities as compared to other characters in the novel. He is stunningly beautiful, intellectually gifted, and infinitely capable. Not to say that he is caricatured by the author but rather he is super-humanized. According to Diana "Dangor writes against the white apartheid version of the tragic mulatto and uses his characters to imagine post-racial possibilities" (117).

Bitter Fruit questions the Manichean representation of South Africa's racial problems in terms of only black and white by foregrounding the experiences of the coloured population. In terms of multiracial heritage Silas was a bastard child himself; a product of a polygamous relationship between a white Christian woman and an Indian Muslim man. Silas harbours a filial resentment towards his absentee father and his father's more legitimate Muslim family. When juxtaposed with Silas's family, Lydia's family represents stability and legitimacy but even they experience a historical sense of illegitimacy as a coloured family. According to Diana, "For

Lydia, the kinship that the Oliphants offer cannot compensate for their cultural displacement as coloreds in South Africa or experiences of oppression under apartheid” (120). Living between two cultures and having to reconcile conflicting past and present constitutes trauma in itself. The coloured characters in the novel are “all twisted up inside” (86) and feel a lack of belonging to the nation.

Mikey, the 'bitter fruit' of Lydia's rape haunts his parents until one day he fulfils his mother's definition of a 'real man' by shooting Francois Du Boise in the face at point-blank range. Hatred and resentment towards the biological father are common between Silas and Mikey. Mikey had grown up seeing Lydia and Silas drifting away from each other into their own sanctuary of grief and silence. Much like the apartheid regime, Francois Du Boise has been a vile and haunting presence in the Ali family. A decrepit old man now dying of skin cancer, Du Boise nonetheless retains a powerful hold on the Alis. In an act of retributive justice and redemption from a prolonged state of traumatic limbo, Mikey “fires--twice--directly into Du Boise’s face...He wants to obliterate Du Boise's face, wipe away that triumphant, almost kindly expression, leave behind nothing but splintered bone and shattered skin" (*Bitter Fruit* 276).

Elleke Boehmer in her text *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* observes that within the postcolonial discourse there are “those among the once-colonized for whom the silences of history have not ended” (132) and because of the schema of social exclusions the colonized bodies do not get an equal chance to represent themselves. Narratives dealing with the colonized female’s sexuality, power and difference, which are socially constructed binaries have made women appear essentially vulnerable and mute. But in the postcolonial process of rewriting, there is a conscious negation of the enforced silence. The silenced and wounded body of the colonized dismantles the trope of the dumb and the oppressed

body undergoes significant translations or transfigurations. In the novel, Lydia refuses to allow her rape to be generalized as mass abuse of human rights during the apartheid period because every act of violence is unique to the individual and so is the trauma associated with it. Succumbing to such institutionalized and guarded narratives would only delegitimize her pain. The TRC's project of uncovering the factual details of human rights abuses fails to take into account the layered complexity of Lydia's trauma. A. Quayson in the article "Symbolisation Compulsions: Freud, African Literature and South Africa's Process of Truth and Reconciliation" rightly points out that "...in the work of the TRC truth was equated with fact. But...traumatic events do not easily yield 'facts' in any straightforward sense of the word" (193-194). The TRC also represents a distinct Christian process of recovery and healing through confession. It is based upon the premise that testimony facilitates healing and would pave the way for forgiveness, reconciliation and moving on from the past. This suggestion of the therapeutic value attested to testimony is a common myth or assumption within trauma studies and in terms of the TRC where testimony is spoken in a public context, additional problems are raised. Ana Miller, pointing towards the ethical dilemmas of narrating traumatic events on a public platform, writes,

Not only is there the risk of suppressing the complexities of personal experiences through the direction of testimony within the TRC's framework, but giving testimony in public can itself be a fraught and traumatic process...people do not necessarily want their activities and experiences to be widely known...Rape is widespread in contemporary South Africa, yet few cases are reported or prosecuted; and the need for anonymity, or at least concealment of some testifiers, suggests that neither the threat of violence nor the stigma attached to rape has abated (154).

Lydia's inability to share her traumatic memories of rape also points to the unspeakable nature of trauma. Certain grave assaults on the body are too terrible to comprehend at the moment of their occurrence and to describe episodes of sexual violence evasively indicates the underlying presence of deep psychological scars. In the absence of an empathetic listener who would tread the treacherous journey of understanding psychological nuances with utmost cautiousness, talking about the traumatic experiences provokes intense emotional distress. It is akin to reliving the original event and hence traumatized people go to great lengths to avoid it.

Silas is aware of Lydia's trauma but there is a conflicting nature to his character; he cannot address Lydia's trauma because the ordeal of talking about her rape is overwhelming for him. He deliberately suppresses his sensitive and perceptive self behind the facade of a pragmatic, work-oriented nexus so that he could manage the past and help "the country to forget and therefore to forgive, a convenient kind of amnesia" (122). More than Lydia's hurt, Silas is concerned with his own affronted manhood. For him, the memories associated with Lydia's rape are too agonizing and sinister in nature to remember and address. Ana Miller rightly points out that

In his job as someone who negotiates between the conflicting versions of the truth raised by the TRC commissioners, the old security people and the African National Congress, Silas symbolizes the political shaping of national memory, the compromise on which the new South Africa is based, and the slippery nature of the truth...He realizes that his job and the particular type of politically negotiated memory it represents requires a conciliatory and simplified notion of the truth...His suppression of uncomfortable memories, truths, and emotions and his desire to remain objective is not completely separable from the TRC's own mediation of memory (149-150).

Sometimes bearing witness to the narrative of gory details of psychic trauma can be overwhelming to the listener. He/She might not be perceptive enough to take cognizance of the traumatic response. The fact that Silas is elusive by nature and is impatient enough to invest tremendous energy in understanding traumatic neurosis discourages Lydia to speak. For him, as Lydia puts it, the pain is only a memory, “a wound to your ego, a theory” (*Bitter Fruit* 14). She reacts to Silas’s blatant rejection of her trauma by trying to harm herself. By dancing barefoot on broken shards of beer glass she creates a physical pain powerful enough to displace “a much deeper, unfathomable agony” (21). Elaine Scarry in her seminal work *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* observes that without visible markers, somebody else’s pain remains elusive and “vaguely alarming yet unreal”(4). The hysterical dance scene in the novel reverberates Lydia’s need to be heard, it is her way of communicating her pain, making it fathomable, real, visible and unavoidable-- a pain that Silas could not escape from. Elleke Boehmer's adaptation of Freud's theory points out that hysterical conditions often arise from suppressed emotions and fears and are expressed in concrete physical and anatomical images. She expounds,

According to Freud, a key symptom of hysteria is the tendency to take metaphor literally or anatomically, as described by or inscribed on the body. Putting it another way, the hysteric expresses her condition through converting 'mind' to 'body', translating her fears and repressions into a language of body images. As hysteria produces symptoms, so symptoms produce stories. The body of the hysteric becomes her text...Physical disorders are seen to enact the psychological distresses of the hysteric (*Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* 128).

Despite having a close-knit family Lydia could not share her distress with anyone. She becomes distant and reticent, choosing to keep a diary and whisper her secrets in it. This diary is her confidante and confessor, “the only site where Lydia ever tells her story” (133). Even physical intimacy with Silas could not salvage their marriage because the traumatic memory of being raped overshadows her sexuality so profoundly that she could not distinguish sex from rape. She directs most of her pain and anger towards Silas but this is often inarticulated and takes place internally. Her physical proximity with Silas serves as an overwhelming and vivid reminder of the rape: “...you should not have brought my rapist home. I can’t rest peacefully with both of you around, your bodies, your smells, even your sounds have become all mixed up. It’s like he raped me on your behalf, so that one day I would live with him through you” (123). According to Judith Herman, trauma impels people both to withdraw from personal relationships and desperately seek company and attention to fill the void. In Lydia’s case, she isolates herself from her family members and tries to find solace outside of familial bonds. Herman further elaborates on this oscillation between trust and mistrust experienced by a traumatized person. She says,

The profound disruption in basic trust, the common feelings of shame, guilt, and inferiority, and the need to avoid reminders of the trauma that might be found in social life, all foster withdrawal from close relationships...The traumatized person therefore frequently alternates between isolation and anxious clinging to others. The dialectic of trauma operates not only in the survivor’s inner life but also in her close relationships. It results in the formation of intense, unstable relationships that fluctuate between extremes (2015).

In the aftermath of the rape, there is a long-term negative effect on familial and marital bonds. In her diary Lydia writes that she “will recover from the physical act of rape”, but inside of her grows “a rapist’s seed” (126) and this psychological act of bearing the child of rape fuels Lydia’s deeply personal trauma. Due to the lack of “an addressable other” or an “empathic listener” (Dori Laub 68), a trauma survivor is often wary of articulating her emotions because he/she does not want to re-experience/ re-live the event. Laub further stressed that “The absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an *addressable other*, an other who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness, annihilates the story” (68). A traumatized person would only interact and share his/her experience with an empathetic listener.

Rape as a tool of asserting power and control used by repressive regimes is, as Lydia says, “a ritual as ancient as history itself” (119). In such a given context rape then, according to Miller, “is used not only to torture women for being subversive; it is also aimed at men and at causing disintegration within families and communities. The shame and stigma associated with rape make it an effective form of political torture” (151). That rape as a method of political control, enforcing subordination of women through terror has been said by Susan Brownmiller in her seminal treatise *Against Our Will*. The author has called for attention to rape, raising feminist consciousness for improvements in social policy and legal and medical care for the survivors. With rape being the locus of the narrative, Dangor presents a series of a complex web of traumatic incidents that dismantles the life of the major characters in the novel. Lydia displays some of the characteristic rape-specific traumatic responses as outlined by Jenny Petrak in “The Psychological Impact of Sexual Assault”. She highlights that “...many individuals may experience prolonged anger. This may be directed at the assailant, the courts, police, society, or

men” (27). When Lydia is offered a chance to appear before the TRC for a closed hearing which was supposed to address the grievances of abused women during the apartheid period to bring the "last festering wound" out in the open, Lydia explicitly rejects since "nothing in any of their lives would change because of a public confession of pain suffered. Because nothing could be undone, you could not withdraw a rape, it was an irrevocable act, like murder” (156). The fact that Lydia’s confession would be used against her will to provide amnesty for Du Boise raises questions on the efficacy of the Commission to provide justice to the victim. *Bitter Fruit* remains sceptical about the cathartic potentiality of public testimony which is invariably aimed at foreclosure and reconciliation, where bits and pieces of memory that have not yet settled into remembrance and understanding are reduced to a set of facts. If Silas chooses to rationalize his trauma through reconciliatory measures sanctioned by the law, Lydia opposes this “containment of history” (155). The Commission cannot mediate through her trauma as if defined by some divine decree. She does not allow her trauma to be appropriated for political ends. She would often be advised “to get on with life, no matter what traumas” she “had lived through” (121). But Lydia does not want to ‘manage’ or repress her trauma and she criticizes Silas’s way of dealing with their catastrophic past: “It was good to have a rule to live by, but how little his rule...had helped all those victims who had told their stories before the Commission” (156). Lydia questions the presumed virtue of the “wise Commissioners” (156) whose law has played a rather contradictory role; inviting testimonies from the victims to protect perpetrators from prosecution.

Many theorists have pointed out that ours is the age of trauma. Roger Luckhurst, a British writer and academician aptly says that "Modernity is marked by the sign of the wound and the modern subject has become inseparable from the categories of shock and trauma" (20). The family of the Alis is haunted by generational trauma which often went unresolved. It was only

Lydia and Mikey who are resurrected from their traumatic past while Silas Ali lived in a state of perpetual quandary. The novel raises some very significant questions: Who has the power and ability to interpret trauma? The traumatized individual or the officers commissioned to interpret testimonies and later reduce it to a set of deducible facts? Must individual context of trauma be bulldozed into oversimplified, generalized narratives of factual details to circumvent complex human experience? Throughout the novel, Lydia asserts the distinctiveness of her traumatic experience - national narratives would never be able to incorporate individual contexts of trauma propelled by race, gender, sexuality, age, class, ethnicity. Post-colonial experiences of trauma told from an 'ex-centric' position often falls outside the larger historical narratives approved by the authority. The novel also critiques how traditional understanding of trauma, which is often narrow and constructed within the experiences of dominant groups in a culture fails to recognize the "private, secret, insidious traumas" (Brown 102) that are not necessarily overtly violent but wounds the psyche and the soul. *Bitter Fruit* intimates that insidious traumas pervade South African (non-White) experiences. The painful birth of a new South Africa is fraught with pessimism since the violent legacy of apartheid has been bequeathed to the post-apartheid present. Eduard Fagan has rightly pointed out that "The new democratic South African Constitution and the TRC were products of a negotiated settlement with the apartheid regime; both were co-written by the oppressed and the oppressors" (261).

The novel also sheds light on how Lydia negotiates through her traumatic past by keeping a secret diary which helps her to resurrect and redefine her life towards the end of the novel. She turns to writing and uses it as a viable instrument to facilitate her healing process. The need to mitigate the effects of traumatic blows by means of writing was first brought into public notice by Suzette A Henke in her book *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's*

Life-Writing. She had coined the term ‘scriptotherapy’ which, according to her is “the process of writing out and writing through traumatic experience in the mode of therapeutic reenactment.” She “argued that the authorial effort to reconstruct a story of psychological debilitation could offer potential for mental healing and begin to alleviate persistent symptoms of numbing, dysphoria, and uncontrollable flashbacks”(xii). Literature offers a powerful recourse to representing the traumatic experiences as it allows both the author and the reader to peek into the dark and convoluted recesses of the mind and helps the survivor to articulate and negotiate socially unacknowledged traumas. In representing individual and 'ex-centric' experiences of trauma which are embedded in a particular period in history, Achmat Dangor has shown how necessary it is to contextualize trauma so that the heterogeneity of traumatic experiences within the South African context can be justly understood.

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Bionote:

Miss. Vipasha Bhardwaj is currently serving as an assistant professor of English at Pub Kamrup College, Baihata Charali, Assam. She can be reached at vipashabhardwaj@gmail.com

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9466-3870>

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