

## Postcolonial Affects: Victim Life Narratives and Human Rights in Contemporary India<sup>1</sup>

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This essay examines victim life narratives from postcolonial India.<sup>2</sup> My thesis is that victim life narratives by the homeless, mentally ill, prisoners and child abuse victims constitute an emerging genre of Human Rights (HR) narrative outside the legalistic or political frames of Truth Commissions, commissions of inquiry and juridical settings in the form of a *cultural apparatus*. Court rulings, state policies and commissions of inquiry might produce definitions and norms about who counts as “human” and therefore has “human” rights. But the cultural apparatus of newspaper coverage, documentation of violations, and narratives of and in civil society, such as the ones this essay discusses, enable what may be thought of as the “popular” construction of ideas of the “human” as well, and hence constitute a significant cog in the non-state machinery of Human Rights movement. As Paul Gready puts it, “human stories provide a no less essential resource—attempting to spark the law into life, transcend cultural and political difference, and cement the solidarity of strangers” (178). This “solidarity of strangers” is the cultural apparatus of Human Rights. This apparatus is constituted by victim life narratives through an entirely different register, which is my focus in this essay: that of *affect*.

This article makes a case for taking the victim’s affective states of narration seriously, in terms of the victim’s own expressivity but also in terms of its overall effects, reverberations and responses (ranging from outrage that might result in appeals and investigations to sympathy resulting in humanitarian aid) in civil society, HR campaigns and the cultural apparatus wherein HR operates—what I see as an emergent “narrative society”. While severely restricted and oppressed—rendered into victims, one might say—because of their social contexts, their very acts of writing, articulation and construction of affective moral webs with other victims within their narratives *shift* their identity from “mere” victims to something else. This shift takes them outside and beyond the identity of a victim into a self-conscious but also other-conscious subject who, in the act of narrating her/his own story and also that of others, constructs a whole new subjectivity. While this is not to suggest that their immediate conditions of

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<sup>2</sup> I prefer the term “victim life narrative” rather than “subaltern writing” because these are produced by people who clearly see and present themselves as “victims.”

incarceration or deprivation are improved through narration, it makes a case for our, readers', response to these narratives (what I treat as the "narrative society") as the re-making of a *civil* society. 'Re-making' here is the reordering of the space of civil society for victims so that the victims can articulate and advertise—narrate—their and others' victim-status. The victim moves toward not just citizenship (which s/he might technically be entitled to by *law*) and membership in the political society but toward the condition of *belonging* in the civil society through the dual conditions of narration and the existence of a "narrative society." Admittedly, the genre is not uniquely "postcolonial," even though much of this kind of writing *has* emerged from formerly colonized regions and nations like Argentina, Guatemala, Africa and the Indian subcontinent and more recently from Bosnia, Iran, and Iraq in the form of war victim writings, Partition narratives, and torture accounts, among others.<sup>3</sup> Such narratives enter into "global circuits of exchange" and are made "available to nurture ... campaigns for human rights" (Whitlock 74).

Since the 1990s, Human Rights has become a "dominant moral vocabulary" (Ignatieff, "Era" 29, emphasis added). Human Rights discourses depend upon a commitment to provide a "public, international space that empowers all human beings to *speak*" (Slaughter, "Question of Narration" 415, emphasis added). All Human Rights discourse depends on a *narrative* tradition in which the nature of the human is defined and to which national and international laws turn (Langlois; Slaughter, "Enabling Fictions"). If Human Rights presupposes an autonomous *subject* ("Enabling Fictions") then testimonial cultures map places and peoples that are *denied* their subjecthood and hence their rights. Victims of Human Rights abuse produce narratives that can serve as testimonial texts, even as the narratives evolve within a narrative field of Human Rights (Schaffer and Smith 1). Although Slaughter, Ignatieff and others are speaking of a Western tradition of Human Rights, these arguments, I believe, hold considerable relevance for postcolonial societies as well, with the proviso that in Asian and African societies, Human Rights of individual subjects negotiate constantly with collective citizens' rights. Thus Bart Moore-Gilbert proposes that though the decentered Self in postcolonial life-writing is a legacy of colonialism, the genre also expresses its "subjects' agency and capacity for self-renewal" (15). That is, postcolonial life narratives map the emergence of the "renewed" subject.

The victim life narratives I examine here appear as interviews and accounts in published collections by prisoners, homeless children (victims of child abuse) and the homeless mentally ill. The essay argues that narratives about Human Rights are primarily narratives of *affect*. Victim life narratives constitute a "scene of strife ... within the hegemonic struggle over so-called national identity" (Spivak, "Woman in Difference" 99). They constitute a textual field that we were, perhaps, not *supposed* to read (what Nicholas Mirzoeff, referring to the

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<sup>3</sup> For human rights narratives in testimonial *fiction* from Argentina see Nayar, "Testimonial Fiction."

Abu Ghraib visuals, termed “invisible,” or what was not *intended* to be visible) or respond to. They disrupt the hegemony of “national” representations and invite us to perceive the “precariousness” of life (see Butler). In short, victim life narratives are speech acts and performatives of affect that impose themselves upon us viscerally and invoke strong emotional responses.

Prisoners interviewed, mostly after considerable legal battles, within their incarceration, find the very act of “speaking out” difficult in *Whither Justice* (2006). In this book, Shabnam and Budhva recall the processes through which justice was denied, and emphasizing the social contexts of their incarceration—caste inequalities, patriarchy, corrupt administrations, the complex procedures of the law—thus draw attention to the legal, political but mostly social contexts of HR and HR violations. *The House I Grew Up In* (1999) and *Bitter Chocolate* (2000) provide often anonymous or pseudonymous accounts of rape and incest. The second volume, prepared by noted activist and journalist, Pinki Virani, is drawn from interviews but presented as first-person narratives. Both volumes erode the notion of the secure family, showing how HR violations occur most often within the space of the home. *Out of Mind, Out of Sight* (2002), likewise, demonstrates through the narratives of the once-mentally ill how it is the family that very often destroys confidence and eventually the victim’s very identity. Almost every single victim in this volume tells us how their families had either engineered their illness, or abandoned them to the mercy of the law, charity and medicine. *Midway Station* (2006) is a set of first person narratives, often introduced within the context of the telling itself—the shelter for the homeless. The slim volume, like many of the others, focuses on social contexts but, unusually, often on the techniques of survival adopted by the victims.

I must hasten to add two specific caveats. First, the essay’s focus on the *generalized* discourse of trauma and affect does flatten out the historical, topographical and cultural specificities of the oppressed. Thus it would seem like a violent homogenization of oppression when the essay situates the Dalit labourer in interior Maharashtra alongside the homeless children of New Delhi.<sup>4</sup> The specific locations of family (in the child abuse narrative), caste (in Dalit texts), social structures like orphanages, prisons and mental health institutes (in the case of homeless children, prisoners and mentally ill individuals) are of course central to the processes through which an individual “becomes” oppressed. Yet once an individual has been denied Human Rights through a particular set of social processes and becomes an abject, then s/he is aligned more with another victim rather than with any other originary or “home” group. I see this as a process of victim affiliation rather than any filiation, ethnic grouping or community formation.

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<sup>4</sup> “Dalit” is derived from the Marathi language and literally means “of the earth” and “that which has been ground down,” and now signifies socially oppressed caste groups, including tribals, the dispossessed, the so-called “criminal tribes” and the exploited. They constitute the fifth *outcaste community*, often thought of as sub- or non-human and not included in categorizations of Indian humanity. See Louis Dumont; Gail Omvedt; Sagarika Ghose.

True, these subjects emerge from particular socio-historical contexts, but once they emerge as victims, being a victim remains their dominant identity. Their lack of agency as victims of social and structural conditions is what aligns them with each other (what I have termed “affiliation”). It is the processes of oppression and institutional exploitation that renders them one-dimensional: as abject. The aim here is to locate a common register of horror, oppression and hope across geographical, cultural and communitarian identities, and to uncover an entire tradition of writing by people deprived of their rights.

What I wish to underscore, at the risk of this homogenization, is the arrival of the subject of Human Rights through acts of life writing in postcolonial India. This subject is a subject-type (the one who has suffered) but who begins to move beyond the category of a victim. If we can think in terms of ‘strategic essentialism’ as a necessary moment in postcolonial subalternity, I see the homogenization into a victim as a “strategic universalism” (Gilroy)—where *all* victims (and those who suffer) denied their rights could be studied together and generate a unified discourse as well. Aligning victims on a continuum despite their historical differences and specificities enables us to generate a “universal” discourse of Human Rights. I have elsewhere argued that “trauma” could function as a critical-analytical category to analyze women’s experiences even when the victims are from different social, cultural and economic backgrounds (Nayar, “Trauma, Testimony and Human Rights”). The aim then is to generate a comparative history of trauma and situate multiple subjects and victims along a line that leads to discourses of Human Rights and emancipatory projects. Elizabeth Goldberg proposes that such narratives and images contribute to

a collective consciousness about torture, genocide, and other such violations, a consciousness that not only validates victims’ and survivors’ experience, but also presumably produces a collective desire to ensure that such atrocities do not recur (15).

It must be noted that Goldberg also merges various kinds of suffering (“torture, genocide and *other such* violations”) while speaking of the possibilities of a new collective consciousness. I am at one with Goldberg here, seeing various examples of violations as contributing to a universal cultural imaginary. While this approach might elide crucial differences, I see such an elision as necessary as an anterior moment to the recognition of the universality of human suffering and therefore of the universal need for Human Rights.

Moreover, it might appear as though the debate about Human Rights is shifting away from the juridical, legal and political domains where they have thus far resided. Sophia McClennan and Joseph Slaughter argue that “human rights are a cultural discourse as much as they are a set of legal standards” (6). This essay maps such a cultural discourse by looking at the emergence of a subject-victim whose rights have been violated.

## Victim Life Narratives, Affect and the Postcolonial Performative

A contestatory narrative of the nation such as minority discourse, argues Homi Bhabha, “intervenes in the sovereignty of the nation’s self-generation,” it reconstitutes the nation as a “social space ... internally marked by cultural difference, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities, and tense cultural locations” (Bhabha, “DissemiNation” 299). “Intervention,” as Bhabha terms it, is about articulation, voicing and the emergence of a discourse. Elleke Boehmer has argued that women’s life-narratives keep alive a discussion of the postcolonial nation and their position within it (255). Life histories in India help us “understand and analyze groups that are socially marginalized, and hence normally not heard” (Arnold and Blackburn 6). Clearly the focus is now on the *continuing* political consequences of narratives, especially those that trouble the hegemonic discourse of the nation. The victim life narrative, I argue, is a narrative form that calls into question the role, power, social programmes and politics of the nation state, insinuating itself with a particular representational tenacity into a larger national narrative in order to disrupt it. It does so through a particular “performative.” The regular appearance of various kinds of victim life narratives—across geographical, socio-cultural spaces—ensures that the mainstream narrative of “India” remains perpetually open to interrogation by these “little traditions” and “heterogeneous histories” of trauma. The power of the performative lies in its *simultaneous* heterogeneity (difference from the mainstream pedagogic) and homogeneity (trauma, suffering, the Human Rights discourse).

A possible route into the “performative” is through postcolonial theory harnessed to debates about the public sphere. Homi Bhabha detects a tension between the “narrative authority of the pedagogic and the performative” (“DissemiNation” 299). The “performative” is the “fluctuating movement that the people are just giving shape to” (303). He aligns the “performative” with instability, a “practice that destroys the constant principles of the national culture” (303). Bhabha argues that the “performative” destabilizes the stereotypes on which the nation depends and which miss “the zone of occult instability where the people dwell” (303). The second route into the “performative” is via feminist re-readings of Habermas’ theorizations of the public sphere. Nancy Fraser and Ann Travers have proposed that to define the public sphere as constituted only by the rational and the logical is to exclude particular *forms* of articulations. Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak see the nation-state and politics as “presuppos[ing] and exclud[ing] that domain of disenfranchisement, unpaid labor, and the barely legible or illegible human.” Such “spectral humans” are “*produced* as the stateless at the same time that they are jettisoned from juridical modes of belonging” (15-16).<sup>5</sup> Butler and Spivak list the

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<sup>5</sup> “Spectral” and “ghostly” people, as Avery Gordon has shown, are reminders of modernity’s violence – of people displaced and wasted. The ghost, she argues, is a “social figure,” whose arrival calls attention to “modernity’s violence and wounds ... about systematic injury in the social world” (24-25).

“incarcerated, enslaved, or residing and laboring illegally” as the stateless, “contained within the polis as its interiorized outside” (15-16, emphasis in original). What Butler and Spivak are gesturing at here is the exclusionary principle of the nation-state that renders its own citizens stateless and “spectral.” The stateless are the dispossessed and the “forgotten,” as Harsh Mander termed the undertrials in India’s most famous (notorious) prison, the Tihar (3). Within the nation-state, within the public sphere and within the citizenry there are “pockets” of the disenfranchised. Such pockets of disenfranchised could include groups and individuals as diverse as Dalits, women victims of domestic abuse, tribals, low-wage workers in urban settings, the homeless, among others, but together this coalition of the oppressed has created a Human Rights narrative tradition that upsets the rhythms of the public sphere. This narrative is an affective one. This is not to suggest that we can see a conscious coalition of the oppressed. Rather, when each individual victim speaks on behalf of another, and when we see correspondences across victims, we see a whole new community of sufferers emerging within the writing itself, constituting, therefore, a cultural script about victims and HR violations.

Affect, writes Deborah Thien, is the “how of emotion,” the “motion of emotion” (451). Affect is clearly action-oriented and instrumental: it is a performative. Thus the affective narrative is a performative, enacting a scene of violation, clearing a space within the dominant discourses of the nation and constructing subjects. The articulations of the excluded are not legalistic, rational or logical but *affective*: hysterics, stunned silences, grief or irrational outbursts. To deny such articulations a space in the public sphere merely because they are “emotional” is to perpetuate the victims’ silences. The affective “performative” (i) contests the fractured nature of the postcolonial’s pedagogic imperative of the discourses of development, progress or “unity in diversity” (India’s best-worn cliché); (ii) reconfigures the public sphere to include the victim’s illogical, hysterical and emotional narratives and finally; (iii) provides the link between the postcolonial condition of continuing exploitation (of, say, neocapitalist and corporate takeover of tribal lands that result in massive displacement), the failure of the state (say, in addressing the demands of prisoners, torture victims and women) and social injustice (embodied, obviously, in the caste system and the unequal nature of land ownership, wages and welfare) and a global culture of Human Rights narratives. Victim life narratives are political documents, and the political itself is redefined as a space where the aesthetic, the moral *and* the affective merge.<sup>6</sup> My interest here is in the register of emotional truth in the *discursive* representations of emotions (I exclude non-written forms, gestures and bodily articulations).

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<sup>6</sup> Affect here is not simply emotion. I follow D.P. McCormack who suggests that affect, “while it is implicated in corporeal sensibility ... is never reducible to the personal quality of emotion” (501). In this, affect is clearly action-oriented and performative: it is instrumental.

## The Denial of Agency and the Spaces of Trauma

The victim life narrative is a performative where the victim is the subject of self-representation and signification. It constitutes a space of collusion between victim-speaker and affected listener where action can be mobilized and justice sought. The stories here are *emotionally* charged, involving accounts of brutalization, exploitation, the denial of subjectivity—trauma. I am not interested here in theorizing the trauma narrative, as others have done before me (e.g. Felman and Laub; Caruth). Rather, my focus is on those elements that link the affective performative, the question of subjectivity and agency when the victim—any victim—*speaks* and the consequence of this form of narrative. A related interest is the other forms the victim life narratives take: the captivity narrative and the demoralization narrative.

First, victim life narratives re-perform past traumas. Take the instance of a victim of child abuse. “I do not allow myself to be in a room with one door,” writes one such victim (Ailawadi 38). The adult woman recalls her childhood abuse in order to link it to her present as the traumatic incident becomes an extended continuum characterized primarily by strong emotional responses in the present to the *memory* of abuse (a feature of trauma, according to Herman).<sup>7</sup> The tense of the sentence—“I do not allow”—enacts in the present the horror of the past in the very act of narration. It is thus a “performative” that has a strong temporal element to it.

Second, victim life narratives also frequently give trauma a spatial specificity. Most narratives open with *spaces* of suffering—the home, the family, the asylum or the remand house, where the space is described through an affective rhetoric of captivity. In the case of survivors of childhood sexual abuse, the individual finds herself trapped inside the “safety” of the home and family.

Third, trauma’s spatiality is accompanied by the sense of entrapment and resultant helplessness. Judith Herman has argued that this sense of entrapment is integral to the trauma narrative (74). Victim life narratives abound in metaphors and images of confinement as the narrative slides into a captivity narrative. The spaces they were victimized in—“home,” “family” and the public sphere—remain, in a sense, their habitations in later post-victimization life, once more attesting to the continuum of trauma. What is arresting is that despite the different contexts of their abuse, the victims all seem to suffer from the same kind of captivity psychosis, once more supporting my argument that it is possible to think of a comparative history of trauma and those denied Human Rights. Sudha, a victim of psychosis, mentions how she was not permitted to leave the house “because the family did not want people asking her questions [about her mental illness]” (Kendra 95). Sonal, in the home for destitute children, tells the interviewer: “I used to be very frightened staying with my mother” (Shankar 23). Asma, returning to her family from the rehabilitation centre, finds the home and family “intimidating” (Kendra 126). Almost

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<sup>7</sup> Many victims of child sexual abuse are unable to find “termination,” in either their nightmare or their narrative, as Lorentzen et al. have shown.

every single child in *Midway Station* describes a traumatic home life (from which s/he seeks escape). One abuse victim in *The House I Grew Up In* describes her home as “a fortress, a prison, a cage” (Ailawadi 8). Budhva, now in prison, recalls how she could not marry the person she had fallen in love with because she was physically restricted to her house (Oza 127). Sofi, one of the many homeless children in *Midway Station*, describes how, due to his stepfather’s cruelties, he had to run away from home (Shankar 87). Mary is trapped in her family with an abusive elder brother, Grace believes she would have been better off as an orphan rather than as an abused child, and Suganya is abused by her husband (Kendra 14, 58, 138). All three show how the family is the locus of harm and damage. Shabnam is placed in solitary confinement for daring to reveal the corruption among jail staff, she assaults a minister on an official visit and has to be “dragged away to her barracks” as “she continued to scream and abuse as loudly as she could” (Oza 173). At her trial Shabnam “scream[s] in protest” until she is dragged out (188). Shabnam’s behaviour in the court—an embodiment of the public sphere and the space of logical, reasonable debate—refigures that space. Her hysterics—affective narratives—significantly alter the nature of public space and constitute an excellent instance of the disruptive role of the affective victim life narrative.

Personal and collective storytelling, Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith argue, gesture at the “failures of democratic nations” to offer inclusive citizenship and “undermine unified narratives of national belonging” (19). The theme of “national belonging” in postcoloniality is often metaphorically articulated in the theme of the nation as family (Schultheis). If Schultheis is accurate in her reading, victim life narratives with their captivity rhetoric that treat the home/family as spaces of trauma and subvert the myths of secure home and the caring family, strike at one of the foundational fictions of the postcolonial nation.

The captivity rhetoric gestures at the claustrophobic, oppressive structure of families, the legal system and the social agencies that offer refuge. As Pinki Virani puts it, “families are also about offering endless possibilities for pain” (129). One victim of child abuse describes the Indian family as a “system that keeps girls at home under the guise of protection and then exploits them” (Ailawadi 13). Grace, who has experienced “powerlessness in the face of chronic abuse by loved ones,” develops a history of mental illness (Kendra 55). A topos of trauma is performed in the victim’s memory and, in several cases, the present. The house is “intimidating” and “frightening,” a locus of nightmarish horror that can be recalled only through the evocation of the *sentiments* attached to it. The topos “extends” into the present when the victim recalls the horror in the telling. It is a performative for it disrupts the traditional notion (the pedagogic) of the home and family as secure spaces even as it shows a continuum of captivity—in the space of the house that is now a memory. These narratives thus call into question the sacralized nature of the home, family and the structures of law, safety and care.



Stories document emotional neglect and abandonment by parents. Husbands and fathers disappearing from the lives of women and children is a common theme in dozens of these life narratives (a feature of sexual abuse narratives as well, see Haaken). Rani was abandoned by her father after the death of her mother, while Sakir is perpetually angry about his father (Shankar 47, 5-6). Jayanthi has no memory of her biological family because they have never come to meet her (Kendra 72). Thus the condition of captivity is the consequence of both, acts of commission (usually abuse) and omission (neglect), with memories of either/both evoking powerful emotions in the present. Once again, this demolishes the myth of family-as-secure-space.

My fourth point about trauma has to do with agency and subjectivity. “Captivity” is the sense of being trapped without a voice or narrative space. Speaking—enunciation and voice (“voice” as in the ability to represent oneself, to tell one’s story)—is the junction between the organic body of the speaker and the symbolic, the point at which the subject enters into a relation with the world (Mitra 493-94). If human rights is defined as the right to agency and individual empowerment (Ignatieff, *Politics and Idolatry* 57), and if agency is about voice and narration (Slaughter, “Question of Narration”) then the denial of voice is tantamount to the denial of agency, and therefore a violation of Human Rights.

Budhva is an under-age and unwed mother who, unable to care for her new-born child, abandons it. The baby dies and Budhva is arrested for neglect and murder, eventually sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment. This is Budhva’s account of the legal proceedings:

The court asked my mother to support her claim of my being underage by submitting my birth certificate. But I had none. In our remote village, when my mother gave birth to me, there were no hospitals, no government offices and therefore no records. There was no way in which she could prove my age officially and the court did not believe the word of a mother. (Oza 140-41)

Here the narrative focuses on two elements: the suffering of Budhva and her mother, and the legal system that demands such documentation as cannot be produced for the simple reason that the state has not provided primary health care and therefore hospital records. Here the narrative functions as a critique of the inadequacy of the social structures.

Budhva’s (and other undertrials’) experiences in prison are located at the intersection of two codes (here I adapt Gayatri Spivak’s reading of Mahasweta Devi’s “Douloti the Bountiful” where she suggests that the female body in the tale is “economically rather than affectively coded,” “Woman in Difference” 108). In the case of the victim life narratives the bodies and identities are legally and scientifically coded in a manner so as to circumscribe, displace, torture or deprive them. But in the victim’s own “voice” a different code emerges: that of affect. Captivity in such narratives suggests censorship and silencing of the victim where extreme emotion—guilt, anger, hatred, shame—either remains beneath the surface, or is

unacceptable to the listening community. If the discourse of rights demands the staking of a claim in the form of raising one's *voice* for one's rights, victim life narratives invariably record silences. The victim life narrative is a "performative politics" (Butler and Spivak 63-64), where to speak of dispossession or non-belonging is to make a claim of illegality which is itself disallowed, for "to make the claim to become illegal is precisely what is illegal" (Butler and Spivak 63-64). As one victim of abuse writes, "I didn't have the words to talk about what was happening" (Ailawadi 7), reflecting a prototypical trauma victim's inability to articulate. Budhva is trapped in a bureaucratic-legal set up in which she cannot seek justice because the discourse of law that codes her as "careless mother" or "thief" prevents her from speaking. Further, if she has to speak she must speak the same code—of the law—as that embodied in her documentation. The absence of the document—her birth certificate—is her censorship and her silence. It is this insistence on a particular kind of narrative—a certificate—that ensures the absence and denial of narratives. This is a contest of narratives where only certain kinds of narratives are acceptable in the *language* of rights. In a classic instantiation of Gayatri Spivak's justly famous argument about the unspeaking subaltern ("Can the Subaltern Speak?"), the victim life narratives document the inability to *speak the language the world demands of them*: a certificate, the language of the law, the language of a claim. They do have other languages—affective narratives—but this, unfortunately, does not acquire the urgent signification of a legal document.

One victim of child abuse feels soiled because she has led a promiscuous lifestyle (Ailawadi 2).<sup>8</sup> The recognition of this continuity of child abuse with rampant adult sexuality—here the victim has internalized the code of "promiscuous woman"—leaves her cripplingly demoralized to face the present. Almost every single victim life narrative dealing with incarceration or deprivation acquires the contours of a demoralization narrative with strong affective components. Hopelessness, anguish and the sense of being broken informs their narrative.

Recalling abuse, for instance, most protagonists describe their abuser and their situation in strong terms. "I had grown up believing that I was physically messed up," writes a child abuse victim (Ailawadi 11). Another one reports:

I feel I hate my life. I can never forget about all the things that have happened to me. Whenever I think of the past, it brings tears to my eyes. I'm broken from inside. (Shankar 24)

Prolonged confinement and trauma shifts the register from captivity to demoralization, as the narratives embody loss—the loss of freedom, dignity and sense of self. The "broken" or "damaged" trope in these texts is literal and metaphoric, embodied and metaphysical, where the protagonist believes both her body and soul to be damaged.

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<sup>8</sup> A feature of abused children is their inability to form stable social relationships (Salzinger).

Demoralization narratives document emotions of humiliation, guilt and shame. “Being used had made me hate myself ... I have washed and washed, but the stink really surrounds me ... It is eight years, but I still stink,” says a victim of abuse (Ailawadi 96-97). Self-flagellating guilt, loss of self and recurrent feelings of humiliation are characteristics of victimhood (Herman; Vorbrüggen and Baer). A survivor recalls the confrontation with her abuser: “confrontation for me was a process of pain, fear, anger, hatred, revenge, guilt and shame mixed disastrously with love, compassion and need to protect the family” (Ailawadi 15; also in Shankar 53).

Each of these narratives is thus cast in the form of an affective narrative: of guilt, shame, loss, mourning, grief or anger. In its affective evocation of the space of trauma—home and family, in particular—the victim narrative acquires the features of both the captivity and demoralization narrative. At the next stage, the victim narratives move to link individual victims to a larger context.

### Affect and “Moral Webs”

Narrative as agency marks the construction of a particular kind of subject. Jean-François Lyotard has argued that “it is in the nature of a victim not to be able to prove that one has been done a wrong” (qtd. in Yamada 152). On the other hand, a plaintiff is “someone who has incurred damages and who disposes of the means to prove it” (qtd. in Yamada 152). This movement from victim to plaintiff hinges upon affective voicing.

Victim life writing rarely stops at the level of the “imposed silence.” Given the encouragement to tell their stories the victims start speaking. Their speech is not only depositional; it is also the opening moments of subject-formation. Speaking makes the victims the subjects of their own lives because affective speech performs the agency of the speaking subject. This “speaking” possesses two levels, the embodied experience and discursive practice, both of which contribute to the making of the subject.

At the first level, affect can be understood as an *embodied experience*. The victim through her narration underscores her experience vis-à-vis a structure—the family, institutions or the law—and sets herself up as the *individual* who has been a victim within a context. This is the embodied component of affect. She locates her trauma and denied subjectivity resulting in strong emotions (pain, anger, anxiety, fear, trauma) at the intersection of power flows (Tamboukou) in the family, institutions, medicine and professional life.

Child-abuse narratives castigate the family for its silent collusion with the abuser, expressing their resentment in emotional terms:

I realise that [that nothing happens to abusers] with a deep sense of hurt when I see my father now continue his relationship with my uncle as before and when I see my uncle continue to command his place in the family as if nothing had happened. (Ailawadi 17)

Similarly, Rani, now one of the homeless, recalls her earlier home and writes: "I haven't seen his [her father's] face in the past three years. I was so angry with him ... I was angry with my father because he never did anything for me" (Shankar 50). Like Rani, Grace, a resident of the home for the mentally ill, also resents being denied an education (Kendra 56).

Another victim of incest is furious when looking back at her life (Ailawadi 79). Affect here is embodied experience that foregrounds the subject *as* the victim deprived of agency and caught within structures of power. It is the lack of agency, constructed through historically different structures, no doubt, that links the victim of child abuse, the homeless urchin and the riot victim. Victim affiliation, as I have termed this, is the co-presence of victims, drawn from different historical conditions, in public discourse.

At a second level, affect is *discursive practice*. "I feel sad when I think of my brothers and sister. I feel sad when I think of myself," says Sonal (Shankar 27). Sonal enacts her own grief but immediately merges it with her sentiment about others. This discursive construction, via affective narration, of an *affective solidarity* of victims is a crucial component of all victim life narratives. Every single victim life narrative refers to other similar events and victims, and every victim can reference at least one other similar case of abuse. The affective narrative stops being completely personal and becomes a collective biography (as I have argued about Dalit autobiographies; see Nayar, "Bama's *Karukku*") and a narrative of cultural trauma (Nayar, "Dalit Writing"): it demonstrates the victim's links with *others*.

This link is made possible through three components: the citationality of trauma, the construction of "moral webs" and the articulation of hope (Zarowsky 194). Affect is the route to agency and subjectivity for the self, but also something bigger. "Moral webs" become means of bestowing affective codes, and thereby reversing the legal-judicial, familial, patriarchal and economic codes. An individual victim battles the absence of agency that made her/him a victim by a conscious effort at aligning her/him-self with other victims. Victim affiliation is therefore not only the generalized condition of lacking agency, but also the conscious individual acts of solidarity and bonding which a victim builds with other fellow-victims. This solidarity of affiliation is a minimal agency that s/he can assert.

Wendy Chun argues that the "force of the traumatic event comes partly from its citation of other such events." This citationality of events means that we discuss the "larger social implications" and the nature of the community itself in which the perpetrator and victim live (Chun 159). When the victim cites another victim or references another's trauma, she becomes a *narrating subject*. By gesturing at another, she constructs herself as the witness, the one who is affected by the pain of others: recording her distress, anger or pain at somebody else's victimhood enables her to exert her agency as a *feeling* subject. The narratives locate an individual's affective experience and its articulation within a dynamic of connections through which individuals and social networks are mutually constituted. This is what

Christina Zarowsky terms “moral webs,” built across individuals, communities and institutions (194). “Moral webs” in victim life narratives build *affective solidarities among victims*—offering their lives as object-lessons to others, locating their suffering beside that of others and situating their abuse within social structures that create other, similar victims. The victim now positions herself as an agent of hope and change.

One victim explicitly states her hope for readers: “I feel that even if somewhere one person reads it and connects with it and takes that one small step towards healing, then it’s been worth it” (Ailawadi 34). In the case of narratives by homeless children, some children caution others against running away from home (53, 61). Mohan, an inmate at the home for homeless children, recalls seeing a girl raped, and mentions how he sent her to a safe home (Shankar 35). Being able to identify and articulate somebody else’s suffering, advise them, or plead (affectively) on their behalf lends to the speaking subject an amount of agency she/he has not thus far possessed.

The “moral web” becomes a means of individual and collective survival. Narratives describe friendships where people take care of each other, stronger victims sheltering weaker ones and engaging in generous acts of care and concern. Allam in the shelter for homeless children tells Lara Shankar: “I only want to be happy and peaceful and *others* should also be happy with me. I take the sick children to the doctor and look after them” (Shankar 59, emphasis added). The prisoner Dayli spends all her time entertaining children who had “no school to study, no toys to play with,” spending hours making toys for them (Oza 39).

The construction of “moral webs” through affective solidarities and witnessing is integral to the making of the sovereign subject. This is all the more significant because it is non-institutional and non-official. The individual takes the initiative to care for another of her own volition, and through this affective process attains agency. When they speak *for* themselves, speak *as* themselves but cite others, they become sovereign subjects.

## Affect and the Subject of Human Rights

Ten years from now I’ll be looking after my family. I’ll have two small kids. My husband, my in-laws and myself will be living together. Five years from now maybe I will be doing a job... . (Gauri in Shankar 75)

The decision to take control of one’s future is the construction of the subject as agent. Victims having begun the process of constructing their subject-selves via “moral webs” and affective solidarities move on to construct themselves as sovereign subjects, once again via affect.

Human rights is about agency as linked to the freedom of choice (Ignatieff, *Politics and Idolatry*). Victims of abuse envisage *choosing* a different scheme for their lives. This choice entails two related movements, both of which rely on affect, and the act of choosing constructs them as subjects. The question of choice and agency is

linked to affect, specifically, hope. Hope as affect is a moment of *discontinuity* that allows the body to go on (Anderson 745). It opens up the not-yet-here as a performative that gestures at an outside (746). Anderson specifically refers to protest literature as showcasing hope—directed at the *possibilities* of alternative worlds (747). Homi Bhabha (“Cultural Choice and the Revision of Freedom”) argues that the construction of the liberal subject is based on the idea of freedom of choice, a freedom to reevaluate one’s life, to change one’s life course from this moment on. Such a narrative is based on a disjunction or a discontinuity from what has happened *so far* and it is the exercise of this revisionary choice that marks freedom. Both Bhabha and Anderson signal *discontinuity* and temporal shifts as central players in the construction of the subject. Victim life narratives work with the affective state of hope by *choosing* a break with the past and concentrating on a new future.

Victim life narratives often present a revisionary scheme. Narrators invariably want the freedom to alter their course of life, to reevaluate their preferences, choices and aims where they seek not continuity with their traumatic past but a disjunction. The mentally ill, the homeless and the abused seek not a return to their homes but a clean break *away*. The present is far less significant than the future which, the victim hopes, will be better for her having abandoned the past and made a *different* set of choices.

The narratives are here marked by a double move. First, they demonstrate through affective narratives how such a choice of revisioning is *not* available to them. It is in this denial of life choices (many homeless boys and girls in their narratives for example wish to be free of the welfare schemes, just as they once sought freedom from their homes and families) that Human Rights are denied. Second, when the subject articulates hopes and plans for the future, s/he has broken with the past. Facilitated by structures of listening—editors, documentation, publishers, commissions of inquiry—the victim turns plaintiff.

The consequence of this dual move possesses two components: (i) the plaintiff as s/he emerges in these narratives via an articulation of affect and hope is a sovereign subject, and (ii) the articulation of hope and plans for the future is located within particular contexts that enable the victims to articulate the affect and the hope. This articulation of hope-affect is the context of Human Rights.

If, as Joseph Slaughter has argued (“Enabling Fictions”), Human Rights envisages and constructs a narrative of growth (a *Bildungsroman*), victim life narratives also track the growth of a subject. “Once I get a job *I’ll* leave ... *I will* go out, find work and become independent ... If I start earning again, *I can* regain my lost respect” (Allam in Shankar 58, emphasis added). Sudha “hopes to someday marry and have her own family” (Kendra 96). Another victim of child abuse declares: “I have *chosen* not to initiate any more contact [with her family]” (Ailawadi 96, emphasis added). In other cases these victims whose childhood has been destroyed by those supposed to protect them decide on careers and marriage (Virani 111, 121). In each

case we see a conscious decision to break with the past. Hope here is the affect that drives them forward so as to ensure that they are at peace with themselves.

We are now in a position to investigate how these narratives and their subjects circulate within a public culture of Human Rights debates. Lauren Berlant argues that testimonial narratives participate in the sentimentalization of public culture. The mourning victim stands in for the political subject whose affective narrative alters the nature of public space. The voice or enunciation—the performative—is the testimony that disrupts the narration of India, and it is one of *affect*. The subjects of signification here produce narratives that do not necessarily follow a pattern of chronology or location but undertake a fuller representation—a *performance* (Brooks)—of suffering. They record their lives' events almost entirely in terms of affect. They are not located within official or even mainstream discourses about India. If, as Sunil Khilnani claims, “the definition of who is an Indian is as passionately contested as ever” (194), these trauma narratives set themselves up as the highly charged emotional voices of those who have been deprived of justice, welfare and fair treatment by the “family” of India.

Victim life writing here functions as a *claims narrative*. Claims narratives could be those within a court of justice or they could be life narratives that consciously or unconsciously set up “affective communities,” making a claim upon us, readers, demanding an ethical response. Claims narratives remind us of the narrators' identity as humans by showing us brutalized bodies—the narrator is the witness (as Jacques Derrida remarked of testimonial narratives, 38) to an inhuman context, social event or life. It is by establishing this role of victim, sufferer, the tortured and the inhuman that claims narratives reveal what has been left out of the ambit of Human Rights.

The victims thus claim new identities, dignity and their place within the public sphere. The narratives constitute a “threatening culture” (Harlow 255) where the secrecy around abuse, the rhetoric of the state's “development projects” and glorified ideas of the family are fractured through life storytelling. They do not claim their rights via debates about law, equal rights or justice; they claim them via an enunciation of strong emotion. Since most victims do not/cannot speak the language of the law in the courtroom their emotional narratives must constitute an altogether different *form* of truth-telling. They do not have an argument to offer, or even supporting evidence: they can only offer themselves and their suffering. That is, their claims upon and participation in the public sphere are based entirely on affect.

Proceeding from the assumption that emotions are emotions-as-practice I see these victim life narratives as performances that produce actions within the context of particular social and political arrangements and situations. We acknowledge that each victim is singular and embedded in particular social and historical conditions. The project of emancipation – which is here coded as “Human Rights” —takes cognizance of this embeddedness, but is not constrained by it. Wendy Brown's response to Michael Ignatieff is worth citing here:

it is in the nature of every significant political project to ripple beyond the project's avowed target and action, for the simple reason that all such projects are situated in political, historical, social, and economic contexts with which they dynamically engage. No effective project produces only the consequences it aims to produce ... (452-53)

Brown, I think, calls for the extrapolation of Human Rights initiatives beyond the immediate. When she writes that a project produces consequences beyond what it "aims" to produce, she is gesturing at a larger politicization. She continues:

But if human rights are tendered as an antipolitical and expressly moral antidote to abusive political power, a defense against power and a protection against pain, deprivation, or suffering, we may still ask what kind of politicization they set in motion against the powers they oppose? (454)

The response to Brown's observation is what I have outlined: the Human Rights initiative based on the politics of affect and claims narratives results in a sentimentalization of public culture—and this is a form of politicization.

These narratives tear apart the Indian myths of the family, caring for the ill, development and justice, and thus engender political readings of the systems of power that operate in these *diverse* structures. Thus when a victim of child abuse records "As a child I was always taught that families are for support" (Virani 129), her statement takes on the function of truth-telling directed at uncovering a different knowledge of the family as a unit. In Budhva's case, likewise, it is the family that hurts her the most when she wishes to marry the person of her choice (Oza 127-28). Such affective victim life narratives must be treated as forms of knowledge and truth-telling about social structures and institutions.

The victims demand reparation, justice and welfare within these mainstream spaces of family, community and nation. They *shame* the nation with their revelations of the flawed family, the legal system and the social milieu. They link the everyday space of abuse and violations with a larger space where such rights exist and can be claimed. As Michalinos Zembylas puts it, "if emotions matter in everyday life, then they also matter for justice" (4). Institutions and agencies, writes Gillian Whitlock, can be made to respond to the "force of public opinion" because they are "psychically and emotionally structured like individuals and vulnerable to feelings of embarrassment and disgrace." Institutional experience of embarrassment and shame constitutes an "economy of affect" (77). It is this "economy of affect" that is engendered and initiated by victim life narratives, an "economy" that demands ethical responses. Pinki Virani in her afterword to *Bitter Chocolate* asks for "multi-disciplinary and multi-agency approaches" to tackle child sexual abuse and she further writes that "laws need to be put in place to protect the child" (244). The moral-experiential axis of abuse, deprivation and suffering is expressed through a multiplicity of frameworks of public and established meanings and praxis: in terms of the law, mental health, the family and social conditions. Victim life



narratives intervene in the public space via the highly personal and private, and thus reconstitute the very nature of the public.

Genealogies of oppression that pay attention to historical conditions in which oppression occurs must necessarily turn to not only statistical accounts but to victim life narratives. They do not make formal legalistic appeals or offer juridical evidence, but they do stake their claims as affective narratives. It is in the circulation-reception of such narratives that the flaws of postcolonial society are revealed. Since postcolonial thought has been politically edged with its interest in emancipation, justice, democracy and rights, victim life narratives fit right into postcolonial programmes and anxieties. If postcolonialism is about the freedom to choose, the contestatory “performative” (as Bhabha proposes), and emancipation, victim life narratives with their affective elements constitute, arguably, one of the key sites of postcolonial thinking. Harnessing Bhabha’s performative to trauma theory (as Anne Cubilié does), I propose that the victim life narrative is a performative act *between* the mute witnesses, the survivor and the witness-reader. The genealogy of postcolonial development is troubled by these genres and, I suggest, this is so because the narratives generate and demand a different ethics of reading. The ethics of reading are also, often, cast as linguistic acts (within the frames of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, legislation). If “linguistic ethics”, as Julia Kristeva puts it in *Desire in Language*, “consists in following the resurgence of an ‘I’” (34), narrative or discursive ethics consists in the postcolonial context following the resurgence of the victim-self as narrator-agent.

While acknowledging these narratives’ lack of legal legitimacy or formal connection with truth commissions, testimonies or Human Rights activism, I also propose that they feed into what can only be termed “informal” networks of thought and action, but constitute what we have identified as the cultural apparatus of Human Rights discourses. Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith identify affect, awareness and action as the three “effects” of such stories (225). These three effects generate and demand the ethics of recognition in contemporary India. They constitute documentary and affective nodes in the movement for social justice, whether it is the plight of the mentally ill, the Narmada dam displaced persons or abuse victims documented in RAHI or Virani. The reading of such narratives “demand[s] a correspondingly activist counterapproach to that of passivity, aesthetic gratification, and the pleasures of consumption that are traditionally sanctioned by the academic disciplining of literature,” as Barbara Harlow puts it in her study of prison narratives by women (4). If the proliferation of testimonial forms has meant “an extension of the legal domain into other realms of politics and culture” (Ahmed and Stacey 1), then the reverse is also true: the proliferation of such life narratives (the cultural domain) prompts (or ought to prompt) legal measures, social reform and political action. It is in this shift between and overlap of the domains – the cultural and the juridico-legal—that victim life narrative finds its agenda.

Such narratives create “affective communities”—activists, welfare workers, jurists—via a “testimonial alliance” (Hartman). The stories generate strong affects in audiences and listeners, producing a state of disruption. Such “affective communities” constitute the circulation and reception of atrocity writings that enable the victims to insert themselves into the public sphere. Victim life narratives here must be seen as part of a *larger* intertextual narrative archive—including reportage, documentaries, government reports—that is contrapuntally located within and subverts the mainstream Indian one. I propose that victim narratives reconstitute their Indian readership into a particular kind of “narrative society.” A narrative society, as James Dawes defines it, is a society “where risk and even compassion are conceived of through stories rather than through statistics” (38). He adds:

story-formation is a recuperative process, a means of restoring understanding and thereby alleviating the damage of confusion ... The innocent victim, named, lamented, and cordoned off, rescues the nation’s ability to confidently believe in its own power to self-narrate. (38-39)

This “narrative society” is interested in, is moved by stories and not necessarily by statistical accounts of displacement, wage inequalities and prison records. A “narrative society” often conflates hard-life stories from various domains (prisons, mentally ill patients, Dalits) but—and this is crucial—opens up the space for the circulation of such stories as a means of understanding itself. That there are such stories being constantly narrated (and heard) signifies a reconstitution of the Indian public culture as a particular kind of narrative society, irrespective of the origins of these narratives. These victims who speak might be nominally a part of the *political* society—with the right to vote, as citizens—but have never, before these narrative acts on their own as well as others’ behalf, been a part of the *civil* society (to invoke Partha Chatterjee’s useful distinction). Affective narration, as I have proposed here, shifts the status of the speaker from that of a “mere” victim to a subject with agency, a sense of belonging and the power of self-construction. This is possible because of the making of a narrative society *through* these kinds of texts. The speaking victim is thus closer to what Gyanendra Pandey has theorized about the “subaltern citizen”—who might be *technically* a citizen but has never been a part of the *civil* society. For a victim to be other than just a victim and to “belong,” it requires, as this essay has shown, both a narrative and a “narrative society.”

The efficacy of this victim narrative in the “narrative society” is achieved through affect, affect being a political strategy that creates an agenda for social justice. Admittedly, emotions have become the basis for manipulation by the culture industry in general and the media in particular (Meštrović). It is also possible that people do “feel” compassion, anger and sympathy at what they see/hear/read and are unable to “put these feelings into appropriate action” (Meštrović xii). Even so, the circulation of so many affective accounts of suffering, one can hope, retains enough purchase in global consciousness, both

individual and institutional, so that measures of safety, restitution and prevention can be put in place.

These voices create a new space. Collaborative activism and empathetic work involving activists, translators and editors alongside the victims is the staking of a claim for a space where the latter can be heard. It is in the performative of emotions—both individual and collective—that the subject is born. Recoding individuals through affect becomes a reversal of the other codes—juridical, patriarchal, economic, familial—inscribed upon them (and into which they have been inscribed). Affective narratives disrupt the logic of social debate, the “due process” of law and legislation. In the continuous presence of these narratives we have the performance of a new India itself.

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