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Wounded Streets, Haunting Voices: The Lived Experience of Terror and the Act of Witnessing in *After the bombs* by Arturo Arias and *Pages Stained with Blood* by Indira Goswami

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Abstract- The article focuses on a comparative study of conflicts in two novels: Arturo Arias's *After the Bombs* and Indira Goswami's *Pages Stained with Blood*. Although they are set against vastly different conflicts- the 36-year-long Guatemalan Civil War and the Anti-Sikh Pogrom of 1984 in India- both novels stand as fearless acts of bearing witness against political amnesia. The two cities, Guatemala City and Delhi, are portrayed as active and traumatised characters bearing the scars of violence in their streets. The authors use starkly different literary tools to represent the literary memory of their respective historical violence. Arias's use of a satirical lens and dark humour exposes the surreal horrors of military rule in Guatemala City; meanwhile, Goswami's work offers raw, diary-like recordings as a witness, trapping the reader in the suffocating, blood-stained city of Delhi, where Sikh hunting was being practised in every nook and corner of the city. Both authors aim to produce an immediate response, accounting for a deeply personalised, fragmented narrative of memories in opposition to official, sanitised government histories.
Key words: bearing witness, city, state violence, trauma and silence.

In the present article, I intend to focus on novels about the conflict, written from a close temporal and geographical perspective, such as *After the Bombs,* originally written in Spanish as *Después de las bombas* (1979) by Arturo Arias, and *Pages Stained with Blood* (2002) by Indira Goswami. I shall seek to demonstrate that these novels aim to recover the memory of traumatic events from the victims' perspective, written by authors who witnessed them firsthand and were driven by a desire to bear witness.

Testimonial literature and the violence

As Nicole Caso said:

The place —both ideological and physical — from which one writes about the past affects not only the form of the representation of events (the literary genre, a style of narrative that is either fragmentary or totalizing in scope), but also indicates how one must read the text within a particular regional context.

The novels *After the bombs* and *Pages Stained with Blood* are fictionalised accounts that are based on the authors' lived experiences, as they witnessed the traumatic events either directly or indirectly. These are also works that challenge the polemical rhetoric used to justify those events. A fictionalised representation of historical events allows the authors to subvert the official versions of 'truth' and revitalise a language of historical memory that has been stripped of its credibility. Consequently, the authors seek to reclaim a sense of

agency by connecting signifier and meaning on their own terms, whilst using the writing process – and, at times, laughter – as a means of counteracting the silence and the sense of powerlessness that lingered in these societies in the aftermath of the conflict. In this way, they function as counter-memories. According to Kimberlay Nance:

Since one of the aims of torture and political repression in general is the silencing of the victim—the power of denial—the very act of speaking or writing that something happened can be in itself a form of resistance. But to speak the truth while oppressors are still in power is merely to join in the contest to shape world opinion, not to win it, and much less to guarantee social action. Historically, the victors have gotten to write the accounts because they were able to silence the losers.

So, the main aim is to break the silence by filling it with alternative accounts or, at times, by recording what happened.

The production of testimonial literature is linked to the activism of writers who were not direct victims, but who feel a sense of responsibility to document events through their writing. As Kimberly Nance says, "… the concept of truth in testimonial literature is far less straightforward than has been assumed in earlier conflations of testimonio with contestation or correction." That act of bearing witness to the event is important in situations where there is no representation, in the face of the State's imposed silence.

In a related way, testimonio implies a challenge to the loss of the authority of orality in the context of processes of cultural modernization that privilege literacy and literature as norms of expression. It allows the entry into literature of persons who would normally, in those societies where literature is a form of class privilege, be excluded from direct literary expression, persons who have had to be "represented" by professional writers.

Margaret Randall sheds light on those courageous and sensitive writers whose works bear the hallmarks of testimony.

Literary works that possess certain characteristics of testimony are referred to as 'testimonial' – a genre that has grown in tandem with the intensification of revolutionary action – and are distinct from essays, historical narratives or autobiographies. They do bear clear similarities to journalism – whether in print, on the radio or on television – as well as to reportage and chronicles. However, their author may be a journalist or a writer; they may be a participant, a leading or supporting figure in the real-life event being recounted; or simply an intermediary, enabling the testimonialist (let us call them that) to convey their words to the listening or reading public. (my translation)

In turn, ineffability has been regarded as a fundamental feature of the traumatic experience. It refers to the inability of language to describe the actual incident for unknown reasons, and the inability of the character or narrator to comprehend the accident or event, which is the primary cause of the development of a traumatic state. Taken together, the traumatic memory remains 'inexplicable' and 'unspeakable'. Caruth argues about traumatic truth that "This truth, in its delayed emergence and delayed expression, cannot be linked solely to the known, but also to what remains unknown in our own actions and our language." It seems that an individual's traumatic experience is incomprehensible and, therefore, inaccessible through normative ways of perceiving human experiences and through ordinary communicative language. This is where the role of literature becomes significant. Literature serves to communicate what would otherwise be ineffable and incomprehensible.

In the case of novels about the Sikh conflict, it is important to note that their emergence coincided with the start of the 21st century. As mentioned earlier, the incalculable scale of the disaster and the state's determination to silence those who voiced their concerns led to a prolonged period of silence that ended decades later, paving the way for the creation of these works. The fictional accounts help prevent the loss of historical truths and promote collective memory by presenting diverse human perspectives.

Although Arturo Arias was very young in 1954 and could not have witnessed the events firsthand, we can say that his youth was shaped by the overthrow of democracy that year and by the military dictatorships and civil uprisings that followed. Arturo Arias recounted the events of 1954 in Guatemala as a bildungsroman, with autobiographical and testimonial elements. Indira Goswami, on the other hand, was a lecturer at the University of Delhi and experienced the events of 1984 firsthand. Both felt the urge to fictionalise everything they had seen or experienced and gave voice to their anxieties and concerns through fiction. Indira Goswami, for her part, wrote her novel in the form of a diary containing her notes on the history of Delhi, initially as a diary and later as a serialised novel after the loss of her diary, whose pages were stained with the victims' blood. In the novel,

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Pages Stained with Blood, the protagonist says: "I was a witness to certain fearful events in Delhi some twenty years ago."

Neither writer was a direct victim; rather, these writers were witnesses to the violence during their respective periods. To preserve the memory of what they had witnessed, the authors of these two novels used their writing as evidence of the era's violence.

And without reaching the point of no return, survivors can bear witness to others as observers of what has happened and, at the same time, bear witness to their own experiences and the events in which they took part. How, then, should we consider the possibility of survivors' testimony?

After the Bombs (1979), by Arturo Arias, is a coming-of-age story that serves as a mirror of Guatemala's modern history, portraying life in the country during the 1954 CIA-backed military coup that overthrew the Árbenz government. It is a surrealist, satirical, and highly politically charged novel that follows the evolution of its protagonist, Máximo (Max), from his days as a baby caught up in the 1954 aerial bombardment to his transformation into a young writer seeking truth, identity, and historical memory amid decades of state terrorism. Through a fast-paced narrative, Max moves towards adulthood in search of his own identity and his father; along the way, he also seeks the true Guatemala and the possibility of a society founded on human decency, in the wake of the bombings. According to Nicole Caso, the novel *After the Bombs* (1979) is "concerned with the complexity of the events of 1954 and their aftermath during the subsequent decades of military dictatorships." For the protagonist, the falling bombs symbolised an adventure rather than terror, and he subsequently took the opportunity to explore the furthest corners of his home, whilst continuing to learn about the outside world, which was rife with violence. His childhood was not so much marked by painful emotions as by curiosity and a growing awareness of the destruction of nature.

After falling victim to violence in the park, the protagonist of *After the Bombs* remained silent for three years whilst in hiding, hardly in contact with anyone except the prostitute Amarena, and then he began to write to come to terms with what had happened to him;

consequently, he had gained an understanding of the country's socio-economic and political situation. During this writing process, he learnt of the resistance movements against the government and the repression of its opponents.

Fear was instilled through a relentless barrage of bombing; after the bombings, people found themselves living at an even lower standard of living. The public execution of people, such as that of a communist for writing about the disappeared and injustice. The public execution of sex workers consequently led to violence being used to silence and instil terror in all those who protested and opposed the government. The curfew created an atmosphere of repression, with schools closed, constant patrols and absolute surveillance designed to stifle all activism. The terrorist bombing caused many deaths, and the bodies were left scattered permanently across the streets as a testament to the violence following that premeditated attack. Consequently, there was a change in power, and people shut themselves away in their homes.

Furthermore, during the anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984, fear gripped the Sikh population as they were disarmed; the rioters were free to take control of the city and execute as many Sikhs as possible, as if they were to receive a reward for every Sikh head. Sikh temples and shops were looted, and Sikh women were raped to intensify the terror. The rioters' sudden and incessant patrols continued to search for Sikhs in the neighbourhoods, marking their homes to attack them again later, in the presence of senior leaders, acting on instructions issued in the midst of the violence. The police's inaction in the face of urgent situations was evident, which exacerbated the genocide against the Sikhs. People stood by as silent spectators. The execution of Sikhs took place in public and in their homes, in the presence of their neighbours. This knowledge demanded that someone acknowledge these events. This task, undertaken by these writers to make the invisible visible, concerns the terror, censorship, falsification or denial of violent acts by the state. The writers have acted as mediators or agents, taking on this task as a first step in addressing historical events that the state has deliberately sought to conceal to erase the scars of these tragic and inhumane events.

Pages Stained in Blood (2002), a novel written in epistolary form, is a political document, a personal testimony, and a counter-archive to the official history. It is one of the earliest literary voices in the history of resistance to the 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom. The narrative focus is not on cultural documentation, but on the act of bearing witness through an ethical lens. She witnessed the death and bloodshed that left indelible marks of fear and trauma on her mind. Her stay in Delhi becomes unbearable due to the violence, and

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she returns to her home state. The title alludes to a diary in which she writes about Delhi and its historical significance, which is later stained with the blood of the victims who take refuge in her home. The title is also a metaphor for the protagonist's wounded psyche, tormented by her memories of the city. The novel chronicles her friendship with three Sikh men of Delhi. Goswami shows that, during the three days of violence, even the most innocent people were attacked, as illustrated through the stories of the characters Santokh Singh, Balbir and Sikh Baba. Within its pages, the author weaves together first-person narratives, real news clippings from the period and the protagonist's personal notes in a very organic way. All of this immerses us completely in the atmosphere of Delhi in the early 1980s. Goswami makes it feel as though you can almost breathe the city itself, capturing the smells, sounds and textures of places as real as Chandni Chowk, Shakti Nagar and Roshanara Bagh.

The story follows a young, single woman of Assamese origin who works as a lecturer at the University of Delhi. Far from remaining in the comfort of academia, she walks tirelessly through the city to uncover and document its hidden history. Through these explorations, the narrative takes us by the hand through the most marginalised and forgotten places, from the darkest alleys of Delhi and Lucknow to the realities of the women who lived in local brothels. The heart of the novel beats with tragic force through the figure of Santokh Singh, a Sikh auto-rickshaw driver who existed in real life and used to take Goswami herself to her lectures. His violent and sudden disappearance during the terrible anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984 becomes the painful fulcrum of the entire story. When the work was serialised in the Assamese literary magazine *Gariyoshi*, it caused a huge stir in the conservative Assamese society of the time. Many readers were uncomfortable with the portrayal of such an independent female protagonist, with an unconventional relationship with her flatmate and, above all, with her deep, empathetic emotional bond with a low-income autorickshaw driver.

The city as a setting for violence- Guatemala City and Delhi were the scenes of conflict. The portrayal of Guatemala City in *After the Bombs* and that of Delhi in *Pages stained with blood*: the depictions of these cities played important roles in their respective conflicts, each very different from the other. The cities became dangerous characters, painted red, creating suffocating labyrinths through their display of public violence against innocent people and against the resistance – the Maya people, the communists and the guerrillas – in After the Bombs, and against the Sikh community in *Pages stained with blood*. In both cases, a dangerous labyrinth is created—an enclosed space that cut off all opportunities to escape, where a constant atmosphere of terror and fear prevailed, acting as a death trap for the victims, whose salvation was guaranteed by no one and which, ultimately, cost them their lives and left them with lasting scars.

In *After the Bombs*, Guatemala City is portrayed not only as a physical setting, but as a surreal, traumatised and deeply symbolic character in its own right. The Guatemalan capital is described as a mutilated city, left in ruins following the bombing. The 1954 bombing created a suffocating atmosphere for the mother, whose son suffered from a skin allergy, and who was taking him in a carriage to the doctor in search of relief. First, the constant cries of the young protagonist, and then the deafening noise of the bombing, transformed the sweltering atmosphere into a state of sheer terror and fear for the mother, who had no support, and for the people on those streets. Later, that noisy environment became a normal setting for the young protagonist, who continued to grow and learn in those streets, which served as his natural schools in the absence of formal ones. And when he left his home for the first time, it came as no surprise that the streets were littered with rotting human bodies, their organs scattered everywhere – something little Máximo had already learnt about and had to avoid coming face to face with. The protagonist, a boy, perceives this as natural; it stems from the era's distorted portrayal of reality. That perception comes to resemble normality through a child's eyes.

The effect of this camouflage on Máximo's life aroused childlike curiosity, and Arturo Arias gave rise to political manoeuvring amid the ruins; each bombing brought a different face of power, along with certain beneficial changes in US policy due to its growing economic ambition. On the one hand, US capitalism came to play a central role in the country's economy. On the other hand, Guatemala City, with the constant participation of ordinary people in demonstrations—expressing their discontent and clashing with the authorities—became a battleground and a witness that drew attention to specific injustices prevalent throughout the country.

The army's violent actions spared not even the teenagers in love, whose wanderings in secluded spots were called into question, even though there was no curfew in the city that day. The teenagers Máximo and Karen went to Las Conchas Park, where they were trapped and suffered because the patrol refused

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to check their identity cards, viewing their blind and strict surveillance as spying and informing. From that personal incident onwards, Las Conchas Park became an active symbol of a place of terror and trauma. Later, as he matured, the protagonist came to understand his circumstances and, deep down, became aware of the political situation and American capitalism, as well as the history of catastrophes and tragedies that his family had endured from one generation to the next for constantly resisting injustice; consequently, he took part, like ordinary people, in the resistance through public demonstrations.

His understanding of capitalism came later in life; before that, American capitalism hadn't meant all that much to the protagonist, as the text mentions:

Máximo recalled how one night, he tried to cheer Karen up by making indiscreet remarks about the dangers of capitalism. To tell the truth that mattered little to him in those days. And laughing, she led him by the hand to the door. 'It's not fair,' he was yelling. Who said it was, she answered, and slammed the door in his face.

Karen's reaction stems from her pride as a white American woman; she also lashed out at the army in Las Conchas Park: "She told them if they touched her Peralta Absurdo would personally blow their brains out", and warned the soldiers that "she herself would chop their heads off on the Jockey Club guillotine." Hence, the city had certain dark corners that served as entertainment for the capitalists, where the murder of the soldiers—the objects of their hatred—took place. This portrayal of Guatemala City is linked to the novel's black humour. The Jockey Club, in the capital, became established and was known as a place of atrocities, where the beheading of innocent Guatemalans who had joined the army became the tragic theatre and black humour of that story as it unfolded. To depict this violent setting, Arturo Arias constructed a parodic version of Guatemala City for his readers, so that they might continue reading without feeling overwhelmed by the stress and empathise with the victims.

The city was also the scene of clashes between communist guerrillas and the authorities, which led to the kidnapping or murder of high-ranking Americans; the guerrillas killed the new ambassador who had only just arrived and, in response to Washington, the government decided to blame the prostitutes. Thus, the capital also became a venue for demonstrations and protests by socially conscious people, a place of chaos, resounding with a cacophony of voices. The public execution of innocent people became a daily practice designed to instil terror and demonstrate authoritarian control. For example, the murder of one of the prostitutes is described as follows:

She shook her head wildly, her eyes enormous. The chief executioner bent over her and with a flick of the wrist jabbed the knife in under her ribs. The body arched in a final convulsion. The chief executioner plunged his hand into the body and tore out the still-beating heart, lifting it over his head, offering it to the guests of honor as he shouted.

Thus, these violent acts brought about the brutal death of the prostitute, and as a result, the trauma cast a complete silence over the city, stifling all protest and movement in its streets. It can therefore be said that the city became trapped in a vicious circle of violence, trauma and silence, which combined to exert absolute control, and it was shrouded beneath a blanket of fear. Another prostitute met the same fate; she put up a deliberate struggle before her murder. Amarena shouted, 'Let's get out of this shit, jumping to her feet, fulminating against the guests of honor with her eyes of fire and vengeance, rancor and madness, and hate, hate, hate."

Those public spectacles affected the mental state of the spectators, such as Amarena, who were left traumatised. That white prostitute found it very difficult to come to terms with the scourge of the state and the trauma.

In Indira Goswami's novel *Pages Stained with Blood*, the setting is the University of Delhi, in the city of Delhi, where news of Indira Gandhi's assassination broke at around ten o'clock; this shocking news silenced the chattering atmosphere of the 'Tutorial Building', where the protagonist had arrived to teach. Everyone made their way to the library in silence upon hearing the news of the assassination from a national newspaper. What the protagonist saw on her way back as she passed the police station roundabout on Roshanara Road was this: "… suddenly a turban rolls onto the road. Someone pushes a Sikh gentleman out of the bus, making him trip and fall near the footpath. His spectacles lie shattered near my feet. It happens so suddenly and abruptly that I'm completely taken aback."Amid the violence, the terrified protagonist of *Pages stained with blood* continued to move through different parts of the city in search of the Sikhs she knew; she felt a sense of unease and an urgent need to return the box she was keeping for the Kabadi Wala. She, a lecturer at the University of Delhi, did not want to be shut away in her home during the violence; she wanted to reach out to the victims with the savings she wished to distribute amongst those in need.

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The city lay in ruins, with bloodied bodies strewn everywhere, right on the doorstep of her home.

That first glimpse of violence on the city's roads had stained the city red with a victim's blood, following an attack on 31 October. The city where the police had ceased to support the Sikh community. It is now clear that: "One passenger from the bus runs up to the police station and starts shouting, "Police, Police!" There is no response from the police post." Meanwhile, bus number 240 arrives, and I hurriedly get in. A small crowd gathers around the Sardarji. Some people help him sit up. Helpless without his glasses, he stretches out both his hands and is helped to his feet. I see two more turbans on the road at the Shakti Nagar crossing and stains of blood, like dried paan juice."

The portrait of the city became increasingly distorted as the protagonist journeyed through various parts of Delhi, which turned into a place governed by an absurd law, facilitating the massacre of the Sikh community. Amidst the conflict, the city is depicted with streets filled with smoke from the pyres of living Sikhs, the screams of unarmed mobs armed with instruments of slaughter—such as iron bars and petrol, which the rioters had taken from the victims' vehicles—and the wheels of those vehicles, which suffocated the victims until they were reduced to ashes. In the absence of the rule of law, amidst a state of chaos, the police and the state acted as obstacles preventing the victims from escaping their own deaths.

The area that had been wiped out of the Sikh man's memory was Jahangir Puri, in Delhi, in Block 12, when the protagonist visits it: "Sundar Singh pulls up a charpai for us to sit on. He brings out a blood-stained turban belonging to his dead son and bursts out crying. Almost all the houses in that block have been destroyed, only a few still remain standing."

The other part of the city, such as Trilokpuri, was also emptied of men and their children; both the writer and the protagonist travelled to those bloodstained corners to witness, investigate and search for Sikh acquaintances, and bore witness to the horrific situation in the camps. Those who had taken refuge in the shelters, especially the widows, were terrified by the murder of their men.

We can see from the selected novels that the protagonists adopted different strategies to avoid being killed. Still, the news was manipulated to convince many Sikhs to leave their homes, only to be murdered afterwards. The State funded this cruel act in India's erased history, which today makes it very difficult to wipe away the stains of genocide in the courts and in the anti-Sikh literature of 1984.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that Arturo Arias and Indira Goswami have portrayed the collective traumatic experience as accessible and addressed its incomprehensibility by producing their work as an immediate response through the act of witnessing. That crackdown in the capital cities, with their curfew, was directly linked to the dismantling of the social fabric – a place where the tragic spectacle played out against the victims. Although they are set against vastly different conflicts, both novels stand as fearless acts of bearing witness against political amnesia. The two cities, Guatemala City and Delhi, are portrayed as active and traumatised characters bearing the scars of violence in their streets. In conclusion, one can say that both authors aim to produce an immediate response, accounting for a deeply personalised, fragmented narrative of memories in opposition to official, recorded histories.

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