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Of Memory, Trauma and the Gothic: Reading Keith Thomas's *The Vigil*

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Abstract:

The word trauma, that derives itself from the Greek 'traumatizo', which signifies 'to wound', often initiates a discourse of agony that engages in a constant and excruciating psychomachia in the human psyche. The past often comes back to haunt the present in myriad gothic ways.

The present paper proposes to take up Keith Thomas's Anglo-Yiddish film *The Vigil* to analyse how trauma translates into horror. The film metonymises the debilitating trauma of the holocaust through a corpse kept on vigil. The Shomer (the person who keeps watch on the corpse before it is taken for burial) finds himself scared out of his wits by paranormal visitations, even as the viewer gradually realizes that the ghosts he sees have close connections to his own traumatic experiences as a Jew who bore the brunt of savage anti-semitism. The past has forever been one of the revenants of the Gothic. And past trauma haunts memory—both individual as well as cultural—inexorably. The Vigil shows how the ghosts of memory make a crossover from the mnemonics of an individual to that of a community to create cultural, natural as well as art horror. The paper also would analyse the film *The Vigil* from the perspectives inspired by the works on trauma theory propounded by Primo Levi, Cathy Carouth, Paul Ricoeur et al.

Keywords: Keith Thomas, *The Vigil*, mnemonics, horror, holocaust, anti-semitism.

The word trauma, that derives itself from the Greek 'traumatizo', which signifies 'to wound', often initiates a discourse of agony that engages in a constant and excruciating psychomachia in the human psyche. Initially of course, trauma was just the medical condition of a shock or a blow being dealt to the body and therefore causing injury or loss to the body

tissues. But slowly, the term began to encompass more psychological nuances as trauma began to denote the socio-psychological fallout of some trigger factor, horrendous in itself. The American sociologist Kai T. Erikson, in his seminal work on the trauma of major disasters, *A New Species of Trouble: Explorations in Disaster, Trauma and Community*, says: 'Something alien breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defence. It invades you, possesses you, takes you over, becomes a dominating feature of your interior landscape, and in the process threatens to drain you and leave you empty' (Erikson, 228).

Noel Carroll in his book *The Philosophy of Horror*, talks of Natural Horror and Art Horror. According to Carroll, Natural Horror connotes the feeling of being horrified by what appalls us in real life. Like being horrified by the war—or the onslaught of the Coronavirus Pandemic. On the other hand, Art Horror, is what we feel when we empathise with the characters who find themselves threatened by the monstrous. Noel Carroll says, "Assuming that "I-as-audience-member" am in an analogous emotional state to that which fictional characters beset by monsters are described to be in, then: I am occurrently art-horrified by some monster X." (27)

Trauma, when it hits the brain, can be an enormous source of natural horror. Human history has afforded the world enough sources of natural horror as the world kept getting torn apart with wars, hatred and trauma. Memories of all that has transpired, comes back to haunt the human psyche in intolerable vehemence. And these memories are scary and frightening.

When one talks of the Gothic as a genre or style, as we may choose to call it, one talks of fear as one of the most indispensable of all paraphernalia that evokes the sublime and beauty. Human history is fraught with references of atrocities, mayhem and coercion that have left indelible marks on the collective unconscious of humankind. Time has flown by, but the memories of the horrific past lives on.

Whenever significant happenings have crossed history, mankind has wished to etch it out in the cultural mnemonics in indelible permanence. Oral literature has done it for long until man learnt to write. Ever since then, man has written down all that transpires, documenting it all for posterity. And then came films. Ever since the Lumiere brothers exposed the world to their short films on 28th December, 1895, eternizing history through the visual, and later audio-visual mode

became a craze. And as the audio-visual medium mimics reality, all that is depicted through film becomes a microcosmic epitome of reality.

Film history in the world shows trauma, triggered and accelerated by vicissitudes of incidents that have happened at various junctures of human history, to be one of the most oft-iterated themes of celluloid. And among all the unnerving histories of bloodshed and mayhem, the history of the holocaust has shaken mankind up more than many other events. Scores of films have highlighted the scenario of the holocaust and have left behind covert interpretations of the same, thereby imprinting some idea or the other in the viewer's mind about human existence. The term 'neurasthenia' became a catchword and came to connote the traumatized state of those suffering from phobias, nightmares and nervousness, physical and mental exhaustion. After the First World War, the world came to know of 'shell shock' –anxiety, sleeplessness and repetitive nightmares of battle. And literature and films around the world have often projected that trauma as spirits—ghosts of the troubled past.

Keith Thomas's Anglo-Yiddish film *The Vigil* is a horror movie that connects the psyche to the gothic in myriad ways. The film pans on Yakov Ronen, who plays the Shomer for a night in exchange of some money—a person who, according to the Halacha or Jewish Religious Law, watches over a corpse round the clock before it is taken for burial, and recites the Psalms to 'comfort the deceased's soul and protect it from unseen evil' (*The Vigil*, 0:01:34). Right into the first segment of the film, the viewers are brought face to face with a corpse. As Freud said, a corpse is probably the most uncanny—the most *unheimlich* of all objects that rouse fear. A corpse is familiar in its humanoid form, yet it is not, in its lack of life. The absence of life is what makes it a metonymy for abjection in the highest degree. The film brings forth an almost droll contraposition of the corpse in the backdrop and the Shomer Yakov Ronen listening to upbeat music and looking up 'how to make a woman love you'. The film posits the stark emptiness of death with an avid looking forward towards life. The background music is diegetically undercut by sinister thuds and creaks and clangs that seem to come from upstairs, keeping the tension alive constantly between life and death. The film plays about with an auditory chiaroscuro of sound and silence to startle the viewers afresh after lulling them into a sense of normalcy every time. The deafening diegetic silence that gets interrupted by the corpse seeming to twitch a finger, gets immediately engulfed by the loud sound of a train passing by with the chiaroscuro of

light and shadow echoing the tension of binaries. The lifeless is shown lying in a pool of low light while strange sounds come from the unknown dark and the stairs that lead to the dark invisibilised upper storey. Yakov falls asleep intermittently—his sleep showing up as a foil to death. When he wakes, Yakov keeps texting with his girlfriend Sarah as the diegetic eerie sounds from upstairs and the nondiegetic music keeps the creepiness alive. Then the light flickers threatening to blur the boundaries between the visible and invisible. Right then as the light bulb shatters a message from an unknown number sends a video of himself in the same room, sleeping in the same chair, while a knobby hand runs through his hair, thereby raising the startling anxiety of being under the Gaze of the unknown. The sudden scares are kept alive through unnatural sights defamiliarising the mundane room of vigil. For instance, Yakov suddenly sees a pair of feet withdrawing sharply. Aporia creeps in as the film shows the man being on pills for psychotic disorder, thereby creating a dubiety between the fantastic and the marvelous. A psychic heterotopias is suggested as the viewers wonder whether Yakov was seeing things, hearing things or whether the uncanny was really happening. On top of everything, there is the shabby, dark house of old couple—a house haunted by death now—as a site for gerontological liminality, as the house neither bustles with life, nor is it totally annihilated in death.

Mrs Litvak, the wife of the deceased Rubin Litvak, afflicted by Alzheimers, becomes an integral part of the heterotopias that forms itself within the confines of the odd little house where a corpse lies downstairs while the wife of the dead remains lost in her own world upstairs. The loss of normative grieving adds to the sense of the *Unheimlich*. As Yakov later tells his psychiatrist Dr Kohlberg over phone, the two old people, confined in their house, must have gone crazy together—the wife had dementia while the old man 'was obsessed with demons'. The discourse of insanity adds to the uncanny. Mrs Litvak herself tries to explain their dishevelled mental predicament: '(my husband) was broken by memories...they bite and the biting never stops'. The viewers gradually make out that the memories are those of trauma—memories of being a holocaust survivor. The film opens with the first frame showing the muzzle of a gun, held to the nape of a terrified woman, before the shot is heard going off onscreen, evoking the allusion to the holocaust and death camps in the mind of the viewer. The *Vigil* shows traumatizing memories becoming the gothic as it gets as they get metonymised as

the Mazzik-- the demon with its head turned all the way back, thus symbolically fated to look back and stare at the past.

An inscription in a text by Moses Ben Shem-Tov tells us that the way to escape the Mazzik is to burn its face by the first night or else it will never leave one. When that person is gone, the Mazzik will find another broken person with some pain they cannot let go of. It will worm its way through the five spiritual essences of life: the *Nefesh*, the *Ruach*, the *Neshamah*, the *Chayah* and the *Yechidah*—the direct link to Hashem. The border between fantasy and reality melts as Mrs Litvah seems to speak to Yakov during a recorded talk by the now deceased Mr Litvah. '...behind you', she says, just as the viewers realize that the past is what is behind all of us, haunting us. In the course of the film, when Dr Kohlberg tries to find out whether it is Yakov's PTSD flaring up, he asks Yakov whether his heart is hammering against his ribs, he is sweating, is shaking, one realizes that the symptoms of fear and grappling with traumatic memory are the same. When Dr Kohlberg asks Yakov to describe the person he's seeing, he says' it is blurry. The 'doctor' asks him in an unprecedented twist whether what he sees has its head turned backwards, and just then Yakov, in what is easily the creepiest juncture of the film, sees the head of the corpse shift back with a sickening crunch. And just then the real Kohlberg calls. A phantasmagoric aporia sets in as Yakov tries to go back to the first call, and he hears his brother from past speak: 'why did you let me die?' Yakov leaves in spite of Mrs Litvah telling him that the Mazzik will make him come crawling back.

As Yakov leaves, his limbs begin to give way. As he falls he sees the Mazzik. As a siren wails and a Deafening screech sings in his ears, his own memories flood back. He remembers a harrowing experience of a group of men harassing him and his little brother Burech on the street. He remembers how they snipped off the pigtail hair from the little boy's head, calling him a girl. They run away as a car approaches, but not before the car runs Burech down. Life and the symbol of Jewish existence had been annihilated in one fell anti-semitic swoop. He wakes up with a start in the same room of vigil. He sobs as memories keep flitting in and out of his mind. He cries and keeps repeating' I'm sorry I let you die. I couldn't move' as if extenuating his guilt. As he looks up he notices that the corpse is gone. He calls Sarah..but she too seems to be in the clutches of the Mazzik herself and keeps reiterating his traumatic

memories. As the memories return, so does the corpse this time in the garb of Burech who keeps repeating 'why did you let me die'. Yakov admits he was scared and asked forgiveness for failing him. Mrs Litvah talks about her own memories of her grandfather being murdered in Kiev. As goes Yakov in search of the Mazzini, this time armed with prayers, he finds his own face as the Mazzik. He exorcises the Mazzik of Holocaust memories from Mr Litvah. Making peace with memories becomes the *modus operandi* for exorcising the demons of fearful memories of the traumatic past. The film plays with fear diegetically, as Yakov cringes in fear at the bizarre things happening around him as well as with the fear of the audience as viewers are kept on edge with the constant lurk of the supernatural invading the natural. Yet, it is this very Carrollian Paradox of Fear that makes what is overtly repulsive, fascinate readers to the extent of providing relief from the fear of death and disease and the painful and violent past. Paul Ricoeur in his *Memory, History, Forgetting (La memoire, l'histoire, l'oubli)*, which he dedicated to the memory of Simone Ricoeur, talks about the strangely reciprocal bond between remembering and forgetting, in that what is past has every possibility of returning to and as the present again. Ricoeur says that the "mysterious and profoundly obscure fact of having been" can very well become the "viaticum for all eternity" for the traumatized mind. And that is precisely the idea that *The Vigil* pivots upon as it shows remembering becoming the phantom that haunts the present and makes it terror-ridden.

Kai T. Erikson says that if 'trauma' in the normal medical usage refers primarily to the shock as well as the triggering incident behind it, in psychological understanding, the term would refer to the distraught state of mind as a result of the shock, which can be potent enough to distance the person involved from the 'normalcy' of the world around (Erikson 1994: 228). In *The Vigil*, Rubin Litvak, the deceased was reportedly a holocaust survivor. He had run away from his memories of trauma and had settled in a new land. Yet he remained totally cut off from the world and confined to his house with his memories. He couldn't escape the haunting of the past. Yakov too, clearly has been ill mentally, as is evident from his very first appearance in the film where he is seen popping some pills and staring dismally at himself in the mirror to his evident close familiarity with his psychologist. The Gothic in the film epitomizes that aberration of the mind, that has its roots in the past and its traumatic upheavals of the jewish existence of Yakov and his brother being precaricised by anti semitic forces. Dori Laub, a Jewish-American psychoanalyst and himself a survivor of the Shoah, points out that the horror of the Nazi death

camps ‘was beyond the limits of human ability (and willingness) to grasp, to transmit, or to imagine’: [T]he imperative to tell the story of the Holocaust is inhibited by the impossibility of telling, and therefore, silence about the truth commonly prevails . . . [S]urvivors who do not tell their story become victims of distorted memory . . . The events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor’s daily life. The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor’s conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events.’ (Laub 1995: 68, 64)

As Yakov tells his group of friends: ‘I just want to be normal’ (The Vigil 0:06:38) to which he is told ‘and a big part of it is letting go...letting go of the pain...the trauma that holds you back’ (The Vigil 0:06:41-7), yet it is evident that Yakov has been running away from the past and has come over to his present place somewhere in the western part of the world where he is evidently having to adjust to a new lifestyle, getting used to the ways of an alien culture, which itself looks quite othering in the first place. Yet, the offer that comes to him to be a Shomer for a night in exchange of \$400 brings him back to his Yiddish community even in the midst of the foreign land, and thereby becomes a trigger for the memories he had been running from, to resurface. The little psalm book that was provided for him in the house of the deceased revealed an ageold photograph of the dead Mr Litvak and his family. The photograph, which itself is a treasurer of the past, shows the faces of Litvak’s sons, then small children. This acts as trigger for Yakov’s memories of his young brother being traumatized by anti semitic forces, to come flooding back in renewed trauma.

In 1917, Sigmund Freud, in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917/1986: 253), likened loss in metaphoric terms to a wound: ‘the complex of melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energies . . . and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished’. The idea of loss is more often than not, connected to some incident of violence or the other. Violence is something that has been denigrated time and again, yet it has reared a thousand hydra-heads across time and space in myriad garbs. However much we shrink from and decry violence, it cannot be denied that violence is as old as life itself and is omnipresent within life in its most natural form *per se*. violence intrinsically can be of various types. Johan Galtung, in 1960, in his seminal work *Violence, Peace and Peace Research* talked of what he called ‘Structural Violence’ as opposed to Direct violence. Loosely defined, direct violence would be the infliction

of usually physical force as an act of aggression aimed at destruction and harm. When the group of perpetrators manhandled Yakov's brother and cut off his pigtail and finally caused him to die, that was direct violence. But there is a very complex working of what Galtung called structural violence, behind the outburst of direct violence. Structural violence is the kind of violence that is born out of systemic ways in which social structures and institutions harm people by being party to acts that increase 'the distance between the potential and the actual, and that which impedes that decrease of this distance' (Galtung 1960: 168). Pierre Bourdieu talks of symbolic violence that stems out from a rubric of epistemic social and cultural hegemonic domination that leeches surreptitiously into everyday habits and way of life, so much so, that it often fails to get recognized as violence at all. This is often known as the misrecognition of violence. In *The Vigil*, while the beating up of Yakov's brother was an act of direct violence, what birthed it was structural and symbolic violence working in cahoots. And the trauma resultant of that violence is metonymised and epitomized in the film *The Vigil* as paranormal forces. The ghosts of the past return to plague the present.

Now here comes the dialectics that hover around the aestheticisation of violence. By using the Gothic to depict what is painful and terrifying as the manhandling of the Jewish child on the street is an aestheticisation of sorts of that horror. Prima facie, it seems heartless and anachronous to do so as art has been associated with the paradigm of aesthetics and beauty from time immemorial. Lilie Chouliaraki in her article, 'The Aestheticisation of Suffering on Television' talks of how 'aestheticisation of suffering...is...produced by a visual and linguistic complex that eliminates the human pain of suffering, whilst retaining the phantasmagoric effects of a tableau vivant', and thus, 'manages simultaneously to preserve an aura of objectivity and impartiality'. In *The Vigil*, the sight of the torment meted out to Yakov and his brother as Jews and the sounds of the rude invectives being hurled at them brings about the phantasmagoric effect that Chouliaraki talks of, thereby allowing the viewers to stay safe behind the wall of objectivity and distancing that precludes any notion of fear of any active harm, thereby encouraging pleasure in the absence of the negativity of direct danger. However ruthless and disagreeable the sensationalisation—so to speak—of trauma and horror that happens inevitably in varying degrees when past terrors are brought back as the ghosts of the present, thereby preparing the way for the advent of scopophilic pleasure in the prospective viewers, it serves the important purpose of bringing the sordid past to the fore, which otherwise the collective

unconscious of the world would well nigh brush under the convenient carpet of silence and non-recollective dismissal.

The Gothic has often been concerned and involved in taking up representations of otherness in that it often deals with abjection and ostracizing. Whenever there is othering, there is an overt or covert manifesting of power dynamics in ways that can be social, political, psychological, racial or religious. The Gothic has often been instrumental in problematising and interrogating the bias of class, creed, race and gender that inform these power binaries. The Gothic has often addressed the alienation, displacement and dislocation that invariably follow any kind of hegemonic force. *The Vigil* too aptly uses the Gothic as a trope to plumb the terrifying aftermath of trauma born out of cultural, racial othering and abjection that is the fallout of a deep-lying hegemony of power and ensuing hatred. The film uses the central image of the corpse, and later on, the Mazzik that seems to hound the corpse as the greatest epitome ever, of abjection, to symbolize and allude to a different kind of abjection—that of anti-semitism and trauma.

The film has very little dialogue in the entirety of its matrix. One could read the politics of silence as a reaction mothered by trauma that often destabilizes identity and existence and subverts the agency of speech which is a signifier of human existence. Noted psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk says that the neurobiological response that trauma initiates almost universally is what can best be described as a “speechless terror” that fails to get “organized on a linguistic level” (Van der Kolk and Van der Hart 1996: 172). Cathy Caruth too, views trauma as a disruption that fragments consciousness and undermines and stalls linguistic representation (Caruth 54). This would result out of the irrevocable damages that traumatic experiences affect on the psyche and shuts down any assimilation into normal memory and narrative representation of the same. And as far as transhistorical trauma is concerned, the essential effects of trauma on consciousness and narrative recall bridge individual and collective traumatic experiences. The dissociative rupture caused by trauma and the terror it creates in the human mind and the resultant loss of linguistic coding leads to the lack of the comprehension of the very determinate value of the experience per se. Yet, the experience lingers on in the human consciousness, making its own devious internal psychological changes, thereby keeping the aberrant past from being assimilated in the life narrative. As Caruth observes in her *Unclaimed Experience:*

Trauma, Narrative, History (1996), trauma is “not locatable in the simple violent or original event in the individual’s past” but manifest in “the way it is precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (Caruth 1996: 17, 4).

This unspeakability of trauma then calls for newer and more specific narratology for the expression of the ghostlike presence of trauma in a psyche dissociated from linguistic fluidity. And that is where the *Vigil* fits in as a medium for a phantasmagoria of images that metonymise the grandnarrative of violence and trauma.

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