

Trauma and Transcendence: The Art of Mourning in the Selected Works of Käthe Kollwitz and Somnath Hore

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Abstract

It is important to place graphic narratives depicting trauma within a culture of earlier traditions of visual representations of trauma, including works that focus on memorialization and protest, as a response to diverse traumatic incidents like wars, poverty, and famines. Abstract artists like Pablo Picasso, in his "*Guernica*," and other expressionist artists, such as Edvard Munch, have created groundbreaking and innovative imagery to convey the inner turmoil representative of trauma. Preceding them, artists such as Jacques Callot and Francisco Goya were instrumental in challenging the boundaries of verbal-visual witnessing of war, grappling with the ethical and aesthetic implications of doing so. Building on this tradition, this paper seeks to explore the works of Somnath Hore and Käthe Kollwitz as a visual articulation of trauma, mourning and resilience. Their shared commitment to minimalism, fragmentation, intertextual resonance and hybrid formats makes their work particularly important within the field of trauma studies and visual culture. Their work is characterized by diverse representational techniques, spanning graphic art, woodcuts and sculptural art, as a means of showcasing the incomprehensible nature of traumatic memories. In doing so, this study hopes to place Hore and Kollwitz as pivotal figures in understanding how visual art and codified representations of trauma can act as a means of aesthetic resistance within narratives of atrocity.

Keywords: Affect; Art; Fragmentation; Resistance; Trauma.

The experience of trauma, in extreme forms, poses a fundamental challenge to our understanding of memory, consciousness and physiological reactions to prolonged stress.

According to Žižek, trauma is not simply a past event or a psychological condition but an encounter with the Real, a term borrowed from Lacanian psychoanalysis. The Real refers to that which cannot be fully symbolized or integrated into language and meaning. Trauma disrupts our symbolic order and confronts us with the unthinkable, unrepresentable, and unbearable aspects of reality. Scholars like Cathy Caruth elaborate upon the unknowable aspects of trauma, which manifest through the gaps and disjunctions in traumatic narratives. The work of scholars such as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, which aligns with this definition of traumatic memory, has had a major influence on trauma and visual studies, influencing how artists, writers and filmmakers approach the problems of traumatic representation. Caruth highlights the inherent challenges of representing trauma due to its elusive and ineffable nature. This was a groundbreaking shift within trauma theory at the time when archival strategies, the Fortunoff archives, for example, were paramount in the depiction of trauma narratives. In moving beyond these archival strategies, Caruth's claims laid the ground for symbolism, nonverbal cues and emotional states that go beyond verbal expression.

Other scholars have debated endlessly about the limits of understanding trauma and the healing power of the narrative in assuaging the trauma of violence. Sabine Sielke in her seminal work titled *Reading Rape*, asserts the importance of separating the event of violence from the narratives produced around it. She maintains that these narratives might function as means of solidifying certain discourses around rape and trauma, paradoxically limiting our understanding of rape in the process (Sielke 4). To aestheticise narratives of trauma, we are led to the problem of hiding the real stories and incidents of trauma that these narratives seek to represent. On the other hand, overly relying on archival projects might work in cleverly obfuscating its own framing techniques, but remains, nevertheless a reimagination of the original event with different contours. This article seeks to understand the points of convergence between these different approaches and the possibility of creating narratives that allow for a nuanced examination of the complexities of trauma.

It might seem that the saturation of videographic and photographic imagery of wars and trauma might make drawn images irrelevant. The evidence of the human touch weakens the image's claim towards truth and objectivity. As Bruno Latour writes, "The more the human hand can be seen as having worked on an image, the weaker is the image's claim to offer truth (Latour)." However, the photographic or videographic images' claims towards truth-telling might be more suspect than we think. Dr

Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh observes the limitations of mainstream humanitarian narratives in documenting the refugee crisis, where only “certain faces, bodies, identities, voices, stories, words, are seen, heard, read, and empathized with, while others remain – or are purposefully rendered – invisible and on the margins (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh).” She argues that such representations need to deal more with spaces and places, rather than faces; with added emphasis on communities and shared spaces of resilience through soundscapes, poetry, graphic installations and creative writing. She points out how the topic of empathy should remain the core progressive theme of the representations that deal with refugees and trauma.

While the erasure of faces can be accused of taking away the key aspect of empathetic engagement on the part of the viewer, the dehumanizing aspects of these so-called “humanizing photographs” cannot be denied. The consumption, or in some cases enjoyment, of these spectacles from the comfort of one’s home, is a “quintessential modern experience” according to Susan Sontag, where the images are increasingly jarring to maximise their shock value for economic considerations (10).

Narratives that create spaces for critical and ethical engagement might present new avenues for dealing with the intricacies of traumatic representation. Taussig suggests that drawings have the potential to capture the essence and vitality of lived experiences in ways that traditional ethnographic writing may fall short. Drawings can provide a more immediate and visceral connection to the observed reality. The act of sketching in the field becomes an embodied practice that allows the viewer to connect with the sensorial and affective dimensions of the observed phenomena. A materialisation of momentary perception and an embodied response to the scene in front of the artist, manifests the scene, endlessly transforming it in the process, both through the act of drawing and later the act of witnessing, where the act of seeing creates its own story and trajectory, confirming and inscribing an absent reality/ imagination into the mind of the witness.

Liberal ethical frameworks, which often gravitate towards the representation of trauma, have, however, circumvented the lacuna inherent in transforming these depictions into socially acceptable forms suitable for dissemination on mainstream television screens. The semblance of normalcy that persists even in the wake of horrific scenes underscores how the ensuing narratives or controversies tend to overshadow the actual trauma experienced by survivors, thereby becoming a battleground for cultural clashes. The challenge lies in conveying stability in the portrayal

of something as inherently destabilizing as trauma through any medium.

Hore and Kollwitz created diverse artistic methods and styles to deal with the subject of trauma, albeit from profoundly different circumstances. A master of woodcut, lithography, etching and printmaking, Somnath Hore continues to be one of the foremost artists of his era. This was borne out in the year-long celebration of the artist's body of work in his birth centenary year (April 13, 2021 – April 13, 2022). Hore's work has become a point of departure and fresh interest, which has been raised about the artistic depictions of trauma, resistance and the art of mourning. Art historian and curator R Siva Kumar praises him as a radical and didactic artist who left a sizable legacy both on the artistic and political fronts (Siva Kumar). At the advent of his career, Hore was sent to pictorially document the Tebhaga movement in the northern districts of Bengal by the communist party in 1946. His diaries have been an insightful record of the visual representation of the sharecropper's distress and a document of resistance, which has continued to interest readers in the twenty-first century, joining the list of distinguished artist reporters like Francois Goya, *Los Desastres de la Guerra*, created between 1810 and 1820.

Hore combines a sophisticated artistic sensibility with a scathing capitalist critique in these works, documenting the struggle of the sharecroppers in his collection titled *Tebhaga: An Artist's Diary and Sketchbook*. Sociologist D N Dhanagare called it "the first consciously attempted revolt by a politicised peasantry in Indian history", the movement being primarily concentrated in the agrarian districts of north Bengal and the Sundarbans of south Bengal (155). Hore's works offer a nuanced understanding of this historic moment, documenting the plight of the peasants through an embodied representation of their struggles. Despite being less skilled at the time, since he was a student, Hore was able to churn out scores of stark black and white images with textured lines, dimmed edges and profound emotive detail. The images of the leaders of the movement were drawn with immense care, showcasing a multiplicity of expressions, and "emphasising the dramatic gestures and moods" of the subjects (Varma). Rather than idealising the subjects, Hore's drawings captured the gritty reality of rural resistance, creating a visual archive of resistance.

Hore was not new to the form of this journalistic drawing, having already documented the Chittagong port bombing by the Japanese air force with savage detail, after being personally affected by the devastation he witnessed in his native village, which was targeted and partially destroyed by the bombings. The waves of attacks were met with debilitating curbs

by the British imperial forces, which eventually culminated in the Bengal famine, which claimed more than three million deaths. This was reflected in the works of Hore, where the depiction of the body in pain was undertaken with a lot of sensitivity and personal risk, journalistic drawing being all but non-existent at the time in the Indian subcontinent. Having joined the Communist Party of India (CPI), Hore started creating handwritten posters, cartoons and drawings for the official newspaper *Jannayudha*, in support of the resistance effort being set up by the party to fight against the unfair legislation by the British. The posters, caricatures and cartoons combined satire and socialist critique, which resonates with the subject matter of newspaper editorial cartoons later on. The cartoons served as protest art, circulated through hybrid theatrical performances and public exhibitions that addressed the problems of famine, starvation and disease at the time.

In the subsequent crackdown by the Congress government, Hore was forced to move underground, as was the case with most of the CPI sympathizers. However, he continued to create posters and woodcuts reminiscent of his days in Tebhaga, with woodcut III emerging as one of the most important works from this time. He recognised the inherent limitations of rigid ideological frameworks and began to focus on the possibility of generating affect by showcasing varied dimensions of suffering through his works. If his earlier woodcuts and colored etchings are symbolic of heroic resistance, these later works take a more sombre turn towards the cost of this resistance. His white on white prints and sculptures, as part of a larger project called *Wounds*, open the ground to this mature phase of artistic creation where sacrifice and loss are not eulogised or romanticised but quietly mourned. Arun Ghose observed how Somnath Hore's deceptive simplicity was one of the most important characteristics of his work. Notwithstanding the self-effacing quality of his work, Hore dappled in graphics, printmaking and sculpting to produce an impressive oeuvre of artwork in his lifetime. He softened the contours of his sketches in order to impress the unrepresentability of trauma and suffering for the viewer.

The *Tebhaga diaries* became a turning point, signalling his movement from illustrations to wood engravings, scenes from the *Tebhaga diaries* which he translated to the wooden etchings. The transition into lithography and printmaking allowed him to reach the largest number of people with his art without succumbing to the propaganda aesthetic that he had grown wary of. His sculptures were modeled by using wax which he moulded by the surface of his fingers adding textural elements to the finished sculpture, which were symbolic of the pain suffered by the subject, a textural

embodiment of pain and deprivation. As one critic put it, the figures were suggestive of how “humans and animals display comparative degrees of roughness and smoothness in their physiognomy, suggesting the strength of life that the figures are endowed with”, evoking the tension between life, trauma and survival. These representations are not meant to idealise suffering, but to register its affective impact on the mind and body of the survivor, as something unresolved and ongoing.

This evolution in his works culminated in the *White on White* series, which dealt with the tactile rendition of traumatic wounds on the psyche of the survivor. White-on-white printmaking blurs the boundaries between sculpture and printmaking, resulting in what can be understood as sculptural printmaking. The embodiment of the wound on the etchings, the physicality of the Brin on the metal plate, the imprints of the hand prints on the model wax, all point towards the violence and depth of suffering and trauma. Hore did not focus on clean lines and contours, but rather forceful etchings with different textures. His creative method necessitated a complex process for creating etchings in which the picture gradually came into view, creating textures and movements within the artwork, reminiscent of tonal etchings by Francois Goya.

Through these methods, the original impression is reproduced multiple times, which makes it capable of being circulated very widely. The circulation and reinvention of wounds through these different mediums and techniques contextualised his bid towards representing trauma, not through urgent messaging but by leading the viewer towards finding meaning and urgency. Hore finds a unique way of objectifying mourning, emphasising the recursive nature of trauma and grief, generating a slower, affective engagement with traumatic memory. The reinvention of the wound through different mediums like woodcuts, printmaking, or copperplate etchings, demonstrates Hore’s commitment to developing minimalist designs, reduced to the barest contours of the body in pain, simply and effectively depicting bodily suffering and its many manifestations. Hore expertly revives the sensuality of Indian art forms which have always had elements of the sacrosanct in it. But here, the body is not rendered divine or idealised; the body in pain is depicted through the tactile representation of wounds, the physicality leading to deeper embers of pain and even resistance.

There was no documented direct contact, that we know of, between Kathe Kollwitz and Somnath Hore, but their artistic trajectories reveal an interesting convergence in form and sensibilities. The underlying sensibilities

of mourning and intricate traumatic expression are something that leads me to collectively document their works for this research. Their works are connected through the seismic global upheavals of the twentieth century—through the world wars and colonial struggles. These traumas are distinct in nature but are instrumental in producing parallel visual representations of mourning and melancholia. If Hore, inspired by the horrors of the empire, showed the human body breaking through starvation; Kollwitz showed the death and destruction on the killing fields of Europe at the onset of decolonization. If Hore focuses on bodies wasted by starvation or poverty; Kollwitz shows the effects of melancholia and mourning, the real suffering of the ones left behind being implicit in her visual representations. Kollwitz's art is mostly informed by the world wars and trauma attached therewith, with personifications of death and the plight of the living left behind.

Like Hore, Kollwitz dabbled with printmaking, lithography, sculpture, woodcuts and etchings; her iconic visualizations of war and death (related to the crucifixion scene and the entombment of Christ), showcasing the different textures of mourning in the private and the public spheres. While Goya's work on war focuses on the documentation of the actual atrocities, this journalistic aspect is missing from Kollwitz's work, whose vision materialises narratives that are never included in the historiography of wars. She brings the hidden aspects and costs of war to the forefront, foregrounding the feminine figure to depict the pain and guilt of the survivors. In the print "Woman with dead child" made in 1903, we see the mother figure, a huge figure which is almost savage in its grief, mourning over the dead angelic child in its arms. The child was a likeness of Kollwitz's son Peter, who was killed in 1914 in the early days of the First World War.

This work eerily foreshadows the death of her son, keenly displaying the perennial grief and disaster which remains hidden in plain sight. She embodies war as an arbitrary killer which destroys everything in its path, rather than a heroic and just cause. In the aforementioned print, the hulking mother figure holds the inanimate child in a moving pangeyric of mourning, which strips away the humanity of the survivors. In other lithographs and prints, we see other figures symbolic of survivors, holding on to the dead in an inanimate fashion, with very little difference felt between the dead and the un-dead. Kollwitz unravels her prints and lithographs within a narrative binary, with the dead juxtaposed with the images of the survivors. The emaciated, near-dead faces of the survivors connect the living and the dead through the identical wounds of trauma.

Notwithstanding the existence of state-sanctioned war artists like the British Eric Kennington and C R W Nevinson, the real traumata related to the experiences of the war were mostly suppressed or ignored during the course of the war; with the use of the terms like “mad” and “shell shocked” being expressly forbidden by the military high command. The granddaughter of a radical Lutheran priest, Kollwitz had always had elements of social protest in her works. As Skye Sherwin writes, “the spine of her work consists of showing the people being forever abused by the system” (Sherwin). The Peasants’ War series is emblematic of this impulse, addressing the themes of poverty and inequality, which were central to the demands of the impoverished rural population in Germany. In an etching titled “*Sharpening the Scythe*”, a peasant woman stares at the viewer with menacing lowered lids while taking a break from sharpening the scythe.

In another etching simply titled “*Battlefield*”, we see a mother figure looking at the dead body of her son on a battlefield with curious detachment; compulsively holding on to her child in an inanimate fashion, her emaciated body and rigid posture being emblematic of the sacrifices and ravages of a fruitless rebellion. The figure stumbles over the piles of corpses with an unseeing gaze, having reached the limit of human endurance, silently invoking the viewers to act as witnesses to the unending bleak landscape. “Bodies are unsealed, unstable and leaky”, writes Margherita Pevere in an introduction to her installation “*wombs*”, which focuses on sexuality and hormonal contraception from a non/living perspective. In Kollwitz’s lithograph, the disintegrating bodies and fluids spill over into one another, the ubiquitous similarity of non/living things constantly at war with one another but also a part of one another, where the snarled bodies of friends and foes disintegrate like all organic/ inorganic matter. This endless looking on seems to be devoid of any ethical or heroic facets, rather enduring the facts of life and death in all their unavoidable horror. While Kollwitz’s oeuvre cannot be reduced to the wars, her sensibilities were certainly influenced by them. Weimar artists like Kollwitz re-emerged with attention paid to the condition of PTSD post the Vietnam War, when added interest was directed towards the cases of war trauma and shell shock during the two World Wars. There was an artistic endeavour that stripped away the pageantry of war, as Nevinson put it, and laid bare the acute distress of the participants and the witnesses alike, with very little difference between the dead and the survivors.

Psychoanalytic frameworks offer further insight into these works. Freud describes mourning as a positive emotion in which the person can deal with the loss and eventually move on from it, gaining positive motivation

from the whole process, while melancholia is defined by an inability to verbalise the feeling surrounding the event. As Darian Leader elaborates, "In mourning, our memories and hopes linked to the one we've lost are run through, and each is met with the judgment that the person is no longer there. This process of surveying and reshuffling thoughts and images will eventually exhaust itself, and the mourner will choose life over death" (Leader 2008, 60). While melancholia suggests a turning against oneself, Kollwitz and Hore elevate this binary by reworking and unraveling melancholia through art, symbolizing this grappling with the incomprehensible. These representations are informed by the interconnection of physical and mental wounds through the abstraction of melancholia, channelling unspoken grief into aesthetic forms. They exemplify the visual representations of the silence surrounding the trauma of the wars, filling the lacunae of memorialization and becoming a form of counter memory.

According to Jill Bennet, the "owned and unshareable" components of trauma are exemplified through Kollwitz's works, whose visual idiom reveals and conceals the incomprehensible aspects of trauma. In the etching titled "*Woman with Dead Child*", there are discernible traces of unspeakable grief and erasure on the mother's face as she looks at the corpse of the child, exemplifying the incomprehensible and terrible aspects of grief and mourning. The print can be seen as a foreshadowing of the future (since it was created before Peter's death), which depicts an event in the past, for us in the present, showing an altogether varied temporality, where the subject and witness are stuck in a loop of eternal mourning. The trace of past grief acts as a metaphor for the present grief, a spillover into the present. Paul Ricoeur proposes the concept of the trace to capture the complexity of the past, which is always absent, and the subservience to the historical, which maintains its own factual rigidity. The trace is an ambiguous concept, suggesting a remnant of an absent event while never fully recovering from it.

Ricoeur sees the past as analogous, which "holds within it the force of re-enactment and of distancing, to the extent that being as is both being and non-being. (Ricoeur 1984, 36). This re-enactment is tragically liberalised through the death of Peter's son, Kollwitz's grandson, in the Second World War; the mental and physical re-enactment enmeshing the artist in an intergenerational cycle of loss, which gets progressively darker in form and content. In a lithograph titled "*Death Seizing a Woman*", created towards the end of her career, we see a shadowy figure turning its mouth towards a frightened and dazed woman, trying to cling to her child. In trying to avert her eyes from the shadowy figure, the woman doubly sym-

bolises hope and despair, with no remedy in sight for humanity.

The works of Somnath Hore and Kathe Kollwitz, though dealing with disparate ideas and contexts, offer profound insights into the nature of trauma and mourning. Both artists showcase how art can transcend the conventional boundaries of representing trauma in their own unique ways, engaging with the complexities of human suffering in their own distinct yet complementary ways. Both of these artists created works which resist simplification and easy consumption by creating a complex relationship between the personal and the political. The shared emphasis on the tactile and physical nature of suffering, through the textured lines of Hore's woodcuts and Kollwitz's artwork, underscores the embodied nature of trauma. This embodied nature of suffering is apparent through the artwork which helps to create a visceral connection between the artwork and the viewer, creating a space for empathy and reflection. These works allow us to actively engage with the realities of trauma, instead of passively consuming representations of trauma. In doing so, they create a space of ethical representations of traumatic memory, where art becomes a means of reimagining the possibilities of traumatic memory and justice.

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