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4 Retrieving and Constructing Memory: The Use of Creative Writing by Women Survivors of Sexual Abuse

PAM GREEN LISTER

Memory is our means of the constructing the past and present and constructing a self and versions of experience we can live with, to doubt is to doubt ourselves, yet doubt we must for it is treacherous (Greene, 1991, p.293)

This chapter draws on my research into women survivors' use of creating writing in which I found that women survivors used writing broadly to break silence, as therapy and as autobiography. Its focus is on the exploration of memory through writing, one element in the process undertaken by women survivors to create an autobiography. Memory loss and retrieval have been core concerns of survivors and therapists working in the field of sexual abuse. Exploring memory is a central theme in the writings of survivors. However there are feminist critical concerns that survivors' accounts of abuse adopt an unreflexive approach to memory. In the light of the debates about the way memory is conceptualised in survivors' accounts, I will explore how one woman in my study described her use of writing to retrieve memory and construct a chronology of her childhood.

The Challenge of Memory for Survivors of Sexual Abuse

Memory disturbances are considered to be characteristic responses to trauma (Courtois, 1992), and memory loss, distorted and conflicting memory have been identified as one of the long term effects of child sexual abuse (Courtois, 1992; Finkelhor, 1986; Hall and Lloyd, 1993; Meiselman, 1990; Poston and Lison, 1989; Wyatt and Powell, 1988). Retrieval of memory is considered to be an important aspect of therapy for survivors (Bass and Davies, 1988; Briere, 1989; Courtois, 1992; Gil, 1988; Poston and Lison, 1981), although it is argued that a detailed representative chronological recall of memories is not necessary for the trauma to be processed affectively (Courtois, 1992).

With regard to writing as a means of working with memory, writing exercises have been found to be generally useful in assisting people to deal with past trauma (Francis and Pennebaker, 1991; Pennebaker, 1993; van Zuuren et al., 1999), and writing is specifically recommended to assist with memory retrieval for survivors of sexual abuse (Bass and Davies, 1988; Bolton, 1999; Hall and Lloyd, 1993; Hunt, 2000). Before examining how one women in my research used writing in this way I will outline the emergence of survivors' written accounts of sexual abuse and highlight the developing feminist criticism of their work.

The Emergence of Women Survivors' Writing

Feminist research of child sexual abuse in the 1980s has played a pivotal role in the understanding of sexual abuse as a political and social problem. Most feminist texts about sexual abuse produced at that time aimed to raise awareness of incidence and prevalence, make known the effects of abuse and develop specifically feminist theoretical explanations for the occurrence of child sexual abuse (Herman, 1981; Hall and Lloyd, 1989; Kelly, 1988; Nelson, 1982; Rush, 1980). Women survivors' written accounts of abuse emerged as a related genre in this period. These writings most usually took the form of a first person chronological account of the writer's life with particular focus on the exposure of sexual abuse in childhood, and its consequences and effects through childhood and often into adulthood (Allen, 1988; Brady, 1979; Danica, 1988; Fraser, 1987; Galey, 1986; Matthews, 1986; Spring, 1987; Ward, 1984). Within this account the writer may also tell of how she came to remember or to know about the abuse (Fraser, 1987; Matthews, 1990).

Feminist Critiques of the Concept of Memory in Survivors' Accounts

Feminist criticism of survivors' accounts, which emerged in the 1990s, is remarkably limited. A recurring theme within this criticism is that the survivors' accounts of the 1980s are seen as representing a significant shift in focus in feminist theorising of child sexual abuse. It is argued that this shift marks a move from the production of texts which aim to provide explanations of abuse based on socialist feminist analyses and focused on achieving political change, to ones which adopt radical or cultural feminist perspectives on survivorship. These works are then characterised by an appeal to personal subjectivity, natural truth, literalist approaches to memory and unmediated experience (Alcoff and Gray, 1993; Armstrong, 1994; Clegg, 1999; Davies, 1993, 1995; Williamson, 1994).

Most of the critical analyses of survivor's writing focus on Fraser's (1989) autobiographical account of the abuse by her father (Clegg, 1999; Davies, 1993, 1995; Williamson, 1994). The analyses of Fraser's autobiography by Davies are the most comprehensive of these critiques (1993, 1995). Davies acknowledges the commitment of such autobiographical narratives to 'making visible the realities of life of the sexually abuse child (1995, p.3), and suggests that these accounts are politically important in:

countering representations that have made women and children silent, invisible, deviant, perverse, aberrant or marginal. (1995, p.4)

However she argues in that over-simplistic conceptualisations of knowledge and truth characterise more recent survivors' accounts which do not analyse:

'self-identity', 'memory', 'attention', 'feeling', 'emotion', etc. [as products of] cultural and discursive factors. (1995, p.13)

Haaken (1999) expresses a similar concern with the theoretical understandings of memory evidenced in both survivors' own writing and self-help texts aimed at survivors. She is particularly critical of the exalted status given to 'subjective experiential knowledge' and 'the literalist approach to memory' which characterises these two writing genres (Haaken, 1999, p.15). Haaken suggests that in these texts unconscious memories are portrayed as being 'stored in the recesses of the mind, frozen in time' and recovered memories are presented as:

representations of actual events, with little attention to how meanings are altered in the course of telling and re-telling. (p.15)

She argues that the concepts of repressed and recovered memories are persuasive because of the hidden cultural history of sexual abuse. However she suggests that rather than insisting on a literalist and representational approach to memory, feminists aiming to recover critical consciousness 'must attend to the various social influences that work their way through the fabric of our memories' (p.16). She suggests that:

the truth of memory may lie less in its factual content than in its narrative structure of shifting plots and sub plots and of changing subject positions that emerge out of the landscape of memory. (p.16)

So, remembering would then be understood as a process of reconstructing rather than reproducing. Such discursive approaches to women and memory have met with criticism from a number of feminists. Flax (1987) argues that the processes of summoning and organising memories serve as an act of validation for women emerging from trauma and that women can have no identity without

memory. She addresses the issue of memory as part of a wider critique of poststructuralist approaches to understanding subjectivity. She suggests that poststructuralist feminist theorists are 'self-deceptively naïve' and unaware of their own basic self-cohesion. In doing so they deny the need for women to have a sense of core self without which they may experience 'a terrifying slide into psychosis' when they are faced with 'a painful fragmentation of the sense of self' (p.93). Flax concludes that only when women have this sense of core self can they make space of this:

transitional space in which is situated differences and boundaries between self/other, inner/outer and reality/illusion. (p.93)

In a similar vein Felski (1993) insists on the urgency for women to write autobiographies in order to bring to the public notice what cannot be remembered. She argues that the act of looking back, of remembering, is in itself an act of survival and extends this concept to suggest that 'survival itself is a form of autobiography' (p.13). She suggests that women's autobiographies are about what cannot be remembered, about trauma and 'a testimony to survival' (p.16). In an area such as child sexual abuse where the victim has very often been subject to personal, cultural and societal processes of silencing, remembering may be an act of survival but it can also be a dangerous activity (Courtois, 1992; Hall and Lloyd, 1993; Summit, 1983; Haaken, 1998). These silencing processes encompass physical silencing during the abuse, denial by perpetrator and family, minimalising by professionals, failure to reach conviction in the legal system and condemnation by powerful lobby groups such as those which emerged in the 1990s under the false memory syndrome banner (Armstrong, 1994; Clegg, 1994; Goldstein and Farmer, 1992; Hall and Lloyd, 1993; Loftus and Ketchum, 1994; Summit, 1983; Haaken, 1998). Nevertheless women survivors face these challenges and continue to break silence and explore memory, with creative writing being one of the means by which they give expression to these explorations.

In my study of how women survivors of sexual abuse used creative writing I offered women the opportunity to engage in a critique of their own writing processes. In doing so they considered how they had used writing to explore memory. Women described using writing to assist the retrieval of memory but also to engage in the process of constructing memory. They adopted a range of writing techniques and forms for this exploration and held a variety of understandings about the nature of memory. In order to illustrate some of these understandings I will examine how one woman in the study, Angey, explained her use of writing to explore memory.

Angey's Understanding of Her Use of Writing to Explore Memory

Angey explained that she lost her memory following a breakdown in her twenties. She described how this affected her.

I had a completed memory wipe out. Weird em. It just ... One day everything just went. I knew I was me and I was in my house but virtually everything else disappeared. And I had to re-build my life and I knew things. Like I knew I had children but I could not remember them being born. And I couldn't remember getting married and I couldn't remember anything really, not with any flesh on. So I had to rebuild that and I think possibly that is part of the importance of the writing for me was that I could prove it. I could look back and prove that I been or something and that was really strong.

Through writing Angey began to develop an awareness of aspects of her past and in doing so began to create a sense of her own existence. She described how she began to write with a 'real urgency ... to get myself, save myself ... fighting for my life'. She explains that she wrote

to find out what was in me because I just felt so empty and black. I mean there wasn't ... there wasn't anything of me but when I started using the writing I began to find there were bits of me so almost like I became person or something.

During this process Angey remained unsure about the nature of memory and the 'truth' of the recall.

One memory that I did have came up and that was like a real memory because there are other memories I wonder if they are what other people would call memories and I struggled you know whether it was real.

She described that she had subsequently recovered a number of memories from writing. She has moved on from having 'huge panics' getting to a 'blank nothing' to the regaining of some memory. Whilst these memories may not be 'specific' she feels she has remembered enough to 'know I was a child' so 'what was an empty hole is now full'.

In describing how she used writing to create a sense of a past and present existence it was important for Angey to establish a chronology of her life in order to place herself in time. She describes discovering three childhood worlds through her writing, worlds which are defined chronologically.

Looking back this experience very near the beginning I had this absolutely vivid feeling that almost certainly there were like three worlds. I was like pre three where things have been OK. Then there was this block of three to sort of nine or ten and then thereafter. ... With the child stuff at first it dotted around a bit between that three and ten but it then settled down. I really went right back to the three year and I was in and out for quite along time and then it shifted to about to seven year old and then a nine year old. And I'm virtually out of it now. If I get

child stuff it is sort of 11 or 12 year old and it is not very often that it comes through.

She describes the writing as

coming through the 11 stages, looking back and being able to tell me what was going on. So it is very chronological and it seems to be re-running it all.

Angey explains how she developed a six-part sequence of child like drawings accompanied by two verses of rhyming couplets. The drawings and poetry refer to Angey as a child from the age of three to ten, which is the period when Angey believed that the abuse took place, although she describes herself as having no 'cognitive memories' of the abuse itself. The first verse of couplets describes the picture. Alongside these is a second verse of rhyming couplets entitled 'Jingle' which provide a different perspective on the child's experience as the following example shows.

About the picture

This is me 'bout three when life got
Tough as tough can be

I tried to hold on to the door
Of happiness like it was before
But darkness, darkness
Came along
I forgot how to sing
The happy song
I was a puddle
On the floor

No more

Jingle

Squirrel, squirrel yup as tree
I was raped when I was three
How on earth could this be done?
When I was living in the sun?
Monster, monster came along
All this time I've had it wrong
It is not me who has the dirt
He's the one who caused the hurt

Angey is clear that the writing process was an essential and indeed integral part of her beginning to create a sense of herself.

When I started using the writing I began to find there were bits of me. So I almost became like a person or something from my point of view through the writing. It is very much a part of building myself definitely.

Some Thoughts on Angey's Understanding of Memory

Angey describes memory loss and memory distortion experienced by many women survivors (Briere, 1989; Courtois, 1992; Finkelhor, 1988; Hall and Lloyd, 1993; Meiselman, 1990; Poston and Lison, 1989; Wyatt and Powell, 1988). The severe loss of memory had a profound impact on her sense of self. Indeed it led her to question the reality of her previous existence. Interestingly she describes losing a sense of her own physicality, not remembering anything with any 'flesh' on it. This extreme loss of a sense of self suggests Angey experienced the kind of terrifying fragmentation and lack of self-cohesion which Flax argues results from severe trauma and repressed memories (1991). Angey describes using writing in order to 'discover' parts this fragmented self which she tentatively supposes makes her 'almost like' a real person.

Angey makes clear that her memory loss left her in a life-threatening situation and that memory retrieval was essential to survival. However, she is deeply aware of the contested nature of the concept of memory, acknowledging and indeed experiencing the existence of different definitions of memory. It is evident that she felt she did achieve some retrieval of what she called 'like a real memory'. This suggests that she had some understanding of memory might be construed as literalist. However her description of the technique of constructing memories is not dissimilar to the process of reconstructive remembering as conceptualised by Haaken (1998).

In order to feel that she had existed as a child and to fill the empty, blank space of her early years Angey began to write in a way which constructed a chronology of her early childhood. As she had no 'cognitive memory' of periods of her life she could not produce a life narrative which described either her childhood or the abuse, using techniques designed to create a sense of realism. Her poetry is naturalistic neither in content nor in style. The rhyming couplet sequence style and structure is highly formulaic and exploration of the effects of the abuse is achieved through the use of metaphors. The door that is referred to in the verse illustrated in this chapter is not a bedroom door but a door of happiness, The puddle on the floor is the three year old herself. Furthermore whilst Angey's use of rhyming couplets may serve as a stylistic device used to represent a child like voice, she does not claim to be writing as a three year old, the poem is about Angey when she was three.

For Angey the relationship between memory and creative writing is complex and dynamic. This relationship is explored by Greene (1991), whose quotation on the treachery of memory heads this chapter. Greene argues that memory 'revises, reorders, refigures, resignifies; it includes or omits'. She suggests that in doing so 'memory takes liberties with the past as artful and lying as any taken by a creative writer'. Indeed she goes further and contends that memory is

a creative writer, Mother of Muses (Mnemosyne) in Greek mythology maker of stories- the stories by which we construct meaning temporality and assure ourselves that time past is not time lost. By means of enabling fictions we make sense of our lives. (p.294)

Angey describes how she was assisted in developing a sense of self-cohesion through creating a work of fiction. She recovers her lost time and makes sense of her life through the construction of a poetry sequence in which achieves a sense of her own chronology, of herself through time. This suggests an ability to work in the kind of transitional space between inner and outer worlds and reality and illusion that Flax (1987) suggests is only available to women following the achievement of self-cohesion.

However although Angey creates a fictional chronology she does not suggest that the abuse she experienced is a fiction or untrue. In the poem Angey makes a clear statement that she was raped as a three-year-old. She refers to the writing as 'proof' that she had existed as a child. The rhyming couplet sequence is can be seen then as evidence of abuse, indeed a testimony for Angey.

Conclusion

It is a challenge for feminists working in the field of child sexual abuse to study the issue of memory. Survivors describe the experience of the loss of memory or the distortions of memory in painful terms. As Angey explained retrieving or creating memory can be essential for survival. Nevertheless survivors take the personal and public risks in using creative writing to explore memory. Most feminist critical attention in this area has focussed on an examination of the writings of women survivors where the content of these texts is analysed. The process of writing has not been explored. In my research I afforded Angey the opportunity to describe and analyse her writing processes. Had I chosen to analyse Angey's poetry sequence without the aid of her critical commentary I would not have learned of her profound awareness of the complexity of memory, of her ability to write in that transitional space between fiction and reality and inner and outer worlds. I would argue that the ongoing challenge for feminist researchers in this field is to continue with the project of assisting women survivors to break silence and to empower them to become critics of the process and content of their own writing. I conclude with a final quotation from Angey who summarised her use of writing as a way 'to find a voice and rejoin the life stream'.

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