Art has two constant, two unending concerns: it always meditates on death and thus creates life.

-Boris Pasternak, Dr. Zhivago

Theodor Adorno who was the most famous decrier of the possibility of art after atrocity, the Holocaust to be precise, writes in his essay titled ‘Cultural Criticism and Society’ which appeared in his collection Prisms (1949),

The more total society becomes, the greater the reification of the mind and the more paradoxical its effort to escape reification on its own. Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter. Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation. (34)

Adorno’s fears are not entirely unfounded. The cloistering of the terrible into the hallowed realms of art and study, with its tendencies towards elite exclusion is a real threat to the idea of the traumatic and a sorry fate for its representation. In fact, he may have had many misgivings about this thesis. Theorising the traumatic, especially in literary and artistic terms, reeks of a bourgeois pseudo-sympathy that attempts to recreate social action while in fact it only succeeds in alienating the experience from the reality of human interaction.

As Sontag astutely points out, there is a distinct difference between acknowledging violence and protesting against it (95-103). As the surfeit of violence engulfs the sanctity of humanity, death in war or brutality at home stops being a reality and gains a surreal quality
simply because the mind cannot conceive of so much horror or does not want to. Ours is a failure of the imagination, for our wilted psyche cannot imagine the pain that it knows exists. And with the death of imagination comes the death of active empathy. There is darkness within your soul that you would like to believe you have curbed. There is a cruelty within you that you would like to imagine you have outgrown. But every time you come across an image of suffering you are reminded of its continued existence—Not only because the image is evidence to the vain optimism of your belief in goodness, but because you can walk away from the image and still believe that what you saw had nothing to do with you. By turning traumatic suffering into a topic of conversation, the humanities risk losing the force of its image and relegating it to the abstract realms of intellectual theorising which allows one to walk away once the discussion is closed.

One is forced to question the root of this apathy. Is it because of an inherent heartlessness? Such a choice is improbable simply because we are naturally imbued with a sense of survival and therefore will automatically react to a threat no matter how displaced. Is it perhaps the surfeit of information that we have been fed via print, television and internet? Such an argument would be ridiculously reductive and reeks of the same non-committing discourse as those discussed in the previous chapters. Susan Sontag addresses this accusation in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

The view...that our capacity to respond to our experiences with emotional freshness and ethical pertinence is being sapped by the relentless diffusion of vulgar and appalling images—might be called the conservative critique of the diffusion of such images.

I call this argument conservative because, it is the *sense* of reality that is eroded. There is still a reality that exists independent of the attempts to weaken its authority.
The argument is in fact a defense of reality and the imperilled standards of responding more fully to it. (108-109)

The audience or reader is aware of dual realities: the immediate reality of her life with its personal angsts and the presence of a darker more horrible reality that is the realm of war, violence and brutality. The first reality is real to the audience in terms of its immediate empirical presence. The inundation of images and materials indicative of that other reality onto the glass dome of immediate reality permeates the sense of reality as such rendering the audience in a limbo state where their immediate reality is as trivial as the unreal other reality. Sontag deems the argument of surfeit a “provincial” and overly simplified stance which fails to see the alienating effect of being a spectator and the implications this casts on the idea of representation and crafting. If the spectacular nature of the spectacle is dismantled it ceases to be recognised and is rendered pedestrian, the consequences of which have been discussed in earlier. If there is a shortage of attention or absence of empathy it has less to do with an excess of images and more with the ability to perceive. Sontag pragmatically points out that shock fades and that repetition habituates. There is a discourse of passivity at work here which creates a sense of impotence and petrifies action. The key to emotional distancing is the movement from empathy to sympathy. Sontag equates sympathy with the inability to act or change and, therefore, with an inevitable fading of empathy into apathy. (101-103)

Sympathy is a thought that stays a thought. Sontag writes, “So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well our impotence.” (Sontag, Regarding 102)

Art’s relevance lies in its ability to create a bridge across this apathy such that the experience can be recharged with force and therefore induces possibilities of action. It calls and directs attention to the breach in reality’s defences and highlights this through the use of artistic tropes that accentuate identification or conversely dissociate completely. By curtailing
or catalysing response, the transformation of suffering through art—for there is an undeniable
transformation at work—can mobilise impotent sympathy into kinetic response. It has the
potential to shake the academic out of the comfortable armchair and the patient from her
couch and the traumatic into text. The art enhances and destabilises thereby creating an
environment for response as opposed to apathy. Rather than passive discussion, it is active
representation involving a creative energy that reinforces as well as jeopardises reality as is
lay-perceived.

In his essay “There’s No Backhand to This” from the book Trauma at Home: After
9/11 (2003), James Berger presents an interesting conceptualisation of Trauma Theory:

Theories of Trauma are immensely appealing. They presume to provide a logic to the
most radically unredeemable, unassimilable, unsymbolizable phenomena. I would
argue that in literary studies trauma theories actually offer a poetics. They theorize
trauma as a secular apocalyptic moment: shattering, obliterating, but also revelatory.
It is the nuclear blinding flash that stands at the center, yet not at the center, rather just
beyond the horizon, and defining the horizon, of contemporary culture. (52)

The idea of ‘poetics’ immediately invokes the Aristotelian mode of art and creativity. For
Aristotle, art was didactic because it served the purpose of communicating a greater aim or
telos, acting as either a preventive or a corrective measure. In the case of the traumatic this
idea goes through a mirror reversal. The corrective/preventive motive is transformed into a
declaration of outrage and the idea of a higher meaning becomes subject to scepticism
especially in the light of the meaningless suffering entailed in the creation of trauma. Nobility
is replaced by ignoble atrocity and the ethos of the text is less about elevation and more about
bringing the reader or audience down to hard earth. There is a definite element of knowledge
that enters the equation of the traumatic art. The artist wishes to communicate the presence
and continuity of trauma in existence. Like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, she is compelled to
tell her story such that the listener will be forced to stop his daily life and listen and more
importantly carry forward the spirit of the narration. The positive didacticism of the original
Aristotelian ideal, which hopes to instruct and correct, takes on a catastrophic element
reminiscent of the Old Testament Prophets where the voice of the trauma text is not an
instruction but a warning or an alerting cry of judgement.

Traumatic art also finds a connection to Aristotle through the notion of catharsis. The
layman translation for this phrase— which has no real equivalent in the English language—
would be 'purgation'. Aristotle maintained that tragedy with its representation of the tragic
fall of a noble hero because of the vagaries of fate and his own hubris assisted the creation
and purgation of the negative emotions of pity and fear from the audience thereby allowing
them to return to life refreshed and morally cleansed. The notion of catharsis is altered in the
context of trauma in the sense that this purgation is not allowed in the reader. Trauma is not a
disease, or a pathogen to be purged out of the system. Rather, it is the scar that remains after
the wound and the artist showcases this scar through his art. The key motive of the poetics of
trauma is destabilisation. It does not hope to traumatise the reader, but it does attempt to first
interrupt the flow of her normal intellectual thought with the awareness of the traumatic and
secondly not let her forget. In a sense the writer transfers the trauma from herself or the text
onto the reader. The text acts as a medium of transference such that the reader is charged with
the impact of the trauma. The trauma text does not call for impotent sympathy but for
knowledge.

In the universe of the trauma text, the writer becomes the source of the trauma that
she hopes to communicate and in doing so charges the universe with her being. Once the
elusive traumatic memory is harnessed in text the sharing of the same with an accepting
community becomes a means of partial purgation for traumatised. This in turn alerts others
with similar experiences to either air their stories or at least know that they are not alone. The creation of a community of shared sorrow not only provides the traumatised a supportive social frame it also introduces the contradiction of uniqueness versus collective. The alleviation of the survivor’s loneliness through a Common World of literary narratives, and of a shared commonality places the trauma writer in paradoxical position. On one hand it makes the task of articulation less daunting. You are assured that there are others in the changed universe that can see it in the same script and colours. It becomes more of an act of sharing rather than a sign of their difference. At the same time, the presence other narratives of the same ilk or event irrevocably diminishes the singularity of the tract in hand. The writer’s unique narrative risks the ignominy of being clustered with others en masse. The negotiation between the loss of a privileged loneliness and the necessity to articulate and support a community are a central to the dynamics of the literatures of trauma and the motive that charge them.

Art arising out of this turbulence of motives quietens this clamour with a single question and its automatic answer: How does one reconcile with the fact that suffering, unfortunately, is not only old but prevalent and constantly renewing? One does not. It is the absence of resignation and the consequent will to fight that fires the trauma text. The discourse is not one of comparison but of reiteration and corroboration. The association of one moment of trauma to another in the realm of art is not a belittling but an enhancing of both experiences such that they reinforce each other and reiterate their presence.

The human person has the soul of Anansi: attempting to outwit or out-negotiate fate, safe in the deluded arrogance of cognisance. It is intelligence, and the ability to override this intelligence in favour of the vagaries of soft cardio-vascular tissues, that have determined the human-ness of man. However, faced with the terrifying and transforming, where neither emotion nor rationale can make sense of the situation, the human person becomes something
alien and undefined. He becomes a part of an awe-full movement of consciousness, surviving which he will remain forever alienated through his existence. He drags his feet weighed down by his shadow, darkened to pitch with the memory of the abyss that swallowed him into its otherworldly innards only to regurgitate him half-formed and imperfect into a terrifying world. He has seen the beast that slouches towards Bethlehem, smelled its musky scentlessness, felt its non-breath on the back of his neck. He has met its dispassionate stare and quivered with the knowledge of his insignificance.

But if the Nietzschean logic works, if the abyss stares long enough into, you will eventually stare right back, and in the staring invoke sight. The fight against insignificance is the defining feature of the human condition: even in our smallness we are unique with a will of our own. The trauma text, at its most aggressive and positive is an assertion of the deep seated ideology of uniqueness. It is a fight against the dehumanising and demolishing effect of overwhelming trauma, to re-establish oneself as a sovereign entity. At the same time it describes the ultimate insignificance of man in the universe. This strange amalgam of humanist and anti-humanist sentiments is characteristic and perhaps the only feasible method for the representation of the trauma text. It becomes the medium to reclaim not just the past but also the fragile body that was removed from the control of the individual. swept by the traumatic, she could not control her actions; the sanctity of her physical and mental Will were overruled by circumstance the made her slave to contingency. The site of the trauma text becomes the medium for the reclamation of her personal autonomy. There is a simultaneous articulation of her powerlessness and her empowerment, a strange cocktail of despair and defiance.

Art itself emerges out of this dichotomy. It is mortality that impresses upon the human mind the beauty — terrible or otherwise — of art while at the same time it is our autotelic imagination, a fruit of our extraordinary intelligence and resilience, which allows for the
creation and appreciation of art. The artistic impulse in and related to a traumatic scenario has a very different tenor from the same in a "normal" context. The artist attempts to not only communicate suffering but is ultimately too committed to life to remain silent. To invoke the biological metaphor once again, the scar reminds you that you survived and can therefore live again. It may ache with the memory of the wrongs inflicted but its presence acts as an emblematic token that refused erasure both of the past as well as the person. As Kali Tal writes, "Literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it "real" both to the victim and to the community. Such writing serves both as validation and cathartic vehicle for the traumatized author." (25) The creation of art becomes a mode of expressing her existence.

For the traumatised, the process of emerging from trauma is an act of relearning and reacquainting. She feels her way through what ought to be natural and in the process must contend with emotional dislocation. And when the emotions eventually come back she has to learn to handle the knowledge and the pain. To be able to see the world as it is in all its tarnished glory and to not hate it, to look at the sky and still notice how green the lone leaf can look against the vast white canvas— that is perhaps what is called hope, what becomes art. The leaf is there, for no apparent reason. So are you. It may be the last leaf, but it still hangs distinct against the canvas of the sky. And if it survives the seasons it will take on the new colours and still show them, stark against the vast sepulchre of the sky. And this is the artistic impulse.

Susan Sontag writes in her essay "The Artist as Exemplary Sufferer" that,

Psychology equates the discovery of the self with the discovery of the suffering self.

For the modern consciousness the artist (replacing the saint) is the exemplary sufferer.
And among artists, the writer is the person to whom we look to be able to best express his suffering.

The writer is the exemplary sufferer because he has found both the deepest level of suffering and also a professional means to sublimate... his suffering. As a man he suffers; as a writer, he transforms his suffering into art. (42)

The suffering writer's art becomes the transformed truth of the ineffable. The strangely imprecise precision of language makes literature an apt medium for communicating the dichotomy of the traumatic—a known, unknown reality that creates a new poetics of being.

A second implication of Berger's statement is that trauma has now become a category of creativity in the sense that it has become a metanarrative trope for the presentation of atrocity. The implications of this idea are contradictory. On one hand it provides a certain recognition for the presence of excessive human suffering and creates a discourse that infuses this knowledge into representation. The representation of a phenomenon as elusive as trauma, and even the partial understanding of such a narrative, requires both reader and writer to ignore prescribed notions of truth, reality and cognition and reach across the abyss. On the other, as Adorno feared, it runs the risk of turning into irrelevant academic tool that removes the urgency of art from its environment.

What Adorno did not account for, is the fact that art and its appreciation, in its basic form is a dialogic act which involves both communication and reception. While the echelons of academia may attempt or accidentally confine the artistic in scholarly discourse, this discourse when employed productively introduces awareness of and significance to something beyond meaning. It directs attention towards suffering, and art becomes the kinetic transformation of this thought. Most importantly, Adorno forgot that art, unlike the traumatic condition, is not meaningless. It acts as a touchstone that connects the past to the present, not
in such a way that the present is wholly determined by the past, but such that the present reaffirms itself through its recollection of the past and in this recollection beckons to the future. Aberbach writes, “Art may enable the artist not just to depict the grief process, or parts of it, but also, up to a point, to fill the lacunae of his mourning, and in doing so creatively, to find meaning in the midst of grief”. (20)

Art may not be hopeful, but its effect always involves hope simply because it presents the dichotomy of man’s fallibility and his continuity. Literatures of trauma are symptomatic of the changing world view which has to accommodate the atrocious alongside the inspiring, and that these categories are often overlapping or invoked through the opposite. Berger writes,

There is no language for that moment of pain and dissolution; but gradually language forms around it. I am struck in much writing about trauma by the word “precisely” when the relation being described is not precise at all. An enormous, inconceivable, visceral condition is rendered algebraic by means of terminology. The argument itself indicates that precision is impossible, and yet language itself is precise: it is precise as language. This precision about the inconceivable is why I refer to trauma theory as a sort of poetics. It is about making, about the creative acts—combining conscious and unconscious of motives and powers—that arise out of horror and confusion. Trauma theory is itself one of those creative acts. It is precise in the way all powerful and rigorous acts of the imagination are precise, even though it describes nothing very precisely (52)

Trauma is a post-apocalyptic concept in the sense that it deals with life after. The crisis which was once impossible has come to pass and life did not end. The story continues and the characters do not know what the plot is anymore. In that sense, trauma becomes an
opening of possibilities. The end that does not result in destruction necessitates the
propagation of a mediating metaphor that either extends the existing mythologies of existence
or creates a new narrative. (Kermode 2000) At its most negative, trauma points to worse
horrors in the future or to a prospect of nihilistic chaos. The negotiation of this excess into the
possibilities of imagination conversely implies that there can be worse in store. But at its
most positive, however, Trauma presents the possibility of recreation and regeneration. Its
apparent meaninglessness requires the negotiating consciousness to create a new network of
meaning and significance which simultaneous retains parameters for the unforgivable and
unjustifiable nature of the traumatic event while at the same time assisting a rehabilitating
metaphor. Art produces an environment that captures and projects the event so that it ceases
to be a collection of random acts and becomes an episode with relevance. The process is
accomplished while also allowing for reconciliation without resignation, a non-amnesiac
rhetoric of moving on.

In the essay “Dancing in Cambodia”, Amitav Ghosh invokes the figure of the
Cambodian dancers and the changed significance of their presence and performance. The first
appearance of the dancers is in the glorious, opulent past, where they signified an exclusive
luxury. Their next invocation is at the point of the fall when Pol Pot’s totalitarian regime
which spearheaded the massive obliteration of the traditional arts which were deemed as
regressive and against the grain of the regime’s communist creed. Dancers were killed or
mutilated, costumes destroyed and schools demolished in the drive to purge the practice out
of the system. The dancers all but vanish, only to reappear in the present after Pol Pot’s
decline marking the slow reclamation of a nation that is still finding its feet. Ghosh records
the story of two performances: their recital in France in 1906 in front of an admiring
awestruck colonial audience, and their performance much later in 1988 in front of a motley
crowd of survivors. While the former responded with awe at the beauty of the performance,
the latter responded with tearful epiphany. Ghosh records the emotions of the Cambodians and the onlookers:

Eva Mysliwiec, who had arrived recently to set up a Quaker relief mission, was one of the few foreigners present at the first performance. When the first musicians came onstage she heard sobs all around her. Then, when the dancers appeared, in their shabby, hastily made costumes, suddenly, everyone was crying; old people, young people, soldiers, children—‘you could have sailed out of there in a boat.’

The people who were sitting next to her said: ‘We thought everything was lost that we would never hear our music again, never see our dance.’ They could not stop crying; people wept through the entire length of the performance.

It was a kind of rebirth: a moment when the grief of survival became indistinguishable from the joy of living. (45)

This indefinable moment is the essence of art and, perhaps, the essence of the human story. Whether by necessity or by choice we are required to carry on. The relevance of art and literature is less in terms of a distraction from the disaster. It is, in fact, a reiteration of it. But the reiteration not only invokes the evil of the past but also reminds us that we remain and in our presence we have the opportunity for beginnings as much as endings.

This thesis is not attempting to promote an overly optimistic stance, as all the preceding chapters prove. What it does propose is the formulation of a new frame of mediation so that the traumatic may receive a respectful hearing, perhaps not a precise one as
Berger notes, but a hearing all the same. In the hearing we may return art and literature to one of their favourite past-times, to “be the axe for the frozen sea inside us”\textsuperscript{1}

\textsuperscript{1} The original quote by Franz Kafka as it appears in a letter to his friend Oskar Pollak, dated 27\textsuperscript{th} January, 1904.

Altogether. I think we ought to read only books that bite and sting us. If the book we are reading doesn’t shake us awake like a blow to the skull, why bother reading it in the first place? So that it can make us happy, as you put it? Good God, we’d be just as happy if we had no books at all; books that make us happy we could, in a pinch, also write ourselves. What we need are books that hit us like a most painful misfortune, like the death of someone we loved more than we love ourselves, that make us feel as though we had been banished to the woods, far from any human presence, like suicide. A book must be the axe for the frozen sea within us. That is what I believe.