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Research Article

Myth, Memory, and Trauma in Nation-Building Narratives

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ABSTRACT

Nation-building is not only a political process but also a narrative act. It is fundamentally cultural and psychological. Nations are constructed through shared myths, collective memories, and narrative traumas. It is also true that Nations are imagined, remembered, and mythologised into existence through stories. Stories transform different acts into different ideas. Those stories also transform violence into destiny and suffering into sacrifice. This paper examines how myth, cultural memory, and trauma intersect within nation-building narratives. Drawing upon Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities, Jan Aleida Assmann's work on cultural memory and Cathy Caruth's trauma theory. The paper argues that National stories often use painful past events to bring people together and make them feel united, as these stories connect people and make them proud of their nation. While myth provides sense and symbolic continuity, trauma interrupts history and leaves lasting pain that cannot be easily explained or resolved. The paper claims that nation-building narratives operate through selective remembering and strategic forgetting. It is converting historical violence into a foundational myth of unity, generating counter-memories that challenge official national histories. By theorising this tension, the article demonstrates that nationhood is sustained not only by shared memory but also by managed trauma.

KEYWORDS: Collective memory, Cultural memory, National narrative

FULL PAPER

Introduction

Nations are rarely born peacefully. Most nations come into existence through conflicts and struggle. Wars of independence, civil conflicts, partitions, revolutions, and genocides often mark their beginnings. So, creating a nation usually requires fighting for independence, asserting identity or recognising society. Moreover, when it comes to narration, nations narrate their origins. It is also true that during the act of narration, violence is frequently transformed into heroism, suffering into sacrifice, and chaos into destiny. These transformations are not accidental. They are narrative strategies. Benedict Anderson famously defines the nation as "an imagined political community- and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 6). So, what Anderson here tries to say is that a nation is a community of people who believe they belong to it, even if they do not know everyone personally. Still, it has defined boundaries and claims the right to govern itself. So, when it comes to written history or literature, the imagined nature of the nation suggests that identity is produced through storytelling, symbolism, and Selective remembrance. The imagination here is not only fantasy but narrative construction. Nations exist because people tell stories about shared pasts and shared futures. These stories, however, are never neutral. They rely on mythic structures, cultural memory, and often unresolved trauma.

This paper explores how myth, memory, and trauma interact in nation-building narratives. In nation-building, national myths help to create a shared sense of identity. The other side of cultural memory supports this by keeping certain events and stories alive and ignoring others. Moreover, at the same time, trauma can both strengthen and challenge these processes. So, when a nation tells stories about unity at that time, it also carries painful memories. It creates tension. This shows that national stories can be weak and incomplete. Hard experiences can challenge the idea that everyone shares the same history. It also makes us question how and why certain events are remembered while others are forgotten.

Myth as Foundational Narratives

Myth does not mean falsehood. Roland Barthes, in his work Mythologies, suggests, "Myth is a system of communication, that it is a message" (Barthes 107). So, events which happened by chance or because of specific historical circumstances are shown as if they were meant to happen and could not have happened any other way. It presents the chance of events as inevitable and sacred. In nation-building, myth elevates historical struggles into timeless origin stories. So, Myth changes history into something that feels natural and unquestionable. Foundational myths often revolve around heroic leaders, martyrdom, lost homelands, or divine destiny. These myths create what Jan Assmann calls "Cultural Memory," a form of remembrance that

stabilises identity across generations (Assmann 130). Cultural memory selects, organises, and ritualises the past, turning it into a symbolic resource for the present. National myths function as symbolic stories that explain origins, destiny, and moral values. These myths are not necessarily false; rather, they are meaning-making frameworks. Anthony D. Smith argues that modern nations are rooted in pre-modern ethnic myths and symbols, emphasising that "No 'nation- to-be' can survive without a homeland or myth of common origins and descent" (Smith 149). Myth depends upon narrative coherence. It smooths contradictions, minimises internal conflicts and suppresses uncomfortable truths. In doing so, it risks masking the traumatic dimensions of national origins.

Cultural Memory and Selective Remembrance

Myth provides a symbolic origin. The other side of memory provides continuity. Maurice Halbwachs argues that memory is not individual but social: "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories" (Halbwachs 38). Collective memory shapes how nations remember wars, revolutions, and crises. Maurice Halbwachs reminds us that memory is socially framed; it is shaped by collective contexts rather than individual recollection. He says, "there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory: it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection" (Halbwachs 38). Moreover, in nation-building, it relies on these collective frameworks to standardise remembrance in many ways. It is through textbooks, monuments, national holidays, and museums.

Pierre Nora introduces the concept of *lieux de memoire* (Sites of memory). "These *lieux de mémoire* are fundamentally remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it" (12). These sites materialise national narratives, embedding them in physical space. However, such memorialization often reflects state priorities rather than plural experiences. Nation-building often highlights certain memories, events, and stories as official or important, while pushing others into the background where they are rarely remembered. In other words, a nation chooses which parts of its past to celebrate and teach, and which parts to ignore or downplay. This selective remembering plays a major role in shaping national identity. The stories repeated in textbooks, public holidays, monuments, and speeches become the foundation for how people understand their country and themselves. They help create a shared sense of pride, belonging and purpose.

At the same time, memories that are excluded, such as the experiences of minority groups, painful events, or controversial actions, often remain hidden in archives or personal histories. Because of this, national identity is not just built on

history itself but on which parts of history are chosen to be remembered and valued. The process inevitably involves forgetting. As Ernest Renan famously declared, "forgetting is as essential a factor in the creation of a nation" (Renan 11). Nationhood requires the suppression of internal divisions and historical crimes. Thus, cultural memory is not merely preservation but also exclusion. Memory is inherently political. Nations highlight moments of unity and heroism while minimising internal divisions or historical injustices. Anderson explains that national memory requires both remembering and forgetting, observing that "all profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias" (Anderson 204). Strategic forgetting allows nations to move beyond internal conflicts and produce a coherent identity.

Trauma, the emotional core of Nationhood

If myth seeks coherence, trauma introduces rupture. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an experience that is not fully grasped in the moment but returns belatedly, disrupting linear understanding (Caruth 5). Trauma resists integration into smooth narrative arcs. Collective trauma often becomes central to national identity. Jeffrey C. Alexander defines cultural trauma as occurring when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to "a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness" (Alexander 1)

In nation-building narratives, trauma often functions ambivalently. On one hand, collective suffering-colonial oppression, war casualties, and displacement can unify populations. Shared trauma becomes the emotional foundation of unity. On the other hand, unresolved trauma may destabilise national myths by exposing suppressed violence. Trauma both supports and threatens nation-building. It can be mythologised as heroic sacrifice, but can also return as counter-memory, demanding acknowledgement of injustice. Nation- building narratives frequently convert trauma into ideological beliefs or myths. Wars become liberation struggles, massacres become martyrdom, and displacement becomes destiny. This transformation shows suffering as noble or meaningful. Such mythologization serves political purposes. It legitimises authority, fosters unity, and justifies territorial claims. However, this process may obscure internal hierarchies- gendered violence, ethnic marginalisation, caste oppression that complicate the national story. When myth absorbs trauma too seamlessly, it risks denying this overwhelming dimension. The violence becomes symbolic rather than acknowledged as an ethical crisis.

The Interplay of Myth, Memory, and Trauma

Myth, Memory, and Trauma do not operate independently. Myth transforms trauma into heroic sacrifice, memory institutionalises myth through education and ritual, and trauma deepens emotional attachment to mythic narratives. Despite the

dominance of official narratives, counter-memories persist. Michel Foucault describes "counter- memory as resistance to hegemonic historical discourse" (Foucault 160). In post-conflict societies, literature, testimony, and art often function as sites of such resistance. Counter memory exposes the fractures beneath mythic unity. It restores silenced voices and reopens the question of accountability. While national narratives emphasise unity. Counter-memory emphasises plurality. This tension is productive. It prevents the ossification of identity and compels ethical reflection. Without critique, myth becomes dogma. The interplay of myth, memory and trauma raises ethical concerns. Should nations preserve cohesive myths for stability, or should they foreground traumatic truths at the risk of fragmentation? The answer lies not in choosing one over the other but in sustaining dialogue. Myth provides symbolic continuity, memory provides historical consciousness, trauma demands ethical reckoning. Nation- building that suppresses trauma may achieve temporary unity but risks future instability. Conversely, endless reactivation of trauma without narrative integration may hinder reconciliation. The challenge is to acknowledge trauma without instrumentalising it. Cultural memory must remain self-reflexive, recognising its exclusions. History must remain open to testimony and effective truths.

Critical Perspectives

Scholars in postcolonial and cultural studies critique singular national narratives for silencing marginalised voices. National memory may exclude minorities, suppress internal conflicts, and legitimise authoritarian governance. Myth and memory are not inherently oppressive. While myths unify, they can also erase marginalised voices and create a simplified, sometimes inaccurate version of history. Such as storytelling can justify polices or attitudes that favour certain groups over others. Even selective memory risks silencing alternative narratives. For example, focusing on independence heroes may overlook local resistance movements or minority contributions. However, emphasising trauma can also preserve resentment and maintain social divisions. A trauma narrative can have long-term psychological and cultural effects, shaping how citizens perceive themselves and others. They can also serve emancipatory purposes, especially in anti-colonial struggles where reclaiming suppressed histories becomes a form of resistance. Understanding the constructed nature of national narratives allows for more pluralistic and inclusive forms of identity.

Conclusion

Nation-building is strongly rooted in narrative construction. In this construction, Myths provide origin and destiny, collective memory ensures continuity, and trauma supplies emotional intensity and moral urgency. Together, they form the symbolic architecture of national identity. By critically examining myth, memory and

trauma, we better understand how nations maintain unity, justify their authority, and manage complex situations. The competition among these forces reveals that national identity is neither stable nor singular. It is continually negotiated through acts of remembering and forgetting. Trauma cannot be entirely mythologised, nor can myth fully erase trauma. A humane nation-building process requires confronting the violence embedded in its foundations. Only by allowing memory to question myth and trauma to challenge closure can nations move toward ethical self-understanding. In this sense, the future of nationhood depends not on perfect unity but on the courage to remember critically.

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