Betraying the Event
Betraying the Event: Constructions of Victimhood in Contemporary Cultures

Edited by

Fatima Festić

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING
In memory of Edward Said
# Table of Contents

Introduction ................................................................................................ ix  
Fatima Festić

**Part I: Signification from Within and Without**

Chapter One ................................................................................................. 3  
The Constructions of Victimhood in Turkish *Coup d’État* Novels:  
Is Victimhood without Innocence Possible?  
Sibel Irzik

Chapter Two .............................................................................................. 21  
Boutique Multiculturalism and the Fictionalisation of the Victim:  
Selling Minority Narratives in Singapore  
Tamara Wagner

Chapter Three ............................................................................................ 35  
Victimization and its Cures: Representations of South Eastern Europe  
in British Fiction and Drama of the 1990s  
Ludmilla Kostova

**Part II: Sexuality, Gender and Power-pacts**

Chapter Four .............................................................................................. 69  
Architectonics of Abyss: A Female Account of the Theatricality  
of a Holocaust  
Fatima Festić

Chapter Five .............................................................................................. 87  
Contesting the “Private” and “Public”: The Representation of Sex,  
Politics and Culture in the Event(s) of the Jacob Zuma *versus* Kwezi  
Rape Trial in South Africa  
Cheryl Potgieter & Vasu Reddy
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Six</th>
<th>117</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“War is Love”: Gender and War Narratives in Transnational Broadcasting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matteo Stocchetti</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part III: The Spiritual Revisited**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Seven</th>
<th>143</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blood-soaked Words and Silences: Cycles of Victimization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in the Romanian Communist Prisons and After</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pia Brînzeu</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Eight</th>
<th>161</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constructive Suffering of the Master of Sorrows: Against the Addiction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to Power</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel Idalovichi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part IV: Dissolving Rivalries: a Multiple Competition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Nine</th>
<th>185</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beyond the Girardian Appropriation Mimesis, the Platonic Mimesis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Bhabha’s Mimicry: Towards a Democratic and Liberal Culture?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick Imbert</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Contributors: 203
INTRODUCTION

FATIMA FESTIĆ

When Said asks himself the question - which truth, of what, for whom, he soberly answers:

“…in most cases it is possible, I believe, to ascertain whether in fact a massacre was committed or an official cover up produced. The first imperative is to find out what occurred and then why, not as isolated events but as part of an unfolding history whose broad contours include one’s own nation as an actor. The incoherence of the standard foreign policy analysis performed by apologists, strategists and planners is that it concentrates on others as the object of a situation, rarely on ‘our’ involvement and what is wrought. Even more rarely is it compared to a moral norm.

The goal of speaking the truth is, in so administered a mass society as ours, mainly to project a better state of affairs and one that corresponds more closely to a set of moral principles – peace, reconciliation, abatement of suffering – applied to the known facts. This has been called abduction by the American pragmatist philosopher C.S. Peirce...Certainly, in writing and speaking, one’s aim is not to show everyone how right one is, but rather to try to induce a change in the moral climate whereby aggression is seen as such, the unjust punishment of peoples or individuals is either prevented or given up, the recognition of rights and democratic freedoms is established as a norm for everyone, not invidiously for a selected few. Admittedly, however, these are idealistic and often unrealizable aims…”

—Edward Said, Representations of the Intellectual, emphasis mine

The idea for this volume came from the panel “Models of Victimization in Contemporary Cultures”, which I organized in Vienna in December 2005. Cambridge Scholars Publishing suggested that I edit a collection on the topic. This volume makes note of an attempt to sustain a further conversation about changes in the ways the processes of victimization are written out and comprehended. Referring to the language of victimization that, particularly in our contemporariness, bears the weight of victimization itself and to ideologies that write literatures, dictate media, or produce crimes and even devise a vicious reversal of the victimized/
victimizer positions, the volume contributors aim to cast light on some recent instances and modalities of cultural and political constructions of victimhood. We try to identify the repetitive patterns in the processes of victimization in contemporary cultures and developments, as well as reasons for their symptomatic recurrence, and what appears as “innovative” within each of them. We try to suggest a comparative approach that would link different experiences of victimization, possibly enabling a cognitive exchange, and emphasize the necessity of raising the writers’ and readers’ awareness of the narrative consequences of victimizing processes and the policies following on from them.

The starting point is the understanding that in gaining an instrumental part, even becoming a fashion, the victimhood theme has drawn attention to its fascinatory and manipulative aspects, and has asked for a critical reconsideration. However, the appeal to the theme in contemporary theory and humanities is still to be read as heterogeneous. On one side it stems from a much needed reassessment of the empirical – a validation of the experience of the victimized as has been pursued in different phases of the feminist, gender, post-colonial, genocide, and other critically engaged studies, on another side from a theoretical authorial taking of the position of the graphematic power using the real of victim(s) and the real of the fact of an event. Within the later, in any specific cultural and historical context, the matter of narrative production of victimization and of its subsequent, contested reconstructions comes forth.

As a symbolic edifice, already a testimony of its own formation, language also assumes crisis in the function of representation and limits to representation as much as it assumes the representational function itself. Precisely at these points of crisis and limits to representation (consequently the victims’ numbness) the rhetorical constructs of victims can play out the way they often do in the dominant public imagery. The rhetorical and political manipulations with violent inscriptions, abuses, sacrifices or committed atrocities step in at points of victims’ alienation and dissociation not only from their own experiences, but also from their rights, possibilities and conditions to produce their own testimonial narratives, these already being produced “in-the-name-of-victims” for the sake of creating or maintaining the producers’ own positions. Hence for decades, authors as diverse as Walter Benjamin, Edward Said, René Girard, or Catharine MacKinnon (to name just a few who, from different perspectives, discussed this topic) were pointing to the same: every victim is the grounding function of the cultural establishment of its victimizer.
Our interest in the overlapping areas of victimhood and rhetoric aims to hint at the ambiguous manner in which language and images thread their way into the critical discourses of today. We aim to discuss the politicization of victimhood, analyzing the political over-determination of the way it is perceived (or not) in a particular and actual society. Whether the focus is literary, juridical, or the one of the media, whether it implies philosophical or social strata, representations of victimization and victimhood touch very significantly yet often ambiguously upon questions of power and authority.

From whichever perspective we approach this subject, we also come to ask what is the role of temporal element, of an immediate notification of suffering and of the veracity of victim’s presence in a victimizing event, or in producing information about it, and of victim’s (in)ability (technical, psychological, discursive, institutional) to convey the reality of victimization and thus incite the wider trust and response. And further, is that which occurs as formative for attaining the consciousness of being victimized seen as a critical potency in need for recognition, institution and retribution or as a debilitating fixation on identity and memory? In discussing these matters, the following readings attempt to cut through various discursive knots and dead-ends, not merely by analyzing or deconstructing victimization discourses, but also by performatively inscribing into them the real of an event.

When ground is not for figure…

The contested construction of victim often comes along with a recurring element in post-victimization processes: the disavowal, negative affection, even hate on victim’s experience. The understanding of national(ist) revivals before and upon the dissolution of former Yugoslavia and the scapegoat of Bosnia and Herzegovina – for example – has branched out to include the whole array from the most serious scholarly studies to repetitively murderous revisionist attempts, sometimes written by no less serious scholars. Instead of finding a way to confirm the fact that genocide was committed in Bosnia, their abrupt concern with “theory”, “academic freedom” in general and “free speech” on the side of the victimizers has blocked them from understanding the very purpose and meaning of these terms. Then we might think of a complex network of differences (gender, national, religious) employed in the systematic rapes (of tens of thousands) of Bosnian women and of its abusive representations that verbalize rape from the discrepancies in the power
structures. Some representations cunningly assign the crimes to the victimized ethnicity (in most cases the victims were Bosnian Muslim girls and women) or even force out the women’s submissive self-inscription into the nexus of gender and religion in the way that it induces their featuring only as rapable object, or even draws them into an absence and death.

Similarly, the recent debate in France and the law passed on the Armenian genocide (which is something that asks for full consideration by historians, the world community, and the Turkish State), has diverged into representations that show how a recollection of a tragic past of a people is shaped mostly in accordance with the current political interests (i.e. when talks of Turkey entering the European Union were undertaken). Instead of being deemed as an insight into facts and basic truths, the past events are turned into an acknowledgment of a useful understanding of what one or the other side is, and of what actually did (or did not) happen.

Or we can consider the othering of representations as deeply engraved in contemporary theory and philosophy yet failing, for instance, when opening to political and military issues as it is illustrated in the case of Emmanuel Lévinas and discussed in one of the following essays on constructive suffering. The most humanist face that Lévinas exposes – ethically fading in front of and into the face of the Other and from it to the third’s face – nonetheless vanishes if it gets trapped within the interplay of the political and ethical responsibility of Lévinas’ discourse in the context of accommodating it in the surrounding Middle Eastern practice, revealing that his metaethics as such cannot easily withstand the criteria of the security issues as seen and raised by the power-addict culture of the State of Israel. For, there as elsewhere, victims and victimizers can easily switch places, as if it is not a human life in general that should be taken for first and utmost value as Lévinas insists.

My point in referring to these cases is to highlight the extent to which representations and narratives of victimization are always challenged, and both for individuals and institutions something to be misused and exploited, often using a victim as a political metaphor. Refashioned victimhood has surfaced in the most diverse human attempts to produce or retrieve for themselves a consistent narrative, an identity, and a space in the world, yet disavowal of and hate on the real of the power of victim’s experience is something that is still not fully brought into the consciousness of the public sphere. With what does the domain of their
empirical (past or present) threaten today? – we might ask, if the victims have to be re-exposed to such negative affection and consequently, as not speaking for themselves, to twofold or multiple victimization, either in some Other’s discourse (metaphor/figuration/simulation) or in an alienated discourse of their own? Are the victims re-victimized already in allegoric rendering of their suffering, which is often inscribed within larger narratives provided by dominant critical or political discourses, when driven to signify in combats instigated and carried on by others, deprived of any singularity or privacy? Even in well-intentioned or the most motivated narratives, victims’ reality cannot always be approached in purely literal terms because of the pervasiveness of metaphors in human thought and violence inherent in language, in a cultural system and framing institutions; adding to this the communicative conditions and narrative technology that further provide the inferential structure we reason with, we are led to results that are restricted to rhetorical betrayal of victims.

Tamara Wagner’s essay on boutique multiculturalism and the fictionalization of the victim well exemplifies the narrative and socio-political potentials of such a twofold exploitation of the victim in Singapore, and an instrumental dimension of claims to victimization. It shows how self-orientalisation effects a double victimization in minority fiction: to make their narratives sellable, minority fiction writers propel themselves into position of otherness and capitalize on a generalizing exoticism. Their self-victimization is obvious “when they engage both with the neo-orientalism promoted by this very project of remarketing a region’s lesser histories – specifically ‘her-stories’ by multiply victimized women – and a more general marginalisation of minority communities in post-Independence nation states.”

With processes of pre- and post-victimization included, isn’t it that victimization is not localized to a specific event but is multiplying its own appearances and contexts in further commodification of victims as objects of reinscription? Whether disguised or recognized, negative affection plays a constitutive role of support to dominant powers in human affairs. Even the word “victim” most often gets deconstructed in a mere attempt to grasp its referent. Although a victim can be taken as a designation of power and resonance capable of generating some new meaning (“can a non-innocent be a victim, claiming some political option?,” asks Sibel Izik or “can an ‘opportunist’ be a victim, ‘using her rape’ for her ‘promotion?’,” Cheryl Potgieter and Vasu Reddy discuss some raised concerns), it is indeed the victim’s non-discursiveness that threatens to paralyze the establishment of
Introduction

those who caused it. It is the power of the body as the object of suffering that can render as superficial and alterable all functions within the symbolic, the body which can serve as a medium for the return of language to the material and the referential. What is endangered at that point is the prevailing canon within which somebody is “allowed” to be (seen as) a victim.

If everything can always be contested, then who (and in what way) can really be socially recognized as victim and receive possible retribution? As if the dispute-prone character of victimhood exposes the victim’s role as prescribed in advance in some socially endorsed formula or script of sufferer within a unit, institution, community or state onto which there is a response already set up.

One of the following texts takes “tour de force” through sexual/political/cultural discourses and issues arising from a rape trial of a high-ranking South African official, Jacob Zuma – the elected president of the state as of December 2007 – where the criminal act itself disappears into pleading interests of the society and the complainant, Kwezi, gets doubly victimized by the verdict’s acquittal of the accused. Or, as the essay on Turkish military coups fiction shows, some situations or political positions make it very difficult to discern who the victim is – if a victim’s definition implies innocence and a particular victim is politically involved or charged. A more general case, the invasion and occupation of Iraq, was not prevented for the reason that the knowledge to be gained from the wide typologies that imperialism and colonialism stand for, was that the Western view should be transformed only by the insight of their abuse of the native population. Since the Western powers presented themselves as allegedly threatened and provoked on several levels and thus not (directly) seen as the victimizing occupying force, the victim in the case was not really recognizable. The fault was not on the side of the “West” and the occupation was “justified” on the basis of “polarized” and “moralized” attitudes, which is reflected in most transnational broadcasting of the events – yet it also proves to be reversible to its true events-sequence by discourse- and media-analyses, as Matteo Stocchetti’s text shows. Obviously, the incommensurability of victim’s experience by some given scheme, and the complexity of determinants that ground it, go far beyond the presupposed fixity of the concept of victim.
Victim’s differential

In the classic theories of the performative it is claimed that the performances of actual speech acts, written or spoken, are datable singular events in particular historical contexts. This might also lead us to grasp the ambiguity of the betrayal of factual events by the performative ones, that one of implicit meanings and functions of performativity – to produce some events in abolishing others – can be both regressive and progressive. The issue which comes right after, and which is probably best substantiated by Judith Butler’s extensive work on language’s stratified acting, is one of the dialectic of the performative. While the performative undoubtedly stands for the way of reclaiming the experience of being victimized, on the same token it can commit victimization on some other or further horizon. Hence, we have a more thorough understanding of how victimhood is often and in large part untruthfully invented, the work of invention turning victimizers into victims, with little attention paid to the actuality of the victimized and the very event of victimization.

The betraying of that event, eliding the event, evading the event, missing the event, the narrative mis-encounter with the event is the focus of our interest. Each of the following essays talk of a different aspect of the challenge posed by this betrayal of the event and by the persistent need of disclosing of what is behind its constructions, even if behind is widely taken as threatening, non-existing, or even delusion. Certainly we must ask: can the real ever be fully represented? or isn’t it that it always comes under erasure?, but we also keep holding to the simple assurance that only an attempt at representation of the real in an actual performance can bring us closer to the event, make us understand its other contested constructions and foresee the materiality of the effects of its linguistic implications.

The common concern of these essays elucidates the relationship between political and theoretical or aesthetic meanings of representation, rendering as a case in point the above mentioned issue of application of a pattern of values, therefore of cultural power within it: who is assigned the power to represent whom, in institutions and in the texts, and the position of those who are excluded from representation, (made to) exercise their own self-victimization in representation or have their excruciatingly sketched self-representations rejected or deviated. These issues are all linked to an often deeply rooted and quite common inability to recognize and read victimization, yet also to the tendency to suppress the element of difference within it. For, it is the suppression of difference within, and the
hypothesizing of uniformity and identity of the large and often confusing referent of the term *victim*, that consents to the invention and work of the binary victim/victimizer which in turn easily reverses the functions of its constituents and figures through the suppression of the real of a particular victimization, i.e. its *event*. Is then that tendency – the very power, the very interest in the suppression of difference/the particular/the real of a victimization what should be analyzed more thoroughly?

Is that interest somehow exposed and discernible or evident in an existing order – in an order either embraced or enforced, which in conceding victimization to premeditated forms simply manages to revise it into the overall authority? And can the authority of victimization as such be traced down to its linguistic grounds in the “warring forces of signification” itself? Can getting to know a particular interest in difference-suppression within the understanding of the term “victim” direct our reading of victimization and help us bring back a particular victimization to the body victimized in the event that it can speak for itself then?

Attempted answers to these questions are corroborated by similar or same arguments in the treatments of diverse topics in the texts written specifically for this volume, the texts which are in turn organized in four sections: 1. *Signification from Within and Without*, 2. *Sexuality, Gender and Power-pacts*, 3. *The Spiritual Revisited* and, as closure, 4. *Dissolving Rivalries: a multiple competition*. The first section comprises three essays and discusses the representations of victimhood in contemporary fiction from three different backgrounds: Turkish *Coup d’état* novels, women’s “multicultural” narratives in Singapore, and British literary “mentoring and curing” of the changes in South Eastern Europe of the 1990s (mostly in Bulgaria and Romania). The second section offers a Bosnian woman’s account of a possible demarcation between genocide and Holocaust, and some exploration of the critical dimension of the Holocaust topic that dramatizes and subverts its own representational logic. That is followed by two provocative analyses of different instances of obfuscating the private and the public: the first considers various discourses generating from a rape trial of a state official in South Africa, and the second opens the analysis of narrative intelligibility in transnational broadcasting (with reference to the case of Abu Ghraib and similar incidents). Although their subject-areas are different, both texts converge in depicting the same constructions of devious and multi-abusive connections between words and acts. The third section comprises two reflections on attempted overcoming of the misery of the human condition as exemplified in some
of its worst forms, the Jewish Holocaust and the horror of the Romanian communist prisons – discussing Lévinas’ moral-theological endeavor and Lena Constante’s documentary, narrative and artistic records of the years of her solitary confinement and contrasting their philosophy and survival-creativity to their later social, political, and vernacular contexts which have tended to obstruct the transference of their positive attainment. The fourth section, which closes our conversation with some suggestive alternatives to denials of victims’ real and to denials of their endeavors to express it and pass it on, offers a broad range of literary, philosophical, social, economic, and political references emphasizing a contemporary need for a conception of culture as a permanent struggle for legitimization.

This closing underlines the main concern of the previous essays, to expose that the conception of victim as the ground of culture should no longer be taken for granted. For, while this view was brought up timely and wisely by a number of key scholars, to keep thinking in the same direction today would also mean to further support a displacing of victimization and teleological inscribing of it into the “originating” event of culture. Patrick Imbert claims that going beyond the mimetic compulsion, escaping the ideology of identity and its correlates, origin and authenticity, and fostering the production of multiplicity of discourses and self-images along with the alteration of each element is what might effectively transform the elements of such a view. Although certainly it is still utopian for the majority of humankind, as it is Israel Idalovichi’s call for the transition from a position of denying the other to a position of co-existence with the other and the necessity of leaving behind the ontological anticipation of being victimized making a commitment to resolve conflicts through dialogue, this process is gradually taking its course at least in the thinking and intentions of some.

Notes

2 The panel was organized at a major biannual conference in cultural studies taking place in Vienna. In 2005 (Dec. 9-11) the Conference topic was “Innovations and Reproductions in Cultures and Societies.” Therefore, my special thanks go to Herbert Arlt, the Conference Organizer and the Director of the INST.
masculine views (in Jacques Derrida, Sigmund Freud, Wallace Stevens, Nathaniel Hawthorne) of the stories of a failed cure – of women who discommoded the men, so the men tended to become their “curers”.

1 Numerous texts were written by more or less recognized scholars with intentions to reverse the sides of the attackers and the attacked in the 1992-5 military aggression on Bosnia and Herzegovina and the subsequent war there or to level the causes for attacks and for defense or to try to find imaginary “excuses” for the mass rapes. Yet those allegedly “pacifying” attempts coming from Noam Chomsky (See: Atilla Hoare, Marco. “Chomsky’s genocidal denial”, Frontpagemagazine.com. Nov 23. Guardian, Oct 31, Nov 2, 17, 2005), Alain Badiou (2002. Ethics. Translated by Peter Hallward. London, New York: Verso), Slavoj Žižek (1994. The Metastases of Enjoyment: six essays on woman and causality. New York: Verso), etc., most thoroughly testify to the viciousness of the moment that the development of critical thought, philosophy, and the humanities has reached today – that victims of mass atrocities in any part of the world can be ignored, denied, falsely represented in the media, or fully erased in one’s script for the sake of keeping vital/irreplaceable one’s canon of thinking or philosophizing.


7 The text “Architectonics of Abyss: A Female Account of the Theatricality of a Holocaust” was written in September 1999, during my first visit to Sarajevo after its besiege and agony; all other texts are written specifically for this collection within the past two years.
PART I:

SIGNIFICATION FROM WITHIN
AND WITHOUT
Chapter One

The Constructions of Victimhood in Turkish Coup d’État Novels: Is Victimhood Without Innocence Possible?

Sibel Irzik

An understudied form of victimhood is the political kind—that is, victimization of people not on the basis of race, ethnicity, faith, gender, or other qualities that they have in a more or less inescapable way, but on the basis of their conscious political choices and actions. Unlike situations such as the Holocaust, on which recent trauma studies have concentrated, there are no readily available patterns of a specifically political sense of victimhood. The complex dialectics of legal, moral, and political conceptions of guilt and innocence that characterizes these cases often creates difficulties in the conceptualization of the actors and sufferers as victims, even when they are the objects of extreme violence. One might formulate this difficulty as an apparent incompatibility between political notions such as choice, concerted action, and struggle for power, and such notions as helplessness, passivity, and lack of volition often associated with the idea of a victim. It is assumed that victims, by definition, are people who are not responsible for the suffering that befalls them, while political choices and actions naturally entail responsibility.

In the case of the Turkish subgenre of “coup-d’état novels,” the canon of victimhood that has developed in response to this lack of a “natural fit” between politics and victimhood is characterized by various forms of evading the political. In the novels that attempt to depict the violence and suffering inflicted on oppositional groups by the repeated military interventions in Turkey’s recent history, the evasion of the political is evident in the portrayal of both the victims and the victimizers. While the victims are dissociated from their political identities, the victimizers,
portrayed in hopelessly abstract and ambivalent terms if at all, appear unreal and incomprehensible.

My main thesis is that the Turkish novels concerning themselves directly or indirectly with the 1971 and 1980 military coups typically construct their discourses around the innocence of the victims, not acknowledging their political agency either in intention or act. Such a construction of victimhood aims to elicit sympathy and indignation in relation to the persecution of the victims, but it also ironically converges with the repressive state's own discourse of the nation as infantile and in need of guidance and punishment. There are, however, marked differences between the novelistic representations of the two coups despite the continuity in some of the main themes. At least some of these differences reflect social changes that had an impact on the cultural cannons of victimhood. I will therefore preface my discussion with a general account of the political and cultural environment surrounding the two coups and the novelistic subgenre that this environment has arguably produced.

The Military Coups

On September 12th, 1980, Turkey’s latest military takeover to date occurred, apparently ending a cycle of one every decade that started in 1960 and continued with the coup of March 12th, 1971. The 1971 and 1980 coups had many characteristics in common. They were both ostensibly triggered by a political crisis in which the violent struggle between the militant right and the revolutionary left had reached its peak. Especially during the late seventies, in the period leading to the 1980 coup, this crisis had reached such dimensions that an average of 15 to 20 people died every day in street fights, assassinations, struggles with the police, and even struggles between different leftist factions.

It is widely recognized today that this political instability had clear economic roots. According to Çağlar Keyder, for example, during the three decades following World War II, the hegemony of Turkey’s ruling elite had been maintained through “a strategy of centrally coordinated national development on the import-substitution model,” but in the 1970s “development came to an end due to an inability to perpetuate a largely closed economy.” Consequently,

The response of the Turkish political establishment in the 1970s was to perpetuate national-developmentalist rhetoric, borrow dollars abroad, and continue to protect industry, support agriculture and subsidize consumers.
They attempted to control the market by fiat, setting exchange rates and prices at artificial levels, and watched helplessly as shortages grew and a black market flourished. The economic crisis and the social dislocation it instigated fuelled the already raging political struggle between the hardline right and the revolutionary left. The 1980 military coup was thus a response to the economic impasse as well as to political crisis. It ushered in a regime of exception under which the alliance of statist and authoritarian interests succeeded in stalling all attempts to break through its own fog of nationalist ideology.  

This fortification of authoritarian statism through brutal repression of all forms of opposition and an intensified infusion of nationalist ideology was common to both coups, but the 1980 coup was distinguishable from the previous one not only in terms of degree, but also in more qualitative ways. In addition to wiping out the opposition in much larger numbers and by even more violent means than the previous one, the military rule following the 1980 coup also engineered important structural and institutional changes that became permanent features of political life in Turkey. Keyder summarizes these changes in the following terms:

The chief institutional legacy of the three years of overt military tutelage (1980-83) was the 1982 Constitution. Under this basic law, the powers of a National Security Council (NSC) were expanded to form what amounted to a parallel government, while the State Security Courts became a parallel legal system with jurisdiction over “crimes against the state”. . . . A Higher education Council was established to oversee the universities, their personnel and syllabuses, and a similar body to regulate the content of all broadcast media. Virtually everything, from foreign and military policy to the structure of civil and political rights, from secondary-school curricula to energy policy, was eventually decided in the monthly meetings of the NSC, invariably along the lines formulated by its secretariat.

The second important feature that distinguished this later coup from the previous one was the radical economic restructuring it made possible. Under the conditions of minimal resistance that the military regime created, and under the civilian governments that followed, the economy was liberalized and Turkey was rapidly inserted as a new market into the neoliberal global economy. New sectors, new economic opportunities and networks emerged as the already unjust income distribution became worse and the economy became much more vulnerable to major crises such as the one that occurred in 2001, from the devastating effects of which the majority of the people have yet to recover.
The effects of globalization were naturally not limited to the economic sphere. The country underwent rapid social and cultural transformations which often deepened the divides among different sections of the population. As in most other societies in the same period of the domination of neoliberal realities and ideologies, a decrease in the willingness to empathize with the poor went hand in hand with a wholesale rejection of socialist ideologies and ideals. This aspect of the post-80s cultural environment has direct consequences for the possibilities of imagining and representing victimhood in the context of the coup.

The two coups shared, of course, the general characteristic of being directed most immediately and most forcefully against the left. The various socialist and revolutionary movements that had emerged during the 60’s and were identified as the cause of the 1971 coup were far from being united and strong enough to present any serious danger to the existing regime. They did not have organic ties with the working and exploited classes they sought to represent and mobilize, and they did not have wide popular support. It was of crucial importance, however, for the psyche of the state elites and of the nation in general, that they presented the first incident in the history of the Republic, in which a political mobilization of significant dimensions and visibility aimed not to reform but to overthrow the existing regime, not to continue the Kemalist project, but to subscribe to a different project altogether. The same can easily be said of the developments that led to the coup of September 12th, 1980. In spite of the increased numbers of activists and the more violent nature of the struggles toward the end of the 70’s, the threat that the radical leftist movements presented were more ideological and psychological than practical. The fact that their political project could not be incorporated unproblematically into the Kemalist narrative of the forward march of the nation toward Western civilization is probably the main reason why recognition of their victimization often necessitated a certain kind of obliviousness to their precise political identity.

Although the two military regimes shared the basic aim of violently repressing democratic and revolutionary opposition against the authoritarian state, the people who suffered from the brutality of this regime constituted a much less homogeneous group in the 1980 coup than had been the case in the previous one. A small but important minority of the people who were imprisoned, tortured, and at least temporarily excluded from the political scene were the extreme rightist militants who had been supported and used by government and state authorities in
various ways and then had gone out of control. More important, the late 70’s and early 80’s were years in which religious and ethnic conflicts increasingly came to the surface. The most visible and threatening among these, of course, was the Kurdish separatist movement, and the military violence duly turned against not only the militants of this movement but the Kurdish minority in general. The accounts of torture practiced in the prison of the southeastern city of Diyarbakır with a predominantly Kurdish population remain unrivaled among similar accounts in their horrifying nature.

This is an important characteristic to take into consideration when discussing the availability of models of victimhood in relation to this coup. The actual victims constituted a heterogeneous group in terms of class, ethnicity, political goals, religious affiliations, and communal identifications. In that heterogeneity, they were very difficult to place unequivocally into a general category of victim with which the general public and the middle class intelligentsia could identify. Consequently, both in public discussions and in literary representations, precisely this heterogeneity remained unmarked and unacknowledged, especially when the aim of these discussions and representations was to recognize the victims as victims. This is noticeable in most of the political novels of the 80s and 90s, and it must also be seen as a reflection of the ethnic and social identities of the majority of their authors and readers. Models of victimhood are shaped to a large extent by those who are able to and do speak in the name of the victims, and by the often unconscious expectations of these “spokespeople” about the audiences to which they appeal.

With respect to political repression and victimization in general, the final balance sheet of the three-year military regime that ended in 1983 displays drastic figures. 650,000 people were taken into police custody and tortured. Police files were created about 1,680,000 people. 388,000 were denied passports. There were 210,000 political prosecutions, the death penalty was demanded for 7,000 of the accused, 517 people were sentenced to death, and 50 of these were executed. 171 deaths were documented as definitely having been caused by torture. 299 people died in prisons, 14 in hunger strikes. 16 people were shot to death while “escaping,” 95 died in “armed struggle with police forces,” and 43 “committed suicide.” 30,000 people were fired from their jobs and 14,000 were expelled from citizenship. 23,677 associations were closed down,
400 journalists prosecuted, nearly a thousand films banned, and tons of newspapers, journals, and books destroyed.⁴

The First Wave of Coup Narratives

As a traumatic event that was bound to leave indelible marks on Turkish people’s, and especially the intelligentsia’s collective memory, the military coup of March 12th, 1971 found prompt reflection, directly and indirectly, in the literature of the 70’s. Most of this literature was produced by authors who were generally sympathetic to the left and who had had different degrees of actual or emotional involvement with the youth activism that had preceded the coup. The predominant focus of this literature was victims and victimization, especially as it found concrete reality and expression in narratives of torture.

In an article titled “March 12th Novels”⁵ Murat Belge provides an excellent survey of the major examples of the literature of the 1971 coup as well as a point of departure to understand the psychosocial dynamics of constructing victimhood within the perimeters of this literature. He first addresses the almost exclusive focus on torture in these novels and how this focus coincides with the primary way in which the coup was perceived by the general public. He attributes this phenomenon to a “secret balance established between torture and questions of guilt” (102). Representing the revolutionaries in fiction, he explains, posed the question of how to view their aims and actions in relation to the laws. There were two alternatives. One could either acknowledge that the revolutionaries were guilty according to the laws, but the laws were wrong in the light of other social values, or one could claim that the revolutionaries were innocent and those who enforced the laws had treated them unjustly. Belge concludes that the predominant tendency in this first wave of coup novels was to subscribe to the latter claim and maintain the innocence of the political activists. The emphasis on torture served to heighten this sense of innocence since it was the context in which the opponents of the system were most clearly victimized and the state was most incontrovertibly guilty. The criminality of the state was emphasized to render the victims innocent by contrast. Without any recognition of the challenge the revolutionaries presented, however, the violence of the state appeared in these representations as simply inexplicable and irrational (104).

Belge observes that this same emphasis on innocence also manifests itself in the tendency to represent the political project of the leftists not as a
Is Victimhood without Innocence Possible?

demand for a new regime outside capitalism, but as a demand for social justice in a much more general sense: “The young are oppressed for wanting what every true progressive and ‘nationalist’ person wants” (108). Some of the examples he cites to illustrate this approach are ludicrous in historical, political, and aesthetic terms. In one instance, the representative of an illegal revolutionary organization lists the fundamental principles of the organization as republicanism, nationalism, statism, secularism, and populism, reproducing the exact list of the principles of the Republican People’s Party, the founding party of the Turkish Republic, headed by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Even when the author has more of a concern with verisimilitude, similar statements are not hard to come by. Belge cites Füruzan’s 47’liler [Born in 1947], for example, where the revolutionary protagonist Emine says to her torturers during her investigation: “I don’t know what your men want from me. We are trying to defend the Constitution of May 27 [1960] against those who violate its laws and the rights it established. If this is a crime, we committed it” (107). The same character has a picture of Atatürk as well as one of Guevara in her room: “‘Is that Atatürk,’ her mother asked, ‘I had never seen that photograph before.’ ‘Yes, it is one of those Independence War photographs of incomparable beauty. The picture of Chief Commander and Veteran Mustafa Kemal’” (108).

In order to account for this strangely docile representation of the leftists, Belge makes a distinction between those who had been “inside” the problematic of the political struggles of the pre-coup years and those who remained “outside” even as sympathizers. His main explanation is that the authors of these novels observed and sympathized with the leftist movements from a distance, and they did not know or understand them well enough to produce convincing representations of them. These authors were not writing from a Marxist perspective. They were not conscious of objective social realities and forces; they could not see the meaning of the revolutionaries’ actions the way they saw them, and thus were able to create only distorted or even caricaturized versions of the people they sought to represent, usually with the best intentions.

Surely, the social background of the authors and their lack of knowledge about the movements themselves must have been an important factor in their failures to bring these characters alive in their fictions and to provide a politically and aesthetically adequate insight into their experiences. With more hindsight than Belge had as he wrote this article in 1976, however, I would like to suggest that the problem is deeper and more
comprehensive. If it had not been so, a literary language more capable of comprehending the political nature of this trauma would eventually emerge, with more voices from “inside the problematic” inevitably finding their way into fiction. But this did not happen. With few exceptions, neither the challenge presented by this unprecedented type of revolt against the system, nor the contradictions and failures of the revolutionaries themselves proved narratable. Even in the few cases in which a closer knowledge of the actual experiences was evident, the leftist protagonists continued to be moralizing, bookish, and naïve, acquiring reality only as victims of torture and persecution. Belge’s judgment at the end of the article remains more or less true to this day: “The thematization of torture in the novel has perhaps served a certain propagandistic purpose, in the sense that it provided a general feeling for the horror of torture. But the novel of the event itself has yet to be written” (113).

My contention is that neither those “inside” the sphere of political struggle nor those outside were completely and consistently free from a sense of guilt and a need to prove their loyalty to the state. The failure to acknowledge the political as a sphere of voluntary action is symptomatic of an insufficiently developed conception of democratic citizenship. So is the tendency to downplay the irreconcilable contradictions between the victims’ goals and the order defended by their victimizers. Within a tradition of an extremely state-centered regulation of political and social life and an atmosphere of paranoid nationalism, the possibilities of imagining and resisting victimization by unconditionally objecting to the violation of human and citizenship rights are severely limited. Instead, the possibility of recognizing victimhood remains predicated on the assertion of innocence and a certain kind of loyalty, not to those in power, certainly, but to the high principles of the state that those in power are supposed to be betraying. It does not seem viable, for example, to hold that torture and the violation of a person’s legal rights are fully reprehensible no matter what the person is accused of and no matter what he or she has actually done.

Perhaps at a more unconscious level, it also does not seem viable to think of a person who has intended and attempted to overthrow the existing social order as a victim. It is hard to imagine a “non-nationalist” political cause as morally acceptable. Accordingly, the follower of such a cause must either be deceived and manipulated, or simply guilty. To such a general “infrastructure” of a model of victimhood, several other characteristics that result from different forms of social conditioning and
prejudice are unconsciously attached. Among the “qualifications” for victimhood, one could cite poverty or rural origins, youth, sensitivity, an artistic temperament, femininity, sexual purity, and the like. Such a conception of innocent victimhood can be maintained only by a willful turning away from the political as such. As a result, politics itself and the state as victimizer become the unrepresentable “real” of the collective trauma.

Post-1980 Narratives of Trauma and Victimhood

In view of the foregoing overview of the March 12th novels, especially of Belge's conclusion that “the novel of the event is yet to be written,” it is interesting to note that the current critical discussions about the relationship between the coups and literature seem to begin with the opposite observation: that unlike March 12th, 1971, which was able to find its expression in literature, the 1980 coup of September 12th was one about which literature remained silent. Although there is much continuity in the limitations and evasions of the coup d’état literature of both periods, this later diagnosis of a difference is also important, especially in order to understand the additional constraints on the construction of victimhood in the post-1980 context.

Let's first consider what is meant by the silence of post-1980 literature about the coup of September 12th. This silence is hard to substantiate in terms of numbers. Although comprehensive bibliographies of the sub-genre do not exist, a quick look at the critical writing about the literature of the earlier coup reveals that the novels and stories commonly referred to are not much more numerous than those published in the 80’s in response to the later coup and its aftermath. In fact, when one considers that the publication of similar novels continued in the following decades, and that there has been a clear upsurge during the 2000’s, with four or five novels published only in 2007, one would have to say that post-1980 literature has been more responsive to the September 12th coup than the literature of the 70’s was to the earlier one. This becomes even truer in view of the fact that the dates of the two coups are so close to each other. Many of the novels written in the late 70’s are “pre-September 12th” novels rather than “post-March 12th.” That is, the political thematics of these novels, especially their characterization of the revolutionaries, reflects the political atmosphere that led to the later coup and the sentiments of the authors about the second wave of revolutionary leftist movements. By this
calculation, the literature focusing on September 12th constitutes a much larger cluster than March 12th literature.

Nevertheless, there is a sound basis for the perception that on March 12th, “the fireball fell much closer to literature.” The writers of this first wave of coup narratives were well-known, established writers of the period, “canonical” at least in the limited sense of constituting the literary scene in the eyes of the predominantly leftist readership. Although most of them were not “within” the political problematic, to use Belge’s phrasing, several had been subjected to state violence, arrested, tortured, and imprisoned, because the military rule was indiscriminate in its efforts to wipe out every form of opposition. In such an environment of total disregard for the appearance of lawfulness, with a permanent threat hanging over all intellectuals, even authors who had not become direct targets of violence and persecution had close emotional ties with people who suffered such fates. Their writings on this theme occupied a significant place in their overall careers as authors, and the presence of these experiences in their texts was direct. So was their indignation and their sympathy for the victims—sentiments they shared with a rather large section of the society as a whole. All these factors, in addition to the fact that social realism in one form or another was still the dominant mode of literary production during the period, made March 12th novels visible as an important sub-genre of the 70’s even though they did not constitute a very large body of writing.

By contrast, many of the coup novels in the early 80’s were written by emerging authors. Although a few among these became major authors during the decades that followed, their work evolved in other directions than the political. In the few cases of already established authors who wrote novels about the 1980 coup soon after it took place, each published only one such novel, and usually not a very successful one. The presence of political figures in these novels was muted and indirect, if not threatening. Adalet Ağaoğlu’s Curfew, probably her least successful novel, and the only one available in English, is one example. In it, a young militant who has been destroyed because he has accidentally killed someone in the course of his political activities lives on in the narrative only as a fond memory, an unfulfilled potential of love, while another is portrayed in the act of putting the final touches on her snow white wedding gown in preparation for the marriage that will cleanse her body from the traces of the rape with a police baton.