UC Merced
TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World

**Title**
Negotiating the testimonial impulse from fictional spaces: Meena Kandasamy's The Gypsy Goddess and Horacio Castellanos Moya's Senselessness

**Permalink**
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0nf1917q

**Journal**
TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World, 12(2)

**ISSN**
2154-1353

**Author**
Venkataraman, Vijaya

**Publication Date**
2025-02-08

**DOI**
10.5070/T4.42498

**Copyright Information**
This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

**Negotiating the testimonial impulse from fictional spaces: Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* and Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Senselessness***

---

VIJAYA VENKATARAMAN
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI

**Abstract**

Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) and Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Senseless* (2004) are both novels based on historical events. While the former chronicles the 1968 massacre of Dalit agricultural workers in Kilvenmani (Tamil Nadu, India) by upper-caste landlords due to caste and class conflicts, the latter thematizes the production and reception of the testimonio in the context of a genocide of Indigenous people in Guatemala that lasted more than thirty years. This essay attempts to read both texts dialogically to offer insights into the epistemic interactions between two parts of the Global South through formal experimentations around ethics, justice, and truth. I argue that both texts use "novel" means to assemble real events from within a testimonial impulse. This unconventional and self-reflexive metafictional mode enables the retrieval of subaltern histories and the assertion of indigenous non-Western perspectives of historical events.

**Keywords:** Testimonio, Dalit literature, Global South, caste, indigenous, systemic violence.

The two novels that I bring together in this work–Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) and Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Senselessness* (2004)–are based on events relating to caste and ethnic violence in India and Guatemala, respectively. Bearing on historical events that left indelible marks on the collective psyche of the people, I argue that both texts engage with ways of representing history and life experiences through fiction and grapple with the difficulties of expressing trauma and memory through language in the context of the debates around the Latin American *testimonio*. The "novel" way in which these texts assemble real events from within a testimonial impulse and use unconventional and self-reflexive metafictional mode allows for retrieving hitherto suppressed subaltern histories from indigenous non-Western perspectives. In so doing, they point to the need for—despite the difficulties—reconstructing plural histories of subaltern experiences and reveal how fiction offers genuine possibilities for engaging with subaltern lived experiences. Further, this epistemic interaction between these two parts of the Global South becomes significant because it uncovers issues of ethics, justice, and truth in contexts of extreme systemic violence inflicted on subaltern subjects. The article will examine the rise of the testimonio and Dalit autobiographies, as well as their move into the fictional space and the narrative strategies that are deployed to reimagine the relationship between literary forms and lived experiences. Finally, the article will

posit that the testimonio has been reinvented through literature as exemplified by these two contemporary writers, who reveal a keen awareness of the debates around the genre in their positioning.

**Testimonio and Dalit Autobiographies**

The testimonio emerged as a genre in Latin America in the decade of the 1960s in the wake of national liberation struggles and peoples' movements against military regimes and state repression. Resisting generic classification and straddling a variety of forms like the autobiography, biography, memoir, picaresque novel, etc., and drawing from ethnography, oral history, and anthropological methods, the testimonio came to be recognized as a distinct genre when the Cuban publishing house Casa de Las Américas instituted a prize in this category. Testimonios produced in the early period were largely mediated texts through which subaltern subjects presented their histories to elicit solidarity. One of the most well-known testimonios is Rigoberta Menchú's *I, Rigoberta Menchú. An Indian Woman from Guatemala*, published in 1983 and translated into English soon after. It narrated the plight of indigenous Guatemalans subjected to a horrific ethnic genocide and succeeded in drawing widespread attention to what was happening in that corner of the world. Narrated to Elizabeth Burgos, the Venezuelan anthropologist, it was to become the center of a raging controversy, with critics claiming that she had not been truthful in her account.[1] The controversy provided an opportunity for academics and critics to revisit the theoretical underpinnings of the genre, with many beginning to argue that the testimonio's moment had passed and its relevance lost. On the other hand, others recognized the role played by the testimonio in foregrounding subaltern voices and histories and argued that it, in fact, was bound to thrive in a neoliberal world with exacerbating disparities. As if to prove a point, the testimonio adapted itself as a genre and took root across cultures and continents, simultaneously carving for itself a space within fiction (Whitlock 197).

Testimonio criticism is a robust example of the transnational epistemic interactions taking place between the Global South, especially in the context of its deployment in Dalit criticism in India. The rise of Dalit autobiographies in the 1990s[2] coincided with the efforts initiated by the predominantly Marxist Subaltern Studies Collective, founded by Indian historians in the 1980s with its focus on recovering suppressed subaltern histories.[3] Between 1982 and 1989, *Subaltern Studies*, the series of volumes inspired by this program, destabilized the "grand narratives" of the independence movements. By re-centering history on the people, on their universe of thought and experience, and their capacity for action and resistance, this collective of historians gave a new impulse to the emergence of the voiceless–that is, of people deprived of history, such as the untouchables, lower castes, and women (Abraham and Misrahi-Barak 235). Motivated by the need

to write non-elitist histories, it succeeded in restoring to subalterns their subjectivity and agency, in recovering their specific sphere of experience and in reconstructing lost voices, and in providing a space for non-metropolitan narratives. It therefore seemed to correspond to the Dalit "agenda" and to the avowed aims of many Dalit activists and writers (Zecchini 70-71).

Most scholars agree that the privileged form consciously used for transmitting these histories was the autobiographical mode, perhaps in recognition of the need to reject translation and recuperation by others and to secure narrative authority for the subject. This helped in positioning the subaltern subject as "a pole of autonomy, assertion, and self-reflexivity" (Poitevin 2002). Zecchini argues that such life narratives served the exemplary function of providing "specific names, faces and narratives to ordinary lives and to people who had hitherto been engulfed in 'indifferentiation'" (74-75). Furthering this idea, Satyanarayana and Rawat also point out that "Dalit vernacular narratives in the twentieth century have conceptualized the category of humiliation not merely as personal but also as informing social and political processes like nationalism and Dalit struggles for personal and political dignity" (2).

Indian scholars of Dalit literature, such as Sharmila Rege, Pramod Nayar, and others, found in testimonio criticism the key to arguing for reading Dalit autobiographies from the testimonial lens. Citing its appropriateness for narrating suppressed histories and memories, individual and collective, of subaltern subjects, the testimonio could become a record of the experiences of oppression of the subaltern subject, both as a victim as well as witness. For instance, Sharmila Rege asserts,

> The entire debate on whether the hateful past should be written and brought into the present suggests the complex relationship between official forgetting, memory, and identity. Dalit life narratives cannot be accused of bringing an undesired past into the present, for they are one of the most direct and accessible ways in which the silence and misrepresentation of Dalits has been countered . . . Dalit life narratives are in fact testimonies, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest, explicitly or implicitly, the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance. (Kindle Locations 350-56)

Just like a testimonio, in Dalit autobiographical narrations too, the intention is not one of literariness but of communicating the situation of a group's oppression, brutalization, and struggle. Rege cites John Beverly's definition of testimonio[4] to emphasize that the narrator claims agency through narration and calls upon the readers to respond actively in judging the situation (Kindle Locations 367). Further, Rege argues that reading Dalit autobiographies in dissonance with the political ideology and practices runs the risk of making a spectacle of Dalit pain and suffering for

non-Dalit readers. Rather, positioning them as testimonios of "caste-based exploitation, everyday resistance, and organized anti-caste struggles" would help in bringing "new insights and theories into elite Brahmanical institutions of academia… When the purpose of reading is one of democratization of knowledges rather than colonization, locating the narratives historically and relationally becomes crucial" (Kindle Locations 39298).

Taking a cue from this, Sara Sindhu Thomas argues:

> The use of the genre of testimonio would require critics/readers to move beyond the traditional genres of literature in order to understand the subjective experiences of Dalits, and to make the upper castes more sensitive to the anguish of Dalit experience and Dalit existence. (239)

Further, Thomas also brings out the political intent intrinsic to the testimonio, especially in the context of women's testimonios:

> Testimonios come close to becoming activists' intervention through the literary domain, and project Dalit writing as being an essentially political act. The testimonios also become innovative cultural texts that re-invent and re-assess the presence of the Dalit woman in the social and political scenario. (258)

Similarly, other scholars like Chattaraj Mukhopadhyay (2018) have described Dalit life narratives in a manner akin to testimonios insofar as they do not serve the purpose of self-glorification or self-indulgence. Rather, "they trace not only individual journeys but also collective journeys" and form the link between the individual and her community. In this sense, "(T)hey can be treated as signifiers of the historically and culturally specific understanding of memory, experiences and identity" (268).

Like the testimonios, Dalit autobiographies, too, are often narrated in spoken language and have been read as acts of defiance on the part of the witnesses and a reflection of the desire for authenticity. Polished literary language has not been considered apt for portraying brutalized lives and experiences. "The Dalit should write as a Dalit," writes the Tamil writer Bama, and ought to disturb "the superficial orderliness of the status quo;" the rules of grammar, syntax, and prosody, the so-called decency of standard languages, "pure, divine, and cultured" (98. Thus, Dalit writers choose to write their testimonies in the language of Dalit reality, that is, the spoken language or the language of the colony (Limbale 33). This choice of a literary style made by early Dalit autobiographers soon came to characterize the genre with only a few exceptions.

**Subaltern life experiences and questions of authenticity**

Echoing the trajectory that the testimonio took, unsurprisingly, Dalit autobiographies too faced attacks for their 'undignified' incursion into the literary field, for purportedly being ahistorical, ethnographic, and unaesthetic expressions of Dalit identity, of limited theoretical import (Gajarawala 170) and for presenting stories of caste oppression and brutality in distasteful language. In this context, Gajarawala argues for the need to read against the grain of postcolonial theories and to look for the sense of historicity, which is expressed by other means, unrecognizable to existing modes of reading. This sense of historicity "is tied up with conceptions of authenticity and lived experience, and articulated through an allusive referentiality as well as a formal, yet iconoclastic, realism" (Gajarawala 169). As Satchidanandan argues, it would do well to remember that "[The] autobiographies of the marginalized perhaps need a different reading strategy. Autobiography can be a means for survival for women, a way of seeking freedom from patriarchal definitions, stereotypical images and expected social roles" (7).

This attack on Dalit literature resonates with the attacks on Rigoberta Menchú's testimonio after her "acceptance" in Western academia. The centrality of the narrator's perspective and the insistence on his/her memory as being valid often raises questions regarding the authenticity of the testimonio and debates the reliability of the 'history' presented by the narrative voice. In her chapter from the book *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature*, Shoshana Felman tries to negotiate this predicament by interrogating the validity of the apparently simple, empirical, documentary mode of the testimonio and argues that it uses the realist narrative form to provide insights into a history that the narrator may not well be in full possession of:

> One does not have to possess or own the truth, in order to effectively bear witness to it; that speech as such is unwittingly testimonial, and that the speaking subject constantly bears witness to a truth that nonetheless continues to escape him, a truth that is, essentially, not available to its own speakers. (15)

Denegri's observation with reference to the 'truth' element in a testimonio, that questions of truth and authenticity have to do with the politics of reading and of how to situate the testimonio vis-à-vis the literary canon, can be extrapolated in approaching Dalit literature. She argues in the context of the truth/authenticity debate about the Latin American testimonio as follows:

> To convey the truth glimpsed through vital experience, s/he must first refract it in order to then reconstruct it and submit it to a new form, which is that imposed by the art of narrating or disposition. What is thus produced will never be the entire truth. Parts of that truth experienced in real life is lost, but in the act of refracting

> and reconstructing it, a new truth, more intense, clearer and more revealing, is discovered. (235)

Denegri echoes Spivak's rhetorical question about whether the subaltern can speak and what happens when s/he speaksto propose that expectations of absolute truth can be reasoned only when the "authentic indigenous subject is viewed as a "noble savage," whose alleged primitiveness keeps him or her closer to some imagined "natural" truth. By this logic, any indigenous person who uses discourse strategically either loses authenticity or is manipulated by external forces outside of his or her control. Therefore, that person must be seen, *de facto*, as a pawn of either the Western colonizers or their revolutionary opponents, whose strategies he or she mimics.

Just as the debate on the truth element of the testimonio problematized the very idea of "authentic" indigenous subjectsand the expectations that lettered intellectuals can have of them, scholars such as Gopal Guru and others advanced the debate around the autobiographical writing of Dalit subjects and their representation by others. They, too, have argued in support of lived experience and that only Dalits have the right to theorize about Dalit experience. Guru contests the ethical position from which non-Dalits theorize Dalit experience, maintaining that such scholars [non-Dalit scholars] choose to theorize Dalit experience standing outside the Dalit experience, and this representation, hence, is epistemologically posterior. (Guru, *The Cracked Mirror* 26)

The other important fallout of the testimonio controversy was that it provided the opportunity for critics and practitioners of the testimonio to reimagine it in terms of its relationship with other similar genres. While some (Beverlyand Gugelberger, *The Real Thing*) continued to position the testimonio outside the literary canon, others like the Guatemalan writer and academic Arturo Arias (*Taking their Wor*), purposefully began to argue for treating the testimonio as a literary text, to free it from the unnecessary burden of truth and authenticity. He argued that the literatures of the peripheries are necessarily non-elitist in character, as the idea of an abysmal socio-cultural distance separating the literary author from the subaltern subject does not usually apply. Arias claims that testimonios have "always led to equivocal perceptions of the self, even within the same cultures, while writing within preconceived notions of cultural meaning" (134). Perhaps, the fact that the testimonio continues to be borne across to new contexts is proof of the fact that the testimonio is not simply a desire but that its reinvention and adaptation to other contexts was but a necessary outcome.

**The Testimonial Impulse in Fiction**

The current times that we live in, with wars, large-scale migrations, displacement of people, the refugee crises, and political turmoil, along with identitarian assertions of various kinds, make it possible for the testimonio to live on. Writing in the context of migrant and refugee narratives, Whitlock argues:

> The hospitality of fiction creates openings for the adaptation and appropriation of refugee life narrative at the ends of testimony. … Here, at the seam where testimony and metafiction are joined, postcolonial life writing 'bears' witness to those 'slaves and monsters' who are the most brutally colonized. (197)

In Guatemala, the trauma and memory of the thirty-six-year-long genocide against the indigenous people continue to haunt present-day writers, and evidently, the testimonio continues to occupy the minds of writers who struggle to find ways to represent the nightmares of their lived experiences while problematizing the contours of such representations. In India too, seventy years since the adoption of a constitution abolishing untouchability, caste atrocities, violence, and discrimination continue to be a part of the everyday reality in most parts of the country. It is in this context that it seems appropriate to reflect upon how fiction has created possibilities for engaging with the testimonio and Dalit experiences through an analysis of the novels that form the corpus of this work.

In the following section of the article, I will explore how literary texts play a role in unsettling assumptions about the relationship between real incidents, documentary truth and notions of justice and engage with the relationship between the literary and the non-literary. The two novels that constitute the corpus of this study can be read as narrators' and readers' encounters with the struggle of individuals and groups to narrativize painful and traumatic events. This struggle epitomizes the need felt by contemporary writers to go beyond the testimonio, without necessarily rejecting it, to write fiction from within the testimonial impulse. Perhaps these novels straddle the aesthetic and the political, offering nuanced versions of alternate truths. The narrative devices that run common are the fragmentary nature of the narrative, ironic and playful metafictional strategies that aim at bringing out the complexities of representing past events negotiated by memories of the past, and the difficulties inherent in representing "true" events.

Meena Kandasamy is a poet, fiction writer, translator, and activist from Tamil Nadu, India, whose writings focus on caste atrocities, linguistic identity, and feminist themes, challenging mainstream writing and politics. Horacio Castellanos Moya is a Salvodorean-born Honduran writer whose fiction centers on the consequences of the prolonged violence in Central America. Both writers have a cosmopolitan identity with access to academic circles internationally and are

well-acquainted with academic debates in the literary field, which is why they engage with issues of representation and contemporary realities through their writing.

**Reclaiming the Truth**

The novel *The Gypsy Goddess* (2014) is based on a historical event of the massacre of forty-four Dalit agricultural workers in Kilvenmani (in Tanjore district in the southern state of Tamil Nadu) on December 25, 1968. The massacre—charring to death of forty-four men, women, and children who took refuge in a hut to save their lives—was engineered by upper caste landlords to crush the strike by agricultural workers demanding higher wages. This marked one of the most horrifying caste brutalities against Dalits in independent India at that time. The caste dimension of this incident was quickly glossed over and erased from public discourse, as the mainstream media largely represented it as a clash between two groups of workers or as an agrarian unrest (Yadav 115). Despite the horrifying nature of the incident, it went underreported in almost all newspapers, perhaps because of the power relations in society. More than forty years later, Meena Kandasamy, through her novel, attempts to reconstruct the incident that left an indelible mark on the collective psyche of the people subjected to violent atrocities based on age-old caste prejudices. Researching extensively on landholding in Tanjore District, the chronicles of the Communist Party, books and oral histories, magazines and newspapers from that period and visiting the place, listening to people who lived through that tragedy, Meena Kandasamy chronicles what she calls "the saddest chapter of Indian history" (The Daily Pao). Her text is a 'novel' way of assembling real events from within the testimonial impulse while drawing attention to the problems of aesthetics through narrative construction.

A significant part of the novel focuses on the advantages or uses of writing a fictional text, as well as the impossibility of writing it. The first part of the novel, "Notes to Story-telling," as well as the Epilogue, discuss the ambiguous position taken by the writer-narrator of the novel, who is unabashed about her reasons for writing fiction. She declares,

> Most people are tired of history, and also tired of history repeating itself, so I am constrained to try a new way to chart and plot my way past their boredom. Since fiction is all about reaching out to an anonymous audience, I shall try and drown my story in non-specificities for the first thousand and eight narrations. (14)

The first chapter is presented like a set of disjointed notes that reveal the difficulties in writing such a story, playfully and ironically pointing to the linguistic failures of a text that is "Tamil in taste, English on the tongue, free of all poetry and prosody, dished out in dandy prose" (12). Moreover, the narrator takes great pain to also insist that her narrative should not be read as "postmodern" novel that would deconstruct all master narratives that can be told. Nor does she

want the reader to expect a typical novel that would showcase exotic India for the West to devour, and the reader is not to expect "a herd of buffalo to walk across every page for the sake of authenticity," just because the novel is set in rural India. The ironical comments by the narrator about the failure of academics, in general, to bring justice to the people of Kilvenmani—nothing was expected of government machinery like the police or even the so-called independent judiciary—strikes hard at the deep-rooted caste iniquities that existed and continue to exist even in Twenty-first century India. As she states,

> Any sociologists and other bored academics who may scour my novel for information about the sexual, alcoholic and deviant indulgences of my protagonists will be sorely disappointed. I am telling a story so that a story gets told, not with the intention that somebody, somewhere, is going to be awarded a PhD for studying the postmodern perversions of this novel. (118)

In reply to a question asked in a fictitious question-and-answer format, the narrator replies that the novel is not "a straight humourless version of events" around "the single biggest caste atrocity in India," nor "a research paper in the *Economic and Political Weekly* [journal], or a balanced press report" (68). Little is to be expected of academic treatises, either. The novelist underscores the dilemma in getting the novel across to its readers through "false-starts" (Mukherjee) and prepares them to leave behind their expectations. From heightened self-awareness to misleading starts, Kandasamy's narrative emphasizes the impossibility of the task at hand, evident in the initial few chapters that aim to establish the writer's role in telling the story.

> So, my attempts to create a piece of fiction out of facts by telling a story from long, long ago, about an Old Woman in a tiny village, have been shelved until it is time for the thousand and ninth narration. Be consoled that to make up for the form being frivolous, the subject shall be serious. (20)

The writer/narrator also acknowledges her unreliability as a woman writer from a third-world country who is writing in a language that is not her own, and the ironic barbs at the scornful remarks by critics and readers who will dismiss her all too easily can be gleaned from the following:

> A first-generation woman novelist evidently working in a second language from that third-world country, literary critics may pooh-pooh and pin me down with prize-orange tartness after reading such a tame line, and prepare to expect nothing more than a domestic dramatic-traumatic tale. Let them jest in peace. (13)

The blurb on the back cover of the novel confirms the self-doubt continually expressed by the narrator and highlights the difficulties of such an endeavor. It reads as follows: "The Gypsy Goddess is both a novel about a true-life massacre and a novel about the impossibility of writing

a novel about a true-life massacre" (Back cover). After all, the narrator seems to ask, can fiction succeed when all else has failed to bring justice to the people of Kilvenmani? The narrator's answer to this question is the novel itself which attempts to defend and authenticate the writer's role in telling the story. Finally, the narrator also insists that the work is a collaborative project and draws the reader into telling the story. She addresses the reader and urges them to not abandon the project with these words:

> Those of you stressed out by this haphazard storytelling, please relax. Stay, those of you who have thought too many times of wandering away. How far away from me can you stray? This is a joint venture. We collaborate on the critical condition that we do not abandon each other. (32)

The narrator also warns the readers not to fall into the trap of considering the "absence of evidence" as the "evidence of absence" in a truly postmodern sense of evasive meanings. She implores the reader to "come and occupy the novel" and to share her zeal to construct meaning and justice for the people of Kilvenmani, "You, being this you, you being no ordinary reader, you being the collective, you being the reader who rights the wrongs, you being the reader who fills in the blanks, you being not only evasive but also anonymous, enter this story." (260)

Finally, like the other text that we analyze, this novel, too, flaunts its materiality by combining quasi-real texts, such as a letter from the Paddy Sellers Association to the Chief Minister, with which the novel begins; the leaflet distributed by the Communist Party to garner public support and opinion and; the proceedings of the High Court, which denied justice to the people for want of evidence. These different layers of texts in *The Gypsy Goddess* can be read from the theoretical lens of intertextuality as defined by Kristeva (1980), whereby the meaning of the text is recreated by the reader, filtered through "codes" imparted by other texts. In the case of Kandasamy's novel, the letter written by the President of the Paddy Sellers Association to the Chief Minister, the pamphlet distributed by the Communist Party to organize the workers or the proceedings of the High Court of Madras all form intertexts strategically placed in the novel. While this could point to the general failure to capture the import of these documents at the time of their publication, this can also be understood as a strategy to compel the reader to revisit and recreate the lost history by correctly reading those documents in their context.

The novel also highlights the subversion of justice when false cases were slapped on the already besieged villagers. It also highlights the cynical position of politicians and journalists, who eventually lose interest in the incident while people continue to nurse their wounds and live: on.

> Everything would die its natural death. The visit of the politicians would fade out and journalists would stop being eager and this news would disappear from the

> headlines and fact-finding missions would be bored of report writing, and life in Kilvenmani would moodily limp back to normal. (195)

The subversion of justice is poignantly narrated, as the people who have experienced this life-shattering, horrific event, have been let down by every institution that could have delivered justice and have no choice but to "exchange its sorrow for insanity." There is no difference between the dead and the living in Kilvenmani.

> The living in Kilvenmani lack life. Everyone is something else: there are the ones who do not eat, the ones who do not talk, the ones who do not bathe, the ones who do not step outside their homes, the ones who do not step inside their homes. (211)

Like the forensic scientists, the police are also meticulous in their observations and speak about the gunshot wounds sustained by coconut trees. But ironically, it was easier to ignore the voices of the living witnesses,

> Because it is a road to nowhere, their reports talk about gunshot wounds sustained by coconut trees. The trees cannot come to court, the trees cannot give testimony, the trees cannot depose, so they are spared the horror of being eyewitnesses. (222)

The High Court judges do not seem to care for the living, as they defend the landlords better than their own lawyers. As experts in ruling-class behavior, they used their understanding of caste and feudal practices to bail out all the accused.

At the end of the novel, a reader, on behalf of all the readers, goes to Kilvenmani to "verify" the story for herself and seeks to interview the Paddy Sellers Association's leader for the sake of "dear old balance and self-screwed neutrality and the latest fad of ethical journalism" (270). However, this attempt at "neutrality" is facetious when all justice is subverted and is hence thwarted by the assassination of the person she seeks to interview. Thus, the attempt to write yet another "anniversary special" write-up of the events of Kilvenmani is thwarted. The only position available to the reader is accepting the story as told by the people of Kilvenmani:

> Dear reader, they also understand–given the timing of your visit and the circumstances under which it has been facilitated–that this is one of those 'anniversary special' stories that you are working on, that, twelve years on, Kilvenmani is a season-ticket for journalists who want to make a pilgrimage into people's memory, that writing an annual one-page article salves not only your conscience, but also everyone else's. You are allowed the privilege of being seen as progressive, the system is allowed the pitfall of being problematic, and the people –potent enough to pay back – are promised paradise for staying pathetic. (271)

Drawing the reader into the text hints at the testimonio's efforts to elicit solidarity from academics and intellectuals and the problems inherent in these relationships. The narrator repeatedly exhorts the reader to "not put down the text for being postmodern" (259); in other words, not to reject it, but to occupy it, and to become a part of the collective struggle for justice.

**The Senselessness of Terror**

The novel *Senselessness* (2004) by Castellanos Moya deploys the testimonio and the autobiography as rhetorical devices to narrate the experiences of the victims of the nightmare of state-sponsored terror. It positions itself to recover the memory of the victims while critically examining their testimonios, the possibilities of justice, and the concept of the archive.

The narrating *I* in *Senselessness*, is a Salvadorean writer and journalist who undertakes the task of editing the final report on genocide[5] against the Indigenous people of an unnamed neighboring Central American country. Employed by the Catholic Church, sitting in the archbishop's office, the narrator takes on a paid assignment to sift through more than one thousand and one hundred pages of testimonios, documentary evidence of the innumerable massacres perpetrated by the army on ordinary Indigenous people. At the beginning of the novel, he is enthusiastic about his job, but as he progresses with the reading of the testimonios, he begins to fear for his life, which intensifies so much that he is finally convinced that he is totally incomplete of the mind, just as the victims whose narratives he reads. His fear reaches levels of paranoia, and at the end of the novel, he abandons the task at hand and the country.

The novel problematizes the issue of the production and reception of the testimonio and the respective positions of the mediator/compiler and reader vis-à-vis the testimonio, using parody and irony as textual strategies. Firstly, the narrator accepts the task of reconstructing the testimonios, not from a position of solidarity but for pecuniary benefits. However, the reading of the testimonio produces an effect in him that he reaches "the overwhelming conclusion that it was the entire population of this country that was not complete in the mind" (Kindle Locations 36-37), which in turn leads him to the conclusion that he too is not complete in the mind. It is evident that the extreme violence and brutality described in the testimonios push him to the brink of madness. The courage of testimonial subjects, who survive the horror and tell their story, contrasts with the cowardice of the narrator, who fails in the role of the committed intellectual or mediator. Through the process of editing, the narrator begins to identify more and more with the witnesses of the massacres. Thus, he imagines himself as:

> the suffering ghost of the civil registrar in a town called Totonicapán … [who] would start to tell his story, always with the fingerless palms of his hands pressing

> together the two halves of his head to keep his brains in place, for I am not a total stranger to magical realism. (Kindle Locations 610-11)

However, instead of empathizing with the victims of this horrifying and senseless violence and torture and being moved to action, he privileges his desire to write fiction and fantasizes about the possibilities of creating some sort of literary collage, using the fragments that he has been obsessively noting down in a diary. Yet, this identification is not quite complete as the narrator realizes that he is only a "copyeditor" and can never quite identify with the souls of the witnesses. "My thoughts playing some kind of disorganized ping-pong game, if at the time I had been a novelist, needless to say, and not just a copyeditor of barbarous cruelties who dreamed of being what he was not." (Kindle Locations 617-18)

The novelist-narrator believes that his obsessive thoughts are a result of an act of imagination, often overly fertile, even sick, or macabre. On the other hand, his reading of the same testimonios as an editor or compiler of the report indicates a reliable and accurate compilation. As La Haije notes, "the distance between the narrator's perspective and that of the indigenous population is never resolved, as the narrator continuously comes to himself, realizing that he is not the victim nor the perpetrator, but a copyeditor" (2017 n.p.) pushed to the brink of madness by reading the testimonial accounts.

Secondly, the writer problematizes the relationship between the testimonio and other literary forms. The narrator is an autobiographical or auto-fictional self, though it is never made explicit. The literariness or the poetic quality of the testimonios moves him. He even compares the style employed in the testimonios with that of the Peruvian poet César Vallejo: "their intense figurative language and their curious syntactic constructions that reminded me of poets like the Peruvian César Vallejo, and I proceeded to read, now with more resolve…" (Kindle Location 212-13). While the content of what he reads does not move him to a proactive position of empathy, the lyrical quality of the text makes an impression on him, as is evident in the following passage,

> Intent on calmly relishing those sentences that seemed so astonishing from a literary point of view, …sentences I could, with luck, later use in some kind of literary collage, but which surprised me above all for their use of repetition and of adverbs, such as this one that said, *What I think is that I think* ...Wow. And this one, *So much suffering we have suffered so much with them* ...: its musicality perplexed me when I first read it, its poetic quality too high not to suspect that it came from some great poet rather than from a very old indigenous woman who with this verse had brought to an end her wrenching testimony, which wasn't the point at the moment. (Kindle Locations 316-20; emphasis in original)

He often imagines the plot of his future novel as being "a story of suspense and adventure" (Kindle Locations 616-18) but simultaneously recognizes the self-centeredness and frivolity associated with such an endeavor "because nobody in his right mind would be interested in writing or publishing or reading yet another novel about murdered indigenous peoples" (Kindle Locations 621-22). The testimonios that he reads relate unimaginable atrocities, but he even imagines himself in the role of the aggressor and confesses that it was almost as if his "transformation into the lieutenant who exploded the heads of new-born babies against beams had been a catharsis, freeing me from the pain accumulated over the one thousand one hundred pages" (Kindle Locations 1233-35) and it is only "the splattering of palpitating brains" (Kindle Locations 1230-31) that brings him back to his senses.

This split between the experiencing and the narrating selves is further highlighted by the chasm between the two. In fact, the simple yet poetic words of the indigenous witness quoted in the text are in stark contrast with the verbose style of the narrator and set apart the two. Moreover, the narrator's views on the lyrical quality of the testimonios also contrast with those of others, including the bishop, who stares at him in stupefaction:

> An indecipherable look in his eyes behind his glasses with tinted lenses and tortoise-shell frames, a look that made me afraid he might see me as a deluded literati seeking poetry where there were only brutal denunciations of crimes against humanity carried out by the army against the indigenous communities of his country, that he would think that I was a simple stylist who wasn't paying any attention to the content of the report, so I abstained from reading any further sentences and instead began to talk about the structure and the table of contents, the psycho-social focus and the classification of the mental afflictions of the victims. (Kindle Locations 574-80)

The reaction of his interlocutor–which is quite the same as the other people he knows and meets during his stay–brings into perspective the relationship between the form and content of the testimonios and reflects upon the authenticity debate that surrounded subaltern narratives, particularly the testimonio. In a sense, the novelist and the reader of *Senselessness* enter a reading/writing task that is like that entrusted to the novel's narrator. Agreeing with Henagar, one could say that all three reading/writing subjects grapple with "how best to engage with marginalized voices and with foreignness or otherness in the texts being read, fictionalized, edited, and/or critiqued" (68).

Castellanos Moya's text has been characterized as "post-testimonial" (Sánchez Prado 79) or "meta-testimonial" (Kokotovic 559). Regardless of its generic categories, what it reveals is the struggle to find ways to reveal suppressed histories and recover the memory, individual as well as collective, of subaltern subjects. Castellanos Moya's text has been read as a parody of the testimonio. In fact, the REMHI report, at times quoted verbatim by the narrator, is the central historical referent in Moya's text, a report presented by the Archdiocese of Guatemala in 1998 entitled *Guatemala: Nunca más. Informe Proyecto de Recuperación de la memoria histórica (REMHI).* (*Guatemala: Never Again. Report of The Recovery of the Historical Memory Project*). The attempt to read this report (testimonios) as literature could be seen as "a means of lessening its impact as merely 'fiction,' rather than fact" (Weiser). Rather than inverting the testimonio, as suggested by Sánchez Prado (82), novels like *Senselessness* use writing, fictional as well as non-fictional, to discuss the effects of what has been termed "oblique violence" (Ortiz Wallner and Mackenbach) on the people who have lived through such experiences. As Thakkar too argues, a novel like *Senselessness* can still be approached and read as testimonio for it shares "the denunciatory and critical impulse of classical *testimonio*, if not their faith in the potential power of social struggle" (57). Such texts that simultaneously problematize the representability of trauma in the testimonio and its representation in fiction suggest that the testimonio survives in newer forms, forcing readers to confront moral and ethical dilemmas in reading practices. By using witnessing as a trope, plot, and *mise en scène*, where the 'witness' is the novelist, the character, and the reader, *Senselessness* proposes a new approach to understanding the production and reception of testimonios. Castellanos Moya uses extracts of testimonios to produce a literary text that combines the literary and aesthetic properties of both testimonio and fiction to produce both affect and action. Fiction, hence, is able to provide the necessary emotional imperative to come to terms with the past. Approaching these narratives as mere works of fiction overlooks their referential qualities, since they incorporate discursive elements from journalism or historical narrative. In contrast, attempts to read them as mere testimonios, subject to verification, would wilfully obscure their literary aspects. (Whitlock 148)

**Conclusion**

The meta-testimonial gestures seen in contemporary fictional texts suggest that the testimonial moment has not passed but still lives on. Testimonios will continue to be produced in Latin America and in other parts of the world for as long as situations of emergency or those that warrant their production and reading remain. Although nearly forty years have passed since the testimonio emerged as a genre and caught the attention of scholars, examples of contemporary fictional texts that revive the past intending to recall trauma and its aftereffects abound, paving the way for re-

imagining the role of testimonial narratives. It is evident that contemporary writers are acutely aware of the debates on truth and authenticity that entrapped the testimonio and the dilemmas and challenges it posed to its practitioners. The relevance of the testimonio remains because it not only continues to display the ability to destabilize hegemonic systems of our society but also forwards possible interpretations, literary or otherwise, to a genre known for flaunting its hybridity and resisting straitjacketing. The testimonio's hybrid and protean character has allowed its spread to other contexts. Lying at the edge of truth and falsehood or fact and fiction, testimonios also permit an understanding of the connections between the two. Thus, approaching the testimonio or testimonial narratives, besides Dalit biographies and autobiographies, from the narrow confines of historical truth or fact or trapping it in literary aesthetics would only present false binaries of truth and falsehood.

Texts such as *The Gypsy Goddess* and *Senselessness* offer ways out of these false dichotomies. By presenting fragmentary texts and real events under the garb of fiction, they straddle the historical document, testimonio, as well as autobiographical narration. These novels also subvert standard novelistic procedure, drawing attention to their textuality and, hence, to the "literary" quality of the testimonios. The unreliability of the narrators is emphasized not only by the fragmentary nature of the texts themselves but also by the playful and ironic appellations to the position held by the narrator vis-à-vis the text in the hands of the reader. The unreliability of the narrator points to the inability to find meaning, which in turn points to the failure of language–whether it be the personal inadequacy of the narrator as in the case of the author in *The Gypsy Goddess*–to represent true life events and experiences faithfully. Interestingly, in *Senselessness* it is portrayed as a failed enterprise–the narrator is doomed to failure–but in the case of Meena Kandasamy's novel, an alternative truth emerges before the reader at the end of the novel as part of the political project undertaken by the narrator and the author. Both *The Gypsy Goddess* and *Senselessness* also point to the failure of reading and representation, whether it be the history of the massacre of Kilvenmani or the testimonios of survivors of the Guatemalan genocide. They also point to the failure of the intellectual project in getting enmeshed in the false debate of truth and authenticity instead of finding new ways of reading. This is what both novels successfully do, offering us new ways to reconstruct history. While Castellanos Moya's text has been critiqued for offering a cynical view of the intellectual's commitment to the testimonio, I would instead read it as the problematizing of the relationship between the intellectual and the subaltern subject. Perhaps the difference between Castellanos Moya and Kandasamy lies in the fact that Kandasamy, being an avowed feminist, brings in the gendered perspective by giving the narrative focus to the

old woman of Kilvenmani, thereby drawing attention to the import of the massacre on women and children who were the principal victims of the attack.

**Notes**

[1] The award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 to Rigoberta Menchú, along with the book's inclusion in the Stanford University reading list, were the primary reasons why the book attracted the wrath of neoconservative assaults on grounds of authenticity. Rigoberta Menchú was denounced as a liar. For a detailed analysis of the controversy, see Arturo Arias (2001).
[2] For a detailed study of Dalit autobiography as a form of subaltern lived experiences, see Raj Kumar (2010).
[3] This group, in its manifesto, introduced the word 'Subaltern', to signify those 'of inferior rank" and to be used to "refer to the general attributes of subordination in South-Asian society, be they expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, work or in any other way" Thus, the term 'subaltern' does not designate a social entity but refers to power relations between the dominant and the dominated who consent to, or resist, their subordination according to their degree of autonomy in relation to the dominant (Guha vii).
[4] John Beverly was the first scholar to attempt a definition, albeit incomplete, of the testimonio in his article "The Margin at the Center" (1989).
[5] The historical referent alluded to in Moya's text is the report presented by the Archdiocese of Guatemala on 24 April 1998 entitled *Guatemala: Nunca más. Informe Proyecto de Recuperación de la memoria histórica (REMHI)*. (*Guatemala: Never Again. Report of The Recovery of the Historical Memory Project*). The brutal assassination of Bishop Juan Gerardi, Coordinator of the Office of Human Rights of the Archdiocese of Guatemala, by the military two days after the release of the report points to the perceived power of the text to reveal suppressed histories and expose those who continued in power in Guatemala even after the supposed return to democracy.

**Works Cited**

Abraham, Joshil K and Judith Misrahi-Barak. *Dalit Literature in India*. Routledge, 2018.

Arias, Arturo. *Taking their Word. Literature and the Signs of Central America*. University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

---. *The Rigoberta Menchú Controversy*. University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

Bama. 'Dalit Literature'. *Indian Literature* no. 197, September–October 199, pp. 97–98.

Beverly, John. "The Margin at the Centre: On Testimonio", *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 35 no. 1, 1989, pp. 11-28. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/mfs.0.0923.

---. "The Real Thing", *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America.* Edited by Georg Gugelberger. Duke University Press, 1997.

Castellanos Moya, Horacio. *Senselessness.* [Translated by Katherine Silver], New Directions Paperbooks (Kindle Edition), 2008. (First published in Spanish as *Insensatez*, Tusquets, 2004)

Chattaraj Mukhopadhyay, Arpita. "Literatures of suffering and resistance: Dalit women's Testimonios and Black women slave narratives – a comparative study". In *Dalit Literatures in India.* Edited by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, Routledge, 2018, pp. 260-72.

Denegri, Francesca. "Testimonio and its Discontents", *Contemporary Latin American Cultural Studies*, Edited by Stephen Hart and Richard Young, Routledge, 2014, pp. 228-38.

Felman, Shoshana and Laub, Dori. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Routledge, 1992.

Gajarawala, Toral Jatin. *Untouchable Fictions: Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste*. Fordham University Press, 2013.

Gugelberger, Georg M. "Remembering: The Post-Testimonio Memoirs of Rigoberta Menchu Tum", *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 25, no. 6, November1998, pp. 62–68. URL: www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2634208.pdf?ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Ftest&refreqid=fastly-default%3Aba01a4f64d91b2a983eb7423710a09a6

---. Ed. *The Real Thing: Testimonial Discourse and Latin America*. Duke University Press, 1997.

Guru, Gopal and Sunder Sarukkai. *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

Henager, Eric. "Fenced-in Readings: Testimonio and Post-Conflict Narrative from Criticism to the U.S. Classroom", *Hispanic Studies Review* vol. 4, no. 1, 2019, pp. 66-79. URL: hispanicstudiesreview.cofc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/HSR-V4-N1-Henager-Eric.pdf.

Kandasamy, Meena. *The Gypsy Goddess*. Fourth Estate, 2014.

---. Interview with Pronoti Datta. 1 June 2015. URL: www.thedailypao.com/meena-kandasamy-i-was-chronicling-one-of-the-saddest-and-most-militant-chapters-of-indian-history/

Kokotovic, Misha. "Testimonio once removed: Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez*", *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* vol. 43, no.3. 2009, pp. 545-62.

Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in language: a semiotic approach to literature and art*. Columbia University Press, 1980.

Kumar, Raj. *Dalit Personal Narratives. Reading Caste, Nation, and Identity*. Orient BlackSwan, 2010.

La Haije, Marileen. "Narration and madness: schizophrenia, paranoia and autofiction in Rodrigo Rey Rosa's *El material humano* and Horacio Castellanos Moya's *Insensatez*", *The Free Library*, University of Northern Colorado, 2017. URL: www.thefreelibrary.com/Narration+and+madness%3a+schizophrenia%2c+paranoia+and+autofiction+in...-a0495830483.

Limbale, Sharan Kumar. *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*. Trans. Alok Mukherjee. Orient Blackswan, [2004] 2010.

Misrahi-Barak, Judith, et al. *Dalit Text. Aesthetics and Politics Re-Imagined.* Routledge, 2020.

Mukherjee, Sumana. *Book review: The Gypsy Goddess*. Livemint. May 10, 2014. Accessed ed 12 Jan. 2017, from www.livemint.com/Leisure/h1DEzUqaoF93mGcartJFRL/Book-Review–The-Gypsy-Goddess.html

Nayar, Pramod K. 'The Politics of Form in Dalit Fiction: Bama's Sangati and Sivakami's The Grip of Change'. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* vol. 18, no. 3, 2011, pp. 365–80.

Ortiz Wallner, Alexandra and Werner Mackenbach. "(De)formaciones: violencia y narrativa en Centroamérica", Iberoamericana (2001). Nueva época, Año 8, No. 32 (December 2008), pp. 81-97. URL: www.iai.spk-berlin.de/fileadmin/dokumentenbibliothek/Iberoamericana/2008/Nr_32/32_Mackenbach_y_Ortiz.pdf.

Pandian, M. S. S. 'Writing Ordinary Lives'. *Economic and Political Weekly no.* 43.38, 2008, pp. 34–40.

Poitevin, Guy. 'Dalit Autobiographical Narratives: Figures of Subaltern Consciousness, Assertion and Identity', Centre for Cooperative Research in Social Sciences, 2002. URL: https://ccrss.org/dalitautobio.htm

Rawat, R S and K. Satyanarayana. *Dalit Studies.* Duke University Press, 2016.

Rege, Sharmila. *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's 'Testimonio'*. New Delhi: Zubaan 2006. Kindle Edition.

Sánchez-Prado, Ignacio M. "La ficción y el momento de peligro: Insensatez de Horacio Castellanos Moya" in *Cuaderno Internacional de Estudios Humanísticos y Literatura* no. 14, 2010, pp. 79-86.

Satchidanandan, K. "Reflections: Autobiography Today". *Indian Literature*, March/April 2010, Vol. 54, No. 2 (256) (March/April 2010), pp. 6-9. URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/23341994.pdf?ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Ftest&refreqid=fastly-default%3Aeb0077626346e0e60f33cb94305c0dc9

Thakkar, Upasana. *Reading testimonio today: Central American literature from 1982 to the present.* University of British Columbia, 2019. [Unpublished Manuscript]

Thomas, Sara Sindhu. "Witnessing and experiencing Dalitness: in defence of Dalit women's Testimonios". In *Dalit Literatures in India*, Edited by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak. Routledge, 2018, pp. 248-59.

Urbina, Nicasio. "Las memorias y las autobiografías como bienes culturales de consume". *Istmo* 2004. URL: http://istmo.denison.edu/n08/articulos/memorias.html

Weiser, Frans. "Present-ing the Past: The Historicized Turn in Horacio Castellanos Moya's Senselessness." *Otherness: Essays and Studies* 2.1 August 2011. URL: https://www.otherness.dk/fileadmin/www.othernessandthearts.org/Publications/Journal_Otherness/Otherness__Essays_and_Studies_2.1/2.Frans_Weiser.pdf

Whitlock, Gillian. *Postcolonial Life Narratives. Testimonial Transactions*, Oxford University Press, 2015.

Yadav, Kanak. "Gentlemen Killers of Kilvenmani: The Politics of Remembering in Meena Kandasamy's *The Gypsy Goddess*." *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* vol. 9, no. 1, 2017, pp. 113–20. DOI: 10.1177/2455328X17691163

Zecchini, Laetitia. "'No name is yours until you speak it': notes towards a contrapuntal reading of Dalit literatures and postcolonial theory." *Dalit Literatures in India*, Edited by Joshil K. Abraham and Judith Misrahi-Barak, Routledge, 2018, pp. 68-85.