RESEARCH REVIEW JOURNALS
Volume-04
Issue-05
May-2019

ISSN: 2455-3085 (Online)
RESEARCH REVIEW International Journal of Multidisciplinary
www.rrjournals.com [UGC Listed Journal no : 44945]

# Monuments to Contemporary Migration

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**ARTICLE DETAILS**

**Article History**
*Published Online: 25 May 2019*

**Keywords**
Monuments, Collective Memory, Memory of Migration, Refugee Crisis in Europe

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**ABSTRACT**

Though migration is a on going phenomena and not an event of the past that needs to be memorialised, the author, instigated by the probing talk of Lubaina Himid : "What are monuments for?", attempts to justify a musealization of migration and presents her ideas on how a monument to migration would make the host society more aware of the hardships of contemporary migrants. A monument to migration can also be a reminder of those who perish in the process of migration. Drawing on Pierre Nora's notion of "Lieux de Memoire", the author argues that the memory of migration and that of migrants contributes to the enrichment of collective memory of the host nation. The questions that arise are: Who holds the claim to a monument of migration? How to best convey the memories of migration without being insensitive to the suffering of migrants? The author comments on a few migration-monuments constructed so far and shares her idea on what aspects should a monument to migration include.

## 1. Introduction

In her seminal talk, 'What are monuments for?'[1], organised as a part of the symposium on 'The monument and the changing city', Lubaina Himid asserts that the contributions of their immigrant populations, especially the Black diaspora, should be made visible on the landscape of imperial cities of Paris and London. Her assertion does not appear startling for it is only right that the diasporas' participation in the process of city building be acknowledged, especially in France and England, two of the most diverse countries on the face of the earth. However, if diasporas of colour, which are already three or more generations old in Europe are not given their due, on what grounds can we seek a monument to migration to memorialise the current stream of migration from Asia and Africa to Europe? To answer this question, let us first ask : What purpose does a monument serve?

## 2. Monuments, Collective memories and National identity:

All individuals have personal memories of the times they live in and the places they inhabit. But these personal memories find resonance with bigger events of the past. For example, we may not have been in New York city when the September 11 attacks happened. But the way the footage of these attacks was repeatedly telecasted on news channels, most of us would be able to recollect where we were and what we were doing when 9/11 happened. These individual recollections produce a " collective memory" of the event. All discourses made henceforth in the commemoration of victims of 9/11, the memorials sanctioned for them, then contribute to the anchoring of this collective memory in the repertoire of individual memories. It is precisely because of this reason that we call monuments our shared heritage since they are what Pierre Nora termed as "lieux de mémoires". Cityscapes act as a stimulus for memory. (Mitter, 2005: 5). The collective memories act as a fuel for our collective identity as members of a community or a nation. We would like to believe that memories exist and evolve organically, yet in reality, what is remembered, or, to be explicit, what must be remembered is largely controlled by the State. Monuments are sanctioned by the State for narratives or events that best support their agenda. To answer the question we first asked, certain sites and/or monuments remain longer in public memory because they represent a particular view of the past; a past which socio political institutions encourage and privilege over other memories. That is why, the Statue of Liberty is such a widely circulated representation of the United States of America, as it symbolizes (or, shall I say, symbolized, prior to Trump era) the USA as an unfinished nation, warmly embracing the incoming migrants and encouraging them to fulfill the American dream, thereby also making them contribute to the growth of the country. An attack on the monuments of a country is clearly an open challenge to the authority of the State. The twin towers of September 11 attack were chosen for a reason. The destruction of Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban was a to the point message: the end of religious tolerance in Afghanistan. Similarly, in the age of ISIS, we hear every now and then, the rumours about attacks on the Eiffel Tower. And we wail vehemently at the very thought of destruction of this symbol of collective French identity.

However, the sum of collective memories of different communities within a nation may not always add up to one coherent national identity and a malaise is bound to crop up when collective memories are contested against each other to best represent the collective identity. It threatens the very fabric of national identity and may as well be reflected through debates and arguments on monuments, as evident in the case of Rambhumi/ Babri Mosque episode in India. In December 1992, a mosque was demolished by members of the far right in India to reclaim the site for Hindus and build a temple there because the land where the Mosque stood was originally (so they say) the place of birth of Ram, a Hindu king (who is given the status of God). The episode led to nationwide protests and

[1] http://incertainplaces.org/projects/what-are-monuments-for-possible-landmarks-on-the-urban-map-london-and-paris-by-lubaina-himid/ (accessed on 12th December 2017)

eventually to debates on rival forms of Indian nationhood: secular vs. Hindu nation. The wiping of a mosque raised doubts in the hearts of Indian Muslims if the narrow and exclusive idea of a Hindu nation also wipes out their right to belong to the country. For the right wing politicians, it was not so much about expulsing Muslims out of the country but more about restoring India to its original identity, i.e., what India was before the invasion of the British and the Mughals.

Nevertheless, turbulent though it may render the political climate of a country for sometime, the debate on monuments is a good thing since it asks "Who also has a claim to the memorials in the city? Where are their memorials?" The real problem occurs when certain collective memories are completely obliterated and suppressed from the national history. Such is the case of France where the role played by immigration in the constitution of the collective memory of the French remained completely repressed in their national identity. (Noiriel,1995: 368). After years of silence, the Musée de l'Histoire de l'Immigration in Paris was formally inaugurated on 16th December 2014. The then President of France, François Hollande, suggested that the immigration museum was to serve as a 'lieu de mémoire' thereby signalling the inclusion of the chapter of immigration in France's recit national. However, the uneasiness of the subject, the reluctance to accept the memory of immigration by L'état français is reflected in its choice of locating the museum in "backwaters of Paris' cultural landscape".

**3. Monuments to contemporary migration:**

If one senses a dilemma in commemorating the difficult past of immigration in a single country, where the migration of colonial subjects was an economically and politically deliberated upon move, where the immigrants were intentionally brought over by France from its former colonies in order to fuel its workforce, one can only begin to imagine the jitters Europe as a whole would experience in face of the project of commemorating the contemporary migration when people fleeing to Europe are considered unwanted and the EU has no clear policy to handle this wave of migration. When we talk of contemporary migration, which is popularly referred to as 'European migrant crisis' in the media, that is, the influx of people from the Middle East and Africa to Europe through the Mediterranean or overland through Southeast Europe, we are already outside the realm of one single national narrative, but are rather located in the domain of transnational narratives and memories. And this is because neither do the migrants come from one particular country, nor do they follow the same trajectory. Yet theirs is again a collective experience which needs to be recorded, archived and institutionalised. Perhaps, we need some time, some distance from the point when the migrant crisis has been resolved before sanctioning a permanent monument of migration and deciding what aspects it should include. Perhaps, it is a task best fulfilled by the 'generation of postmemory' where postmemory describes the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic experiences that preceded their birth but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. (Hirsch, 2008: 103)

To leave the work of commemoration on postmemory is not because of an indifference towards what is happening or disinterest in shouldering the responsibility but rather a disappointment and dismay on the superficiality of commemoration by the governments. Monuments are not constructed only to decorate the cityscape, they are invitations to the bigger stories. More so, in the case of tragic events, they are the symbols of 'le devoir de la mémoire'. Le devoir de la mémoire is the moral obligation to remember a tragic, historical incident and its victims/ survivors in order to ensure that such a tragedy does not occur again. Lubaina Himid puts it more succinctly, "If the monument exists to honour the people who are ignored suppressed or abandoned, when most in peril in the past, it must be now to show your city would behave in a different way given another chance and you would protect and defend these people now." However, the memorial services done for the victims of contemporary migration crisis appear nothing more than lip service of apology by the EU states. To illustrate this point, I pick examples from the commemoration done for migrants trying to enter Europe by crossing the Mediterranean sea.

The now famous Porta di Lampedusa- Porta d'Europe, a memorial for lost and dead migrants, made by the renowned Italian sculptor and painter Mimmo Paladino, and installed under the auspices of UNHCR, surely is a place of reflection for people on the subject of transformative power of the gate of Europe on the lives of migrants. However, an artwork that cost much expenses delivers little to no impact on the actual lives of migrants. Despite the installation of the gate in 2008, as the Maltese Prime Minister, Joseph Muscat said, "As things stand we are building a cemetery within our Mediterranean sea."[2] Another instance is when the Italian Government announced honorary citizenship to the people that died in reaching the island of Lampedusa on 3rd October 2013. The lifeless migrants posed no threat to White, Christian Italy, so they become easy objects of Europe's manifestation of political correctness. On the other hand, unfortunately, the migrants saved from drowning are termed illegal (if they fail to satisfy the terms and conditions for seeking asylum) and even expelled in many cases. Those who remain in reception centres are nothing more than numbers. As was poignantly noted, the migrants are 'more visible dead than alive'.

Apart from the unsuccessful initiatives of remembrance and commemoration made by the State of Italy and international organisations, there are other artworks apparently commemorating the horror of forced migration. One such example is the sculpture Raft of Lampedusa made by British–Guyanese artist Jason deCaires Taylor. Raft of Lampedusa depicts migrants in a dinghy at the base of the sea. The title of the sculpture is a play on The Raft of Medusa, the 19th century seminal painting by Theodore Gericault. While in the painting, the fatigue and despair of people on the raft was evident, in Raft of Lampedusa, the submerged migrants are shown in shorts, as if they are dressed for the beach. Their expressions are not clear either, i.e., they do not give away their state of anguish.

[2] Mediterranean, a cemetery, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24502279, (accessed on 14th December 2017 )

 

Can Raft of Lampedusa be a memorial of contemporary migration? In my opinion, no. No doubt, Raft of Lampedusa "without dictating its politics, as propaganda would, (...) opens up the possible visibility of situations, issues, events, and people and leaves it to its viewers or readers to enact that visibility; to answer its call by seeing." (Bal, Hernandez-Navarro, 2011: 14). But at the same time, we ought to ask a few questions about the artwork: Who is commemorated? How? How can we best convey the stories of victims so as not to 'humiliate the living, feeling sickened in the reality of facing a past guilt' but not be insensitive to their suffering either?

**4. Spaces of Visibility**

The series of questions is not to discourage the entrepreneurs of memory; it is not to imply that we should do nothing about the narratives of people traversing seas and oceans to find better lives at other shores until their memories become stale. Before we come to consensus on the place of memories of migration in the transnational or transcontinental narratives and the rightful way of dignifying the experiences of migrants, we must start to create spaces of visibility for individual migrant voices, stories told by the real actors of mediterranean passage, the migrants themselves, who by relying on the realm of aesthetics have managed to gain visibility and to become 'subjects of power'. (Mazzara, 2015: 450) As defined by Federica Mazzara,

"Spaces of visibility are those where the migrants and those who support them, are promoting a process that aims to put a face on the real actors of mediterranean passage: individuals with names, features and stories."

Focusing again on the Italian case, I look at Askavusa as one such space of visibility, qualifying closest to what a monument of migration should look like. Askavusa is not a statue or a mausoleum or any of your traditional monument structure. It is instead a collective constituted by locals, activists, migrants, artists and cultural mediators working 'to rewrite the history of global migration defending human rights and projecting a different image of migrants who become visible in an undisturbed fashion as dignified individuals.' The move is to let migrants themselves produce their stories of migration and control their narrative. The memories hence stored are both, communicative and cultural. At Askavusa, the embodied experiences of migrants are transmitted in diverse forms: day to day objects, photographs, interviews and short films. These forms of expression are best suited to depict the notion of memory of trauma of migration as opposed to the notion of formal history. One of the main attractions of Askavusa is the exhibition of rescued objects from migrants' boats. Giacomo Sferlazzo, one of the founders of the Askavusa Association had already begun to collect objects in 2005.

It is important to state that when migrants come to Lampedusa, they sail on proper fishermen wooden boats and once they approach the island, the Coast Guard or the Border Police sail from the port of Lampedusa towards the boats, and organize the transfer of the migrants to their own vessels. The boats that are towed to Lampedusa are first registered as proof of a crime – illegal entry in a EU country – and subsequently stored in boat yards in the island or in the local dumping site. The cemetery of the boats, name given by the members of Askavusa to the boat dumping site is the site where the traces of migrants' lives, aspirations and fears can be located in the form of objects left on the boat. The Askavusa members make weekly trips to the cemetery of boats to collect objects which for them, tell not only the story of the journey the unknown owners of these things made to reach Europe, but also the proof of passage of people in the history of the island of Lampedusa. The objects mostly found are Qurans, Bibles, photographs, clothes, and daily use utensils like teapots, glasses and pans. Sometimes, letters too are found which Askavusa members, in collaboration with other partners, translate and conserve. Their exhibition of these objects are unencrypted invitations for people to learn more about migration as one would learn in a museum, for example, in Musée de l'Histoire de l'Immigration at Paris. But Askavusa follows an anti-museum approach in its display of objects.There are no labels or placards to introduce objects or to detail their signification. Their exhibition poster reads:

> "Despite us doing all we can to archive, restore or assign value, the object is in eternal transformation [...]. We therefore believe it is important to leave behind both the expectations of those who look and of the object [...] we believe these objects must be shown and not studied, catalogued, restored or 'shut away' ". (Askavusa blogpress as cited in Vecchi,2016:177)

Next to the exhibition is a mini library dedicated to Thomas Sankara. The books kept there are mainly on the subject of colonialism, post colonialism, capitalism; comprehensively to lure visitors into lectures so that they develop a deeper insight on the subject of migration and thus destroy the belief that the poor people from the Global South are coming to snatch the hard earned prosperity from Global North. These traits of Askavusa make it an intersection of space between art collection and memorial of immigration. A successful monument, as defined by Lubaina Himid, must inspire hope or joy or pride or laughter (...) as sites of contemplation and reflection ideally they should encourage noble thoughts and valiant deeds. May be, Askavusa does not incite joy or laughter, but it recounts the valiant deeds that migrants undertook to reach Lampedusa and instills pride in the efforts that Lampedusa locals and Askavusa members are making to interweave the narratives of migrants with the history of the little island. Their approach is not of othering the migrant subject or rendering them powerless but to enable their participation in the organisation thereby granting them spaces where they are seen and heard. And, to quote Himid again, "To help the people who engage with it to move towards liberation, democracy or equality is that what a monument is for."

**5. Conclusion**

A nation is never made up of a homogeneous collective memory. It is instead made up of collective memories. A memory of migration will eventually become one sub set of national memory. But those whose experiences are to be memorialised should not be forced to reiterate the horrors they lived. The task should rather be taken up by the generation of post memory. The problem with the monuments to contemporary migration that have cropped up in the countries of

 

Southern and South Western Europe is that they serve more as tools of propaganda and less as apparatus of memory. Askavusa, in its anti museum approach, presents migration not as an event of the past but as a phenomenon in transformation, transforming both the new arrivals and the old inhabitants. By providing migrants as space of visibility, Askavusa becomes the best model of what a monument to migration be like. Definitely not an archaic, stagnant monument.

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