

HEMA'S STORY AND AJITH MUNASINGHE

A REPLY

In his comment on my article 'Hema's Story', Ajith Munasinghe (Pravada, May/June 1995) raises questions which are fundamental if a scholar decides to take up a study on such a sensitive issue as experiences with violence indeed are. Let me summarize his questions. First, Munasinghe wonders whether my representation of Hema's story is not another wound inflicted upon her due to my treating her as 'the other', as an object of my study instead of a woman who spoke to me. Secondly, Munasinghe suggests that my representation - in this context, I prefer this term above the term 'discourse' which Munasinghe uses - is of more significance within "an international project on the meaning of violence than an intervention in Hema's predicament". This question, as I perceive it, hides an ethical one, which is: is it at all justified to carry out research on experiences with violence and suffering without the explicit aim of intervening in the predicament of its victims, i.e. the persons interviewed? As such I will take up this question. In the third paragraph of his comment, Munasinghe re-phrases the first question at another level, the level of discourse, and wonders whether I have silenced Hema's "disorienting and unique message".

Let me start with the question whether it is at all justified to carry out research on experiences with violence without the explicit aim of intervening in the predicament of its victims, i.e. the persons interviewed? It is the same question that comes back with, for instance, research on experiences of sexual violence, and on experiences of survivors of Nazi concentration camps or torture chambers which still exist in many countries today. Narrating experiences with violence is painful, and reporting abductions and murders carried out by people in power is dangerous. Anyone who is not a cynical opportunist is aware of this and immediately feels the urge that something beneficial should come out of it in return for the sacrifice made and risk taken. I didn't take this urge lightly, but also wondered whether it was not in the first place an expression of my uneasiness when confronted with suffering caused by politically motivated violence. I was not equipped to offer either relief or protection and didn't raise false expectations in this regard to anyone I spoke with. This left Hema some space to decide whether to talk to me or not. In that sense my encounters with people who spoke to me were negotiated.

This doesn't mean that I did not have an aim. What I was after was some sense of truth, which would start from experiences of the survivor, from, in Munasinghe's words, particularities. In my reconstruction of Hema's story, while being involved in a continuing process of learning how to listen, I tried to sensitize any audience to this exercise of listening, so that the particular stories of men and women like Hema be recognized.

If that is the aim, the question is: how did I listen to the stories of the relatives of the 'disappeared' and killed sons, daughters, husbands wives, sisters, brothers and friends? Moreover, how did I represent this act of listening in my article? Did I turn this into an act of speaking, in a discourse in which I deprived Hema of her subjectivity and treated her story as merely a condition of discourse, as Munasinghe suggests? I don't think so. On the contrary, my argument was and is that Hema's story, as told under the specific circumstances that were prevalent in February 1993, ultimately *resists* discourse. Up to a point, in the context of impunity, it was Hema, like other men and women, who decided so. In that sense I would argue that I presented her as the subject of her own silence.

There is, however, a limit, for Hema, for me, as well as for, as I would suggest, Munasinghe. This limit is the question how to live, how to represent, how to act (intervene) when confronted with a violent death and without a body to mourn over. In other words, how to live, represent, act, when the continuity of life is disrupted and living has become living *as if*... If I would speak of any intervention it is here, at the level of discourse, be it academic discourse or human rights discourse. Here my reconstruction of Hema's story could serve as a 'reminder' to avoid the complacency which so easily accompanies interventionist pretensions.

Finally, Munasinghe opens his comment stating that he has read my article as a citizen engaged in human rights issues. That is the difference between the two of us - at this moment, since I too was engaged in human rights work before. Whereas I tried to represent Hema's particular story with its essential unsolvability, Munasinghe might perceive it as his task to represent Hema as one of the many in order to intervene in her particular predicament. Both positions have their potential, limits and pitfalls. Let us be aware of them.

Therese Onderdenwijngaard ■