



## Echoes of Absence: Unraveling the Theme of Loss in Arko Datta's 'A Woman Mourns a Relative Killed during a Tsunami.'

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**Abstract:** *In the realm of photojournalism, where each image captures a moment suspended in time, the profound narratives woven by photographers extend far beyond mere visual documentation. Arko Datta's acclaimed photograph, 'A Woman Mourns a Relative Killed during a Tsunami,' serves as a poignant testament to the evocative power of this art form. This striking image, having earned prestigious recognition, stands as a visual testament to the universal theme of loss. In the wake of tragedy, photojournalism emerges not only as a chronicler of events but as a conduit for conveying the deep and enduring echoes of absence. This research paper endeavours to delve into the nuanced layers of Datta's photograph, unraveling the thematic intricacies of loss and mourning. As we scrutinize the composition, narrative, and emotional resonance of this award-winning image, the analysis aims to illuminate the transformative potential of photojournalism in encapsulating and conveying the profound human experience of grief. This exploration not only dissects the photograph but also underscores the broader implications of photojournalistic storytelling as a potent force for societal reflection, empathy, and the preservation of collective memory.*

**Key Words:** *Loss, Photojournalism, Arko Datta, Tsunami, Photography, Visual Studies.*

Photography, as an art form, possesses a unique ability to articulate narratives of absence and loss, transcending the boundaries of language and time. In the realm of visual representation, Roland Barthes' exploration of the "punctum" in his seminal work, "Camera Lucida," provides critical insight into the elusive quality of certain photographs that pierce through the veneer of representation, evoking a profound personal response. Barthes' notion of the punctum, often an element that is not explicitly shown but felt, underscores the idea that the power of a photograph lies not only in what is captured within the frame but in what is conspicuously absent, leaving a void that resonates with the viewer's emotions. Susan Sontag, in her essay collection "On Photography," delves into the paradoxical nature of photographs, asserting that they both preserve and betray the passage of time. Photographs, she argues, immortalize moments that are irrevocably gone, creating a haunting sense of absence. Sontag's reflections prompt us to consider the complex interplay between the tangible presence of an image and the intangible void left by what it represents—a duality that becomes particularly poignant in the context of loss.

Furthermore, the work of contemporary photojournalists such as Don McCullin, known for capturing the human toll of conflict and suffering, exemplifies the capacity of photography to convey the profound absence created by war and tragedy. McCullin's images, marked by their stark realism, not only document the visible scars of conflict but also evoke a palpable sense of what has been lost—be it innocence, security, or, tragically, human lives. In navigating the landscape of photography and its inherent connection to absence or loss, these critical perspectives provide a lens through which to interpret the silent narratives woven into the visual fabric of images. Photographs, by their very nature, become vessels for memories, emotions, and the intangible essence of what once was, inviting viewers to confront the complexities of absence and loss through the frozen moments in time that they immortalize.

Arko Datta stands as a luminary in the realm of Indian photojournalism, his lens capturing the ebb and flow of the nation's collective narrative with poignant precision. Hailing from a land pulsating with cultural diversity and societal complexities, Datta's photographic oeuvre reflects an acute sensitivity to the nuanced stories embedded in India's fabric.



From capturing moments of triumph to exposing the harsh realities of adversity, Datta's work transcends the mere documentation of events, delving into the profound human experiences that shape the nation. Born in New Delhi in 1969, he embarked on his journey as a photojournalist at the age of 22 in 1991. After completing his studies in Economics, Datta pursued a master's degree in Journalism and Mass Communication. His career in photojournalism began with the Indian Express in Chennai, followed by a stint at The Telegraph. Datta's professional trajectory also led him to work with Agence France-Press (AFP) before joining Reuters, an internationally acclaimed news agency, in 2001.

Arko Datta's work spans a diverse array of events, earning him international recognition for his photographic prowess. Beyond his role as a photojournalist, Datta co-founded the Udaan School of Photography, with branches in Mumbai, Delhi, and Kolkata, where he imparts his knowledge through various workshops and photography courses. His photographs grace the pages of renowned publications worldwide, including *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *International Herald Tribune*, *Newsweek*, *Washington Post*, and *Time magazine*. Datta's dedication to capturing the human experience is further exemplified by his book, 'Lost Childhood,' addressing the critical issue of child labor and sponsored by the International Labor Organization. His accolades include the prestigious *World Press Photo of the Year* award in 2004, where he also earned the title of *Reuters Photographer of the Year* for his iconic image depicting the human suffering wrought by the Asian tsunami. Recognized for his exceptional talent, Datta has amassed several awards, including those from the *Indian Express Photo Competition*, national photo prizes from the government of India, and recognition in international competitions such as the *Canon International Photo Competition* and the *Publish Asia awards* in Malaysia.

During his career, he has taken a wide range of photographs belonging to different zones such as wars, sports, natural disasters, social causes, national and global events, etc. Some of his famous photographs include the photos of Tsunami in 2004, Mother Teresa's funeral, Gujarat Riots, Olympics in Athens, World Cup in South Africa and conflict photographs of Kashmir, Afghanistan and Iraq. "Datta is, first and foremost, a newshound with a camera in hand. He has chased all types of news stories, both big and small" and "has found himself working amid death and destruction many times" (Bhowmik 1; Burrell 3). Photographing tragedies and traumas does adversely affect him; he conveys his predicament during an interview with Sahni by saying, "You see so much pain, so many emotions and when you come back you aren't the same person you were before" (3). He understands nature of his work and maintains professionalism by reminding himself time and again "why he's at the job" and adds, "the sweetest songs are always the saddest" (Bhowmik 2).

Despite undergoing the post-traumatic stress that is a part of his profession, he manages to perform his duty of being a photojournalist. In the interview with Burrell, he also expresses how he manages to carry out his task in horrific situations, "It comes along with the job. We do the best we can in those situations and I still feel proud to be a photographer because we are able to help in a way by taking photographs and making people aware of what is happening in the world. I take my consolation from that" (2). In 2004, Datta won the award of *World Press Photo of the Year* for Spot News for his photograph of a woman "crying in agony after finding her relative's body post the 2004 Indian tsunami" (S. Joshi 3). The massive Indian Ocean earthquake that occurred on December 26, 2004 resulted in an enormous tsunami, which affected vast regions of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand and India. The power of the earthquake was "eventually determined to be about a magnitude 9.2" and led to large-scale destruction and losses (Lace 18).

As per the data provided by U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), "In total, 227,898 people were killed or were missing and presumed dead and about 1.7 million people were displaced by the earthquake and subsequent tsunami in 14 countries in South Asia and East Africa"<sup>1</sup>. India was one of most adversely affected regions as a result of Tsunami and the most damage was faced by the states of Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. "As per the estimates, over 15,000 lives were lost and thousands were reported missing in India" (Pillai 3). Datta, was working for Reuters at that time and took his iconic photograph in Cuddalore, Tamil Nadu. He tells Burrell in the interview, "I heard the word tsunami and I didn't know what it was. I had no idea what I was getting into and what I would see" (2) and when he reached the location, he saw a grieving set of parents who had lost their eight-year-old son to the disaster. It became difficult for him to maintain his own composure when he witnessed the colossal wreckage the disaster had caused. One cannot but

<sup>1</sup> The complete survey can be accessed at:

<http://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/eqinthenews/2004/us2004slav/#summary>



agree with Burrell who writes that, “It is the news photographer's lot that his or her greatest professional triumphs are likely to be tainted by the knowledge that they are inextricably associated with the tragedy of others” (1). In the interview with him (Burrell), Datta expresses how he managed to maintain his professionalism:

I was trying not to relate to it and to just do my work. [I knew that] If I became emotional I would not be able to do the mechanical stuff. But there were times when I just had to put my hand on a person's shoulder. I have covered a lot of stories in tragic circumstances but never a case like this. (2-3)

The photograph that won one of the world's most prestigious acclaim in photography for him can be accessed at the official page of 'World Press Photo' via the link: [www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/2005/31394/1/2005-Arko-Datta-WY](http://www.worldpressphoto.org/collection/photo/2005/31394/1/2005-Arko-Datta-WY). The caption given with the photograph at the Reuters website reads, “An Indian woman mourns the death of her relative (L) who was killed in the tsunami in Cuddalore, some 180 km (112 miles) south of the southern Indian city of Madras” on “December 28, 2004”. In an interview with Supriya Joshi from the magazine *Better Photography*, Datta explained the build up of circumstances that led him to capturing this photograph in the following words:

There were clusters of people collecting at the shore waiting in anticipation to find their lost relatives. Some time later, a woman's body was being brought to the shore, and one woman recognized her as her family member. Upon seeing her, she immediately broke down. I was there for about five minutes photographing, and kept reminding myself that I was doing my job to keep my sanity and [to] keep me away from depression (3).

Datta also wrote in an article titled “I was Crying Inside”, published in *Business Line* how covering tsunami was different from other projects and how it affected him emotionally:

When I take pictures of people, I take them as they are, without bringing my emotions into it, as it becomes difficult to shoot. After all, taking a picture is a rational process of deciding the shutter speed, depth of field, white balance, choice of focal length, etcetera... and it cannot be done if you get emotional. But for once I couldn't help it. I was crying inside. And then I let my heart rule my shooting. I realised what was affecting me was not death itself, but the reactions of the survivors. (3)

It is exactly this reaction of the survivor that makes for the essence of this photograph. The photograph depicts a woman on the right side of the frame grieving while lying on the sand with her hands outstretched, while on the left side, her dead relative's blood stained hand can be seen. The agony of the woman, wailing with hands open towards the sky carry the major visual weight of the picture. “Deep weeping or wailing communicates and assuages the irreplaceable loss of a self-identity projected onto a particular person who was loved either because of normative expectations or personal involvement and commitment” (Weigert and Hastings 1183). The presence of the hand in left corner is especially significant because it doesn't explicitly depict the gore cause by the disaster but very subtly directs the viewers' emotions towards the suffering and the pain it caused. The composition is especially powerful due to the mood of gloom it creates through its shadows and lighting, rough texture, somber hues and the lines and shapes created by a single slipper, the dead victim's hand, a rope, and another element washed to the shore after the tsunami. The presence of these elements - the rope and the perhaps metallic tape or wires point towards the mysteriousness of the circumstances under which thousands of people died during tsunami with no definite way to ever find out. The expression on the woman's face is pitiable as she sorrowfully either prays or just uncontrollably lies on ground distraught.

Looking at the photograph, the viewer is filled with sympathy and sadness for the loss the disaster caused. This photograph appeared “on the front pages of almost every major news publication on the globe and became one of the most widely published picture of 2004 tsunami (Burrell 1-2). The tsunami aftermath was difficult to cover even for a seasoned photojournalist such as Datta. He writes in the article “I was Crying Inside”:

Those moments were tough, as I walked a fine line, grappling with my own feelings and staying professionally competitive. It is unnatural to witness so much pain and grief, and so often. It completely changes you as a person. What kept me going, as I guess would be the case for other photojournalists as well, is that we play a relevant part in helping people. We play an important role in letting the privileged parts of the world know about the tragedy at ground zero. (2)

The decision to declare Datta's photograph as the prize-winner amongst all other entries was not a difficult one to arrive at. The jury member Kathy Ryan, the picture editor of *The New York Times Magazine* in 2004 described Datta's



photograph as “a graphic, historical, and starkly emotional picture”<sup>2</sup>. Further, Teresa Ha quotes to us through her book *Popular Photography*, the Jury chair Diego Goldberg’s comments that, “There was a deliberate choice to tell the enormity of the story by focusing on a private moment. There was no need to see thousands of bodies or immense destruction: The lonely cry of this woman and the hand that appears as intruding in the image has a strong emotional impact. At the same time, it is subtle and delicate” (98). The photo garnered praises from almost all across the world. Ha also cites Mayes’ high commendation of the photograph in her words, “This particular picture [is] very raw journalism. It was taken within days of the disaster, and the photographer is just reacting to the events. But . . . he didn’t try to shock or horrify. You can see the woman’s hands scratching the sand in desperation. You can sense that one woman’s pain” (98). The photograph became so popular that it went on to become a Dutch postage stamp published on *World Press Photo’s* 50th anniversary (Pillai 3; S. Joshi 3). Though Datta was happy to get worldwide recognition for his work, he was also saddened by the fact that his acclaim rested on an assignment where human tragedy was involved. He tells Burrell, “You cannot really feel too happy. There’s so much sorrow that you really can’t enjoy the fact that all the papers have carried your pictures” (1).

Despite the mixed emotions that Datta felt on receiving the award, he tells Bhowmik that what actually made him feel better and made the award “doubly” special was the fact that his winning the award also won laurel for his country as the news everywhere read, “Indian photographer bags World Press Photo Award” (1). The picture editors at Reuters were proud of his work. Gary Hershorn, the news editor for pictures in America, was quoted saying, “From the moment I saw Arko’s picture I knew immediately it was something special. It conveyed all the emotion of the tragedy of the tsunami. Many people told me that they stared at that woman trying to understand the emotion she was feeling” (Ganguly 2). He further added, “Arko is a gifted photographer who covered an emotionally draining story in his home country of India with the utmost of professionalism. His pictures amazed me.” In times of tragedies and disasters, though photojournalists have to be on the site and capture what they see/find through their lens professionally, their work, when published create far reaching impact and help in procuring aid or acting as a tool for social change.

Datta writes in his article “I was Crying Inside” that his coverage of tsunami which stretched from Tamil Nadu to certain zones in Sri Lanka, helped in affecting the viewers and prompting them to come forward and proactively help the victims. He writes, “Eventually, images from all the tsunami-affected regions across South Asia brought out a massive outpouring of generosity, as people extended themselves to support those affected” (3). Writing in the November 2005 issue of *Asians in Media (AIM)* magazine, Tina Junday, a journalist informs us that, “The impact of such a photograph instigated a world-wide response in news reports. Charity organizations such as *British Red Cross* and *World Emergency Relief* have unveiled her images to boost donations after the media attention it received”. Five years after taking this photograph, Supriya Joshi tells us that Datta visited the same place where it was captured and looked for the same woman in the photograph. Datta found the woman easily since his photograph had made her famous. He tells S. Joshi that meeting the subject of his iconic photograph “was a joyous reunion” and that they “were both excited to see each other. In fact” he says, “she had a cut-out of the image I took of hers along with my own photograph. It was a humbling experience” (3).

As a photojournalist, Datta’s focus has always been on showcasing the plight of people as a result of calamities, disasters or tragedies. His aim is to depict the sadness that such events leave behind rather than to shoot the dead bodies or the gruesomeness at the site of occurrence. The essence of most of his photographs is the ‘loss’ experienced by people and disorientation the aftermath of such events brings in the lives of the survivors. How the viewers respond to the photograph depends a lot upon what the artist wishes to show. According to W. J. Stillman, it is the artist’s skills which “awaken in us, by some association, a certain feeling which underlies the impression made on the sense, and which we call sentiment”<sup>3</sup> (Brown and Phu 10). When we attempt to recall an event in the past, the mental images of the event play a crucial role. Photographs in media impinge on our minds and shape these mental images we have of what we experience or see. “The photographs are a kind of memorandum, a document to authenticate the text. [They act as evidence] and are not determined solely by associations, but by their materiality” (Alfred and Marie 3).

<sup>2</sup> This quotation has been taken from BBC News article titled “Indian Wins Top Photography Award” published at BBC News website. The article can be accessed at: <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/4257127.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4257127.stm)>

<sup>3</sup> Brown and Phu further cite the reference as, “W. J. Stillman, “The Art Side of Photography,” *Photographic Times and American Photographer* (1889): 217–220 (quotes 217–218)”



A good photojournalist can create a wave of change through his works by using the ability of photographs to create affect and modify or alter viewers' behaviour. By capturing the pain of people and how they live after a disaster or tragedy, photographs can become "a potentially open-ended form of testimony to, and a call for, a new way of seeing—what Benjamin describes in a different but related context as 'the history of how a person *lives on*, and precisely how this afterlife, with its own history, is embedded in life'"<sup>4</sup> (Baer 182). Datta's works concern themselves with the effects the incidents of pain and loss have on the victims and the survivors. Tanvi Mishra writes in her article on Datta that "his projects have many overlapping concerns, such as environmental degradation, climate change", "socio-cultural aspect" [of things], "gender dynamics", "class", etc. (1-2). Datta's photographs emotionally pique the viewers and encourage them to look at the situation with a sympathetic and humanitarian perspective. Through his photographs he has symbolically immortalized the pain that tragedies and disasters bring in the lives of the victims and the families of the deceased. Bhowmik wrote in his article *Snapper on the Spot* that Datta "pioneered Indian photojournalism and took the profession to a new level and understanding" (2).

Portraying the emotional reactions of the people as consequence of loss they bear due to the dire circumstances they face, Datta's photojournalistic works have created photographic entities with deep denotative meanings. Weigert and Hastings write, "Loss can occur at a number of levels of human existence: parts or functions of the body; value or symbolic possessions; interactional or significant others; social or cultural symbols or meanings; and finally, moral or spiritual beliefs and values" (1171). In the light of the above statement, if one looks at Datta's wide variety of works, one may say that his photographs embody multiple themes and continue to tell the stories of humanity's experience of loss and trauma and the after effects of such losses on the characters and identities of people. The greatest loss however, remains the death of the loved ones, especially a family member and leads to loss of identity of the self. It is not only the "the loss of the deceased family member but also that part of self embodied in the concerted identity constituted by the relationship with the deceased" (Weigert and Hastings 1176). Photographs of trauma historicize the pain experienced by one generation and can convey that sense of loss to future generations.

As a photojournalist, Datta had his set of difficult moments when he had to cover tragic events and yet remain emotionally distant. There were moments in his career when he was face to face with "the wave of death, mourning and mass burials" and was so affected that he "grappled with the meaning of life itself" ("I was crying inside 1). He narrates in his article "I was crying inside" the irony that struck him while he'd been covering the tsunami aftermath and received a call from his wife from whom he began to enquire about the well being of his family members. "In the course of the conversation", he says, "I asked her if everything was okay at home. And the moment I finished my sentence, I felt a pang of guilt . . . I was standing on the debris of someone's home" (2). He expresses his feelings to Bhowmik about how it feels on winning awards for photographs that depict tragedies faced by other people:

"I don't shoot anything with the thought of an award or prize. I am on assignment, on a job and I have to deliver the goods. But I'd be lying if I say that all the tragedy and mayhem does not affect me. It does and very much so, but I tell myself 'Arko you have work to do'. It is an emotional experience and the award is just a bonus" (1-2).

As viewers looking at photographs of trauma and loss, we witness "a mechanically recorded instant that was not necessarily registered by the subject's own consciousness" (Baer 8) since "traumatic experiences not only distance and estrange the onlooker but are inherently marked by a rift between the victim and his or her experience" (Baer 20). Baer's "traumatic" theory of photography "proposes that in this way photography shares the structure of traumatic memory" (Meek 51). There is a strong link between photographs of trauma and loss, and memory. In many trauma theories, "trauma is described as an impression of an overwhelming reality on the mind, which leads to a deformation of the memory" (Alfred and Marie 3). Thus viewing photographs of traumatic nature can change people's memories

<sup>4</sup> In a footnote to this quote, Baer has referenced page 149 from the book *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940* edited by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, published by University of Chicago Press in 1994.



and the way they understand such events. Datta's photographs offer to the viewers the experience of being in the shoes of the subjects, consciously or unconsciously (as in the case of traumatic experiences) going through disturbing times.

Datta's works serve both juridical and memorial functions as defined by Martine Hawkes in her paper titled "Exhibiting Loss and Salvaging the Everyday: Photography, Objects and the Missing". At one level, his photographs of disasters help in identifying the dead victims and the survivors serving the juridical function and on second level, his photographs serve the memorial function by marking the "everyday impacts of traumatic event" (Hawkes 68). Better understanding of Datta's works can be achieved by "an understanding of the collective dimensions" of social suffering, "multiple contexts" and "the knowledge and practices of cultural and social systems and the power and positioning of political struggles enacted on individual, family, community and national level"<sup>5</sup> (Kirmayer et al. 170). As a photojournalist, Datta is one of India's finest and his works continue to affect the audience by arousing emotions such as compassion and sympathy. His photographs have far reaching implications on the personal and political lives of people. On being asked by S. Joshi what he would like his legacy to be, Datta replied:

I think I am too young to leave a legacy! However, on an individual level, I want to be remembered as an honest photographer, whose work made a difference, even if it was to one person. On a professional level, I hope I inspire the younger generation to take up photojournalism and do it to the best of their ability. (3)

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Arko Datta's contributions to Indian photojournalism transcend the role of a mere chronicler; they embody a profound narrative that encapsulates the pulsating heart of a nation marked by its rich tapestry of culture, resilience, and struggle. Through his lens, we traverse the diverse landscapes of India, not merely as spectators but as participants in the shared human experience that defines the subcontinent. Datta's ability to encapsulate the nuanced stories of joy and sorrow, celebration and hardship, elevates his work to a realm where photojournalism becomes a form of cultural preservation and societal reflection. As we reflect on the body of Datta's work, it becomes evident that his visual storytelling goes beyond the superficial, offering a glimpse into the soul of a nation grappling with its complexities. In the context of Indian photojournalism, Datta emerges not just as a photographer but as a visual poet, weaving narratives that resonate with authenticity and evoke a deeper understanding of the myriad emotions that define the Indian experience.

In an age where images wield significant influence in shaping perceptions, Arko Datta's legacy stands as a testament to the transformative power of photojournalism. His work encourages a continual engagement with the narratives that unfold within each frame, fostering empathy, understanding, and an appreciation for the multiplicity of stories that make up the tapestry of Indian life. In celebrating Datta's contributions, we also celebrate the enduring spirit of Indian photojournalism—a dynamic force that has the potential to not only document history but to shape and define it.

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