

Oroumiehchiha, Hossein

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Unveiling Trauma Through Literature: Key Insights and Theatrical Perspectives

Hossein Oroumiehchiha

Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja (eds.). *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*. London: Routledge, 2020. 452 pp. ISBN 9781032570358.

[reviews]

The editors Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja published *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* in 2020. In this publication, the invited contributors explore various connections between literature and trauma and provide a detailed understanding of how trauma is depicted in literature. This volume serves as a testament to the richness and extensiveness of possible engagements within the field of trauma studies, with contributions from numerous scholars across various disciplines and locations.

Davis and Meretoja divided the book into five parts, each dealing with a particular aspect of trauma and the way it is portrayed in literature. Part I, entitled ‘Sources and Inspirations’ (9–88), serves as a strong introduction that situates the development of trauma theory and its scholarly history. This part provides valuable information to further the reader’s understanding of trauma studies’ philosophical, psychological, and cultural frameworks before introducing the book’s following parts. The book explores the concept of trauma through the works of key authors and theorists who have made significant contributions to the field, such as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Cathy Caruth – who also contributed to the last chapter of this part, titled ‘Trauma, Time, and Address’ (79–88). It traces the

evolution of trauma-related concepts and theories by examining the ideas put forth by these influential figures. The differentiation of trauma in the broader research context is essential for the readers to familiarize themselves with the subject and recognize the richness of trauma research as an interdisciplinary field intersecting with other cultures, philosophies, and study fields.

Part II, titled ‘Key Concepts’ (89–184), delves into subjects integral to the theory of trauma, such as victimhood, perpetrator trauma, and witnessing. Feminist and postmodern concepts are used by the authors in this part to indicate the importance of these concerns in the complex phenomenology of trauma. Six chapters allow the reader to acquire a rich and profound understanding of trauma as well as the means of its representation. For instance, analyzing the chapter on victimhood circumscribes the topic, setting the focus on how social, political, and cultural factors influence our perceptions of the victim and how these aspects manifest in the trauma literature. Similarly, the chapter on perpetrator trauma offers the reader a critical reflection on the binaries of victim-perpetrator and argues for a more nuanced view of trauma that acknowledges psychological and moral aspects of the process.

Part III (185–284) shifts the focus from narrative analysis to examine trauma through a range of critical lenses, including cognitive approaches, the influence of the digital age on trauma representation, and the intersection of trauma with global issues and modernity. This part highlights the evolving nature of trauma studies and the importance of considering new perspectives in understanding and representing trauma in the contemporary world. The editors and the authors work with the theories and methods relevant to globalisation and the contemporary world, including posthuman, ecocritical, and digital perspectives, to reveal how applying these approaches to trauma analysis can help expand the horizons of understanding it.

One strength of the book is that it dedicates Part IV (285–360) to exploring trauma across various media, including fiction, poetry, life-writing, graphic narratives, and theatre/performance. This multidisciplinary approach sets it apart from other works in the field, such as *Trauma and Literature*, published by Cambridge as part of the Cambridge Critical Concepts series in 2018 and edited by J. Roger Kurtz, which primarily focuses on trauma in literature. By encompassing a broader range of media, *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* offers a more comprehensive examination of how trauma is represented and explored in different artistic forms, though it may not delve as deeply into each medium as Kurtz's book, which provides a more focused and exhaustive analysis of trauma in literature. The chapters in Part IV provide rich discussions of how trauma is depicted and negotiated in selected prose and poetic texts, as well as in life writing

and graphic narratives. In the context of the authors' examination of how meaning is constructed in various genres and media, and how these respond to and engage with specific methods in various ways and for various purposes to support the idea of trauma and torture. For example, the chapter on fiction explores how literary characters and authors employ plot, characterization, and symbolism to depict the psychological and emotional effects of traumatic incidents. On the other hand, the chapter on poetry reflects on how poetic genre and language can recreate the notion of a broken and unreliable traumatic memory. However, the chapter that can mainly be recommended as the highlight of Part IV is Patrick Duggan's piece entitled 'Trauma and Drama/Theatre/Performance'. In this intelligent and witty text, Duggan presents a systematic and engaging overview of how trauma is understood and represented on the stage. To support his arguments, the author references the spectacles of ancient Greek drama and the contemporary plays that shed light on the issue.

In the chapter, Duggan effectively uses examples from specific plays by Sarah Kane, Caryl Churchill, and Martin McDonagh to illustrate how these playwrights employ various techniques to confront audiences with the reality of trauma. For instance, Kane's realism and utilitarianism in her drama – using plays such as *Blasted* and *Cleaned* – draw the viewers into the real-life experience of violent trauma. Through multiple shifting timelines and the aesthetics of interruption that characterize her dramatic narratives in *Top Girls* and *Love and Information*, Churchill depicts how the process of narrative and mnemonic fragmentation is the consequence

of traumatic histories. McDonagh's comedies of menace highlight the pain and the bizarre circumstances that often surround them and force the viewers to reconsider prejudices within the victim/perpetrator paradigms familiar from *The Pillowman* or *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*.

The chapter also seeks to discuss the background as to how trauma has been represented in theatre in the course of developing trauma theory and the ways that the playwrights have created techniques of representation of trauma experiences. Therefore, the audience can easily follow how Duggan aligns relations between the primary ideas of erasure, acting out, and working through trauma and how such concepts are reflected in theatre performances. The author also examines the dynamics of translation and staging the unspeakable, encompassing realistic and avant-garde approaches adopted in the theatre. However, Duggan highlights the ethical reasons behind staging and explores trauma as material for the theatrical performance. He discusses the role of theatre professionals and their obligations concerning the portrayal of the matters in question and the effects the content could have on the performers and the audience members. As demonstrated throughout the article, Duggan seeks to manifest how the theatre can act as a site for witnessing the traumatic while understanding the possibilities of re-traumatisation and the imperative need to tread the path safely.

This brings another crucial strength of Duggan's chapter into consideration: in his argument, the audience plays a crucial role in portraying trauma. Through the focus on how the audiences relate and even empathize, as well as their range of thoughts and feelings regarding the depic-

tion of trauma on the stage, the author highlights the theatrical platform's seemingly endless possibilities in promoting positive change within society. Duggan also points out that when a play depicts an event that had an impact on the audience members, this results in making witnesses of the viewers who are conscious of the fact that they are not going to be able to prevent the catastrophe for the second time, thereby helping them face many traumatic scenarios. It would be unfair to criticize Duggan for not having enough space to elaborate; the fact that the author can propose both a contextual framework for analyzing representations of trauma on the modern stage and highly detailed case studies of specific plays and performances demonstrates the author's expertise and erudition.

Part V, titled 'Places and Events' (361–451), repositions trauma within specific cultural and historical paradigms and discusses trauma in the context of Holocaust narratives, Nazi-occupied France, the Vietnam War, and other crucial incidents. This part helps supplement prior parts in the book as it shows how trauma is nuanced and, in turn, helps in understanding specific social, political, and historical contexts. The chapters in this section also discuss how literature can embody social and political interventions to promote cultural memory and warring about trauma as a subject.

By aiming at providing a comprehensive synthesis of the existing literature and covering such a broad range of topics, however, one could argue that the book may have a particular weakness: while some chapters or parts will be most relevant to specific audiences, others may not be as useful. Nevertheless, it is quite

a minor issue, as the book has an apparent breakdown into thematic sections that will enable readers to quickly locate the subject more relevant to their scholarly interest or study. Furthermore, the editors have succeeded in providing each chapter with specificity that makes it useful in itself as a contribution to the understanding of trauma, at the same time the diversity of perspectives and the coherence of the overall vision make this volume a valuable resource for scholars and students alike.

Another benefit of *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* is that the publication tackles diversity questions that must be addressed in academia. The editors have made a deliberate attempt to ensure that scholars and practitioners from all over the world and of different backgrounds (for example, cultural, ethnic, and disciplinary ones) were considered for the book, as trauma is a multicultural study area. Other chapters of the book cover postcolonial trauma literature, First Nations literature, and literature from the countries of the Global South, highlighting the importance of considering the intersectionality of identity and experience when studying and representing trauma in literature and culture.

A strength of the volume and a notable feature of the individual chapters, particularly in the chapter dedicated to theatre and drama, lies in the sensitive and thought-provoking manner in which the author demonstrates how theatre is a compelling means of responding to traumatic events.

In conclusion, the comprehensive and insightful nature of the book, with its inclusion of ideas from various disciplines, different viewpoints, and careful structuring and ordering, makes it a valuable resource for understanding trauma and its representation in different cultures and through the arts. The chapter dedicated to theatre and drama, an abridged version of Duggan's other comprehensive book, *Trauma-Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance* published by Manchester University Press in 2012, stands out as a particularly insightful and well-crafted contribution, offering significant value to theatre and drama scholars. Overall, the book is a worthy affirmation of the relevance of trauma studies and the ability of literature to elucidate traumatic occurrences, making it a significant addition to existing literature and essential reading.



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