

BOOK REVIEW

Lucy Bond and Stef Craps, **Trauma: the new critical idiom** (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 184 pp., ISBN: 978-0415540421, \$15.19

This book by Lucy Bond and Stef Craps highlights the discourse on trauma. Trauma is regarded as the most intricate, pervasive, severe, and repressed psychological scar that results from terrible experiences in life. It remains unresolved for decades, and generations, which recurs through nightmares, hallucinations, and flashbacks. The word trauma first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary (2000), which derives its meaning from the Greek word 'wound'. The author clarifies that these traumatic memories are slippery because they blur the barrier between mind and body, memory and forgetting, and speech and silence. Trauma is dynamic because it is omnipresent across cultures, disciplines, ages, and institutions. It is contested, because its origin, its symptoms, and its remedies have been a matter of discourse in the last 150 years.

The book is divided into 4 sections. The first section entitled 'The History of Trauma' highlights the development of trauma as a field of study. The evolution of trauma during the 17th and 18th centuries was initially associated with physical injury. Still, it extended its dimensions to psychological scars when people were exposed to industrial modernity in the late 19th century. Gradually railways play a prominent role in terms of time and space. But from the 1840s to 1860s, the number of casualties increased due to railway accidents which imposed fear, terror, shock, and trauma in the minds of individuals and caused both psychological and physical injury. These psychological effects caused by railway accidents lead to neurosis and give rise to a medical condition termed 'Railway Spine', a term given by John Erichsen in the year 1866. Later on, the idea of trauma was associated with the concept of 'Hysteria', a kind of mental disorder that results from symptoms like emotional outbursts, repressed emotions, libidinal desires, and physical dominance. Ultimately, in the 20th century, the idea of trauma was finally expanded to the psychiatric care given to soldiers in the US, Germany, Italy, and the UK during World War I. This ultimately resulted in the development of 'PTSD', or post-traumatic stress disorder, and gave rise to the term 'shell shock' in the US and Vietnam wars. According to Lucy Bond in *Trauma: The New Critical Idiom* (2020) 'In 1980, PTSD was classified by the American Psychological Association (APA) to explain the psychological symptoms exhibited by veterans of the Vietnam War and ten years after the APA coined PTSD in 1980, literary critics at Yale University established the foundations of contemporary trauma theory – shifting attention from the specifically psychical to the more broadly cultural and particularly literary dimensions of the condition' (p. 19) Finally, trauma as a theory generalizes its context from psychological realms to multiple areas in the public sphere in the 20th century.

The second section entitled 'Words for Wounds' focuses on trauma as a theory that emerged from Yale University in the early 1990s. The central members associated with trauma studies are Cathy Caruth, Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, Shoshana Radstone, Michelle Balaev, Gert Beulens, and Ruth Leys. Dori Laub. Trauma studies began in the 1990s drawing from Sigmund Freud's idea of 'Hysteria'. Freud and Breuer proclaim in *Studies in Hysteria* (1895) 'that the original event was not traumatic in itself, but only in its remembrance. Because the original event continues to inflict harm, the talking cure must understand the past's effects and gain freedom from its symptoms' (p. 192). The study of trauma in literature began with Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, narrative, and History* (1996). She argues that in contemporary times, trauma has

become universal and complex, both as an experience and as a subject of study. She highlights the three features of trauma which are repetitious, timeless, and unspeakable. Caruth posits that, 'trauma cannot be described by the event itself nor in terms of a distortion of the events. It focuses solely on the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it' (1996, p. 4). 'Secondary or Vicarious trauma' is the type of trauma, where the family members and the therapist of PTSD suffer indirectly in contact with the trauma victims over a prolonged period. It can be triggered in the individual or group through media footage, survivor testimony, narration, novels, films, museums, or other forms of cultural representation. Juxtaposing with the statements of Cathy Caruth, another trauma theorist Pierre Janet emphasizes that the motto of therapy is to convert 'traumatic memory' into 'narrative memory'. 'Traumatic memory' is a repressed traumatic experience that cannot be narrated and healed easily, whereas 'narrative memory' can be narrated easily. Contrasting to the statement Janet argues that 'the transformation of the trauma into narrative memory from traumatic memory can lose both the precision and the force that characterize traumatic recall' (1996, p. 153). Another renowned trauma theorist, Geoffrey Hartman in his famous essay *On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies* (1995) associates 'trauma which marks 'the disjunction between experiencingand understanding, with figurative language' (1995, p. 540). According to him, traumatic knowledge has two contradicting elements one is called 'traumatic event', which is registered rather than experienced and affect directly to the human psyche. The other is called 'memory' of the event. Another trauma theorist, Felman and Laub's idea on 'Video Testimony' plays a vital role in *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992). Felman and Laub regard testimony as 'a precocious mode of witnessing -of accessing reality - when all other modes of knowledge are precluded' (1992, p. 20). The role of the audience or listener in testimonies is further explained by Laub in his work *Being Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening* (1999). According to her, 'A listener is a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event', because when the listener engages with the victims emphatically it leads to vicarious traumatization. The helpless victim is directly dependent on an empathetic listener, who experiences partial trauma but does not become the victim. Felman talks about the idea of 'expressionless', a term borrowed from German Jewish critic Walter Benjamin, which denotes the meaning of 'the silence of the persecuted, the unspeakability of the trauma of oppression' (1992, p. 13).¹⁹⁹²

The third section entitled 'Trauma Theories' reflects on the notion of individual, collective, and cultural trauma and their relationship with each other. It also highlights on theories of Cathy Caruth's relationship between the 'Crisis of survival' and 'Crisis of knowledge'. Other theorists such as Felman and Laub explore the crisis of witnessing in two different aspects, one is the 'Crisis of listening' and another is the 'Crisis of literature'. The author points out Dominick La Capra's idea of 'Working through' and 'Acting out', which has been inspired by Freud's idea of 'Mourning' and 'Melancholia'. 'Acting out' disables the bridge of present, past, and future. The individuals are haunted by their past and cannot free themselves from the ambiguities and the horrific traumatic experiences which further are carried, retained, and reflected in their future lifestyles without any hope. On the other hand, 'working through' reestablishes the gap between past, present, and future after a period of experiencing a traumatic event, which enables the open boundaries of future lifestyle. La Capra supports the idea of 'Working through' and suggests that narration acts as an antidote for the survivors of trauma. Capra further explains the concept of 'Historical trauma', which is applied to the instances of loss and suffering caused by the catastrophic events of the Holocaust, 9/11, and the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombings. The author also tries to highlight Marianne Hirsch's idea of 'Post memory' and 'Transgenerational Trauma'. It has imprints of first-generation trauma

passed down from generation to generation through various mediums such as narratives, photographs, testimonies, films, texts, museums, documentaries, and other narrative mediums. Another trauma theorist Alison Landsberg gave the theory of prosthetic memory, where he argues that due to the advancement of mass culture, the traumatic memories of horrific events can be acquired by anyone, where the private memory turns into a public one. But critics such as E. Ann Kaplan in his work *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (2005) argue that in an age of mass communication, 'most people encounter trauma through the media' (2005, p. 2). However, the boundaries of immediate experience and secondary witnessing, which led to the development of a new idea called the 'Fantasies of Witnessing', popularized by Gary Weissman, have been blurred by the prosthetic technologies of contemporary trauma culture. He describes that the 'prosthetic memories' are designed in the form of text, museums, and films that seem real, even if they have not experienced that particular event. This causes a blurring of the boundaries between 'real memories' and the hyperrealistic 'prosthetic memories'. The author further adds the idea of 'Individual Trauma', 'Cultural Trauma', and 'Collective Trauma'. An important theorist Erikson tries to frame a difference between the psychological nature of 'Individual Trauma' and the social nature of 'Collective Trauma'. Erikson in *New Species of Trouble: Explorations in Disaster, Trauma and Community* (1994) states that individual trauma means 'a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one cannot react to it effectively' (1994, p. 153). In contrast, collective trauma refers to 'a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people and impairs the prevailing sense of community' (1994, p. 154). At last, the concept of 'Cultural Trauma' given by Ron Eyerman and Jeffrey Alexander occurs when the entire group or community feels that they have been subjected to a horrendous catastrophic event that leaves a psychological scar on their group consciousness.

The fourth section focuses on the recent and emerging developments in trauma theory. This section is subcategorized into four sections. The first section reflects on the study of trauma as a global rather than a European or Western phenomenon. The trauma caused by the Holocaust or 9/11 which comes under the European phenomenon has always attracted the entire nation and has been a center of addressing trauma. Whereas, the trauma caused due to racism, slavery, colonialism, apartheid, partition, or stolen generations has been ignored for ages. The second section highlights trauma aesthetics, while the third section looks at the transformation from victim trauma to perpetrator trauma. The fourth section explores the theory of 'Pre-Traumatic Stress'. The notion of 'PTSD' reflects on the 'future combat-related', 'flash-forward experience and the 'proto memories' of the victims that they experience during bombings, rocket attacks, and landmine explosions pandemic. The victims or individuals are haunted not by their experience rather they are being haunted by their future events which have yet to happen or have not yet taken place. On the whole, it is an anxiety disorder that we experience before any occurrence of an event, which causes mental agony, stress anxiety of future events.

In conclusion, trauma is a universal and complex thing to be understood in today's 21st century. With the verge of time, trauma employs various meanings which range from physical to psychological injuries. The evolution of trauma itself has a huge history and asserts cultural relevance in the public sphere. Studying the realms of trauma in an extensional way reflects the new method of analyzing trauma.


References

- Bond, L., & Craps, S. (2020). *Trauma*. The New Critical Idiom. Print.
 Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. John Hopkins University Press.

Erikson, K. (1994). *New species of trouble: Explorations in disaster, trauma and community*. W. W Norton and Co Inc.
Felman, S., & Laub, D. (1992). *Testimony: Crisis of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history*. Routledge.
Freud, S. (1895). *Studies in hysteria*. Penguin Publishing House. Print.
Kaplan, E. (2005). *Trauma culture: The politics of terror and loss in media and literature*. Rutgers University Press.

Ishani Ipsita Patel
Department of English & MELs, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan, India

Devendra Kumar Sharma
Department of English & MELs, Banasthali Vidyapith, Rajasthan, India

 devendra999iitr@gmail.com

© 2024 Devendra Kumar Sharma
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2024.2344541>

