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Trauma, Memory and Silence of the Irish Woman in Contemporary Literature

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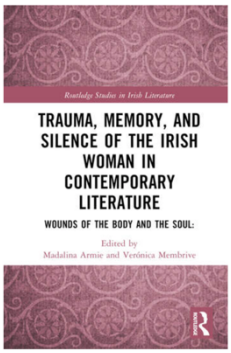
BOOK REVIEW

Trauma, Memory and Silence of the Irish Woman in Contemporary Literature, edited by Madalina Armie and Veronica Membrive, London: Routledge, 2023, 222pp., ISBN 978-0-032-40964-1 (hardback).



The volume *Trauma, Memory and Silence of the Irish Woman in Contemporary Literature* (2023) is a collection of essays and creative texts dealing with the theme of female trauma, and how memory and silence have affected trauma victims/survivors in Irish society. The volume opens with a prologue comprising a brief but thought-provoking foreword by novelist Evelyn Conlon, and an introduction by the editors, Madalina Armie and Veronica Membrive. Part I, then, includes eleven academic essays, while Part II features three pieces of creative writing. With such a comprehensive work at hand, the editors assert in their introduction that the aim of the volume is, mainly, to demonstrate that "what makes Irish history different … is how previous systems of power and oppression worked and still work in relation to this triad – trauma, memory, silence – and womanhood" (7). Indeed, we are then led to a collection of essays that magnificently tackle such topics and highlight the traits intrinsic to Irish history and society that have affected and still affect Irish women to this day.

In the first chapter, Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen analyses Catherine Brophy's critical dystopia *Dark Paradise* (1991), commenting on the power of the science-fiction genre to represent and tackle trauma. Her exploration of Brophy's novel sheds light on how this genre works as a mirror to reflect reality and engage the reader in a critical, although fictional, reading of Ireland's traumatic past. Aliaga-Lavrijsen links the novel's portrayal of forced sterilisation to the patriarchal domination of women's reproductive processes in Ireland (37) and concludes that Brophy's approach to these controversial topics in fiction "serves to reclaim women's voice and space, both in the contemporary Irish literary sphere, as well as in general historic and political context of post-Celtic Tiger years" (39).

In the second chapter, Burcu Gülum Tekin explains how silence and memory are present in the aftermath of trauma. In her analysis of Leland Bardwell's short fiction, Gülum Tekin uses three stories to show how traumatic events alter the individual's psyche and how such experiences are often hard to articulate in a precise manner since trauma "disrupts the ordinary functioning of the individual's memory" (45). She highlights different kinds of trauma and stresses the importance of feeling the community's support for a victim to speak up about their experience. Through her analysis of female characters who are victims of sexual and physical abuse, it becomes clear that these characters are abandoned by the institutions and their communities, dooming them to silence. Gülum Tekin explores how the power of the Catholic Church and nationalism in Ireland are behind "the social neglect of women's traumas in the country" (50) and underlines the importance of writers like Bardwell whose fiction gives a voice to silenced female characters.

Chapter 3 deals with the trauma of the Magdalene Laundries' survivors. For their analysis, Elena Cantueso Urbano and María Isabel Romero Ruiz use real survivors' testimonies alongside Patricia Burke-Brogan's play *Stained Glass at Samhain* (2003); they discuss the role of the Church in Ireland before and after the truth of the Laundries shocked the country, and how women were silenced to "preserve the reputation and prestige of those in power as well as the ideal image of the country" (55). The aim of this chapter is to prove how the Laundries intended to incarcerate and subdue women, and this objective is successfully attained by highlighting the psychological wounds and the alienation suffered by the victims of this terrible reality of Irish history. Moreover, emphasis is placed on the importance of breaking the silence around traumatic events and giving the victims/survivors a voice to claim compensation for the injustices they suffered.

Paula Romo-Mayor focuses on family and transgenerational trauma in Chapter 4 through an analysis of Rachel Seiffert's *The Walk Home* (2014). Arguing that the effects of trauma play "a crucial role in the construction of Irish identities" (65), she brilliantly explores the transmission of trauma in a family of Protestant Irish descent living in Glasgow, and how the experiences and oppression of older generations inevitably impact and shape younger generations. In this chapter, notions of colonialism, masculinity and violence intertwine with the exploration of trauma providing a solid background on which the novel's story comes into play. Romo-Mayor highlights how trauma victims can overcome the toxic cycle through sharing their experience, and how inability to articulate trauma turns individuals into perpetual victims.

In Chapter 5, Melania Terrazas explores the representation of trauma, memory and silencing in Emer Martin's novel *The Cruelty Men* (2018). Drawing

on Will Storr's research on storytelling, Terrazas analyses the novel's main storyteller, Mary, and how her transmission of stories provides her with agency. Terrazas argues that Martin's writing and use of storytelling in her characters constitutes "a form of memory of the silencing of Irish women" (78). The analysis sheds light on how these female storytellers are using their voice to break the silence around a history of trauma. Martin's novel intertwines issues of class, colonialism, and gender to illustrate the "long-term psychological effects of prejudices rooted in colonialism and sexism" (87), and wonders whether a release from this past will be enough to heal Ireland's traumata.

Chapter 6 comprises an alternative way of looking at traumatic events and their effects on the human psyche through the Lacanian conceptualisation of trauma. Applying this theory to Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* (2013), F.B. Schürmann argues that no experience can be defined as traumatic *a priori*; consequently, explaining the female protagonist's actions and tragic fate as an aftermath of trauma would be depriving her of agency.

Sally Rooney's novels *Normal People* (2018) and *Conversations with Friends* (2017) are the focus of Chapter 7. In her contribution, Alicia Muro aims to show how "relationships intermingle with the psychological effects of trauma, shame, and silence" (103), arguing that Rooney's female protagonists are damaged women whose trauma is almost universal to Irish identity. Muro unfolds a solid exploration of the two novels interlinking the two main female characters' trauma and silence, which lead them both to be read as detached individuals with low self-esteem who develop unhealthy coping mechanisms. However, the analysis shows that such a situation can be escaped through the support of others, thus emphasising the importance of healthy relationships to overcome trauma.

Self-care appears as the central point of Chapter 8, in which Kayla Fanning explores Louise O'Neill's non-realistic novels *Only Ever Yours* (2014) and *The Surface Breaks* (2018) Using Lukács notion of "rounded action," Fanning argues that O'Neill's novels thwart this concept since the traumatic events female characters had to deal with make it impossible for them to fully experience a Lukacian homecoming (116). Through the two main characters, Fanning explains how the restriction of self-care leaves women vulnerable to experience a kind of dissociation with their own bodies and selves. Nonetheless, these female characters can find the way back to themselves through fleeting distractions that are not really allowed for women. Self-care becomes an unhealthy way of escaping an oppressive reality, something that, as Fanning concludes, "invalidate[s] girls and prohibit[s] them from experiencing a homecoming" (125).

In Chapter 9, Asier Altuna-García de Salazar explores Donal Ryan's novel *Strange Flowers* (2020) focusing on the struggle of lesbian characters to experience their sexuality in a religious and traditional rural Ireland. Arguing that "silence and unspeakable truths impede a woman's healing from the wounds and trauma caused by being unable to confront her lesbianism" (127), Altuna-García draws on the topos of the "unspeakable/unsayable" to develop his analysis of trauma in the novel. Indeed, being unable to speak about her reality, Moll, the main character in Ryan's novel, causes trauma not only for herself but also for her son, who will have to deal with the aftermath of the unspoken truths in his family. Although Moll's lesbianism and secret relationship with another female character are eventually revealed to the reader, the two sapphic characters still feel the need to keep their love secret. All in all, Altuna-García argues, "Moll's identity as a lesbian is an exemplar of traumatic subordination encapsulated in silence" (133), and Ryan's novel becomes a necessary representation of an often-forgotten reality.

Chapter 10 also focuses on lesbianism and how silence becomes a barrier to the healing of trauma. Emma Donoghue's *Hood* (1995) serves as the basis for Mayron Estefan Cantillo-Lucuara's analysis, revisiting the novel from a perspective marked by Heideggerian hermeneutics to explore it as a trauma narrative. The closeted experience of Penelope, the protagonist, whose same-sex partner, Cara, has just died, impedes her from healing her wounds. According to Cantillo-Lucuara, this impossibility to approach the trauma caused by death sends Penelope into numbness and emotional repression; she remains silent to avoid suspicion over her relationship, but silence stops her from coping freely and healthily. It is not until she comes out to Cara's sister that Penelope realises she needed to talk about it to start healing; as Cantillo-Lucuara argues, "the imperative of socialising or sharing the traumatic experience becomes inescapable sooner or later" (147). Penelope acquires a sense of community through sharing her experience, helping her to break the silence and escape her ontological closet.

María Gaviña-Costero's essay – the final chapter in Part I – on Anna Burns' *Milkman* (2018) tackles the issue of silence around the Northern Ireland conflict, something this academic argues serves as a metaphor for "sweeping conflicts under the carpet, thus undermining any possibility of true cauterization" (151). Gaviña-Costero focuses on the violence suffered during the Troubles, a *normativized violence* that has left the Northern Irish community collectively traumatized. She argues that *Milkman*'s revelation of three kinds of trauma – individual, collective, cultural – contributes to a collective healing of wounds through the voicing of the silenced Northern Irish victims. The community described in the novel suffers an imposition of silence and fear of disclosure that blurs personal identities; in this context, the novel emphasises

the need for disclosure to overcome trauma. Through her excellent exploration, Gaviña-Costero highlights how this novel differs from other fiction about the Troubles in its acknowledgement of gender inequality and the repression of women in violent times, showing a new perspective on the traumatic effects of the Troubles on the female population.

Part II begins with a contribution by Catherine Dunne, who includes five extracts of her upcoming novel *A Good Enough Mother* which aims to explore motherhood in Ireland. Using the voices of multiple female characters, Dunne offers the reader an engaging selection of texts dwelling on the trauma suffered by Irish women who were victims of a still very present past. The second text comes in the form of a draft from Mia Gallagher's novel-in-progress titled *Kindergirl*; a mysterious narrative set in Germany but focused on two Irish girls dealing with topics such as emigration, disability, missing children, violence, and discrimination. The last piece is Lia Mills' *Flight*, a text in which she revisits the Irish legend *Tóraíocht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*; in this revision of the legend, Mills gives voice and agency to the haunted young woman. By offering the protagonist, Aisling, a say in her own future, the writer gives voice to all the silenced women in Ireland who were and still are victims of a patriarchal society. Mills defends the need to publish stories of this nature, for the roots of violence against women to be "dragged out into the light and dismantled" (191), a statement I wholeheartedly agree with.

All in all, *Trauma, Memory and Silence of the Irish Woman in Contemporary Literature* proves to be a wonderfully enriching volume, able to shed light on some of the most intricate and delicate traumas for women in Irish society while underlining once again the power of literature to represent and aid these kinds of struggles. There is still a long way to go regarding women's issues; the fight for equality and finding compensation for a haunting traumatic past is not over yet, but contributions like this help academia and scholars everywhere to understand the relevance of these topics, which makes the present volume a major accomplishment.

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