

TRAUMA STUDIES, POSTCOLONIALISM AND POSTCOMMUNISM: CONCEPTUAL DISJUNCTIONS AND CONJUNCTIONS¹

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Abstract

The general objective of the article refers to the modality in which the representability of trauma aligns to the dynamics of representability of the postcolonial and postcommunist vocabularies, under the circumstances of the problematic of trauma having marked ideological and ethical implications. The proposed idea is an extremely actual one and with a powerful impact on cultural studies: the traumatic events represent a constant of our contemporary society, while their history is a long and controversial one as well. The terms of postcolonialism and postcommunism are already associated with functional theoretical vocabularies, and the traumatic reality belongs, chronologically, to the reality these thoroughly cover.

Keywords: trauma studies, postcolonialism, postcommunism, ideology, representability

Introduction

The article is intended as a comparative study of the aesthetic and ideological implications in representing trauma in postcolonial and postcommunist literatures. The general objective of the article refers to the modality in which the representability of trauma aligns to the dynamics of representability of the postcolonial and postcommunist vocabularies, under the circumstances of the problematic of trauma having marked ideological and ethical implications. The proposed idea is an extremely actual one and with a powerful impact on cultural studies: the traumatic events represent a constant of our contemporary society, while their history is a long and controversial one as well. The terms of postcolonialism and postcommunism are already associated with functional theoretical vocabularies, and the traumatic reality belongs, chronologically, to the reality these thoroughly cover.

Equally important is comparing the modalities in which the tension between trauma as an irrepresentable event and trauma as a concrete event that can be confronted and narrated could be reflected at the level of the literatures.

Thirdly, the article intends a comparative and systematic analysis of the formal innovations with regard to representing collective and/or individual trauma in the works that deal with the traumatic experience.

Last but not least, a direction of research addresses the ethical and ideological perspective, namely identifying the resistance of the text to the process of absorbing the dominant discourses, as well as the analysis of the possible relations between narrative innovation and ideology.

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Trauma Representability in Postcolonial Studies and Literature

The association of cultural trauma theory and postcolonial studies is debatable and has constituted a topic of intense discussions for over a decade now, with its most relevant exemplification in the appearance of the 2008 issue of *Studies in the Novel*, coordinated by Stef Craps and Hans Buelens. “The specificity of colonial traumas and of the act of postcolonial literature trauma representation in relation to the dominant trauma discourse,” assert Craps and Buelens, “should lead to alternative conceptions of trauma and of its textual inscription, leading to a revitalization of trauma studies.”²

The issues at stake, according to Visser, are represented by the core definitions of trauma, by the opposing perspectives on trauma in the field of trauma studies and by their Eurocentric orientation. The topic stands as most relevant in the context of discussing the trauma typology and dynamics in the non-western countries, a space in which Western trauma models are constantly imposed: “Postcolonial trauma theory should seek to employ a model of trauma incorporating non-western templates for understanding culturally specific traumatic psychic disorders.”³ Leela Gandhi pleads for a similar approach to non-western knowledge systems so that one should be able to “learn to speak more adequately to the world which it speaks for.”⁴ Similarly, Anne Whitehead criticizes the mislaying of the Western construct and discusses its obstructive hegemonic impact on the significances of non-western cultural practices.⁵

Postcommunism and postcolonialism in literature are concerned, among other things, with the role of memory in representing history: the commodification of memory, the fictionalization of representation, dethroning the concept of History, fragmentarity, the politics of identity, the dynamics centre-periphery, all indicating connections between memory and trauma. These directions form the background of the contemporary theories on trauma, with a special applicability in the field of cultural studies. However, trauma theory, when applied to works of literature, will focus only on the preservation, and not at all the healing, of trauma: hence, the common themes underlined and discussed will be victimization, guilt, melancholia – “crippling self-reflexivity”⁶ -, while recuperation and psychic resistance will be obscured. Knudsen refers to this victimizing perspective as reducing the “vigour and imaginative impact”⁷ of postcolonial literature, while Susan Najita⁸, following Judith Herman and Dominick LaCapra, identifies the need for political activism, social change and individual healing of the postcolonial texts as a modality of promoting postcolonial resistance and recovery as opposed to melancholia and unspeakability.

As far as the postcolonial fiction is concerned, it is traumatic due to its concern with the recuperation of memory and the acknowledgment of those negated, suppressed or

² Stef Craps and Gert Buelens, ‘Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels’, *Studies in the Novel*, 40(2008), 1–12 (p.3).

³ Irene Visser, ‘Trauma theory and postcolonial literary studies’, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 47.3 (2011), p. 272.

⁴ Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1998), p. x.

⁵ Cf. Anne Whitehead, ‘Journeying through Hell: Wole Soyinka, Trauma, and Postcolonial Nigeria’, *Studies in the Novel*, 40 (2008), 13–30.

⁶ Park Sorenson, in Craps and Buelens, p. 10.

⁷ Eva Rask Knudsen, in Craps and Buelens, p. 11.

⁸ Susan Najita, in Craps and Buelens, p. 11.

forgotten. The postcolonial traumatic literature involves the recuperation of the ignored histories and the bringing forth of the marginalized events and characters, the replacement of a collective representation of history with representations of personal memory.

An immediate effect, however, would be that of “hyper-particularism” or “hyper-localism” Michael Rothberg refers to, namely a “tendency to create Bergsonian maps – maps of the social that are so detailed and particularizing that they forfeit all potential to Orient investigation.”⁹ At the opposite end, there runs the risk of over-homogenization, postcolonial trauma studies having to “pursue an approach between homogenizing universalism and nominalist particularism.”¹⁰ At this level, the originality of the article consists in the re-evaluation of the concepts of colonialism and postcolonialism as a consequence of the analysis of the modality in which the violence of the historical and cultural experience has been modelled ideologically in the literary discourse. Terms such as: civilization, beneficial colonization, occidentalization are reviewed from the perspective of the dialectics colonized/colonized, ideological discourse / historical reality. In the larger context of postmodernism and, more specifically, in that of postcolonialism, one cannot speak about reality, but of realities, each representing a plausible variant of one narrator. Hayden White asserted that a research of the traumatic history may be interested not in the fact that certain events took place, but in what those events may signify for a particular group, society or for the present conception of a culture.

The problem of the postcolonial writers concerned with the recuperation of the past is not the identity of events, but how these must be described so that one explaining modality should be preferred to another. The truth of the traumatic history is represented by the event plus the conceptual matrix by means of which it has been localized in the discourse, imagination being always involved in the representation of truth.

The narrated traumatic events are never ideologically neutral, but always liable to a process of selection by the one who will organize them coherently in a literary text; not the raw facts compose the image of reality, but the facts transformed imaginatively, passed through the ideological and cultural filter of the artist. The represented reality has as a fundament the events themselves, yet what constitute it coherently and significantly are the sets of possible relations and configurations that establish among them as a consequence of the perception of events by different consciousness – the configuration process of reality is the result of the creator’s projecting imagination having as a support the raw events. The postcolonial reality will always be an ideological construct, facts representing the past as a background against which different ideological, political and ethical attitudes confront one another. Thus, the possibility of manipulating events becomes part of the imaginative process of reconstructing the real.

Traumatic events are rendered in postcolonial literatures by means of a specific vocabulary, one that functions on concepts of liminality, ambiguity, hybridity, transgression. These, according to Adrian Otoi, characterize the “‘in-between spaces’ of cultural ambiguity where diasporic and migrant identities, hovering in the indecision of in-betweenness, are

⁹ Michael Rothberg, ‘Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response’, *Studies in the Novel*, 40 (2008), 224–34 (p. 229).

¹⁰ Rothberg, p.229.

shaped.”¹¹ Otoi’s judgment is founded on Homi Bhabha’s position as to the significance of the “limen”, which is used to describe the “in-between spaces where strategies of identity are elaborated [...], the boundary [that] becomes the place from which something begins its presencing.”¹² The use of “doubling tropes”¹³ such as irony, allegory, and parody give a different shade to motifs of dislocation, alienation and threatening events. The experience of the traumatic events leads to a classical postmodern worldview of missing teleology and fragmented identities, though, according to Piret Peiker, in spite of this existing condition, there is “a repeated motif in postcolonial literature [...] just the opposite: the longing for a topos of maturity and order, a mythical realm of centeredness that exists or existed somewhere.”¹⁴

Postcolonial critics and theoreticians such as Kamran Aghaie, Jill Bennett, Victoria Burrows, Sam Durrant, Rosanne Kennedy, David Lloyd and Rebecca Saunders perceive colonization as collective trauma, therefore postcolonialism – a post-traumatic cultural formation. As a consequence, it is necessary that the specificity of colonial traumas should be reconsidered, a necessity reflected in the literary representation of trauma in relation to the dominant Western discourse.

The postcolonial criticism denounces the pathologization and depolitization of the victims of colonial violence and criticizes the western self-sufficiency in approaching the non-western histories or records. The lack of historical particularity is what postcolonial criticism indubitably reproaches to trauma theory, the former focusing on the historical, socio-economic and political factors in the colonization process and its aftermath. Craps and Buelens point to the fact that “the chronic psychic suffering produced by the structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class and other inequities has yet to be fully accounted for.”¹⁵ Trauma theory is perceived as limitative for postcolonial criticism due to the perception of trauma as ahistorical and structural; besides this, the use of formal criteria such as narrative rupture and aporia are considered Eurocentric misfit approaches to different cultural specificities. From this perspective, Luckhurst refers to the “prescriptiveness”¹⁶ of trauma theory’s formalist criteria.

Within this context, it is necessary to conceive alternative modalities of approaching colonial traumas, such as forced migration, diaspora, segregation, political violence. This attitude is reflected in the representing modalities of the postcolonial trauma: self-reflexive and anti-linear techniques are preferred to a direct and linear rendering which would suggest an easy and successful overcoming of the traumatic moment; the promotion of realism and of the indigenous artistic and literary practices are used as a modality of avoiding a particular western discourse that, by asserting the impossibility of representing trauma (Caruth, Laub, Felman), leads to a political, ideological and cultural debilitation. Both representation modes

¹¹ Adrian Otoi, ‘An Exercise in Fictional Liminality: the Postcolonial, the Postcommunist, and Romania’s Threshold Generation’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 23(2003), 87-105 (p. 88).

¹² Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 5.

¹³ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 7.

¹⁴ Piret Peiker, ‘Post-communist literatures: A postcolonial perspective’, *Vikerkaar* 10-11 (2005) (Estonian version) <<http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2006-03-28-peiker-en.html>> [accessed 14 September 2012].

¹⁵ Craps and Buelens, p.3.

¹⁶ Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 88.

point to the necessity of considering the cultural and political contexts in which the literary works are produced and received. The literary corpus will include novels in which the collective and individual traumas are correlated with the controversial aspects of identity, cultural space, ideological discourse and ethical responsibility.

“The plurality and growing number of responses to trauma theory in postcolonial criticism”, observes Visser, prove “the ongoing appeal of trauma theory, despite the limits of interpretation that it also often imposes on postcolonial readings.”¹⁷ All the voices that posit a debatable attitude to the classical trauma theories demonstrate the “necessity of an openness towards non-western, non-Eurocentric models of psychic disorder and of reception and reading processes.”¹⁸

Trauma In Postcommunist Studies And Literature – Postcolonial Similarities And Divergences

The question whether postcolonial theory is relevant in discussing the postcommunist experience represents a vivid debate in the Eastern-European academic world. New nations having appeared or the Soviet influence having been eliminated - both represented a change of direction for the postcolonial studies as well¹⁹. Establishing and debating similarities and differences between postcolonial and postcommunist studies should start after the attempt of clarifying the paradigms of postcolonialism and postcommunism themselves.

According to Ion Bogdan Lefter, one of the first to address the issue of postcolonialism as correlated to postcommunism, in “Can Postcommunism Be Considered a Postcolonialism?/”²⁰, 2001, the concept of postcolonialism appeared as a result of international cultural and political movements. Firstly, it should be discussed in the context of a conceptual background of political correctness in the nineties, in North-American and West – European democracies, which distance themselves morally from the previous colonialist attitudes, hand in hand with the political and cultural emancipation of the colonized. A second source would be the evolution of the post-structuralist research in the cultural disciplines, in art criticism, in the humanist field in general, namely in those directions that recuperate all possible socio-cultural contexts. Traditions, historical and political conditionings have been capturing attention and, from this perspective, the situation of the countries formerly colonially occupied appears as an extremely offering thematic field. Thirdly, one should consider the drive of postmodernity towards the recuperation of all diversities and marginalities. The pluralist philosophies, the models of cultural polycentrism, have replaced the old/previous imperialisms of the old world “centres of power”. “Provinces” have now the privilege of being in the limelight, post-colonies among them as well.

Asking why postcolonial scholars do not pay much attention to Soviet Russia and its Central and Eastern European satellites, under the circumstances of a highly potentially profitable field for postcolonial studies, Liviu Andreescu asserts: “I suspect leftist political sympathies are not the main reason scholars take so little notice of the USSR. Rather, I

¹⁷ Visser, p. 179.

¹⁸ Visser, p.280.

¹⁹ Cf. Christian Moraru, ‘Postcommunism and the Paradigm Shift in Postcolonial Studies’, *Euresis*, 1(2005), 82-96, (p.87).

²⁰ Ion Bogdan Lefter, ‘Poate fi considerat postcomunismul un postcolonialism?’, *Caietele Echinoux*, 1(2001), 117-123.

submit, the Soviet Union has not been thoroughly investigated in this context because in many respects it does not fit the postcolonialist paradigm.”²¹ Another answer to the same question is offered by Mircea Martin in “Communism as/and Colonialism”: “[...] formal post-colonialism was perfected in the American academia and (less often) in Western European circles, generally by leftist intellectuals. [...] For these latter authors, the fall of communism has done little to shake the confidence in an ‘ideal’ Soviet/Marxist model. As for Eastern European researchers, their national and cultural pride (of course, not publicly admitted) has prevented them from accepting the hypothesis of colonization for their own space of origin.”²² Andreescu refers to the “postcolonialist paradigm” in line with Edward Said – for whom postcolonial studies are concerned with “the impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge associated with domination”²³ – and with Ella Shohat – for whom imperial practices and ideologies are functional in the postcolonial era as well, being a “repetition with [a] difference” and the “regeneration of colonialism through other means”²⁴ -, contextualizing it in the West and its former colonies.

Extensive perceptions of postcolonialism as ahistorical or transhistorical, an attitude that could apply to and explain any forms of oppression and domination, “a set of general epistemological insights”²⁵, are judged as too generic, the alternative being that Postcolonial Studies “should rather be ‘tethered’ to such central (Western) concepts as race and nation, to a specific philosophy of democratic politics and of (in)equality, to an economic outlook, as well as to colonial practices predicated upon these ‘ideological formations.’”²⁶

An opposite perspective on postcolonialism as a “globally inflected term” applicable to diversified geographical regions comes from Cristina Sandru (see *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millenium*, editors Sandru, Janet Wilson, Sarah Lawson Welsh, Routledge, 2009), via a larger international conceptual background, which allows an ideological and cultural rapprochement between Postcolonial and Postcommunist Studies. For Sandru, “Both postcolonialism and postcommunism aim at demystifying the grand narratives of the past, interrogate personal and collective memory and explore the ambivalent nature of cultural and intellectual resistance. Hence, the potential of reciprocal translability of postcolonialism and postcommunism as critical discourses.”²⁷

²¹ Liviu Andreescu, ‘Are We All Postcolonialists Now? Postcolonialism and Postcommunism in Central and Eastern Europe’, in *Postcolonialism / Postcommunism: Intersections and Overlaps*, ed. by Monica Bottez, Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru and Bogdan Stefanescu (Bucuresti: Editura Universitatii din Bucuresti, 2011), pp. 57-74 (p. 59).

²² Mircea Martin, ‘Communism as/and Colonialism’, in *Postcolonialism / Postcommunism: Intersections and Overlaps*, ed. by Monica Bottez, Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru and Bogdan Stefanescu (Bucuresti: Editura Universitatii din Bucuresti, 2011), pp. 77-103 (p. 77).

²³ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), p. 9.

²⁴ Ella Shohat, ‘Notes on the ‘Post-Colonial’’, *Social Text*, 31-32 (1992), 99-113 (p. 107).

²⁵ Andreescu, p. 60.

²⁶ Andreescu, pp.60-61.

²⁷ Cristina Sandru, ‘Textual Resistance? “Over-Coding” and Ambiguity in (Post)Colonial and (Post)Communist Texts’, in *Postcolonialism / Postcommunism: Intersections and Overlaps*, ed. by Monica Bottez, Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru and Bogdan Stefanescu (Bucuresti: Editura Universitatii din Bucuresti, 2011), pp. 39-56 (p. 43).

This homogenizing attitude includes the phenomenon of postcommunism under the larger umbrella of postcolonialism: David Chioni-Moore²⁸, in “Is the Post- in Post-Colonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique”, postulates a universal signification of the term postcolonial, a critique of the Western imperial power in general, based on a history of the omnipresence of the colonial-type domination at a global level. Benita Parry²⁹ brings the two terms, postcolonialism and postcommunism, under the sign of “historical transition” and of a similar discursive attitude. An older argument, yet still functional and representing an alternative to the homogenizing attitude of the two phenomena, is that Eastern Europe has never suffered the exploitation and the colonial racism typical for the colonies in South Asia or Africa.³⁰ Maria Todorova, in *Imagining the Balkans*, is the adept of this position, in line with some Romanian research in the field³¹. The discussion concerning the similarities and differences between the two historical, social and literary phenomena is included in *Caietele Echinox / The Echinox Papers* (1/2001) și *Euresis* (1/2005).

A compromising way between an attitude of (over)homogeneity and the other of (hyper)localism is suggested by Adrian Otoiu³², for whom it is obvious that, in historical, economic and societal terms, the colonial experience and the communist experiment have distinct profiles that cannot overlap; similarly, the ideologies that found them. Despite this, however, different historical forces can produce similar effects. Post-communism and post-colonialism could intersect not to produce reductionist assertions by their attempt at adapting terminologies, but to find a common vocabulary, a plausible and mutually advantageous one. The postcommunist prose writing in Romania, especially that produced by writers in the 80s, combines two apparently antagonist traits: textual experimentation and forms of raw realism. The simultaneous presence of the two representation modalities stand for a characteristic of “liminality”, direct cause of the traumatic suffering. The concept of liminality is a key term in the postcolonial theory³³, and it can be associated with those of ambiguity, hybridity and transgression. Andreescu, however, remains sceptical as to the utility and relevance of the postcolonial vocabulary for the post-communist one: “Yet his discussion of the numerous borders, borderlines, margins and trespassing, while quite plausible in itself, hardly invokes a colonial relation [as defined above]. The postrealism of G80 was, in Otoiu’s reading, a reaction to domestic socialist realism. While there are plural worlds in the fiction of the G80, the world of the colonizing USSR is not a major focus.”³⁴

The theoretic vocabulary of post-colonialism can offer the essential terms for developing a proper one in the post-communist trauma literature: hegemonic discourse – totalitarian discourse, Apartheid – concentration camp, center – periphery, History – histories, ideological discourse – private discourse.

²⁸ David Chioni Moore, ‘Is the Post in Postcolonial the Post in Post-Soviet? Notes Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique’, in *Baltic Postcolonialism: A Critical Reader*, ed. by V. Kerlertas (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 11-30.

²⁹ Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 124.

³⁰ Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³¹ Radu Surdulescu, ‘Identity Raping Practices: Semicolonialism, Communist Reeducation, and Peer Torture’, *Euresis*, 1(2005), 54-55.

³² Otoiu, p. 95.

³³ Bhabha, p.78.

³⁴ Andreescu, p. 67.

The representation of trauma in the post-communist literature is associated with the representation of an intermediate spatiality and temporality, associated with the identity ambiguity. The concept of liminality, discussed by Arnold van Gennep³⁵, Victor Turner³⁶, Homi Bhabha³⁷, Mihai Spăriosu³⁸ designates ambiguity, applicable to the “contact zones” between two cultures or various moments of the same culture, therefore to the Eastern European space and the post-communist trauma literature.

The historical and social context in which this literature of liminality appears is one characterized by transition, ambiguity and mingling. The state of spatial and temporal transition of the Balkanic area is significantly postulated by Maria Todorova, in *Imagining the Balkans*, while in the Romanian cultural space, it is discussed by Lucian Boia³⁹ (2002), Neagu Djuvara⁴⁰, Cornel Ungureanu⁴¹. The liminal condition of the Romanian space, especially after 1989, is illustrated in a hybrid democracy and economy, a discourse in a double register and an ambiguous positioning.

At the level of the literary reception, typically postcolonial notions such as: dilemmatic, fragmentarity, hybridity – become common terms of the postcommunist traumatic discourse. The literature of the writers situated between two social and cultural paradigms abounds in hybrid identities, hybridized intermediary spaces, social ambiguity, double language. Internal or physical limits, real or imaginary ones constitute traumatic instances, the analysis of their modalities of representation involving special attention paid to the historical, social and ideological space. However, Cristina Sandru asserts, “the overcoded fiction of East-Central Europe differs in that its narrative undecidability is assumed as a protective mask against an oppressive extra-textual reality and not as a law of intratextual composition. This fiction demands a decoder adequately ‘equipped’ to penetrate behind the Aesopic understatements of the text.”⁴² Therefore, the subversive narrative voices are associated more with a magical realism, the world of fantasy, while the modality of expressing disengagement with a traumatic reality is transposed in confessions and exercises of memory – diaries, notebooks, journals, yet all imbued ideologically.

Conclusions

The article has set to identify the similarities and differences as to the modalities of representing trauma in the postcolonial and post-communist spaces, in the context of perceiving the traumatic phenomenon as a social and ideological construct. Trauma studies, a controversial, yet equally vivid field of contemporary research, should be acknowledged as relevant as correlated with postcolonial and postcommunist studies as long as it is perceived in correlation with a social, political and ideological context. One cannot speak about generic traumatic experiences, but about some deeply rooted in the national or regional specificities.

³⁵ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

³⁶ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

³⁷ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

³⁸ Mihai Spăriosu, *The Wreath of Wild Olive: Play, Liminality and the Study of Literature* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996).

³⁹ Lucian Boia, *România, țară de frontieră a Europei* (București: Humanitas, 2002).

⁴⁰ Neagu Djuvara, *Între Orient și Occident* (București: Humanitas, 2001).

⁴¹ Cornel Ungureanu, *Mitteuropa periferiilor* (Iasi: Polirom, 2002).

⁴² Sandru, p. 54.

Only from this position can one detect the ideological implications of the traumatic experiences and therefore value them aesthetically in a particularized way. The postcolonial and postcommunist studies and literatures do share a significant common ground as critical discourses; however, the cultural, historical and ideological discrepancies could prevent the balance from weighing more to theoretical, decontextualized similarities. A beneficial position should involve us into discriminating factual differences and on the other hand, cherishing the mutually enriching similarities.

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