

# Representing Trauma in American Women's Literature

Marta Bosch, Mercè Cuenca, Mònica Miravet,  
and M<sup>a</sup> Isabel Seguro  
*Universitat de Barcelona*

## Abstract

This round table aimed at exploring how different female traumatic experiences have found expression through literature. For that purpose, the session began with an introduction to the question of trauma in the field of the humanities. Then the discussion focused on the representation of individual trauma through the poems of Anne Sexton. After that, the debate explored how social trauma was transmitted transgenerationally by analyzing Nora Okja Keller's novel *Comfort Woman*. Finally, the work of Arab American women writers served to illustrate the issue of collective trauma caused by September 11, 2001.

## 1. Mònica Miravet Hernández

According to the American Psychological Association, trauma is a response to an event outside the range of usual human experience. The mind is wounded by a sudden, unexpected, emotional shock. As a consequence, the means of interpreting the world are upset and the victims often feel haunted by intrusive memories that fail to be integrated in their minds and find it difficult, if not impossible, to narrate their traumas, which thus become unspeakable. Trauma studies have permeated the field of the humanities especially since the 1990s, when the research carried out by clinicians was widely circulated. Since then, in the analysis of literature, trauma theory has been increasingly adopted as a perspective which can shed new light on texts dealing with traumatic experiences. Noteworthy contributions to the field of trauma in the humanities were made by Cathy Caruth, Soshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, Dominick LaCapra, Dori Laub, and Michael Rothberg, among others. One of the characteristics of trauma literature

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

is the emphasis on the search for new ways of representing an experience that resists representation.

### 2. Mercè Cuenca

For the traumatized individual and/or group there is a divergence between actual events and the way they are experienced which necessarily problematizes the representation of trauma, its linguistic articulation or textualization (Whitehead, 2004: 3). Betty Friedan highlighted precisely this problematic relation between trauma and language in her seminal volume *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), where she defined the collective anxiety of Postwar American middle-class women over the curtailing of their freedom as “the problem that has no name” (16) –a social trauma which, as Friedan would have it, registered as a “non-event” for over fifteen years.

While such a claim has been historiographically contested, confessional poetry can be considered a literary representation of the *angst* the “feminine mystique” occasioned which emerged well before the publication of Friedan’s work. The genre, which began to flourish in America in the 1950s and early 1960s, was characterized by writers’ blending biographical experiences with historical facts (Lerner, 1987: 47-48). Its mixture of individual confession and social critique is best epitomized by Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, both emblematic literary figures who have come to embody the tragedy of many mid-twentieth century American women. Mercè Cuenca dealt with Anne Sexton’s poetry because the reception and hailing of her work by feminist critics has resulted in the occlusion of the importance of her individual traumas to her literary creativity. Therefore, Cuenca attempted to show how Sexton’s poetic endeavor can be more productively considered as an example of how literary texts can bridge the gap between individual and social trauma. To do this, Cuenca dwelt on a small selection of poems from one of Sexton’s later volumes entitled *The Book of Folly* (1972).

Sexton’s therapeutic process enabled her to acquire the confessional tone which became the signature of her intensely personal poetry. In this connection, it is interesting to consider Michel Foucault’s reflections on psychoanalysis, his definition of both

**MARTA BOSCH, MERCÈ CUENCA, MÓNICA MIRAVET, AND M<sup>a</sup>  
ISABEL SEGURO**

confession and scientific discursivity as “modes of production of truth” (1990: 64-65):

Combining confession with examination, the personal history with the deployment of a set of decipherable signs and symptoms; the interrogation, the exacting questionnaire, and hypnosis, with the recollection of memories and free associations: all were ways of reinscribing the procedure of confession in a field of scientifically acceptable observations. (1990: 65)

Hence, according to Foucault, confessions exacted from patients through the techniques of psychoanalytical treatment acquire a claim to discursive objectivity which they would otherwise be read as lacking.

Sexton’s therapy and, consequently, her writing revolved around two types of confessions: firstly, the reconstruction of traumatic biographical events through hypnosis, and, secondly, the conscious rendering of her anxieties and worries over womanhood as it was conceived in her historical context.

As regards the first type of confession, under hypnosis Sexton related two instances of sexual abuse that she presumably suffered during her childhood and youth at the hands of her father and her great-aunt Anna, after whom Sexton was named (Middlebrook, 1991: 57-60; 167). As Middlebrook points out, once Sexton managed to verbalize her traumatic memories, she could only remember the words she had used to articulate those recollections (Sexton, 1999: 57). Hence, “language” literally was her memory, her only means to (re)construct her forgotten past, and her only path towards a more productive present. Cuenca drew on “The Death of the Fathers” and “Anna Who Was Mad” to exemplify how Sexton (re)created her traumatic incestuous experiences through her writing.

The second type of confession Sexton articulated in her psychoanalytical sessions was constituted by the poet’s utterances on the anxiety which her overdetermined role as “woman” in Postwar America caused her. Sexton’s rejection of univocal gender is

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

represented in her poetry through a textual (re)construction of her gendered identity as both masculine and feminine; the poet repeatedly created an androgynous persona who was meant to transgress gender boundaries. A good example of such a transgendered persona would be “The Other”. Following Deryn Rees-Jones’s argument that “Sexton’s work attempts to refigure the self as a model of power that moves her from the horror of silence to the horror of suffering” (1999: 296), “The Other” may be read as the poet’s attempt to craft a subject position for herself through language which incorporates the other, masculine gender, despite the pain this may cause her.

Thus, Sexton built a bridge between individual and social traumas based on the strength of her desire to make silenced sufferings come to life through language. As the poet phrased it in “The Silence”:

The silence is death.  
It comes each day with its shock  
to sit on my shoulder, a white bird,  
and peck at the black eyes  
and the vibrating red muscle  
of my mouth. (1999: 319)

Sexton stood up to the challenge.

### 3. María Isabel Seguro

Nora Okja Keller’s first novel, *Comfort Woman* (1997), belongs to the category of those literary works which, according to Anne Whitehead, exemplify “[t]he desire among various cultural groups to represent or make visible instances of trauma” (2004: 3). Keller claims to have been inspired by the testimony offered by a former Korean woman, Keum-ja Hwang, who gave an account of her experience as a sexual slave (*Jugun Ianfu*) for the Japanese Imperial Army during the Asian Pacific War (1932-1945).

Her novel, structured around a mother-daughter relationship, depicts both the trauma of a Korean comfort woman and also of her country, first under Japanese colonialism and later under U.S. imperialism, as represented by the numerous images of the defiled and

**MARTA BOSCH, MERCÈ CUENCA, MÓNICA MIRAVET, AND M<sup>a</sup>  
ISABEL SEGURO**

mutilated female body. It is also representative of the trauma caused by an enforced silence as a result of traditional Korean patriarchal values.

The novel depicts the difficult relationship between Akiko/Soon Hyo, a former Korean *Jungun Ianju*, and her American daughter, Beccah, mostly due to what Beccah perceives as her mother's unconventionality: her trances and her supposed ability to communicate with spirits and the afterworld. It is after her mother's death that Beccah discovers the nature of those trances and of the connections with spirits, together with her past history. As Judith Lewis Herman explains, in the manner that survivors of traumatic events "challenge us to reconnect fragments, to reconstruct history, to make meaning of the present symptoms in the light of past events" (1992: 3), so Akiko (the name given to her by Japanese soldiers) challenges her daughter to reconstruct and give voice to her history to become again Soon Hyo (her Korean name/self). From this perspective, the novel parallels the process of recovery from traumatic experiences by which, by reconstructing those experiences, the connection between mother/daughter and, by extension, between victim/narrator and the community, is re-established.

The issue is how to write trauma fiction if trauma is caused by events of such a caliber that the psyche is incapable of registering them in an ordinary way, producing what has been termed as the dissociation or split of the mind (Leys, 2000: 23). Keller's novel is an example of trauma fiction or traumatic realism for her use of certain literary devices that depict the symptoms/behaviors produced by traumatic experience. For example, the disruption of a linear, chronological sequence reflects the traumatized individual's reliving of the past in the present due to an inability to integrate it appropriately in memory.

Akiko/Soon Hyo's relationship with spirits/ghosts is another fundamental device in the novel's attempt to convey the traumatic effects of the past, both upon the individual and a nation. The ghosts/spirits of the dead are elements from the past which haunt the present, representing the "irruption of one time into another", as well as "the traumas of recent history and [...] a form of collective or cultural haunting" (Whitehead, 2004: 6-7).

Akiko/Soon Hyo is, in fact, a shaman, "an intermediary to spiritual beings" (Lee, 1973: 152), whose function is to restore harmony

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

(Grim, 1984: 250). The performance of shamanistic rituals, apart from being a source of income for mother and daughter (Akiko becomes a famous shaman in Hawai'i), is also a means of expressing, reliving past events which cannot be articulated in conventional ways. Akiko/Soon Hyo begins her role as an intermediary when, being still too young, is in charge of serving comfort women, and helps them to pass messages between them. When she becomes herself a comfort woman, the women create a language of their own to communicate, different from the patriarchal language embedded in Japanese or Korean: "We taught ourselves to communicate through eye movements, body posture, tilts of the head [...] in this way we could speak, in this way we could keep our sanity" (Keller, 2000: 16). It is this kind of language she wants her daughter Beccah to learn and embrace, one associated with women by which the knowledge and transmission of experience, including that of traumatic experience, may be passed from generation to generation and not be forgotten.

### 4. Marta Bosch

Marta Bosch's contribution exposed the main concerns of post-9/11 Arab American poetry. In the aftermath of September 11, Arab Americans wrote poems as a means of trying to make sense of the tragedy. Analyzing Arab American poetry written by Suheir Hammad, and also making reference to some poems by Mohja Khaf, Bosch argued for literature as a potential site for healing.

September 11 can be said to be a form of collective trauma for the Arab American community. Their social trauma is related to the specific nature of their situation, in which they share the national trauma experienced by all Americans and, at the same time, they have an added fear of reprisal and discrimination as Arabs are being related with terrorism. Moreover, it is said that 9/11 is a mediatized trauma, as E. Ann Kaplan argues, because of the preeminence of technologies in the way this trauma was experienced, and also because of the gap left by the Twin Towers was filled with images of them, images that inform Arab American poetry.

The scholar on trauma studies Anne Whitehead states that, "trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the

MARTA BOSCH, MERCÈ CUENCA, MÓNICA MIRAVET, AND M<sup>a</sup>  
ISABEL SEGURO

individual and resists language or representation” (2004: 13). This difficulty of putting trauma into words is very present in the poetry about 9/11 written by Arab American women. Suheir Hammad’s poem “first writing since”, first published in *In Motion Magazine* on November 7, 2001, precisely starts acknowledging this. It reads,

there have been no words.  
i have not written one word.  
no poetry in the ashes of canal street.  
no prose in the refrigerated trucks driving debris and dna.  
not one word.

Right after, she faces the reader with the idea of fear, and focuses on the distinct approach Arab Americans make of September 11 in relation to their double trauma as both Americans and also as people of Arab descent. First, Hammad asserts “I fear for the rest of us”; and then, in a series of parallelisms in a form of prayer, she implores,

first, please god, let it be a mistake, the pilot’s heart  
failed, the plane’s engine died.  
then please god, let it be a nightmare, wake me now.  
please god, after the second plane, please, don’t let it  
be anyone  
who looks like my brothers.

This last plead underlines the root of her fear as an Arab American: the fear of being vilified, being discriminated, because of the reinforcement of the stereotype that relates Arabs with terrorism. This fear appears also in other poems written by Arab American women after 9/11; as is the case of Mohja Kahf’s “We Will Continue Like Twin Towers”, published in her anthology of poetry *Emails from Scheherazad*, where she expresses this concern through the stanza which reads,

I will continue to invite your children  
to play with my children.

## PROCEEDINGS 31<sup>ST</sup> AEDEAN CONFERENCE

Will you continue to want your children  
to come and go with mine? (2003: 83)

Hammad totally contests the vilification of people of Arab descent arguing that white people are not vilified for their terrorist acts. As an example, she refers to the Oklahoma City bombing, and to the Ku Klux Klan:

we did not vilify all white men when mcveigh  
bombed oklahoma. america did not give out his  
family's addresses or where he went to church...and  
when we talk about holy books and hooded men and  
death, why do we never mention the kkk?

Hammad highlights the discrimination suffered by Arab Americans because of their being stereotypically perceived as terrorists. This ambivalence in the Arab Americans' approach to 9/11, which moves between feeling American and fearing retaliation, is encapsulated by Mohja Kahf's poem "The Fires Have Begun", which reads, "There is a World Love Center inside my ribcage / There is a World Hate Center inside me too" (2004: 84).

In fragmented structures typical of trauma literature, Suheir Hammad and Mohja Kahf present poetic pieces which put together the concerns of Americans and of people of Arab descent, and underline the problematic position of Arab Americans after 9/11. The visual nature of trauma and the difficulty of putting it into words are acknowledged; the specificities of the traumatic experience of September 11 for Arab Americans are also explored. Arab American poetry about September 11 proves to be a possible site for making sense of this traumatic event and, thus, it can be considered a potential site for healing.

### References

- Caruth, C. Ed. 1995. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Felman, S. and D. Laub. 1992. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York and London: Routledge.



**MARTA BOSCH, MERCÈ CUENCA, MÓNICA MIRAVET, AND M<sup>a</sup>  
ISABEL SEGURO**

- Foucault, M. 1990. *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Friedan, B. 1983. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Laurel.
- Grim, J. A. 1984. "Chaesu Kut: A Korean Shamanistic Performance". *Asian Folklore Studies* 43. 235–259.
- Hammad, S. 2001. "first writing since". In *Motion Magazine*. February 2008 <<http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/ac/shammad.html>>
- Herman, J. L. 1997. "Introduction". *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: BasicBooks. 1–5.
- Kahf, M. 2003. *Emails from Scheherazad*. Florida: University Press of Florida.
- Kaplan, E. A. 2005. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. Rutgers University Press.
- Keller, N. O. 2000. *Comfort Woman*. London: Virago.
- LaCapra, D. 2001. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lee, J. Y. 1973. "Concerning the Origin and Formation of Korean Shamanism". *Numen* 20. 135–159.
- Lerner, L. 1987. "What Is Confessional Poetry?" *Critical Quarterly* 29:2. 46–66.
- Leys, R. 2000. "Introduction" and "Freud and Trauma". *Trauma. A Genealogy*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press. 1–40.
- Middlebrook, D. W. 1991. *Anne Sexton: A Biography*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Rees-Jones, D. 1999. "Consorting with Angels: Anne Sexton and the Art of Confession." *Women: A Cultural Review* 10:3. 283–296.
- Sexton, A. 1999. *The Book of Folly. The Complete Poems*. Boston and New York: A Mariner Book, Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Soh, C. S. 1996. "The Korean 'Comfort Women'. Movement for Redress". *Asian Survey*. 36: 12. 1226–1240.
- Whitehead, A. 2004. "Introduction to Part I." *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 3–11.