Placed within the recently developed and rapidly evolving discipline of trauma studies, this book is an eloquent study of the application of trauma theory in literary texts and a substantial contribution to the exploration of traumatic narratives and the (im)possibilities of resolution and healing. Starting with the premise that historical trauma is individualised while simultaneously recognised as part of a broader collective trauma, the authors of the book employ the theories of prominent thinkers such as Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra and Marianne Hirsch to analyse the “most crucial traumatogenic stressors that affect the lives of the novels’ characters” and to indicate expressions of absence, loss and guilt as these are exhibited both in the novels’ protagonists as well as in their surroundings. The chapters of this collection are structured so that the reader is taken from specific events of collective trauma – the Holocaust and Hiroshima – to instances of intergenerational or insidious trauma – within the realm of the family or the neighborhood - to structural trauma as experienced by individuals.

The collection starts with a very succinct introduction outlining the main principles and terminology of trauma studies. Definitions of trauma are provided alongside indications of the topic’s broadness and the problematic raised should it be considered too formally.
Notions such as belatedness, repetition compulsion, witnessing, narrative versus traumatic memory, acting-out and working-through the traumatic experience are explained in addition to the pivotal issues of accuracy, truth and its distortion, possession by the past and the importance of memory, unfamiliarity and incomprehensibility. More importantly, the authors underline the importance of departing from the contextual analysis of the texts and highlighting the (meta)textual components and qualities of traumatic narratives that contribute towards the structural mimicking of trauma.

The first chapter, Stanislav Kolar’s *Trauma and the Holocaust in the American Novel*, focuses on the reflection of traumatic experiences caused by what the author acknowledges as the “crucial trauma of the [previous] century” in American Holocaust Literature. The author submits that the Holocaust and its effect on the victims can only be perceived and fully understood in the light of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and so focuses on the mirroring of “survivor syndrome” in literature. To this end, Kolar looks at five books: Edward Lewis Wallant’s *The Pawnbroker* (1961), Saul Bellow’s *Mr Sammler’s Planet* (1970), William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice* (1979), Cynthia Ozick’s *The Shawl* (1989), and Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel *Maus* (1986, 1991). He then looks at Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) and Dara Horn’s *The World to Come* (2006) to expand on the connections between trauma and memory and to speak of the workings of transgenerational “postmemory”. In the first part of his paper, Kolar explores texts whose main protagonists are haunted by their past and highlights the traumatic instances inscribed in them, in a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the novels but also in juxtaposition to each other. With the inclusion of the other three novels Kolar proceeds to examine the importance of metanarrative components but also to raise issues of authenticity or even the morality of artistic representation of events of such extremity. Kolar’s work truly offers a kaleidoscope of traumatic personae, an abundance of PTSD symptoms manifestations and a wealthy source of trauma examples in literature.

Chapter 2, *Nuclear Holocaust and Trauma: John Hersey’s ‘Hiroshima’*, again by Stanislav Kolar, is much shorter in length and in scope. Focusing on John Hersey’s reportage of the atomic attack on Hiroshima and its aftermath, as published in August 1946 in *The New Yorker*, Kolar explores the trauma caused by the unfamiliarity of the event and tracks the emotional reactions of the survivors in the following days: solidarity, followed by numbness and apathy.

In *Finding Identity through Trauma* Zuzana Burakova seeks to explore the ways trauma and memory have shaped one of the major issues of postmodern interdisciplinary research, the search and assertion of identity. The author argues that “since trauma is rooted in individual as well as collective forms of identity, it may affect the process of both collective and personal identity formations” (69) and employs theories of intergenerational and transgenerational postmemory as well as “insidious trauma” to present Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), Lara Vapnyar’s short stories *There are Jews in My House* (2003), and Gary Shteyngart’s *Absurdistan* (2006) as depictions of traumatic – i.e. divided, damaged or disrupted - identity and as cases of what she considers to be a key theme in American ethnic literatures, the return to one’s roots and traditions.

In the final chapter of the book Katarina Sandorova turns to structural trauma and sets out to “identify the sources of the traumas which are experienced by lesbian women.” (97) For Sandorova, such trauma can stem from the clash between the salient identity protected by social acceptance or conformity to generally established social rules and a
newly acquired self-awareness or the quest for personal fulfilment and freedom. In her analysis of three British novels from the late 20th century, Sarah Waters’ *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), Joanna Trollope’s *A Village Affair* (1989) and Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), the author detects determining traumatogenic stressors that are traditionally omitted or neglected in definitions of trauma: the confrontation with accepted public opinions, the restrictions imposed by closed environments in the development of alternative choices, the resistance imposed by institutions such as the family or the church which feel threatened by the appearance of new ideas.

*Reflections of Trauma in Selected Works of Postwar American and British Literature* is, on the whole, very enlightening for the scholar or student wishing to explore the applications of trauma theory in literature. The case studies presented are both detailed and well-argued and can function as an exemplary springboard for anyone interested in the manifestations of trauma in fiction. Despite the authors’ attempts to provide a broad range of texts and traumata, however, one cannot help but observe the lack of other literary genres in this analysis; arguments concerning the re-enactment of trauma, the narrative or metanarrative components as well as the fragmentation and discontinuity of the text might have been more explicitly outlined with the inclusion in the collection of works of poetry or drama, especially given the emphasis placed by the authors on the formalistic qualities of the text. What is more, one is deeply surprised by the fact that a selection of American texts reflecting trauma fails to include – let alone mention – an analysis of the 9/11 novel which, in many respects, is currently the seminal example of traumatic literature. In fact, there seems to be a certain imbalance concerning the book’s thematic thread: emphasis on the Holocaust – albeit successful in stressing the specificity of the event – is sidetracked by the presentation of other types of collective or individual trauma. Yet, should we isolate the instances of historical trauma the 9/11 absence is evident; Kolar’s analysis of *Hiroshima* not only shifts the focus from the Shoah but also makes this lack blatant. Finally, for those who have delved in trauma and memory theories, applications of trauma theories in the novels chosen seem to be limited to a surface level, as the authors’ explorations in memory – although precise and insightful – fail to acknowledge the “multidirectional” memory of the text. The novels in question are seen as separate case studies that may be juxtaposed but do not engage in dialectic relationships and thus restrict the intertwining of literary narratives in the expression of cultural memories.

---

**AUTHOR**

**ANGELIKI TSETI**

University of Athens, Greece