

Childhood Traumas: Narratives and Representations

Ed. Kamayani Kumar and Angelie Multani

221 pages, 2020, ₹995 (hardcover)

Routledge, South Asia Edition

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What We Talk About When We Talk About Childhood Trauma

Childhood Traumas: Narratives and Representations is a collection of essays edited by Kamayani Kumar and Angelie Multani. The volume unites chapters from various scholars worldwide who work on Postcolonial Studies, Childhood Studies, Trauma Studies, Literature, and Cultural Studies. Drawing from the contributors' diverse methodologies, this volume offers a compelling analysis of childhood trauma and its representation in various media. The work explores childhoods in the 20th and 21st century—a time defined by harrowing events in world history like the First and Second World Wars, the Holocaust, the Partition of the Indian subcontinent, the Spanish Civil War, the Iraq-Iran War, and civil wars on the African continent. The tremor created by such events victimized children across the globe. Subsequently, the representation of childhood in diverse media reflected and acknowledged the psychological trauma necessitating an investigation, thereby conflating the two academic disciplines of Childhood and Trauma Studies. The essays of this collection elaborate on such media's potential in conveying trauma. They reiterate a rather established idea that the complex reality of childhood lies far beyond universal stories of innocence. In addition, this collection reaffirms the multi-disciplinary nature of Childhood Studies.

The prefatory essay offers an expository discussion on childhood trauma with a detailed summary of the fifteen articles. These investigate childhood from historical, sociological, psychological, and anthropological perspectives across spatiotemporal contexts. The volume provides a roadmap to researchers by analyzing genres such as paintings, films, fiction, poems, and anecdotes, thereby explicating the possibilities of Childhood Studies for examining trauma narratives. Our present review thematically divides the book along subjects such as forced displacement, memory of childhood trauma, tropes of trauma narratives, lives of child soldiers, and post-9/11 trauma.

Five essays treat the broad aspect of forced displacement and branch out to subthemes such as coping with trauma through art and the trauma of separation. "Poof! Up in Smoke" progresses by analyzing artworks collected from the Terezin concentration camp. It clarifies how art operates as a threshold to express fear, creativity, and

fantasy, which in turn helps children simultaneously escape and acknowledge their lived reality. “Colours of Trauma” reflects on the effects of border crossing on children’s psyches and studies aspects of forced migration, memory, and imagination in creating a home away from home.

“War Babies,” “Waiting for My Mum to Come Back,” and “Children of the Trail” problematise the skewed and over-glorified narratives of various ‘rescue operations.’ “War Babies” analyses the short story collection *We Should Never Meet*, which focuses on the Vietnamese children who were ‘rescued’ as part of Operation Baby Lift. The essay gives a glimpse into the trauma etched on the children and unravels the process of othering. “Waiting for My Mum to Come Back” and “Children of the Trail” deal with the forced displacement of children by white settlers in Australia and America respectively. Analyzed from the vantage point of trauma theory, the authors situate childhood trauma within the larger picture of epistemic violence against indigenous communities.

The memory of childhood trauma and the retrospective nature of its representation are studied in two adjacent essays. In “Drawing an Account of Herself,” Amrita Singh surveys the possibilities of the comic genre in representing trauma. The author concludes by establishing comic narratives as a powerful medium for preserving personal as well as political history. “Cache-Cache: Writing Childhood Trauma” differentiates between a child survivor’s account and that of an adult narrator by focusing on the narrative techniques chosen to present trauma in Georges Perec’s novel, *W*.

Four conjoining essays examine the uses of various narrative tropes in presenting traumatic childhood. “Negotiating Trauma” studies *Midnight’s Children* and *Cracking India* from a position informed by trauma theorist E. Ann Kaplan. It analyzes the association between the disabled body and trauma created by postcolonial subjectivity. “Quest into the Past” inspects the trauma that undercuts young adult literature and the proclivity of writers in drawing a fine line between narrating trauma and not transferring its cognitive effects to its readers. To govern this ethical responsibility, writers often resort to the narrative structure of a heroic quest and fairy tale motifs. “Children at War” and “Returning Horror” delve into Japanese animation and the famous Studio Ghibli film, *Grave of the Fireflies*. The essays scrutinize the post-war Japanese imagination and the coping mechanism offered by the medium of fantasy. “Children at War” explicates the idea that the theme of war is popularized through animation and argues that the traumatic content articulated through fantastical characters provides a safe distance for the audience.

Three essays align with child soldiers’ lives and their testimonies, namely “Et Tu, Brute?,” “Coping with Killing?” and “We Needed the Violence to Cheer Us.” “Et Tu, Brute?” inspects the plight of child

soldiers against the backdrop of the Sri Lankan civil war. It documents the sexual abuse of children and pays equal attention to the prevailing social situation, which creates the cycle of violence. “Coping with Killing?” deals with child soldier narratives presented through films such as *War Witch*. It studies the aspects of false indoctrination and luring children with violence from the vantage point of trauma theory. By reading Ishmael Beah’s *Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*, “We Needed the Violence to Cheer Us” researches the trauma created by military violence and the difficult process of re-assimilation into society. The final essay, “Child/hood and 9/11 Trauma,” details Jonathan Safran Foer’s postmodern coming-of-age novel, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*. It investigates the ‘unspeakability’ imparted by trauma and the narrative techniques employed in portraying the post-9/11 melancholia.

The book addresses Childhood Studies by positioning trauma at its heart and engages in a critical dialogue with its readers by presenting the precarious conditions and conflict zones in which many children live. Thus, the volume bears testimony to a significant argument in Childhood Studies in acknowledging that children are ‘political actors’ with a voice of their own. It addresses the emancipatory nature of the domain and initiates a conversation on resilience. Each piece unpacks and contextualizes childhood representation from intriguing angles within the broad domain of Trauma Studies. The volume masterfully tackles diversity by critically evaluating childhood trauma employing a range of methodologies. It is slightly disappointing that the collection does not address race, corporeality, and dysfunctional families adversely affecting 21st-century childhood. Finally, the collection is a timely and handy guide to researchers. In an age of growing hate speech, divisive policies, and refugee crises, a humanitarian academic discourse of this kind has the ability to sensitize readers. This book is a necessary intervention in the enduring dialogue on reassessing childhood.