

Heterogeneity, Diversity, and Place: Trauma Theory Research in the Postcolonial Context

Ziwei Xie

School of Arts, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, Gansu Province 730070

Abstract: Situated within the trauma theory of the postcolonial context, this research adopts a cultural studies paradigm, building upon a critique and reflection of traditional trauma models. The theory emphasizes representing trauma from a heterogeneous and dynamic perspective, challenging and reconstructing the existing politics of trauma. The diversified modes of representation allow the complexity and diversity of trauma to emerge, thereby breaking through the expressive dilemmas of modernist aesthetic forms. Trauma recovery, starting from collective memory and national culture, not only transcends simple psychological intervention but also integrates with economic, social, and political realities, truly addressing the deep-rooted historical and structural traumas. The "friendly diplomatic relations" between postcolonial theory and trauma theory further realize the fusion of authenticity in representation, beauty in expression, and goodness in recovery, contributing to the creation of a more just global future.

Keywords: Postcolonial; Trauma Theory; Cultural Studies

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Introduction

The concept of "postcolonialism" has been a research hotspot since the 1950s. Postcolonial studies cover multidisciplinary fields such as politics, literature, history, geography, and culture, questioning and expanding Western critical trends through the lenses of race, gender, and class. "Trauma," originally referring to physical injury, was extended by Freud to the psychological realm, introducing the concept of "psychic trauma," thus laying the foundation for modern trauma theory. With the efforts of scholars like Geoffrey Hartman, Cathy Caruth, and Judith Herman, trauma theory flourished and gradually expanded to encompass fields such as history, memory, and literature. In the 21st century, trauma studies further integrated political, economic, and cultural perspectives, merging with cultural studies, and presenting an increasingly diverse and globalized trend. Against this backdrop, the "friendly diplomatic relations" between trauma theory and postcolonial theory have become an inevitable trend. In 2008, *Novel Studies* magazine explored the connection between trauma theory and postcolonial theory in depth. The editor Stephen Claps, in his 2013 monograph *Postcolonial Witnessing: Beyond Trauma*, further analyzed the complex interplay between the two through theoretical interpretation and text analysis. Overall, trauma theory in the postcolonial context particularly focuses on the trauma experiences of non-Western cultures or minority groups. These traumas often cannot be analyzed through traditional models, providing a new perspective for the reconstruction of cultural trauma and historical memory in the non-Western world. Under the guidance of poststructuralist methods and the cultural studies paradigm, the critical connection between the two becomes evident, questioning truth, universal values, and political regimes—especially Western regimes.

1. The Heterogeneity of Trauma Representation: Rooted in Specific Cultural and Historical Contexts

Trauma theory in the postcolonial context emerged based on the research of the second and third categories of scholars. It is rooted in specific cultural contexts, emphasizing the heterogeneity of trauma representation, and challenges traditional Western-centric perspectives, giving voice and attention to more marginalized groups. Specifically, it is reflected in three aspects: First, it does not solely focus on events like the Holocaust, PTSD among American veterans of the Vietnam War, or the 9/11 attacks. In trauma theory, most of the attention has been directed toward events that occurred in Europe and the United States, with much of the theoretical development surrounding trauma and witnessing driven by the Nazi genocide of European Jews. As studies by Caruth, Felman, and others indicate, trauma theory as a field of cultural scholarship has evolved through engagement with Holocaust testimonies,

literature, and history. However, as Claps states: "If trauma theory is to fulfill its promise of cross-cultural ethical intervention, it must include victims from non-Western or minority cultures"^[1]. Researchers of postcolonial trauma theory broaden their focus to global trauma, particularly examining the trauma of the Third World, including genocides, oppression, and racial extermination in colonial histories, class oppression in everyday life, and gender-based violence. For example, Ananya Jahnara Kabir, in *Emotion, Body, Place: Trauma Theory in the World*, focuses on the partition of India and Pakistan, exploring the traumatic experiences within specific cultural contexts. Similarly, Gayatri Spivak, in *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: History of the Present*, focuses on the subordinated classes in the Third World, discussing the trauma they endured under the dual oppression of local puppet regimes and imperialist ideologies.

Second, traumatic experiences should be represented within cultural contexts rather than being claimed as irreproducible. Greg Fort once stated that the irreproducibility of trauma is related to "the rupture with the pre-colonial era enforced by coercion and the prohibition of memory by specific regimes. This means that these past events, in principle, can be restored, represented, and narrated."^[2] The issue with the claim of trauma's irreproducibility is that it places authenticity under strict conditions. A more useful approach is drawn from Dominique LaCapra's perspective: "I believe truth is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition; it must be fully integrated with other dimensions of historical writing."^[3] Trauma theory in the postcolonial context sees truth as a necessary but insufficient condition, emphasizing the heterogeneity of trauma while fully considering specific historical, cultural, and geographical factors. Researchers focus on how to effectively express the voices of victims within different social structures and cultural backgrounds, while avoiding homogenizing their experiences. Postcolonial trauma theory advocates not only for the representation of trauma but also for the redistribution of the right to speak. In this process, we are able to examine those marginalized, forgotten, or even deliberately erased historical fragments, thus revealing the heterogeneity of trauma from a multicultural perspective.

Third, rather than an ontology grounded in an event-driven model, this approach advances an epistemology based on symbolic representation. In the postcolonial context, trauma theory no longer emphasizes the fundamental triggering role of objective catastrophic events; instead, it stresses that major events possess only a potential for trauma, which must be realized through symbolic representation in order to be constructed as "cultural trauma." As Tao Dongfeng puts it, "trauma is not born as trauma; it becomes trauma."^[4] In other words, trauma is not the event itself. Without specific symbolic construction and without being situated in particular social and cultural contexts, trauma is difficult to form. For example, the Rwandan genocide and the genocide in Guatemala have not become global traumatic events in the same way as the Holocaust, a discrepancy closely related to the failure of symbolic construction and to unequal distributions of global discursive power. An event-driven ontological model focuses only on traumatic events at a given moment, thereby neglecting the trauma produced by multiple social, cultural, and historical factors. By contrast, postcolonial trauma theory interrelates trauma with power and ideology, attends to the heterogeneity of global traumas, and explores how they are narrated and remembered in different cultural and social contexts, thus challenging and reconstructing existing historical paradigms and the politics of trauma.

Trauma theory in the postcolonial context advocates for the representation and reconstruction of trauma events on a global scale, particularly focusing on genocides, class oppression, and war events in non-Western regions. This theory moves beyond traditional event-centered approaches and the binary opposition of imperialism, instead emphasizing the representation of trauma from a heterogeneous and dynamic perspective. By questioning the absolutization of the "truth" of specific events, it reveals the complex power dynamics, symbolic representations, and ideological manipulations behind trauma. From this perspective, trauma is seen as a product of power structures, requiring us to re-understand and rewrite the history of trauma within specific historical, cultural, and geographical contexts. Therefore, postcolonial trauma theory not only restructures our understanding of historical trauma events but also promotes the redistribution of global discursive power.

2.The Diversification of Trauma Representation: Embedding Aesthetic Forms within Specific Cultural Contexts

In the postcolonial context, scholars of trauma theory have absorbed various critiques and challenges and have proposed expanding the modes of trauma expression into a broader range of cultural and artistic domains. They argue that trauma theory should not presuppose a direct or necessary connection between aesthetic forms and political or moral values; rather, it should closely examine the specific social and historical contexts in which representations of trauma are produced and received. At the same time, scholars advocate sustained attentiveness to the diverse representational forms and strategies of resistance generated by—or demanded by—these contexts. They emphasize that adopting pluralized modes of trauma representation allows for a more comprehensive grasp of the complexity and diversity of trauma, thereby avoiding the constraints imposed by simplified or formulaic literary language and by a single modernist aesthetic. More specifically, diversified trauma representations extend vertically across multiple artistic genres, including dance, film and television, music, and literature, while horizontally encompassing a variety of modes such as modernism, realism, and trauma realism.

From a vertical perspective, when art forms represent traumatic experiences, they should be closely tied to the local cultural context, each reflecting trauma in a unique way within specific historical and social situations. Taking Angola as an example, this country endured five centuries of Portuguese colonial rule, a brutal independence war, and a 27-year-long civil war. Kuduro music and dance are powerful responses to Angola's prolonged wartime trauma and racial trauma. Kuduro music blends indigenous Angolan elements with Portuguese and even global electronic beats, with its rap sections using a hybrid language of Portuguese and Kimbundu (a Bantu language from northern Angola). This choice of language enhances its local flavor and national identity. In terms of dance, it incorporates dynamic movements from breakdancing and hip-hop, traditional Angolan and carnival dance moves, as well as graphic theatrical gestures—such as dancing on the legs as if they were amputated. Specifically, this third type of movement evokes the survival challenges faced by Black people during the colonial era, particularly the widespread amputations caused by landmines during the Angolan War of Independence. This form of representation, to some extent, offers a corporeal reenactment of the traumatic history, allowing the audience to touch upon the pain and memories of that history through perception, observation, and experience. Kuduro music and dance are filled with passion, frenzy, and aggression. As a unique form of trauma representation, it blends local and global cultural memories. Through body language and rhythmic music, it becomes a medium of resistance in the "third space." On the other hand, it breaks the traditional "melancholy" mode of trauma representation with its intense emotion, showcasing the vitality and rebellious spirit embedded in traumatic experiences.

From a horizontal perspective, the arts present a diverse array of forms and styles, each reflecting the relevant regional cultural background. South Africa's apartheid policy left deep scars on its people, and this historical violence has been explored in numerous texts that address the trauma left by colonialism and the apartheid system. Over the past two decades, since the abolition of apartheid in 1991, autobiographical literature has flourished in South Africa. During this period, South Africa published a large number of autobiographies, including personal memoirs of those involved in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), autobiographical narratives by artists and South African writers, as well as fictionalized memoirs that question the TRC's ability to repair and heal both individual and collective trauma in South Africa. Whether in the realist style, such as *Dog Heart* and *Mr. Chameleon*, or in the modernist approach, such as John Maxwell Coetzee's autobiographical trilogy (*Boyhood*, *Youth*, *Summertime*), these works do not follow traditional linear narratives but instead use counter-narrative techniques through fragmented life episodes. All these texts are rooted in the African worldview of "Ubuntu," which means "my humanity is tied to your humanity, inseparable." These works not only cover the pain, humiliation, and dark history of the apartheid era but also reflect the current cultural trauma of the South African nation and the outlook for the future, including a vision for "South Africanness" and national reconciliation. Similarly, the trauma realist narrative film *Zulu Love Letter* also draws on the spirit of "Ubuntu." Through telling a love story of a Zulu woman during

apartheid, the film reveals how trauma is passed on between individuals and communities and how it is understood and represented within different cultural contexts. The film employs a series of modernist techniques to express the protagonist's painful traumatic memories, such as frequent and sudden time shifts, unstable police chase shots, or fragmented visual language. Even though *Zulu Love Letter* uses blurry, fragmented images to convey the painful nature of the traumatic experience, it aligns with the local realist depiction, allowing the audience to feel the deep interweaving of history and reality. It also showcases the power of art in the process of trauma representation.

It must be further clarified that, in the postcolonial context, trauma theory's attitude toward modernist forms is actually significantly different from the classical trauma model. This difference goes back to the key issue of "reproducibility," discussed in the first section. The classical trauma model is fixated on "melancholy," emphasizing delay, dissociation, absence, emptiness, and the crisis of truth, thus excluding the possibility of trauma representation and national healing. In contrast, trauma theory in the postcolonial context focuses on "mid-mourning." Referring to Freud's analysis in *Mourning and Melancholia*, he points out that the difference between "melancholy" and "mourning" lies in the fact that the latter accepts the loss of the object and is able to look to the future, whereas the former refuses to accept the loss and is unwilling to choose alternative solutions, dwelling in the pain of the past.^[5] However, "mid-mourning" exists in a dynamic state between these two. On one hand, it acknowledges that recovery and growth are possible after traumatic injury; on the other hand, it emphasizes the repeated representation of traumatic events, where each expression, each representation, generates further examination and interpretation. The difference from "melancholy" lies in not abandoning the opportunity for representation, while the distinction from "mourning" lies in reinterpretation through repetition, rather than simple acceptance or forgetting.

In short, the modernist representational forms in the postcolonial context, based on the possibility and inevitability of trauma representation, not only challenge the passive and helpless views in the "melancholy" model but also offer new pathways for addressing racial trauma and other types of collective trauma.

3.The Locality of Trauma Recovery: Pathways of Healing through Collective Memory and National Culture

In the postcolonial context, researchers have drawn on these critiques and experiences, shifting the focus of trauma recovery research toward collective trauma. The recovery process for collective trauma emphasizes locality, starting from the uniqueness of each ethnic culture and collective memory. This marks a significant departure from previous methods such as writing therapy and talk therapy, as it focuses more on exploring the unique value of ethnic culture and collective memory in trauma recovery. As mentioned earlier, the trauma recovery process for the people of Sri Lanka should take into account the protective beliefs within local Hindu and Buddhist traditions. These beliefs allow the people to believe that even under the threat of terror, they can survive and have the opportunity for rebirth and compensation through reincarnation. In discussing trauma recovery, Kabir uses the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum as an example, emphasizing the healing function of the "Buddhist memory site"—the Bodhi tree: As a memorial to the Khmer Rouge atrocities, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum carries the enduring collective trauma of the Cambodian people and the modern world. The Buddha, sitting in meditation under the Bodhi tree outside the museum, embodies the saying: "The nature of the Bodhi tree is inherent; the moment the mind arises, it is delusion," and "One may be confused by the teachings for countless lifetimes, but awakening occurs in an instant." In this cultural context, trauma recovery is no longer a simple psychological intervention but involves deep cultural identity and spiritual solace. "The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum reminds us that even in a revisionist form, the European-centric paradigm is insufficient to explain trauma and its memorialization outside of European space. Just like in Cambodian society, the museum's healing power comes from Buddhism."^[6]

It is important to further clarify that, in the postcolonial context, trauma recovery work is not limited to addressing psychological issues; it also focuses on resolving the economic, political, and social roots of trauma. If trauma is not viewed within a broader cultural context but instead confined to the individual psychological level, the

issues that are essentially political, social, or economic may be simplified into medical, pathological, or psychological problems. This could lead to an overemphasis on psychological healing while neglecting the need for political, social, or economic structural changes, ultimately overlooking more fundamental structural traumas, such as political oppression, racism, and economic hegemony. This point has long been addressed in Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, where he states: "Only when everything is repositioned in the most materialistic sense can true alienation be overcome."^[7] Fanon reminds us to pay attention to the social nature of the trauma caused by racial oppression, emphasizing that the alienation of Black people is not a psychological issue but a societal one. The novel *The Memory of Love* also profoundly illustrates this point. Set against the backdrop of the recently ended eleven-year-long Sierra Leone Civil War, it tells the story of the physical and psychological trauma of survivors. Adrian, a psychologist specializing in PTSD, enters Sierra Leone with well-known Western trauma recovery methods, attempting to help the local people. However, when Atila questions Adrian, asking "What is normal?" with no clear answer, his response, "You call it dysfunction, my friend. We call it life," seems to prove the limitations of the Western model. For most of the people in Sierra Leone, the "normal" experience is one of oppression, deprivation, and turmoil, while freedom, wealth, and stability are actually exceptions rather than the norm. As Claps points out, the "normal" state to which the local people will return after receiving treatment is one of enduring pain, and the root causes of this pain—socioeconomic and political issues—remain hidden and unresolved. Therefore, in postcolonial trauma theory, the path to trauma recovery must be integrated with the economic, social, and political realities in order to truly address the deep-rooted, structural causes of trauma. While the Western recovery model has value to some extent, it overlooks the complexities of cultural differences and social contexts.

Trauma recovery in the postcolonial context, starting from collective memory and national culture, paves a local path that differs from Western healing models. It involves deep issues of identity, cultural beliefs, and spiritual solace, placing the trauma survivor within the community of cultural generational transmission and collective memory, going beyond simple psychological intervention. At the same time, the local path of trauma recovery focuses on changes in economic, political, and social structures, addressing the root causes of trauma arising from structural issues, reflecting the complexity and dynamic nature of trauma recovery across cultural differences.

4. Conclusion

As Veesser observes, "it is no exaggeration to say that over the past decade, the redefinition of trauma and the current theorization of literary trauma studies have owed almost everything to the discoveries of postcolonial and non-Western scholarship."^[8] In the postcolonial context, trauma theory has drawn on cultural-studies approaches from the social, political, economic, and media spheres, building upon critical reflections on traditional models of trauma. The cultural study of trauma thus appears to be an inevitable trajectory. Reconsidering trauma theory from a postcolonial perspective can indeed move beyond the impasse of Euro-American trauma centrism and, through the representation, articulation, and recovery of traumas across the world, further realize an integration of truth, beauty, and goodness. An inclusive and culturally sensitive trauma theory can heighten awareness of injustice, help us understand shared conditions of precarity, and cultivate empathy for forms of suffering previously unheard, thereby contributing to the opening of a more just global future. Yet at present, postcolonial trauma theory remains caught between the conceptual poles of "the West" and "the non-West". It must move beyond this binary in order to guard against the inadvertent reproduction of a new form of Orientalism. In advancing trauma theory, we should remain aware that no theory ought to become a new set of shackles. While postcolonial trauma theory seeks to expose injustice, it must also avoid falling into another trap of reductive thinking. Through continuous self-reflection and critique, it should strive for a broader perspective — one that embraces difference and promotes a genuinely pluralistic and inclusive global dialogue.

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