

## THE THEORY OF POSTCOLONIAL TRAUMA AND ITS IMPACT ON THE RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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### ABSTRACT

This article argues that postcolonial trauma theory is beneficial not only for recognizing postcolonial people's trauma but also for the development of religious studies. The western trauma theory ignored the trauma of colonialism which still has many influences in the contemporary world. Here to respond to that condition, the postcolonial trauma theory shall probe how colonialism left trauma in the society of postcolonial people. Not only that topic, but this article also investigates how the adaptation of postcolonial trauma theory on religious studies. Because religion, as a fact of contemporary society, has got a thorough influence from colonialism. The approach of this study is qualitative research by investigating literature about postcolonial trauma. By probing the literature around the postcolonial trauma theory and its adaption in religious studies, this article shall open the possibility of another development in religious studies. This research concludes that the postcolonial trauma theory can be advantageous to religious studies.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial trauma; trauma studies; religious studies; biblical studies.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This article argues that the postcolonial trauma theory is beneficial for the religious studies discourse. The trauma perspective is gaining popularity because many phenomena can be explained (Phipps, 2014; Root, 1992). Starting from the perspective of trauma studies, postcolonial scholars find that the western trauma theory often ignores the trauma of colonialism (Ward, 2013). It is also true with the society of postcolonial people. Even though most postcolonial people already gained independence in the 20th century, the colonial system still exists in many ways until contemporary times (Ramone, 2011). Therefore, it can be argued that postcolonial people still live in the trauma of colonialism. It is the main motive of postcolonial trauma theory. The postcolonial trauma theory wants to answer this problem by developing a field that investigates the trauma of colonialism that still dwells in postcolonial people's lives.

Further, the postcolonial trauma theory acquires attention from religious studies scholars. Because colonialism and religion are inseparable facts of postcolonial society, using postcolonial trauma theory in religious studies. This article argues that the adaptation of postcolonial trauma theory is possible and has already been started by several scholars. Many scholarly works of literature introduce the trauma theory (Root, 1992; Traverso & Broderick, 2010) and its adaptation to religious studies (Becker, Dochorn, & Holt, 2014; Sremac & Genzevoort, 2019), but there is no literature explicitly speaking on the postcolonial trauma theory and its adaptation to the religious studies. This article shall probe in that direction by doing literature research on the postcolonial trauma scholarly literature. Moreover, probing on how the theory of postcolonial trauma influences the religious studies field. This study aims to see how postcolonial trauma theory development can further develop the religious studies discourse.

### **A Concise Introduction to Colonialism**

The term "colonialism" refers to an era when one particular group of people came to a foreign land to conquer land in order to exploit the resources from that. This particular historical event happened mainly in the early modern era, namely the 15th century. It started when the western people tried to "discover" the new land. This doctrine of discovery is problematic in the first place because the primary people mainly inhabited the land where the western conqueror claimed to be discovered by them. This event created a new era of world history because practically almost every part of the world has been colonized by western nations such as England, France, Portuguese, Spain, Belgium, and Netherland. The colonizer gained and maintained their colonization through military power and by indoctrination of their colonial ideologies. Although many of the colonies have achieved their independence, the impact of colonialism cannot be denied still exists.

There are some impacts of colonialism that still abundantly stay in contemporary society. Such can be named if Western society still becomes the standard of other societies. The colonizers brought their culture to the colonized

people, eventually turning them into modern people. Therefore, colonization came hand in hand with the modernization of the world (Cooper, 2005, p. 3). Now, being western is the leading standard of the world. The other impact is how the world becomes mixed socially. The colonization era is a migration era because the colonizer built a colony and created a new society with the blended elements anywhere. The new society in the colonies was created. However, the colonizer's country itself also changed because many colonized people were moved to the colonizer's land to be workforces.

In the realm of religiosity, the colonial era created new encounters of religions. Colonialism as a social mobility phenomenon comes with a political agenda and religious organization. Many missionaries from different Christianities came to the colonized society with a mission of Christianization and created a very diverse context of inter-religious encounters in the colonized societies. That is particularly important to notice the relationship between Christianity and indigenous religions. However, this specific part of History is not similar. In the Middle East, the relationship between Christianity was already established a far long time before the colonial era.

Nevertheless, the relationship between Christianity and Islam has become more complicated since the modern colonial era. In southeast Asia, the inter-religious relationship is more complicated because the encounter of religions is between Christianity and the indigenous religions and other religions such as Islam, Hindu, and Buddha. Even though Christianity already existed in some areas of Asia, such as India and China. The coming of missionaries, along with the colonizers, made the image of Christianity is changed totally.

In the contemporary postcolonial world, the heritage of the encounter of religions in the colonial era still left some problems, especially for the indigenous religions. Because the encounter of religions was not necessarily peaceful, there are times when the encounter of religions in the colonial era happens intensely of negativity. Violence, war, and other damaging stories of encounters flaming not only the times the stories occurred but also afterward. This story of colonialism becomes a trauma, especially for the postcolonial. Moreover, the postcolonial trauma theory shall do investigate this Trauma of colonialism. In order to explain more about postcolonial trauma theory, it is important to see first the trauma theory because postcolonial trauma theory is a theory that tries to respond to the western trauma theory.

## **RESULT AND DISSCUSION**

### **The Western Trauma Theory**

Cathy Caruth, the leading scholar of trauma studies, says that the main problem of Trauma is in its representation. Drawing insight from Sigmund Freud, Caruth questions the representation of trauma experience is itself, in reality, is expressing a *belatedness*. Sigmund Freud once talks about the belated aspect of

Trauma by mentioning an example of a person who suffers an accident. For instance, when the person has a car accident, the Trauma does not appear right away. Nevertheless, the person will realize the Trauma in psychological pathologies such as alexithymia and anhedonia (Caruth, 1995a). The belatedness becomes complicated when the person cannot easily express the traumatic experience. However, Freud and Caruth agree that a narrative is a vital tool for the traumatized person to find the meaning of the traumatic experience to heal. Although, the situation is not as simple as that. There is also what Caruth says as "the paradox of trauma," that the traumatized person needs story-telling to heal. However, it is hard to express the unspeakable traumatic experience (Caruth, 1995a).

Facing the paradox of Trauma, Shoshana Felman argues that narrative literature, in this case, is novel, also a form of testimony. For Felman, a Novel is a form of testimony because it expresses specific traumatic experiences in the fictional subject. It helps the traumatized people to find meaning in the trauma experience (Felman, 1995). The novel has been a crucial tool for the postcolonial people to express their trauma. Along with that, Stevan Weine also emphasizes that "In novels, poetry, plays, shorts stories, and essays, there is a dexterity with the linguistic and narrative aspects of testimony that strict memoirists or 'objective' observers from the clinical and social sciences often fail to capture" (Weine, 2006). Weine is speaking in the context of clinical testimony. However, he acknowledges that in literature, the testimony itself has more freedom in its expression of psychological, ethical, and historical aspects of the traumatizing events because it is less dependent on any theory or ideology. According to him, it is "perhaps closer to life"(Weine, 2006).

In the book edited by Cathy Caruth, Henry Krystal shares his struggle to deal with Jewish Holocaust survivors. In his experience, he finds that most of them have anhedonia and alexithymia symptoms. Those pathologies in the psychoanalytical analysis are depression, long-life shame, and insomnia. Krystal discovers that the symptoms are increasing as all of them are in the process of aging. Most of them, by data, have a short span of life. Most articles in the anthology strictly speak of the psychoanalysis context of Trauma, but they try to develop its critical aspect. One example is the transcript of Cathy Caruth's interview with Robert Lofty. He is a professor of psychoanalysis at Yale University. Caruth tries to deepen some of Lofty's critics to the understanding of Trauma. One notion of his critics is that Trauma studies do not consider death as a foundation of trauma experience. Because trauma studies draw inspiration from Sigmund Freud, some psychoanalysts tend to conclude that any trauma is based on childhood trauma quickly. Lofty argues that understanding Trauma from death experience is based on his experience in Hiroshima, where many survivors are dealing with the death of their relatives (Caruth, 1995b).

Kai Erikson talks about Trauma in his book differently from other authors, and his particular focus is collective Trauma. At the beginning of his article, Erikson explains that his opinion is based on several disasters in the United States of America. This way, Erikson follows the other writers in the book who talks about

Trauma based on events. However, his special attention to the collective aspect of Trauma draws him to conclude that collective Trauma is "... a blow to the basic issues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people and impairs the prevailing sense of commonality." Erikson's main point is that Trauma destroys collaborative relationships. However, further, in the article, Erikson says the communal Trauma can also endorse creating some everyday moods between the member of the group.

Later, the postcolonial analysts discover that the traditional trauma theory of Cathy Caruth and others is unsuitable for the postcolonial world because they mainly develop their trauma theory based on the Euro-American context (Craps & Buelens, 2008).

### Postcolonial Trauma Theory

Decolonizing Trauma Studies begins in a special issue published by the Journal Studies in the Novel - *StiN* (Vol. 40 - 2008). It is a unique series that includes some literature critiques that try to read novels from non-Western writers who bear postcolonial trauma/ witness. This particular series still use the binary concept of the western-non-western world. The binary has been criticized because it is not realistic but ideological (Hall, 2019). Their investigation of the novels reveals many insights on how desperately postcolonial people need alternative ways to understand the literary product of postcolonial countries and, more importantly, how trauma studies can understand postcolonial traumatic experiences/ witnesses.

Eloquently, in the *StiN* edition, Stef Craps and Gert Buelens (the editors of the issue) explain postcolonial studies' criticism of traditional trauma studies. In this case, Cathy Caruth, one of the leading theorists in trauma studies, and Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominic LaCapra were criticized by postcolonial trauma theorists because they developed their theories solely from European contexts. Moreover, traditional trauma studies tend to Eurocentrism. Even when Caruth tries to promote the cross-cultural links between cultures with trauma experience, her work was based on the events related to white Westerners' experiences. Her methodology and theoretical framework are unsuitable for non-Western context and non-Western theoretical framework because of her background. In this matter, Caruth also stated, "... assist in the perpetuation of Eurocentric views and structures that maintain or widen the gap between the West and the rest of the world" (Craps & Buelens, 2008). It means the trauma studies need new development on focusing on the traumatic experience and testimony from the postcolonial country, such as Indonesia. This research wants to address this point by focusing on the Indonesian novels as an Inter-Indonesian postcolonial trauma perspective.

The perspective differentiating postcolonial Trauma from western trauma theory focuses on analyzing the complex relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. The postcolonial people were trapped in the paradoxical relationship between remembering and forgetting the traumatic past (Durrant, 2004). Octave

Mannoni saw the psychological relationship between the colonizer and colonized as inferior and dependent. According to Mannoni, the colonizer felt inferior to the colonized because of the skin difference. The minority white people felt inferior in front of the majority of black skin people (Mannoni, 1993). Otherwise, the colonized still depend on the colonizer as a child dependent on the parents. Frantz Fanon (1986) later criticized Mannoni by arguing that the colonized desired to be like the colonizer.

The postcolonial critique of trauma studies firstly wants to emphasize the traumatic experience in non-Western settings and consider the cultural differences in treating Trauma. Postcolonial Trauma focuses mainly on understanding colonial Trauma such as dispossession, forced migration, diaspora, slavery, segregation, racism, political violence, and genocide. Postcolonial trauma studies criticize the exportation of Western theoretical and *diagnostic* models to non-Western contexts to open up the possibility of any modifications to reach broader applicability (Craps & Buelens, 2008).

Michael Rothberg, who writes a response in the issue, heavily criticizes the binary concept of Western and non-Western context of Trauma. Because by doing so, the postcolonial critics fall into homogenization of the so-called "Western" context. In Europe itself, there are diverse experiences of trauma-based events. Therefore, it is unwise to endorse such a binary position (Rothberg, 2008). This notion of plurality in the Western context aligns with the plurality of postcolonial Trauma. Therefore, to understand the West and the Rest, one needs to dig specifically into a specific context.

Still, in the same *StiN* series, Craps & Buelens explain an example of a unified theory for the postcolonial trauma context. It is the theory of insidious Trauma. The theory is by feminist psychotherapist Laura S. Brown, who argues that there is also Trauma from oppression that does not necessarily impact the body; instead, it does violence to the soul and spirit. Frantz Fanon, a leading psycho-postcolonial theorist, experienced that kind of Trauma when being subjected to depicting a demonic black figure in the eyes of a little white boy. It then transforms Fanon, in the child's mind, into a nonbeing. This experience causes people to develop feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and self-hatred (Craps & Buelens, 2008).

Postcolonial trauma theory also criticizes the framework of traditional Trauma, which only focuses on individual psychology. The Trauma of the postcolonial world is a collective experience. The translation of individual Trauma theoretical framework into collective conditions has damaging effects. One that Craps and Buelens suggest is that "A narrow focus on individual psychology ignores and leaves unquestioned the conditions that enabled the traumatic abuse." Therefore, by offering the collective and political perspective of Trauma, postcolonial Trauma offers a corrective for the individualizing, psychologizing, and depoliticizing tendencies characteristic of Western trauma treatment models (Craps & Buelens, 2008).

This postcolonial critique also highlighted the relationship between the trauma victim and the expert interrogating certain traumatized moments. It is based on the relationship between analysts and analysts in the context of a psychoanalytic interview. In that context, the trauma victim was a truth holder who is not fully conscious and can only be conscious of the truth indirectly. In that position, the victim cannot transform the testimony into an act of political intervention. The expert who heard the testimony also can only understand them sympathetically. In that situation, the expert obviates the need. To identify any political influence on the victim and vanish all the self-critical reflection on the process (Craps & Buelens, 2008) Michael Rothberg (2008) criticizes this position by arguing that the traumatized person is not necessarily a victim because, in some cases such as genocide, the perpetrator is also traumatized. Moreover, in some other cases, the victim is not the traumatized person, for example, when the victim is dead. Therefore, the category between the traumatized person and the victim must be clear.

By focusing on the communal condition of the postcolonial world, the postcolonial Trauma tries to develop its theoretical framework based on realism and indigenous literary practices. The realism of indigenous people is closely related to how they see the world, for instance, cosmology which lay in their local wisdom. The indigenous knowledge is recorded in the literary product of their community. All this time, because of colonization, such indigenous knowledge is repressed in the name of modernity. Therefore, by upholding the role of local stories and indigenous practice for traumatized people, postcolonial trauma studies try to undermine the centrality of western knowledge and practice (Craps & Buelens, 2008).

The Decolonization of trauma studies has become a widespread concern. Irene Visser, for example, elaborates on the postcolonial critique of trauma studies by saying that some potential themes can be developed based on the theoretical framework of postcolonial countries. She pays attention to resilience because postcolonial countries not only have one traumatic event, but they still live in the ongoing Trauma within political oppression. Furthermore, for such regions, Trauma is always resilience (Visser, 2015).

There is also some indigenous spiritual counseling that proved helpful to counter certain traumatic events. For example, when traumatic events occur in one place, the indigenous leader will hold a ritual; in Indonesia, we call it "*Tolak Bala*" (meaning: to refuse lousy luck). This ritual aims mainly to make the people who experienced the traumatic event "forget" the event and continue carrying on with their lives. One other perspective theme of postcolonial trauma studies is the effort of forgiveness. With local practices, postcolonial trauma forgiveness can be theoretically challenging to the "Western" conception of unspeakable Trauma. The perspective of Inter-Indonesian postcolonial Trauma in the novels is an example of how Indonesian people deal with unspeakable Trauma, especially by writing it in the form of literature.

Michael Rothberg agrees that postcolonial Trauma should oppose the tendency of Eurocentrism, but he also warns of the tendency of over-particularism in the postcolonial trauma critiques. Every debate on the theorization of trauma studies cannot happen in the realm of over-particularism. There are many aspects, which postcolonial trauma studies can learn by comparing with another theoretical framework. As the researcher mentioned before, one example is when Frantz Fanon speaks about his insidious Trauma, which he draws from white feminist Trauma. Therefore, postcolonial trauma studies must be careful with the tendency of homogenization of Eurocentrism, but at the same time must be aware of the tendency of over-particularization. Michael Rothberg's purpose away by constantly doing comparative studies cross-culturally to avoid the trap of those two sides. This approach he called "Multidirectional Collective Memory" (Rothberg, 2008). Michael Rothberg's critique of the earlier effort of postcolonial trauma theory is well developed in his book *Multidirectional Memory*, as the researcher will discuss next.

### ***Multidirectional Memory***

Michael Rothberg's book entitled *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* is a development of his critique for postcolonial trauma theory, which sees the field of trauma studies as either traditional trauma theory or postcolonial trauma theory in the competitive term. In his book, Rothberg specifically criticizes Walter Benjamin Michaels and Khalid Muhammad, who understand collective memory as a zero-sum game. Rothberg addresses the crucial moment when Michaels shows a memorial museum to the Jewish Holocaust and quotes Muhammad in one mall in the USA. Michaels insists that the History of Black slavery Americas is far more massive than the Jewish genocide. Rothberg shows that Michaels and Muhammad's logic is at fault. In the History of the Jewish Holocaust, the recognition of collective memory is not operating in such a competitive manner. Instead, it is more *multidirectional* because memory is gaining recognition. By "ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative" (Rothberg, 2009). Michael Rothberg's book entitled *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* is a development of his critique for postcolonial trauma theory, which sees the field of trauma studies as either traditional trauma theory or postcolonial trauma theory in the competitive term. In his book, Rothberg specifically criticizes Walter Benjamin Michaels and Khalid Muhammad, who understand collective memory as a zero-sum game. Rothberg addresses the crucial moment when Michaels shows a memorial museum to the Jewish Holocaust and quotes Muhammad in one mall in the USA. Michaels insists that the History of Black slavery Americas is far more massive than the Jewish genocide. Rothberg shows that Michaels and Muhammad's logic is at fault. In the History of the Jewish Holocaust, the recognition of collective memory is not operating in such a competitive manner. Instead, it is more multidirectional because memory is gaining recognition. By "ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative" (Craps & Buelens, 2008). Rather than seeing the



struggle of Decolonization as a zero-sum game, Rothberg shows how the worldwide recognition of the Jewish Holocaust as an opportunity to bring the postcolonial trauma perspective in the public sphere. For Rothberg, collective memory studies create space for others, but not by competing or annihilating other memories. Rothberg shows that Jewish Holocaust memory can even gain space from the decolonization effort from the postcolonial country (Rothberg, 2009). Rothberg states clearly,

A series of case studies treated intellectuals and artists ranging from Hannah Arendt and W. E. B. Du Bois to French anti-colonial activists and experimental documentarians, Du Bois will demonstrate that early Holocaust memory emerged in dialogue with the dynamic transformations and multifaceted struggles that define the era of Decolonization. The period between 1945 and 1962 both the rise of consciousness of the Holocaust as a distinctive form of modern genocide. The coming to national consciousness and political independence of many subjects of European Colonialism (Rothberg, 2009).

Rothberg moves further that the relationship of memory and identity is also not about winning and losing. Our past forms us, but it does not close the possibility that we will gain a new form of identity in the present and future because of our interaction with the other. Rothberg argues that in the past, our collective memory as a basis for identity is not strictly based on our exclusive History but rather be borrowing or adapting from the perspective which seems foreign for us initially (Rothberg, 2009). Therefore, the ambiguity and ambivalence of memory and identity do not have space for winning or losing the competition.

### **Impact on the Religious Studies**

Generally speaking, as one impact of the colonial era, social migration is highly increasing. Some religions travel across the world and gain new followers. At some point, some religions become a world religion because they have many members worldwide. However, before these colonial times, religion tended to be localized. Indigenous religions have their followers in some specific regions. However, essentially the term world religions do not appear in the empty realm. In his famous and influential article, David Chidester explains that the term "world religions" is problematic because it excludes indigenous religions. As a term which may refer to the meaning of the religion all over the world, but in reality, as Chadester says, "...it seems to operate opposition in indigenous religions of colonized people all over the world" (Chidester, 2018). So, in this case, the study of religion has first considered how colonialism affects religion by practice and how the study of religion itself. Nevertheless, besides the impact of the colonial system on the study of religion by the appearance of terminology "world religions," there is a straight impact from the postcolonial trauma theory in the study of religion. In this section, the researcher will focus on the postcolonial trauma theory, which considers the Trauma of colonialism in the world, has been used in the study of religion.

Two people use the theory of postcolonial Trauma in the study of religion. Namely Liza Esterhuizen and L. Juliana Claassens. Both of them specifically play in the realm of Hebrew Bible studies. That is a subfield of religious studies where its focus is how to read the Bible as the sacred book of Judaism and Christianity. Esterhuizen and Claasens, with the inspiration of postcolonial trauma theory, develop a reading strategy that acknowledges the Trauma of colonialism. It is the postcolonial trauma reading of the Bible. This perspective is beneficial for the postcolonial people because the reading focuses on the text itself and the dialogical process with contemporary postcolonial people. Liza Esterhuizen examines this perspective firstly in the Book of Isaiah. The Book of Isaiah is one of the most influential books in the Hebrew Bible.

Esterhuizen analyses the metaphorical name "*Shear Jashub*" in Isaiah 5:3, which means "a remnant shall return." She analyses this name in dialogue with the Trauma of apartheid in South Africa. The metaphorical name "a remnant shall return" is, in fact, a hope prophecy for the Judean people who live under the threat of being a vassal for the Assyrians. Moreover, at some time, they were being colonized by the Assyrians. As one of the great empires that threaten the Judean people, Assyrian Kingdom has all the power to colonize the Kingdom of Judah. That is why the metaphorical name "*Shear Jashub*" is a liberation for the Judean people. Esterhuizen argues that the notion of hope in "*Shear Jashub*" is equal to the concept of Ubuntu in South Africa because the liberative prophecy for the Judean people is also an opportunity to create a new society from the postcolonial Trauma. The collective notion of Ubuntu, which means "people are people through other people," is hope for postcolonial South Africa after living in the adversity of apartheid. Therefore, the hope to God to liberate the Judean people from the colonial ruler is also a peaceful post-apartheid South Africa (Esterhuizen, 2018).

L. Juliana Claasens is another scholar who read the Bible from postcolonial Trauma. She focuses on the Book of Jonah. A story about an Israelite who received a prophetic job to notify God's forgiveness for the sins of the Nineveh people, Israel's enemy. At first, Jonah was fleeing from his occupation. After a series of dramatic scenes in the Sea and the Land of Nineveh, God wants to teach Jonah about His universal love. Jonah eventually received that even the enemy of his people is forgivable in the blessings of God's love. According to Claassens, the story of Jonah is a story of postcolonial Trauma. Jonah can be seen as a representative of the angry person to foreign people because of continuing threats from imperial power. Nineveh itself was the capital city of the Assyrian Kingdom, which was also an imperial power that threatened the Israelite people (Claassens, 2021, p. 584). This use of postcolonial trauma theory in the study of the sacred texts opens the possibility of using the postcolonial trauma theory in the other subfield of religious studies. Religious studies scholars can enlarge this study by applying postcolonial trauma theory in the History of Religions, the doctrines in religious systems, and lived religions by focusing on how the Trauma of colonialism dwells in the life of religious communities and religious healing strategy for them.

## CONCLUSION

As we may have seen in the analysis, the postcolonial trauma theory is a resistance theory. It strikes mainly in how western theorists have dominated the theory of trauma studies. The postcolonial scholars then developed a new field of Trauma that focused on the memory and Trauma of the postcolonial people. Because the western trauma theorists ignore that colonialism left massive Trauma to the postcolonial people, the postcolonial people need postcolonial trauma theory. Fortunately, in the realm of religious studies, scholars use the postcolonial trauma theory to analyze the sacred text and the phenomenon of indigenous religion. This initial effort can open a new adaptation of the postcolonial trauma theory in literary studies and the study of religion in its many subfields.

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