Paula Morgan

The Terror and the Time: Banal Violence and Trauma in Caribbean Discourse.


Can we understand contemporary society through a study of violence and trauma? To what extent can literature contribute to that understanding? These are the primary questions that Paula Morgan deals with in The Terror and the Time. The entire study is based on the idea that the past experiences of all groups in Caribbean society are rooted in some aspect of trauma. Trauma is democratic as it affects everyone. This is a book about the experiences of people whose history is filled with violence, repression, and resistance. It is based on the assumption that our past history of violence and trauma has serious repercussions for Caribbean society today. And it represents a conscious attempt to use literature to understand our past, our history, and our society. Morgan refers to the work of prominent Caribbean writers such as Jean Rhys, George Lamming, Derek Walcott, Erna Brodber, V.S. Naipaul, and Harold Sonny Ladoo, among others. Most Caribbean writers have examined trauma in one form or the other.

After an introduction, the book is divided into two parts—“Ontologies” and “Social Issues,” followed by an afterword. The introduction examines new trends and recent views of how trauma has been engrained in our societies. It shows the impact of trauma and the ways in which people collectively deal with it. Morgan claims that a study of themes such as trauma and violence in our society can “show us where we have come from and pathways we should be pursuing” (p.16). She notes that “this study is historically grounded and socially situated” (p. 18).

Each of the four chapters in the first section focuses on a particular aspect of trauma in Caribbean society and draws on the work of various Caribbean writers. The first deals with trauma during slavery, looking at the experience of enslaved people on the slave ships and drawing on literary representations of the Zong, a British slave ship. Chapter 2 focuses on racism in Caribbean societies. Using works by Olive Senior and Paule Marshall, Morgan discusses the complexities of plantation societies as well as the legacy of racism and its impact on Caribbean identity formation. In the third chapter, she deals with Indian indentureship, drawing on the writings of V.S. Naipaul to discuss the experiences of Indo-Caribbean people as well as notions of belonging and the construction of identities. Chapter 4 examines the legacy of slavery through the work of Derek Walcott. This chapter examines the trauma of the Middle Passage, undoubtedly one of the most traumatic experiences of our Caribbean ancestors, and the formation of societies plagued with “social ills.”
Each of the five chapters in the second section addresses some aspect of Caribbean social life. Chapter 5 deals with violence in Haiti, drawing on the narratives of Edwidge Danticat. It emphasizes notions of state violence and ways in which it has been negotiated by the society. In Chapter 6, Morgan discusses various forms of trauma in society, specifically ageing and Alzheimer’s disease in the work of Barbara Lalla and David Chariandy. Chapter 7 examines trauma during childhood. Referring to a variety of literary works, Morgan focuses on the impact of childhood trauma on the development of the individual and consequently on the society. Chapter 8 addresses another “social evil,” alcoholism. Deeply entrenched in our society, there is a close link between alcoholism and violence. Alcoholism often results in violence toward women, murders, and suicides. The book’s final chapter deals with the impact of poverty in society. Drawing on newspaper sources, calypso, and poetry, it shows the link between poverty and gender-based violence as well as that between poverty and hunger.

This book relies on a variety of sources—literature, personal narratives, print media, and pop culture. Slavery and indentureship are the two dominant themes and, as noted in the conclusion, Morgan supports the call for reparations. The book begins by painting an extremely pessimistic view of Caribbean society all geared toward revealing the extent to which violence and resulting trauma are a crucial part of our Caribbean life. However, it ends on a positive note by showing the consistent attempts to deal with trauma in our society.

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