ČASOPIS ZA KNJIŽEVNOST, KULTURU I KNJIŽEVNO PREVOĐENJE

Signs in Disguise
No. 2 - Year 16
06/2026 - LC.6

Martina Domines, University of Zagreb, Croatia

Patriarchy and the Terror of Memory in Miriam Toews's Women Talking (2018)

Abstract

The essay discusses Miriam Toews's novel Women Talking by focusing on the trauma of rape. Based on a true event that happened between 2005 and 2009 in a remote Mennonite colony in Bolivia, the novel follows the story of women and girls in the colony who were raped and now suffer from memory loss, traumatic memories, and the return of the repressed. By talking to each other and planning their escape, the women gain insight into the injustice of patriarchy within such a small religious community. The narrative moves from the idea of memory being synonymous with imagination, through the idea of traumatic memory as a trap, to the final idea of regained memory that, in the case of the raped women, serves as an epiphany. This essay will explore the ways in which memory functions in the novel to unravel the patriarchal discourse that keeps the women submissive and guilty of their own victimization. Traumatic memory will be examined through the lens of trauma theory (Caruth, Herman, Stampf, Pederson) and Judith Butler's concepts of vulnerability and resistance.[1]

Keywords: Mennonite community, trauma of rape, vulnerability, victim, perpetrator

1. Introduction

On the cover of Miriam Toews's seventh novel, Women Talking,[2] Margaret Atwood calls it a novel that "could be right out of The Handmaid's Tale." Based on a true event that took place between 2005 and 2009 in a remote Mennonite colony in Bolivia, the novel follows the story of women and girls in the colony who suffer from memory loss, traumatic memories, and the return of the repressed, which are all being dismissed by the community's men as "wild female imagination"

(58). Toews herself grew up in Manitoba in a Mennonite family and for most of her life was aware of the restrictions of this conservative Christian community. She managed to reject it and escape from it, but the themes of religious bigotry and its consequences on the mental health of the Mennonite community continued to haunt her throughout her life.[3] As the story unravels from the pen of Augustus Epp, the son of the colony's priest, it becomes clear that these women were attacked by eight men from the same colony. They visited the women at night, used the animal anesthetic to knock them unconscious, and raped them. The colony attributes these women's traumatic memories to ghosts and demons, but their physical wounds show that their attackers must be men. By talking to each other and planning their escape, the women gain insight into the injustice of patriarchy within such a small religious community. This essay will unravel the workings of patriarchy through Judith Butler's idea that name-calling is an important dimension of speech acts in a community that silences women. Also, it will position Butler's vulnerability and resistance as vital concepts for understanding the novel's advocacy for women's agency. Furthermore, it will explore the ways in which memory functions in the novel to unravel the patriarchal discourse that keeps the women submissive and guilty of their own victimization.

2. Patriarchy as a Speech Act

In her 2014 essay "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," Judith Butler rethinks bodily vulnerability through the conception of relations. Stating that "one clear dimension of human vulnerability has to do with our exposure to name-calling," she believes that name-calling (how we are referred to in childhood) "demonstrates an important dimension of the speech act," and thus concludes that: "We do not only act through the speech act; speech act also acts upon us" (5). Butler's idea about the importance of speech acts acting upon us even before we learn how to speak, points to an essential idea behind Toews's novel Women Talking (2018). It is only through their speech that the protagonists in this novel, women in the Molotschna colony, can think of resistance to patriarchy. Yet, that same speech is already imbued with patriarchal values to which they had been exposed since their early childhood: devoid of the right to education and cooped up in their homes to perform daily duties of care for others, the colony's girls and women were conditioned to obey men. Such submissiveness made them victims of the most atrocious crime,

the crime of rape. All they know is that they were knocked unconscious and violated and that they have two days to devise a plan before the rapists are bailed out of the city's prison and return home. In the morning, the women would wake up in pain, groggy and often bleeding, not understanding why. Much to their surprise, the eight demons responsible for the attacks were real men from Molotschna, many of whom were close relatives of the women (brothers, cousins, uncles, and nephews). Though research has shown that acts of sexual abuse mostly happen within families and the perpetrator is well-known to the victim, the women of Molotschna are reluctant to believe that. As Morgan Gagnon explains: "If a certain person has played a significant role in shaping who we take ourselves to be, then accepting that they are bad or have done bad things jeopardizes the self that we have built with them" (434). Molotschna women live in heterosexual relationships, and they care for their partners and sons. Accepting that the ones they love and whom they believe to be good have done something as terrible as rape retards the possibility of condemning violence and reacting against it—the patriarchal system in which women are conditioned to offer unconditional love supports such tardy response and masks violence.

The novel is therefore a trajectory of their coming to terms with bodily and mental trauma they had endured and of being able to narrate their experiences. Yet, how can women tell what really happened if they lack the language to tell the story? If the use of language in the colony is already pre-conditioned by patriarchal structures, then men's language is the truthful one and women's language is secondary and devoid of truth. The possibility of figuring out what really happened to them and who the perpetrators truly were is closely linked to their ability to voice their trauma and act upon it. Yet, the voicing of trauma is difficult not only because traumatic experiences lie buried as repressed memories, but also because their bodies are bound up in networks of relations that make their lives possible. In Butler's words, one's "body is bound up in a network of relations, [and] despite its clear boundaries, or perhaps precisely by virtue of those very boundaries, [it] is defined by the relations that makes its own life and action possible" (5). Eight women who decide to gather and talk about the night visitations of the male colony members think and react in line with the clear boundaries of the patriarchal Molotschna community by always prioritizing the male perspective on how to live. By being named Autje, Neitje, Mariche, Greta, Salome, Agata, Mejal and Ona, they call themselves "the women of Molotschna" (Toews 4, 5, 15, 19, 56, 89, 99, 120) and the performative

effect of being given female names and of living in a closed religious community is that they do not think of themselves as members of the colony capable of agency. In other words, it is only when they recognize the patriarchal ideology behind the colony's arrangement that their narrative becomes the tool of resistance. What is significant is that they recognize the patriarchal structure but cannot name it; instead, they refer to it as "talking through the flowers" (Toews 120). They have to discard the name-calling that acted upon them before they learned how to speak and change the colony's patriarchal speech acts into speech acts that would empower them. In order to do that, they must adopt a new way of speaking, one that questions the narratives of male members they thought were truthful, i.e., narratives that have relegated them to the status of second-rate community members. Such patriarchal narratives were inculcated into the community's male members from an early age since the boys were taught to humiliate and look down upon the girls. As one of the female protagonists, Neitje, says: "Fifteen-year-old boys still believe that throwing horse turds at the girls while we do the milking shows their love" (Toews 78). Salome could only wish for her daughter Miep that one day "a boy will intentionally miss hitting her with a clump of shit" (Toews 78), thus showing some affection. The majority of the colony's women do nothing to change the patriarchal narrative and live in obedience and fear. However, the eight women willing to discuss their trauma and the possibility of dealing with it show that resistance is a matter of embracing a different perspective and forging their own narrative by questioning the male-dominated speech acts. Therefore, this group of women organizes meetings in the hayloft and considers three different options—to do nothing, to stay and fight, and to leave. The first one is immediately ruled out as offensive and inadequate, but the second and third options are discussed with all the pros and cons: if they stay and fight, they will not have to pack and experience the uncertainty of not knowing where to go, and if they leave, they will finally be safe. In voicing these pros and cons, the women are strongly driven by ethical impulses and the notion of guilt: they do not want to fight, and they fear men will never forgive them. Also, the local priest Peters, the spiritual leader of the community, told the women to either forgive the men or leave the colony for the outside world. Together with the elders, Peters called the police and had the men arrested and taken to the city. As two of the perpetrators were killed by male relatives of the victims, the priest thought that by imprisoning them, he would save their lives. Thus, the priest himself perpetrates the patriarchal structure of domination and submission in which men are to be protected at all costs

and women are to either keep silent or leave. Peters seems to disregard the fact that forgiving the perpetrators without acknowledging the wrong is another act of violence. It directly affects women's agency through relegating them to patriarchal speech acts and obliterating their power of speech.

The colony is otherwise insulated from the outer world through its own self-policing system and its language, Plautdietsch. This unwritten medieval language, a combination of German, Dutch, Pomeranian, and Frisian, is spoken by all members of the colony. They are also Mennonites—a group of Anabaptist Christian church communities that trace their roots to the Radical Reformation. Mennonites moved from Canada to Mexico and South America in the 1920s, and today, 65 000 of them live in Bolivia (Janzen 76). Their emigration from Canada was the consequence of the Canadian government insisting that their children attend English-language public schools, which the Mennonites saw as an infringement upon their religious freedom and refused (Janzen 76). In the novel, the community lives by the word of the Bible as interpreted by the priest, Peters, and the elder male colony members. Only boys are allowed to go to school, whereas girls are deprived of education. Being illiterate, the women appoint a man, August Epp, to be the minute-taker for their meetings. Yet, paradoxically, they will never be able to read what he had written, but the minutes would hopefully serve as proof of crime for future generations. Moreover, August is Peters's son and was expelled from the colony with his mother when he was twelve years old. By the end of the novel, we find out why: at the age of twelve, August began to resemble Peters so closely in his facial features that Peters wanted to get rid of him rather than bring suspicion among the members of the colony. August is "the symbol of life after violence" (Toews 212) because he was born after his own mother was assaulted by Peters. For the priest, August was a reminder of his own sin and transgression in the most despicable way, and also of "the failure of the Mennonite experiment" (213), which he took every precaution to hide from public view.

The fact that the women appointed a man as the minute-taker for their meeting might seem curious at first sight. However, they have compelling reasons for choosing August Epp, since he is different from the men of Molotschna in several significant ways: he has seen the world outside (he was educated in England, and his mother was a literature teacher), and in the colony, he lives alone in a shed (the houses being reserved for families only). Also, the other members of the colony

consider him effeminate—prone to emotional mood swings and crying, which is frowned upon by the majority:

> *I am emotional. I don't know what is wrong with me. Ona is looking at me. I raise my hand. … Tears are rolling down my cheeks. I can hardly see the paper to write these words. I see Mariche purse her lips, look away. This half-man. Of dubious origin. Autje and Neitje appear to be as mortified by my crying as I am. (Toews 167)*

In the scene above, August hears Ona Friesen, one of the women at the meeting whom he is in love with, sing, and her voice makes him emotional. Ona is a spinster who wears her hair differently, which could be read as a sign of defiance. He also knows that he might not see her again and that it might be their last goodbye.

It is worth noting that by believing there is something shameful about August showing his emotions and crying, women of Molotschna reinforce patriarchy. They have entirely internalized their gender roles as wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters, always seeing themselves through the male gaze. Butler's idea that language acts upon us before we act is crucial in what she calls "gender assignment," defined as

> *all those ways in which we are, as it were, called a name, and gendered prior to understanding anything about how gender norms act upon and shape us, and prior to our capacity to reproduce those norms in ways that we might choose. (6-7)*

The girls of Molotschna have been taught from early childhood on that they should be passive and submissive to men since they are far below them in the social hierarchy. They are seen by men as "walking wombs," their only purpose being to procreate. One of the reasons the women decided to meet in the hayloft rather than at one of their kitchen tables is because their kitchens are full of children. Once, August gave himself a challenge to walk down the main path for several miles and to take a breath only when he saw a child—his breathing never once faltered. In the Molotschna colony, most families have up to fifteen children; some even have twenty-five. Thus, the women's meeting in the hayloft becomes an attempt at finding their own voice, since they have no internal voice to rely on. All they were taught from their childhood on was that their opinion did not matter.

This is in line with Butler's claim that every "speech act depends upon its social conditions and conventions," and more importantly, that "the performance of gender more generally depends upon its infrastructural and social conditions of support" (9). According to Butler, "[t]his bears implications for a general account of embodied and social action, but also for understanding the bodily risks that women take" (9), assembling where they are not supposed to. Their activities need to remain hidden from public view because they know most members of the colony would not support them. Ona is said to be a demon because she lost her fear. Losing fear, according to the men of Molotschna, is akin to having lost one's moral compass and been transformed into a demon. In fact, every assertion of female power is seen as dangerous to patriarchy. The issue of "bodily risks" for women is a pertinent one throughout the novel: their bodies never belong to themselves. Either they are violated during night attacks, or they are tortured by intrusive memories of bodily harm in daylight. Their bodies are never discrete, singular, and self-sufficient, their embodiment being tied to the patriarchal infrastructure in which any kind of resistance is considered sinful. In the same vein, Butler claims that embodiment is relational, where "relationality includes dependency on infrastructural conditions and legacies of discourse and institutional power that precede and condition our existence" (11). The women of Molotschna oftentimes voice their dissatisfaction with how they are being treated by men in the very language of men, simply because they do not have any "human precedent" or "some person in whom (they) can see (themselves) reflected back to (themselves)" (Toews 22):

Mariche Loewen: We will be forced to leave the colony … if we don't forgive the men and/or accept their apologies, and through the process of this excommunication we will forfeit our place in heaven. (24)

Ona Friesen: When we have liberated ourselves, we will have to ask ourselves who we are. (28)

Mejal: How, if we are to remain good wives … can we leave our men? Is it not disobedient to do so? (156)

The examples above show that women desperately want to have a place in heaven, and their Mennonite belief system preconditioned them to believe that disobeying men is akin to disobeying

God. They are also afraid of losing their identity—within the colony, they know their place; once free, they will have to rebuild themselves from scratch.

Furthermore, the women of Molotschna provide the goods but are forbidden to visit the co-op or to handle the money from the sales. In Caliban and the Witch (2004), Silvia Federici showed how women, during the transition from feudal to capitalist economic relations, played an important role in fighting land expropriation all over Europe. The shift from subsistence to money economy impacted women in a negative way "because as soon as land was privatized and monetary relations began to dominate economic life, they found it more difficult than men to support themselves, being increasingly confined to reproductive labor at the very time when this work was being completely devalued" (Federici 74). Thus, the patriarchal confinement of women to reproductive labor in pre-capitalist Europe, which is only further exacerbated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is similar to the exclusion of Molotschna women from the financial sphere in their community. In the novel, Salome, an older woman full of passionate wisdom, is right in claiming that they have been financially manipulated by men. Yet, most of them cannot clearly see the connection between the financial abuse of women and their confinement to the private sphere where their sole purpose is to have children. Furthermore, Salome claims that by leaving the men behind, the women do not necessarily disobey the men according to the Bible, because the women do not know exactly what is written in the Bible, being unable to read it. This shows how women become theologians in their own way: even with limited education they are not afraid of coming up with their own interpretation of the Bible. Little by little, by discussing their possibilities, the women decide to leave the colony with the boys, in order to educate them differently, and the elderly, in order to take care of them in their last hours. They conclude that the safety of their children must be their priority and therefore God must understand that there is nothing sinful about leaving the colony for safety reasons. By talking to each other in a safe and supportive environment, the women gradually find their voice and are able to utter their truth—the change of perspective and the voicing of alternative future become important steps in their healing and recovery.

3. The Terror of Memory

At the core of Women Talking is the trauma of rape and its consequences for the bodies and minds of violated girls and women: “Between 2005 and 2009, more than three hundred girls and women of Molotschna were made unconscious and attacked in their own beds. On average, an attack occurred every three or four days” (15). The central narrative, of women being attacked by ghosts and demons and those attacks being God’s or Satan’s punishment for their sins, is underlined by Peters’s authoritative reading of the Bible that views women as prone to adultery and to making up stories due to “wild female imagination” (58). The trope of “wild female imagination” is a dangerous tool of patriarchal discourse, which renders women untrustworthy and volatile, whereas, in reality, ‘imagination’ is synonymous with “flashes of memory” that violated women experience daily. Their fundamentalist Christian religion teaches them to be passive and never to question their low position in the hierarchy. Peters told one of the women who later hanged herself, unable to bear the burden of trauma, that Satan was responsible for the night attacks and that it was God punishing them for their sins. The only position given to them within this community is that of sinfulness for some unnamed sin they have committed and forgiveness that fosters the status quo. Thus, patriarchy works through reversals of moral codes: those who sinned by raping women would stay in prison and thus stay protected, while innocent girls and women believed they deserved what happened to them and had to forgive the perpetrators.

In line with recent trauma theory, after its pioneers in Holocaust studies such as Cathy Caruth, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dori Laub, the novel questions the idea of trauma as an unspeakable experience only to show that “the unspeakable may be a phase in the process of traumatization and not its predetermined endpoint” (Stampfl 16). In the case of Women Talking, the unspeakability of trauma is fostered by the patriarchal value system in the colony where girls’ thoughts and words are devalued and dismissed as meaningless. In other words, the girls and women of Molotschna have to find their voice and support each other’s narratives in discussing their options of resistance to male power. Opening up and showing one’s vulnerability is possible only in a safe environment. For these women, not even their houses are a safe place, so they hold meetings in the hayloft![4] The hayloft is a contained space in two ways—it is hidden from public view and ensures that the stories remain shared only with trustworthy people. Also, there are often cows and horses in the hayloft, and the women feel their proximity to animals in a despicable way.

One of the women, Greta Loewen, once said that though the women were certainly not animals, they were "treated worse than animals, and that in fact Molotschna animals are safer than Molotschna women, and better cared for" (Toews 39). In the hayloft, they wash each other's feet, a gesture reminiscent of their humility and solidarity. Also, recalling Jesus's humble gesture of washing the feet of his apostles, the women challenge the community's hierarchies by showing that they are equals among equals, deserving of affection and support. It is only through mirroring each other's experiences of rape that they can embrace them as true events and not figments of their fancy. Once their words become meaningful, the women are able to embrace their narratives as truthful, and their vulnerability opens up to avenues of resistance. In this gradual process, their bodies suffer as well, since traumatic memories inhabit the body and the mind. In The Body Keeps the Score (2014), Bessel A. van der Kolk claims that

attempts to maintain control over unbearable physiological reactions can result in a whole range of physical symptoms, including fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue, and other autoimmune diseases. This explains why it is critical for trauma treatment to engage the entire organism, body, mind, and brain. (53)

In other words, as long as the traumatic experience is not resolved, the stress hormones keep circulating in the body, causing the cycle of emotional responses that vary from one person to another. From the very beginning, the story of what really happened to the girls and women of Molotschna unravels slowly through their different post-traumatic symptoms:

Neitje draws and draws, perhaps to balance the wild, lava-like outpouring of her aunt's words with solid, silent lines on paper. (Toews 21)

Ona's repetitive dream: She found a hard candy in the dirt behind her home and had picked it up and taken it into her kitchen, planning to wash it and eat it. Before she could wash it, she was accosted by a very large two-hundred-pound pig. She screamed, Get that pig off me! But it had her pinned against the wall. (25)

Miep [Salome's daughter who is only three] is unaware of why she experiences pain in certain parts of her small body, or that she has a sexually transmitted illness. (45)

Nettie Gerbrandt … gave birth prematurely to a baby boy so tiny he fit into her shoe. He died hours after being born and Nettie smeared her bedroom walls with blood. She has stopped talking … (45)

Mina hanged herself after Neitje was attacked in her bedroom, her wrists rubbed raw with baler twine, her body smeared with blood and shit and semen. (57)

From the examples of trauma symptoms above, such as engaging in art, terrifying dreams, silence, feeling pain in one's body, and committing suicide, we see that each and every woman experiences trauma in her own unique way. They also have intrusive memories of the night attacks but mostly believe them to be imaginary. It is their hurting bodies that tell a different story in the morning. Also, the victims feel guilty for being raped, and the colony's elders are there to confirm that their feelings of shame and inferiority are justified. In Trauma and Recovery (1995), Judith Herman claims that "traumatic events violate the autonomy of the person at the level of basic bodily integrity" (38), with the final outcome being the victim's damaged self. Herman continues:

The body is invaded, injured, defiled. Control over bodily functions is often lost; in the folklore of combat and rape, this loss of control is often recounted as the most humiliating aspect of the trauma. Furthermore, at the moment of trauma, almost by definition, the individual's point of view counts for nothing. In rape, for example, the purpose of the attack is precisely to demonstrate contempt for the victim's autonomy and dignity. The traumatic event thus destroys the belief that one can be oneself in relation to others. (38)

In the aftermath of rape, the victims feel shame and doubt. In Herman's words "shame is a response to helplessness, the violation of bodily integrity" whereby survivors of trauma "doubt both others and themselves" (38). For the women of Molotschna, this implies that they have lost their sense of dignity and individuality and have never developed a sense of self-esteem. Namely, they live within a colony operated by a strict system of rules, and it could be said that they are in captivity—the victims are thus in prolonged contact with perpetrators, which creates a special type of relationship between them, one that Judith Herman calls "coercive control" (54). Though the perpetrators are out of their sight, they are continuously on their mind. It is a common misconception that a perpetrator must be a psychopath, visibly deviant and disturbed. Herman

insists that "[h]is most consistent feature, in both the testimony of victims and the observations of psychologists, is his apparent normality" (54), and that is what most people find disturbing.[5] Furthermore, the community that seeks to cover up the abuse is equally responsible. Although contemporary trauma theory has very little to say about the perpetrator's trauma, we have reason to believe that at least some of the perpetrators used to be victims of rape. Gagnon claims that "there is speculation that real life events on which (the novel) was based involved significant sexual abuse against boys in the community, but shame and stigma prevented their speaking out" (437). The novel says little about intergenerational trauma and the perpetrators who might also be victims in the same patriarchal system that does not address the reasons for violence and avoids severe punishment for sexual abuse. Thus, Peters protects the perpetrators, not only by removing them from the colony to the city prison, but also by convincing women that their stories are lies and their memories nothing but fantasies. Peters has denied medical treatment for Miep on the grounds that the doctor would gossip about the colony and that people would become aware of the attacks. Also, Mina hanged herself after Peters told her that she was making the attacks up. August has a hard time believing that his father is such a man, and at the end of the novel, he wonders why Peters allowed him to return to the colony. Assuming there is still some humanity left in Peters, he asks: "Is there a small but vital piece of Peters that is seeking to make peace?" (Toews 214). Salome, Ona's younger sister, is the only woman who voices her rage openly because she saw the attackers and attacked them with a scythe. Apart from that, she is the mother of little Miep, who was also sexually abused and that makes "her rage … barely suppressed, vesuvian" (21). Salome's reaction is also proof that not all women were silenced and that a different reaction to abuse is possible. She is the colony's Lilith, the first wife of Adam who was banished from the Garden of Eden for not obeying him, however, a woman's rage is not allowed in the community as it poses a threat to its conformity. Salome cannot stop talking; she will not shut up and August believes that she "will be able to communicate and to give life, fearsome life, to every emotion stemming from each injustice she perceives" (21) as long as she lives. August adds that "[t]here is no Inward Eye in Salome, no bliss of solitude. She doesn't wander. And she is not lonely" (21). By paraphrasing Wordsworth's poem, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud," August in fact tells the reader that Salome does not subscribe to romantic introspective thinking about her traumatic experience; she will never suppress her rage against the perpetrators, and she will not be silenced. To Salome,

trauma is no longer ‘an unclaimed experience’ (Caruth, Unclaimed Experience 11) but it is both memorable and speakable. As Joshua Pederson argues: “In contrast to the involuntary experiencing of traumatic memories, narrating memories to others … enables survivors to gain more control over the traces left by trauma” (339). Thus, the fact that Salome is dealing with traumatic memory and that she is able to speak about it motivates other women to become active in their ability to face trauma. In their vulnerability as victims of abuse, they share their stories and accept the restorative power of language to heal their shattered psyche. The women’s trajectory is therefore from the position of perpetrators abusing their vulnerability to vulnerability becoming a form of resistance. Butler writes that “vulnerability, understood as a deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment” (12). In other words, the moment the women meet to share their stories and open themselves up to traumatic memories of night attacks, they become vulnerable once again, but this time, with the feeling of shared vulnerability, they are able to strike back. As Herman states, “a violated woman must be an author and arbiter of her own recovery” (94), and women talking about their trauma and ways to protect themselves is a significant step in their empowerment. According to Herman, three steps are crucial in the recovery of rape survivors: safety, naming the problem, and restoring power and control over one’s life. Furthermore, restoring power and control is possible only “within the context of relationships, it cannot occur in isolation” (Herman 94). The women of Molotschna decide to leave the colony together for safety; they talk about their traumatic memories, and their shared knowledge of violation becomes their hidden power. In deciding to leave the colony, they use their agency, which leads them out of the position of victimization.[6] In the final step to restoring power and control over their lives, they decide to raise their boys differently so that they respect women as equal partners in every single thing they do. In the process of their empowerment and the trajectory from victims to survivors, August’s witnessing plays an important role. By being a sort of outsider and an emotional man, August is an empathic listener, and the women’s trauma causes him to experience what Dominick LaCapra calls ‘the empathic unsettlement’:

Being responsive to the traumatic experience of others, notably of victims, implies not the appropriation of their experience but what I would call empathic unsettlement, which should have

stylistic effects or, more broadly, effects in writing which cannot be reduced to formulas or rules of method. (41)

In the case of August's minutes, the effects of his writing will have no bearing on the women who left Molotschna but on the generations to come. Thus, by breaking the cycle of patriarchal discourse, the cycle of intergenerational trauma will be broken as well. Furthermore, Ona is aware that August was having suicidal thoughts and the taking of minutes would save him. If August, as the focalizer, opts for love and life at the end, preferring to think of himself as "a physical reminder not of evil, but of God's grace" (Toews 215), the narrative sides with the idea of surviving trauma and the possibility of healing and recovery.

4. Conclusion

In Women Talking, Miriam Toews explores how damaging the Mennonite philosophy had proven to be for the women living in this fundamentalist Christian community. Toews questions what the right thing for women is to do after having been violated: to do nothing, to stay and fight, or to leave. The community encourages them to do nothing and to seek retribution in heaven, whereas staying and fighting would perpetuate violence. So, the only way out is for them to leave the community together and raise their children in the spirit of love, equality, and tolerance. Toews has shown that women's empowerment after the vilest abuse is possible by using their vulnerability in a safe environment as a tool of resistance. Butler's idea of speech acts acting upon us even before we learn how to speak is essential to understanding that women have to reinvent their speech to be able to resist patriarchal values within the Molotschna colony. The reinvention of their speech happens through acts of sharing their traumatic memories and trying to find out what really happened to them. Once their truth is confirmed in the mirror-like echoing of each other's stories, they can embark on the journey of healing. This journey starts with their leaving the colony, August's minutes being a reminder to future generations of their struggle to find their own voice. In one of Toews's interviews, she clearly stated that the concept of forgiveness is a religious construct and should not be applied in the case of sexual abuse: "In my community, forgiveness is all. But forgiveness can be permission. It can mean nothing changes. So, what good is it?" (Brown). At the end of the novel, Toews acknowledges that girls and women are still living in

patriarchal, authoritarian (Mennonite and non-Mennonite) communities across the globe. She sends her love and advocates for solidarity, which are, for some women today, the only tools to sustain anti-patriarchal narratives.

Works Cited

Brown, Helen. “Miriam Toews: ‘Forgiveness Is a Religious Construct, a Means of Maintaining the Status Quo.’” Independent, 22 May 2023, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/miriam-toews-interview-women-talking-b2342058.html.

Butler, Judith. “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance.” Keynote Address, June 2014, Madrid. Bibacc, www.bibacc.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Rethinking-Vulnerability-and-Resistance-Judith-Butler.pdf.

Caruth, Cathy. “From Trauma and Experience.” Theories of Memory: A Reader, edited by Michael Rossington and Anne Whitehead, Edinburgh UP, 2007, pp. 199-205.

Caruth, Cathy. “Introduction: Recapturing the Past.” Trauma: Explorations in Memory, edited by Cathy Caruth, Johns Hopkins UP, 1995, pp. 151-8.

Caruth, Cathy. Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History. Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

Federici, Silvia. Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation. Autonomedia, 2004.

Gagnon, Morgan. “The Ethical Potential of Love in the Wake of Sexual Violence.” The Journal of Ethics, vol. 25, no. 4, 11 Oct. 2021, pp. 429-48. Springer Nature Link, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10892-021-09383-1.

Hartman, Geoffrey H. “On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies.” New Literary History, vol. 26, no. 3, 1995, pp. 537-63. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20057300.

Hays, Mathew and Sarah Polley. “Women Talking and Other Necessary Conversations: An Interview with Sarah Polley.” Cinéaste, vol. 48, no. 1, winter 2022, pp. 16-19. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/27180661.

Herman, Judith Lewis. Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror. Basic Books, 1992.

Janzen, Rebecca. “Still Life/Mexican Death: Mennonites in Visual Culture.” Arizona Journal of Hispanic Studies, vol. 19, 2015, pp. 75-90. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/43855404.

LaCapra, Dominick. Writing History, Writing Trauma. Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.

Laub, Dori. “Truth and Testimony: The Process of the Struggle.” Trauma: Explorations in Memory, edited by Cathy Caruth, Johns Hopkins UP, 1995, pp. 61-76.

Pederson, Joshua. “Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory.” Narrative vol. 22, no. 3, Oct. 2014, pp. 333-53. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/24615578.

Stampfl, Barry. “Parsing the Unspeakable in the Context of Trauma.” Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory, edited by Michelle Balaev, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 15-41.

Toews, Miriam. Women Talking. Faber and Faber, 2018.

Van der Kolk, Bessel A. The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma. Penguin Books, 2014.

Wallraven, Miriam and Ksenija Kondali. “‘We are all victims’? Rethinking Vulnerability and Victimization in Literary Representations of Women’s Suffering in Miriam Toews’ Women Talking.” Suffering in Anglophone Literatures, edited by Martina Domines and Charles I. Armstrong, Lexington Books, 2024, pp. 259-77.

[1] This paper was written within the framework of the institutional research project A Glossary of Transatlantic Literature in the Long Nineteenth Century (581-990-1045) at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, funded by the European Union – NextGenerationEU.

[2] In her third novel, A Complicated Kindness (2004), Toews also writes about the Mennonite community and its effects on a teenage girl who wants to be liberated from its strict gender norms. It delves into family relationships under the pressure of fundamentalist Christianity in a small Mennonite town called East Village, a fictionalized version of Toews' hometown of Steinbach, Manitoba. The novel won the Governor General's Award for English Fiction, the CBA Libris Fiction Award, and CBS's Canada Reads.

[3] See Helen Brown's interview with Miriam Toews, "Forgiveness is a Religious Construct, a Means of Maintaining the Status Quo." Independent, 22 May 2023, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/miriam-toews-interview-women-talking-b2342058.html.

[4] In the 2022 adaptation of the novel, written and directed by Sarah Polley (who won the Oscar for the screenplay), we see women talking inside the hayloft for most of the movie. The women are some of the most amazing contemporary actresses, including Rooney Mara, Claire Foy, Jessie Buckley, Judith Ivey, Ben Whishaw, and Frances McDormand. The movie is now available on Netflix. While they feel safe inside and contribute to the discussion in a democratic way, there is a huge contrast between the safety of the indoors and the danger of the surrounding fields and woods. Yet, the huge opening in the hayloft's attic, with a magnificent view of the landscape, suggests the possibility of a different future for them should they embrace life's unpredictability. For the interview with Sarah Polley, see Mathew Hays and Sarah Polley. "Women Talking and Other Necessary Conversations." Cinéaste, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 16-19.

[5] Judith Herman gives the example of Hannah Arendt's report on Adolf Eichmann, one of the major organizers of Holocaust, who was found to be normal. Half a dozen psychiatrists certified that he was neither sadistic nor perverted and this normality was "much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together," as Arendt put it (qtd. in Herman 54).

[6] For more on the Molotschna women's agency as a way out of victimization read Miriam Wallraven and Ksenija Kondali "'We are all victims?' Rethinking Vulnerability and Victimization in Literary Representations of Women's Suffering in Miriam Toews's Women Talking." Suffering in Anglophone Literatures, edited by Martina Domines and Charles I. Armstrong, Lexington Books, 2025, pp. 259-277.



Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License