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Making things happen: Literature as a means of dismantling silence, shame, and stigma

[Review of *#MeToo and Literary Studies. Reading, Writing, and Teaching about Sexual Violence and Rape Culture*, edited by Mary K. Holland and Heather Hewett, Bloomsbury 2021, 415 pp.]

This volume comprises twenty-eight chapters grouped in four thematic sections: “Critical Practices,” “Re-readings,” “Pedagogy: Practices and Methods,” and “Pedagogy: Classroom Contexts,” thus giving a logically ordered review of the phenomenon of #MeToo and suggesting ways of using it as a discussion point in the domain of literary criticism and education (high schools, colleges, universities). As the editors Mary K. Holland and Heather Hewett (Professors at The State University of New York at New Paltz, USA) point out, this is the first attempt to address the issue comprehensively. The chapters have been written by academic scholars, lecturers and teachers, and provide a fresh perspective on the variety of literary responses to the cultural, social and political ramifications of the organized fight against various forms of sexual abuse. At the same time, as is acknowledged, this monograph is one of many recent publications of a similar kind (see the selected bibliography below). After all, over just a few years, #MeToo has become a dynamically expanding field of critical reflection.

Initially, #MeToo was criticized for focusing almost entirely on the experience of white cis gender women and marginalizing females of color, autochthons, those living in third-

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world countries, the disabled, and the non-heteronormative. As for the racial context, that was, in fact, a most paradoxical situation. #MeToo has double roots, and the earliest protest was published in 2006 on Myspace, the first social network to reach a global audience, by the African American Black activist Tarana Burke. Over ten years later, the actress Alyssa Milano tweeted a now-famous viral request to her followers: “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted, write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet” (October 15, 2017). Along with accusations against celebrities such as Harvey Weinstein, Roger Ailes, and Bill Cosby, the world has since observed a surge of analogical activist movements or campaigns: #TimesUp in the USA, #NiUnaMenos in Latin America, #KuToo in Japan, and NOW in Australia, to name but a few. Popular culture responded almost immediately with documentaries and TV shows about rape, sexual harassment, and different forms of misogyny: *The Tale* (2018), *Unbelievable* (2019), and *Second Assault* (2019), among others. Simultaneously, #MeToo met with resistance: victims were often publicly shamed, and employers and lawyers contested the credibility of their testimonies.

Why does “literature” feature in the title of this monograph study? #MeToo has become a powerful movement thanks to its application of storytelling, which has structured the voices of victim-survivors, increased publicity, and, consequently, helped dismantle the silence shrouding the problem. Storytelling, the essence of fiction and non-fiction, is also a bonding agent for all communities supporting the sexually abused. Above all, it is a means of making the traumatic experience more comprehensible for the tellers themselves. This curative property of storytelling has already been successfully tested by psychoanalysis.

The introductory essay of *#MeToo and Literary Studies* outlines the long history of sexual violence, mentioning some of its regional variants: the plight of African American women during the time of slavery and Jim Crow, state violence against women in Latin America, “comfort women” in Korea, and “dowry death” in India. It also emphasizes #MeToo’s indebtedness to the feminist theories developed in the mid-twentieth century. Each chapter that follows is worth the reader’s attention; however, I would like to dwell briefly on four selected ones.

In “Dismissed, trivialized, misread”: Re-examining the Reception of Women’s Literature through the #MeToo Movement,” Janet Badia, a Professor and Director of Women’s Studies at Purdue University Fort Wayne, engages with the critical reception of Toni Morrison’s debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and Maya Angelou’s autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). Focusing on these two exemplar narratives, Badia takes a historical perspective and looks at how women’s writing on sexual violence has been read, most often erroneously, and how its value has been diminished. At issue here is the political dimension of literary interpretations—the strategies for creating valid canons and the functioning of educational institutions as systems of power that perpetuate patriarchal privilege. As noted, “[t]he #MeToo movement has disrupted more than

just male privilege; it has disrupted syllabi and class discussions, ... and has the potential to disrupt literary history” (33). According to the testimonies cited, reading African American women’s prose in academic (and other) courses may be a liberating experience for individual participants, an important step in healing trauma. It can be argued whether breaking down psychological barriers belongs to the goals of academic education; nevertheless, Badia believes that efforts in this direction should be taken.

Tanya Serisier, a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Criminology at Birkbeck College, University of London, in her “Reading Survivor Narratives: Literary Criticism as Feminist Solidarity,” stresses the fact that #MeToo has grown out of the feminist-inspired imperative to say things directly, to everyone. Serisier is the author of the term “narrative politics,” which recognizes the potential agency of narrativized testimony in the political milieu: “fighting sexual violence through personal testimony draws on long-standing feminist recognition of the cross-pollination of the literary and the political...” (43). Autobiographical narratives are powerful—the victim gains visibility, their story opens the way for others to speak directly about their anguish, and social perceptions of sexual violence change (harmful stereotypes and myths are debunked). Feminism, however, is by no means only an enabling context. As Serisier notes, it “authorized the telling of the stories” but, at the same time, set “limits on what stories can be told” (48). What is told and by whom still matters, and the statistics leave no doubt about it: “[s]urvivor narratives are predominantly stories of stranger rape told by white, educated, heterosexual, able-bodied, cis women” (49). Language itself is an obstacle, too. How to name the event precisely? “Rape,” for example, is a conventionalized, general term that can dilute the particularity of what happened to the victim. On the other hand, it is easily understood. Finding a compromise between uniqueness and commonality remains a challenge indeed.

In “The Limits of #MeToo in India,” Nidhi Shrivastava, a PhD candidate at the University of Western Ontario, Canada, re-reads Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel *Cracking India* (1991) along with its film adaptation, *Earth* (1998), directed by Deepa Mehta, to demonstrate that speaking out about the experience of violence does not always improve the situation and safety of victims. Shrivastava points to a different, typically Indian embodiment of the #MeToo movement. A case of gang rape in Dehli in 2012 sparked violent protests on the streets and online. As a result, #PinjraTod and #WhyLoiter were launched in 2014. Indian authorities effectively gagged wronged women’s mouths, which was nothing new. In 1947, during the so-called Partition, 3 million people were killed in a fratricidal genocide, and 75,000 women were abducted and raped. The public ignorance of the atrocities lasted until 1984. As argued, Metha’s film failed to bring the memory of that pivotal event into the mainstream media. In fact, “[t]he [whole] film industry was ... complicit with India’s cultural silence about Partition” (177).

Sarah Goldbort, a PhD candidate at the University of Buffalo, draws attention to the experience of a queer person in “‘Teach as if you aren’t afraid of getting fired’: A Queer Survivor’s Use of Restorative Justice Circles to Embrace Vulnerability in the Classroom.” This article is a very personal confession. As the author, a teacher, asserts, LGBTQ+ students and those affected by trauma unerringly sense in what environment they can feel safe. A school in which controversial topics such as rape or nonheteronormative sexuality are forbidden or avoided by teachers is a suppressive institution. “In 2012,” Goldbort recalls, “I realized the value of queer visibility when one of my students revealed in class that he was gay; I knew the risk he was taking, and I supported his vulnerability by replying: ‘me too.’ This was the first time I had disclosed my sexuality to anyone ...” (289). A revolution in their thinking about fear and shame led to the organization of “restorative justice circles,” which centered on female literature about sexual assault. The idea of “circles” comes from indigenous traditions, which emphasize the importance of ties connecting all living beings. The circle brings participants together, teaches mutual respect, and heals them—an excellent and original environment for discussing literature and authentic experiences.

The articles gathered and edited by Mary K. Holland and Heather Hewett have been written by acclaimed, experienced researchers and fledgling scholars. The inclusion of the latter is an asset of the project as the book has become a significant platform for discussion about a relatively newly-addressed problem seen through the eyes of the young. The analyses encompass numerous aspects of the connections between #MeToo and literature, balancing the number of analyses devoted to canonical and marginalized texts and widening the spectrum of contexts: from linguistic to racial to sexual to national to political. And all of them are permeated by the profound belief in the literature that can make things happen.

#MeToo and Literary Studies. Reading, Writing, and Teaching about Sexual Violence and Rape Culture is an exercise in cultural, social, political, and, most of all, literary heuristics, evidencing the awareness of the editors that the complexity of the #MeToo phenomenon still requires exploration. Therefore, the question “what remains to be done?” concluding the introductory essay is so valid. “A lot” is the briefest answer. Assisted by all the contributors to this impressive volume, we feel critically well-equipped to face the task.

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