

CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER VULNERABILITY AND RESISTANCE: A MEDITERRANEAN APPROACH TO THE ANGLOSPHERE

Edited by María Isabel Romero-Ruiz and Pilar Cuder-Domínguez

Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022

https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.20239447

J. JAVIER TORRES-FERNÁNDEZ

Universidad de Almería

jtorferna@ual.es

[<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5999-0040>](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5999-0040)

213

Cultural Representations of Gender Vulnerability and Resistance: A Mediterranean Approach to the Anglosphere is a collection of twelve chapters that explore growing cultural and social issues, such as vulnerability, gender violence, precarity, and resistance. The approach of this carefully curated volume is a transnational one that considers eleven case studies from the United Kingdom, the United States, Ireland, Australia, Canada, and India. Considering the present globalized world, the editors acknowledge the Mediterranean as a place of cultural hybridization from which to tackle continuing processes of exclusion and discrimination. All the contributors, Mediterranean based, look at texts from the Anglosphere delving into this wide range of representations of vulnerability, oppression and resistance offering a multidisciplinary theoretical approach drawing from Post-Humanism, Human Rights Studies, Postcolonialism, Critical Race Studies and Animal Studies. Providing substantial insight drawn from these fields, this volume not only proves to be breaking new ground but also stands as a publication of great interest to any scholar dealing with such theories and contemporary transnational social issues. I turn to Judith Butler to contextualize this volume in terms of previous work on vulnerability in general and gender vulnerability in particular, who affirms that we live in interdependent communities and that some bodies, which can belong to different groups, are more vulnerable to violence than others based on, for example, gender, sexuality, and race (2004: 26-29).

In Chapter 1, a thorough introduction to the volume, María Isabel Romero-Ruiz and Pilar Cuder-Domínguez, henceforth the editors, successfully deliver a comprehensive examination of the current debates around vulnerability and resistance in cultural and literary studies. The Introduction answers to the powerful emergence of Vulnerability Studies in the last two decades and establishes one of the main objectives of this collection: filling an existing gap in scholarship dealing with Vulnerability Studies within Cultural Studies and Humanities.

The volume is divided into three thematic sections and comprised of eleven chapters, plus the Introduction. Each section explores different contexts and definitions of gender vulnerability concerning resistance and resilience, agency and interdependencies, and trans*/post* identities. The first part, entitled “Gender Vulnerability, Resilience and Resistance”, deals with the concepts of vulnerability, resilience, and resistance in literature from the gender perspective. Drawing from Butler, vulnerability is not understood as a “subjective disposition” but rather politically imposed and unequally distributed (2016: 25). Elena Cantueso-Urbano opens this part with her chapter titled “Growing Resilient in Irish Magdalene Laundries: An Analysis of the Justice for Magdalenes’ Oral History Project (2013) and Kathy O’Beirne’s Autobiography *Kathy’s Story: A Childhood Hell Inside the Magdalen Laundries* (2005)”. Cantueso-Urbano conducts a detailed examination of the concept of trauma within the reformatory process experienced by non-privileged women in Ireland. Focusing on the autobiography of Kathy O’Beirne, who was a resident of the Magdalene Laundries, Cantueso-Urbano highlights O’Beirne’s work as a particularly compelling testimony. The author concludes her analysis with a more optimistic tone by suggesting that resilience, resistance, and vulnerability can complement one another and become coping strategies. Therefore, testimonies such as O’Beirne’s represent how, after enduring such traumatic events, survival and healing can be achieved.

In a similar vein, the following chapter, “Becoming Resilient Subjects: Vulnerability and Resistance in Emma Donoghue’s *Room*”, is written by María Elena Jaime de Pablos and analyses Donoghue’s novel *Room* (2010), which was inspired by a real case. Jaime de Pablos suggests examining vulnerability within the framework of resistance to better understand the subjectivity of the characters. More precisely, Jaime de Pablos explores the traumatic experiences lived by vulnerable individuals confined within cramped spaces for an extended period of time. This is portrayed in Donoghue’s novel with the example of a mother and her child. Despite the pessimist undertone that permeates through the story, glimpses of hope are found in the role of Ma, “an intelligent woman, a caring mother, a proper figure of attachment, a source of affection and a model of principled behaviour” (37). Ma’s positive influence becomes evident when following their prolonged confinement

as the characters try to reinforce resilience and resistance while struggling with oppression and vulnerability.

Chapter 4, “Of Mice and Women: Gendered and Speciesist Violence in Joyce Carol Oates’s ‘Martyrdom’” by Maria Sofia Pimentel-Biscaia, offers a distinct perspective on resilience, resistance and vulnerability through a speciesist lens focusing on sexual violence against women. Pimentel-Biscaia’s chapter presents an analysis of Joyce Carol Oates’s short story “Martyrdom” skillfully drawing parallels between human and non-human suffering. Building on Oates’s story, where the wife willingly endures violence within her marriage, the chapter examines the figure of the martyr as “a composite of abstract concept and material object” (55). Additionally, it explores the significance of self-representation and the existence of silenced martyrs. In Oates’s story, patriarchal and speciesist violence collide given that women are depicted as rats subjected to human males and conceived as mere sexual objects. Pimentel-Biscaia emphasizes the need to consider the embodied subjectivities of human and non-human entities as martyrs, and henceforth offers an innovative contribution to the field when proposing the parallelism between both human and non-human animal relations and gendered relations.

Concluding part one, Auxiliadora Pérez-Vides’s chapter, titled “‘Nobody Kills a Priest’: Irish Noir and Pathogenic Vulnerability in Benjamin Black’s *Holy Orders*”, explores the concept of institutional precariousness emphasizing the flawed practices of systematic power in Irish institutions such as the police, the press, and the Catholic Church. The author argues that the bodies of the travellers, a subaltern community, and its children and women remain under the control of these corrupted authorities that enforce pathogenic vulnerability and multi-layered precarity resulting in an erasure of any possible form of resistance leading to further victimization. Through the analysis of Benjamin Black’s *Holy Orders* (2013), Pérez-Vides offers the reader a better understanding of the exposure of moral dysfunctionality within the Catholic Church and highlights the failure of institutional norms on individuals from diverse social, gender and age groups. Throughout the four chapters of part one the concept of vulnerability, initially considered as fragile, is transformed into something strongly intertwined with the notions of resilience and resistance, which also transcends historical and geographical boundaries.

Part two of this edited collection is titled “Gender Vulnerability, Agency and Interdependencies” and guides the reader into a deeper exploration of vulnerability in relation to identity in crime fiction, cinema, and television. Pilar Cuder-Domínguez initiates this section by addressing the situational vulnerability of refugees in Chapter 6, titled “Crime Fiction’s Disobedient Gaze: Refugees’ Vulnerability in Ausma Zehanat Khan’s *A Dangerous Crossing* (2018)”, presenting

a compelling argument that Khan's novel critically examines and critiques "the failure of European states and transnational institutions to morally respond to the needs of a population whose vulnerability is context-specific" (93). According to Mackenzie et al., the vulnerable subject is located at the center of social policy and institutional responsibility. In other words, those in power are deemed as responsible for the vulnerable and precarious conditions of others (2014: 13-15). These supranational institutions are failing to protect refugees from systemic forms of violence and Cuder-Domínguez argues that fiction and reality can converge in advocating for the protection of vulnerable individuals and communities. To conclude, the author directly addresses "the material effects of current migration management practices in Europe and more widely in the West" (105) to point at the contradictions found between the discourse of human rights and the politics enforced by nations against migration.

In Chapter 7, Beatriz Domínguez-García with her chapter titled "Detection, Gender Violence and Atkinson's Jackson Brodie Series" delves into the study of vulnerability from a feminist standpoint. Domínguez-García focuses on the detective stories in the series and carries out a comparative analysis between the portrayal of the protagonist in the television series, *Case Histories* (2011-2013), and the written works. This chapter offers a thought-provoking and innovative approach to reevaluating perceptions of vulnerability conveyed through both media sources introducing, for the first time in this volume, a television series as the subject matter. While in the novels Brodie connects empathically to women victims of gender violence by empowering them and promoting their autonomy, the television series delivers a picture where the detective presents a stronger detachment projecting his patriarchal stance as a male caretaker over the victims. Continuing with a feminist approach, E. Guillermo Iglesias-Díaz's paper titled "Resisting Binaries: Vulnerability, Agency and the Sovereign Subject Through a Feminist Critical Gaze" argues against the traditional opposition between resistance and agency, exploring the feminist critical gaze in cinema. Iglesias-Díaz explores Andrea Arnold's film *Red Road* (2006) emphasizing the reversal of roles depicted in Arnold's film, which subverts the traditional notion of the male gaze while also challenging assumptions about agency and vulnerability. The chapter concludes by emphasizing the intricate nature of vulnerability "as opposed to agency and sovereign subjectivities in order to subvert them" (141). Iglesias-Díaz argues that Arnold presents a set of characters full of agency while also vulnerable, but never as victims.

In the closing of part two, María Isabel Romero-Ruiz's paper titled "Trans-National Neo-Victorianism, Gender, and Vulnerability in Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* (2005)" explores the concepts of gender and vulnerability through

the novel's capability to challenge the conventional conceptualization of colonization by presenting both the colonizers and the colonized under conditions of precariousness and vulnerability (151). Romero-Ruiz skillfully contextualizes Grenville's novel to provide a comprehensive understanding of the situation, offering an apt analysis of the Neo-Victorian narrative that converges with post-colonial issues. After reading Romero-Ruiz's analysis, the reader can comprehend how the retrieval of cultural memory in fiction can be collected through past events and gendered archetypes. The contributions that build part two broaden the scope of research by incorporating new terms and perspectives in exploring vulnerabilities beyond traditional academic frameworks.

Part three, titled "Gender Vulnerability and Trans*/Post* Identities", introduces new ways of embodiment beyond the heteronormative societal structures in contemporary cultural representations of non-binary, trans* and post* identities related to vulnerability in dystopian fiction, science fiction film, and television series. Turning to Butler, resistance emerges from being seen and acknowledged (2016: 14), which is crucial for those identities not fitting in the societal status quo who have been traditionally marginalized and oppressed. Furthermore, when a system fails to represent all its diversity, those who have no chance to represent themselves are found at a higher risk of being othered and treated as less human (2004: 147). Rocío Carrasco-Carrasco opens this section with her chapter titled "The Vulnerable Posthuman in Popular Science Fiction Cinema" where she critically examines how posthuman subjects are often portrayed as vulnerable beings who seem to be condemned to fit within normativity. Carrasco-Carrasco argues that the posthuman subject has been represented in contemporary films as an alternative way of understanding the world (170), therefore disrupting the traditional notions of normalcy and difference. Through the analysis of Jonathan Glazer's *Under the Skin* (2014) and Rupert Sander's *Ghost in the Shell* (2017), the author explores two distinct depictions of posthuman subjects. First, "an unnamed and impassive alien who abducts and kills men around Scotland in *Under the Skin*" (170); and second, "a human-machine hybrid working for the police in an unspecified Asian city who eventually discovers her true identity in *Ghost in the Shell*" (170). Carrasco-Carrasco's reflection on the identity of the posthuman subject suggests that identity-building should be understood as a "process in constant change" (171). She concludes by arguing that the disruption of the status quo allows us to understand the posthuman subject in their non-normative bodies.

Chapter 11 by Juan Carlos Hidalgo-Ciudad, titled "Trans* Vulnerability and Resistance in the Ballroom: The Case of *Pose* (Season 1)", continues in line with the exploration of non-conventional vulnerability. Hidalgo-Ciudad examines how homo and heteronormative communities can reject vulnerable subaltern identities

due to their gender, ethnicity, and sexuality. Delving into the captivating world of ballroom in the groundbreaking television series *Pose*, the author analyzes the characters, who are LGBTQ+, Black, and Latinx as trans* subjects that lead to resistance instead of perpetuating heteronormative dichotomies in their “continuous process of (un)becoming other(s)” (198). *Pose* brings historically silenced voices forward into one of the most mainstream media platforms, television. Hidalgo-Ciudad carefully examines vulnerability and precariousness within the Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ communities that take part in the ballroom culture as presented in the show. The author concludes that this representation of the ballroom culture, its history and its members offers a sweetened version of an environment “that reinforces, to a certain extent, the validity of the American dream for the dispossessed” (199). The volume closes with Chapter 12, titled “A Trans Journey Towards Resistance: Vulnerability and Resilience in the Dystopian Narrative of Manjula Padmanabhan”, by Antonia Navarro-Tejero. Navarro-Tejero adds a new framework, the utopian genre, for the analysis of gender identity and its constraints. The author delivers an examination of dystopian scenarios, Indianness and womanhood employing a feminist lens from an activism standpoint and explores the displacement of technology leading to women being perceived as the sex at risk. Navarro-Tejero concludes her work by arguing that in the event of a dystopian displacement by technology, the only solution out of a precarious reality would be for these vulnerable subjects to adapt and join forces. The last three chapters of this collection offer a contemporary and fresh perspective by examining gender vulnerability and trans*/post* identities in science fiction cinema, television series, and dystopian narratives.

Collectively, *Cultural Representations of Gender Vulnerability and Resistance* is a comprehensive publication that arguably makes a significant and original contribution to the scholarly investigation of vulnerability and its corresponding dynamics of resistance and resilience. Thoughtfully designed and carefully structured, the volume provides a thought-provoking collection of synchronized chapters with an uninterrupted flow of ideas, theoretical frameworks, and thematic explorations presented by the contributors. If only, to further enrich this publication and drawing from Sociology, the analyses presented in this volume could have benefited from including another layer of theoretical apparatus such as Imogen Tyler’s work on the process of stigmatization, self-stigmatization, and collective responses to stigma. However, the complex transnational nature of this volume is not to be overlooked since it further enhances its scholarly achievement. The interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches incorporated throughout the volume widen its scope and reach. In fact, adopting the Mediterranean as a vantage point from which to delve into the analysis of texts coming from the Anglosphere implies the recognition of the modern world’s interconnectedness in

terms of gender vulnerability and inequality. Including perspectives from popular culture, literature, television and cinema, this publication not only provides a much-needed exploration of Vulnerability Studies within the Humanities and Cultural Studies, but it also achieves the greater social purpose of giving voice to vulnerable subjects and communities who live under precarious conditions and are marked by violence and oppression. In conclusion, the editors and contributors of this publication are setting the ground for further research endeavours by introducing new concepts, theoretical constructs, and case studies that will undoubtedly attract an extensive body of scholars working in apparently different, but ultimately interwoven, fields of study.

Acknowledgements

This research has been funded by the Spanish Ministry of Universities (FPU21/01232). The author also acknowledges the support from the Women, Literature and Society (HUM-874) Research Group and the Communication and Society I+D Research Centre (CySOC) at the Universidad de Almería.

219

Works Cited

BUTLER, Judith. 2004. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.

BUTLER, Judith. 2016. "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance." In Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti and Leticia Sabsay (eds.) *Vulnerability in Resistance*. Durham, NC: Duke U.P.: 12-27.

MACKENZIE, Catriona, Wendy ROGERS and Susan DODDS. (eds) 2014. "Introduction: What Is Vulnerability and Why Does It Matter for Moral Theory?" In Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers and Susan Dodds (eds.) *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford U.P.: 1-32.

Received: 30/06/2023

Accepted: 22/09/2023



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.