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Menis, Susanna (2021) TANYA SERISIER, Speaking Out: Feminism, rape and narrative politics. Palgrave Macmillan, 1st edn 2018 (2020), pp. 272, ISBN 978-3030404253. [Book Review] (In Press)

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***Speaking out* by Tanya Serisier (Palgrave-Macmillan; 1<sup>st</sup> ed 2018 (2020); 272 pp., £22.99 (pbk) ISBN 978-3030404253)**

### **Abstract**

This is a review of the book *Speaking Out* by Tania Serisier. The monograph reminds us of the implications of dominant knowledge production. Although recognising the fundamental cultural space created by feminist discursive activism, the genre of rape storytelling has narrowed the scope for recognising different experiences that are at the margin or outside hegemonic narratives of (sexual) violence. The focus here is on the politics of speaking out and the importance of critically talking about the politics of narrative.

**Key words:** speaking out, rape, feminism, literal genre, hegemony

In the Greek mythological story, Cassandra is given the gift of true prophecies by Apollo. However, once she refuses to repay with her love, the God puts a curse on her. From now on, she will see the future, but she would never be believed. She witnessed in silence the fall of Troy, her own rape and death.<sup>1</sup> Since the late 1940s psychology has reduced Cassandra's experience to illustrate a 'complex' - a personal one: the clinical emotional and psychological struggle of those who are disbelieved. Some scholars have profiled Cassandra as a symbol of the manic, the hysterical.<sup>2</sup> But what if - Aeschylus was alerting us to something completely different? That is, to our social tragedy of not listening.

In *Speaking Out* Serisier provides insight into the complex world of narrative; the text focuses on rape memoirs predominantly driven and made public by and through second wave feminism (p.26). Serisier expounds that once a window was open to accommodate these

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<sup>1</sup> Aeschylus, Agamemnon (458 BC)

<sup>2</sup> Laurie Layton Schapira (2016) Laurie Layton Schapira on Mythology, *Jung Journal*, 10:2, 69-72, <https://www-tandfonline-com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/doi/pdf/10.1080/19342039.2016.1158589?needAccess=true&>; Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in the Greek Tragedy and philosophy*. Cambridge University Press (1<sup>st</sup> published 1986) 2001, 414.

stories in the public space, the promise for cultural change about rape and the experience of rape survivors started to brew (p.6). The benefits of speaking of one's own experience not only assumed to challenge power relations (p.184), but it created a literal genre (p.44).

Serisier explains that 'their authority as public survivors of rape challenged the cultural limitations placed on women's speech, and the historical refusal to deny, minimise, or ignore' their narratives; hence, these stories are 'victories for feminism [...] as the producer and enabler of a genre of women's stories' (pp.40-41).

*Speaking Out* critically examines published rape memoirs to investigate the "'turning point" in public reception of survivor narratives and the cultural authority of the discourse of speaking out' (p. 210). The reading is methodologically instructive; its clarity and coherency, matched with a comprehensive theoretical context, make the text a research-method guide.

The scope of examination is specific, focusing on 'Anglophone Western feminist practice of speaking out' (p.13); the case studies at the core of the analysis concern women with shared cultural discourses (USA, UK, Australia and Canada). Serisier says that she followed a 'feminist interpretation of representation, narrative and rape' where 'language, interpretation and subjectivity' are at the forefront of the interrogation (p.14). However, whilst using this approach, Serisier is also critical of it. She shows us how dominant feminist interpretation of speaking out practices (p.101) has led to a selective 'listening', selective storytelling, and selective visibility (pp.9, 47, 48).

As the saying goes, never judge a book by its cover. However, once inside, we are taken through a journey that taps into our cultural deafness. Since the 1970s speaking out about rape became newsworthy material, and this has been amplified by the social media options available nowadays (p.12, p.94). However, Serisier argues that 'despite its significant cultural impact [speaking out] has not ended' nor reduced sexual violence (p.12). Certainly, centuries of a harming practice might necessitate a likewise number of centuries for a healing process;

but this is not the point. Indeed, Serisier explains how the purity of a literal genre relies on exclusion (p.46-7); accordingly, the genre of speaking out created an exclusive club, open to ‘white, heterosexual, educated women’, who experienced stranger rape, possibly inter-racial, and possibly by black men (p.47). Still, white Western feminism will record all stories (p.11); however, those less reflective of real rape (p.48) - and perhaps less newsworthy (p.173) - might sink down to the bottom of the hierarchy of those stories that are – politically - worth telling (p.51, 55).

Serisier asserts that the (feminist) social (and personal) (p.52) ‘need to be believed’ has led to some problematic political implications (p.172). Rather than contributing to the acceptance of many ‘truths’, the politics of speaking out ended up being a complicit in the narrow pharming of legal-truth narratives (p.71, 78). Second-wave, white Western feminism’s tendency of ‘speaking on behalf’ and taking ownership of the narratives (p.11, 42, 45, 132) have fostered what Serisier identified as the ‘power of judgment and of granting or withholding belief’ (p.146). Leading to a ‘hegemonic and normative understanding’ of sexual violence (pp.64-5, 210), the politics of speaking out has ‘reproduced the same racial and class boundaries that restrict survivor speech in other forums’ (p.44, 57, 87). But not only that. The analysis in *Speaking Out* demonstrates how this politic distils the experience of sexual violence as if it was the only ‘item’ in one’s life experience which deserves social attention. In Serisier’s words, this ‘works to generically marginalise the stories of women for whom rape sits alongside other experiences of trauma and violence’; these experiences might include racism, colonialism, interpersonal and familial social and cultural dynamics (p.49).

*Speaking Out* urges us to be mindful of the effects of dominant knowledge production (p.144). Unlike the (deceivably) stable and uncontested knowledge created by feminist discursive activism, Serisier proposes to embrace ‘an open and insecure future which is yet to

be written' (p.215). This approach recognises a reality that cares to embrace all experiences, and not only those defined by the (limiting) criteria of a genre (p.45). Regi Ray reminds us:

To approach the world by objectifying it, to reside mainly in the head, is to put ourselves in a position of domination, mastery, and control. We dominate the world by filtering it through our concepts, and this enables us to own and process it, to make it subservient to our agendas and wants.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ray, R. A. (2008). *Touching Enlightenment*. United States: Sounds True, p.25