

**SYMBOLS OF TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE IN SOJI COLE'S *EMBERS* AND
IYORWUESE HAGHER'S *LAMP OF PEACE***

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Abstract

*Trauma studies has its foundation in the psychoanalytic theory of Freud. However, the 1990s saw an upsurge in the discourse of trauma studies in literature especially with the influential study of Cathy Caruth. Over the years, trauma studies has thrived and been applied in the interdisciplinary discuss of race, feminism, ecology and globalization. This paper explores the narratives of trauma in two Nigerian plays. It goes beyond the concept of "trauma unspeakable"(Caruth 1994) to investigate the impact of institutionalized violence on the vulnerable group of women and children. Based on Literary trauma theory and psychoanalytic theory, the paper offers a diversity of interpretation to women's experiences of loss, displacement, and trauma in Soji Cole's *Embers* and Iyorwuese Hagher's *Lamp of Peace*. It finds that events of violence and inequality impacts the lived experiences of the characters differently and the ways in which it is captured in literature.*

Keywords: Trauma studies, Literary trauma theory, Drama, Women, Psychoanalytic theory

Introduction

The age of globalization is a digital era marked with technological advancement and closer human connections. It is also marked by general unrest, terrorism, natural disasters,

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and other acts of violence, which Ballengee and Kelman (2021:i) call “the age of traumatism”. Violence is a social malady that affects families, communities, states and continents. It is a prevalent act that is reflected in the personal space and the public space. The impact of violence is varied and ubiquitous (Reidy et al., 2013). Violence impedes on development and affects all facets of human development. The World Health Organization Report on Violence and Health states that violence is the leading cause of mortality for people aged 15- 44 (Krug et al., 2002). Violence ranges from self- inflicted violence, to inter-personal violence and collective violence. It is reflected in the “invisible suffering of society’s most vulnerable individuals to the all too visible tragedy of societies in conflict” Nelson Mandela (cited in Krug et al., 2002, p. xi).

Creative writers find inspirations from the society to craft their arts. The materials of their creativity come from social issues, history, human nature, and the oral literature of their people. Violence and violent conflict has been an important source of inquiry by the creative artist. The complicated issues of inter-personal violence, collective violence and self-inflicted violence has piqued the imagination of the creative artist from the times of Sophocles to Aristotle. Writing as an art goes beyond the action of telling stories. It critiques and challenges the dominant belief systems of the day and brings to the fore issues that are paramount to the wellbeing of the society. As noted by Emenyonu (2008) the work of art is not created in a vacuum, rather the writer is socially committed to the social and political issues of his time no matter how difficult or delicate.

Literature offers insights into the subject of human nature in relation to the environment - social, cultural, and economic. It is on this premise that this paper investigates the narrative of trauma and the reflections of violent conflicts on the vulnerable characters (women and children) in the selected plays texts. The plays of choice- Soji Cole *Embers* and Iyorwuese Hagher *Lamp of Peace* are based on violent conflicts such as civil war and violent insurgencies. This paper sets out to identify the narratives of trauma in the plays and how the playwrights capture the delicate psychological after-effect of violent conflicts. The paper also explores the social conditions that nurture and normalize violence and the ways in which it affects the vulnerable members of the society. Sociological, environmental and psychological factors are found as contributory to violence in the society.

Literature offers us the opportunity to creatively unravel these situations that might be lost in the cold language of documentation and official files. It is through the creation of the dramatist that literary drama lends empathy to these stories. Through drama, the playwright explores and exhumes the workings of the mind that is buried under socio-cultural ethos. This he recreates through his fictional characters, imbuing in them the

themes he wants to pass across. As stated in the ABC of Galtung's conflict triangle, behaviours (B) and contradictions (C) that promote violence are hidden under actions (A). It is these actions and their manifestations through the characters of the plays under-study that this research paper addresses. A psychoanalytical reading will enable and aid a revelation of this conflict. The actions, behaviours and contradictions that lead to violence and sustain violence are all social acts that emerge from the psyche of the individuals involved. Conflict does not exist in a vacuum and like drama, conflict propels the actions leading to a resolution.

Theoretical Framework

Through literature the unconscious finds an escape or expression just as in dream symbols. Bennet and Royle (2004), state that literature has always been concerned with the unconscious or the other, the fantasy, hallucinations and other forms of impersonality. Literature offers insights into the subject of human nature in relation to the environment (social, cultural, economic etc.). Freud lists a tripartite that is helpful in the understanding of the working of the mind of the human. The Ego, the Super Ego and the Id. These three levels rightly correspond to the consciousness, the conscience and the unconscious which are in a constant state of conflict with each other. The unconscious is structured like a language that implies a loss or lack. The expression of which takes place in the forms of anxiety, defenses, dream symbols, repression and others.

Psychoanalytic theory can be applied to the characters and the choice of characters in a play text. It is also reflected in the use of language, the plot, the theme and the settings. Jacques Lacan a co- proponent of the psychoanalytic theory stresses the importance of language for the human psyche. Lacan theorizes that the operations of the unconscious resembles the figure of speech – metaphor and metonymy. They act as stand in for a loss that is experienced. Psychoanalysis gives insights not only on the playwright's mind but on that of the characters which are representative of human personality. Psychoanalytical theory can further be applied to the understanding of other theories among which is feminism. As noted by Tyson (2006), "Psychoanalysis can be used to help us understand the psychological effect of patriarchal ideology as well as why and how women and men internalize it (94).

Furthermore, Fortier M. (1997) cites three dimensions on which psychoanalysis engages with art and literature. Firstly, it can be used to psychoanalyze the artist, secondly to psychoanalyze the characters and thirdly to demonstrate the pattern of the psyche in general. Frontier notes that, "as drama text, theatre is open to each of these approaches.

Any playwright or dramatic character is susceptible to psychoanalytic analysis, and in the realm of character, drama has yielded particularly rich materials for psychoanalysis” (61).

Literary Trauma theory

Trauma studies focus on the representation of psychological trauma in language and the place of memory in shaping individual and cultural identities (Balaev 2021). Trauma in this case refers to a mental wound, separate from physical trauma of the body. Trauma studies explore the psychological impacts of trauma (personal or collective) on a person's psyche due to war, terrorism, social conflicts, political violence, natural disasters and other distressing events. Although the definition of trauma is contested and no generally accepted definition of trauma exist, Balaev definition of trauma as the representation of an extremely disruptive experience and its impact on identity and memory is utilized in this paper. “Trauma thus, is an individual's response to an experience that disrupts previously held perceptions of one's self and others” (Balaev, 2012, p.2). Trauma studies explore the impact of trauma in literature and society by analyzing the cultural and psychological significance of an unprocessed traumatic experience.

Interest in trauma in literary criticism started in the 1990s with the works of several scholars such as with Judith Herman, Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman and the influential Cathy Caruth's editorial essays: *Trauma: Exploration in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experiences: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996). Literary trauma theory explores the intense change in perception brought on by an extreme emotional state that is captured in literary narratives through the use of psychological theories. Trauma studies in literary criticism as proposed by Caruth explored the limitation of language in capturing meaning- hence, trauma unspeakable- a loss that emerges from a missed event. Caruth viewed trauma as an event that fragments consciousness and prevents direct linguistic representation. Thus, the painful recollection of the event might not be verbal but can still be captured in imaginative literature. Caruth argues that even when trauma is amnesic and unspeakable, fictional representation (novels, films) gives voice to traumatized individuals and population. The occurrence of trauma memory emerges then from the unprocessed traumatic experience (Caruth, 1995, p.153).

It is worthy to note that Joshua Pederson's 2014 article challenges Caruth's model of trauma theory and memory based on the findings of Richard McNally, a clinical psychologist. McNally in his book- *Remembering Trauma* (2003) notes that traumatic memories can be recalled and are speakable. Pederson proposed a three- pronged model for reading trauma in literary theory. Firstly, he notes that trauma victims do not necessarily suffer from trauma amnesia but that traumatic memories are memorable and speakable. Hence, he advocates for the critic to focus on the trauma texts itself rather than

on the structure. Secondly, he notes that the victims' textual narrative of trauma has healing power and the speaking of trauma can help the process of rehabilitation. Thirdly, Pederson states that, the depictions of trauma experiences can be "temporally, physically and ontologically distorted" (337). In essence, the memory of trauma maybe heightened but altered. The literary critic is thus informed that the authors of trauma texts, may recount trauma with excessive details and vibrant intensity employing peritraumatic dissociation (dissociative alternations in consciousness).

On the other hand, the Pluralistic model of trauma studies advocated by Michelle Balaev allows for a more nuanced and varied response to trauma. It notes that the assumed unspeakability of trauma (Caruth's model) is one of the many responses to an extremely disruptive event, rather than it being the defining feature of trauma. The Pluralistic model offers an exploration of the ways in which contextual factors such as time and place inform the remembrance, the retelling and the experience of a traumatic experience in a novel. Place and landscape are meaning making sites that portray the range of emotional sufferings. Balaev argues that silence is a narrative strategy rather than an evidence of the epistemological void created by the experience of trauma which Caruth posits (Balaev, 2012, p.23).

Some of the techniques for depicting trauma in literature include: landscape imagery, silence, narrative omission, non-linear plot, fragmentation in speech and narratives, repetitive actions, flashbacks, and disruptive temporal sequence that heighten chaos, mental confusion and ruptures meaning. Trauma theory is often applied to trauma texts which are sometimes war memoirs, fictional narratives, poetry and film. However, in this paper we apply it to the interpretation of selected play texts.

A Reading of Iyorwuese Hagher *Lamp of Peace* and Soji Cole's *Embers*

The violent acts of war do cause trauma which can trigger Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This manifest in the form of depression, anxiety, nightmares, panic attack, violent anger and other repressive acts. PTSD was once referred to as shell shock and combat fatigue. Although PTSD has existed as far back as the Greek era, it was not until the First World War that the impact of psychological trauma was discovered and defined. PTSD was first believed to have been caused by soldiers' direct contact with artillery bombardment and other weapons of war, hence the term Shell Shock. Further studies after the return of American war veterans from Vietnam and the psychological distress they suffered led to the inclusion of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder in 1980 by the American Psychiatric Association. It

is noted that distressing experiences, violent acts, traumatic experience especially in the time of war when human rights are easily infringed and abused can cause PTSD.

In *Lamp of Peace* we see Madam Alafia suffering from PTSD as the medical officers agree that she has gone mad and refer her case to a psychiatrist. Although madam Alafia and General Ado disagree with the diagnosis, as the play progresses we experience the depth of the tragedy that has befallen madam Alafia and understand her plight. The playwright through the use of psycho drama and the technique of a play within a play attempts a dispassionate presentation of the horrors of war. In the form of trauma texts, the conversations between the characters are disjointed and fragmented. There are scenes of flashbacks, temporal dislocation in the plot and peritraumatic dissociation in Madam Alafia's narration of the death of her family.

Boy Soldier, a young child soldier of eleven years already bears the scars of war and also suffers the traumatic effect of war. His exaggerated panic and frantic grip on his automatic rifle as a life saver shows his desperate belief in the power of the gun. The moment his gun is taken away, Boy Soldier "surrenders" and appears weak. At that moment he pleads for his life. It is telling that the first and only question Boy Soldier asks Dr Ndu is "Doctor. Am I going to die?" The altercation between Dr. Ndu and Boy Soldier is an example of the strain that traumatic events can cause. It does not occur to Boy Soldier that he is at the hospital in safe hands and his life is about to be saved not cut short. The actions of Boy Soldier are consistent with the actions of one who has been exposed to extreme degrees of violence and to whom violence, pain and death is normalized. Boy Soldier is more distressed about his gun being taken away rather than the bullet lodged in his head from which he is bleeding profusely. It is the inability of children to process fear, sense danger and be cautious that makes them a valuable addition for insurgents who prey on them. Child Soldiers are regarded as easy to indoctrinate, fearless, cheap to maintain and willing to fight when they have been drugged, fed and indoctrinated.

Due to exposure to trauma and excessive violence at a tender age, Child Soldiers are desensitized to violence and killings. They normalize killings especially if they have witnessed the brutal killings of their parents and loved ones. The instinct of a child soldier is directed at survival, and if he has to kill to survive, so be it. In *Lamp of Peace*, Boy Soldier's refusal to let go of his weapon, even in the hospital where he has been brought in for emergency treatment expresses the constant state of danger, distress and alertness which his young mind has been subjected to.

Child Soldiers via the nature of their experience tend to be more violent and have aggressive behaviours. The encounter between Boy Soldier and Husband on the street during Husband's search for food buttresses this point. Boy Soldier by the law of the gun

can decide who dies and who lives. He is rude and uncouth to Husband and does not observe the respect a younger person accords to an elder especially in the African tradition. This social and cultural dis-stability is one negative effect of armed conflicts.

In Post-Conflict situations, trauma, personality disorder, and depression are not uncommon amongst the survivors of violent conflicts. This is especially pronounced among vulnerable group of children, women and ex-combatants. Schauer and Elbert (2010) writing on the psychological impact of child soldiering reports that:

Child Soldiers are raised in an environment of severe violence, experience it, and subsequently often commit cruelties and atrocities of the worse kind. This repeated exposure to chronic and traumatic stress during development leaves the children with mental and related physical ill-health, notably PTSD, and severe personality changes. Such exposure also deprives the child from a normal and healthy development and impairs their integration into society as a fully functional member (311/312).

The plot of *Lamp of Peace* is nor linear. Rather, it is disjointed. It applies the tool of flashbacks, fragmented speeches, detailed and distorted narrative to capture the emotional turmoil caused by war. The playwright's use of disjointed language and repetition, reveals the inadequacy of language to capture the traumatic experience (Caruth 1995).

BOY SOLDIER: Halt there! [*He covers him menacingly with a AK47*]

HUSBAND: Yes, sir.

BOY SOLDIER: Hands on your head.

BOY SOLDIER: Password.

HUSBAND: Password?

BOY SOLDIER [*kicks him*]: Password, stupid. Think you can just walk the streets like this?

HUSBAND: My son, I don't understand.

BOY SOLDIER: Sharrup. I am not your son, period. Now what is in your sack?

HUSBAND: Empty.

BOY SOLDIER: Empty what, stupid?

HUSBAND: Empty sack.

BOY SOLDIER: Empty sack. In sack?

HUSBAND: Empty sack, son, sir

BOY SOLDIER: Put the sack on your head stupid.

HUSBAND: Yes, sir. [*Drapes sack over head.*]

BOY SOLDIER: Now, march forward to the execution ground at once. You are long face traitor (215/216).

The traumatic experience of Boy Soldier is tied not only to the violence he has experienced on the battle field but also to the atrocities he has committed in the name of war. It is telling that the war comes to an end when Boy Soldier helps the state forces capture his father, Warlord. In conflict situations such as these, the lines between familial relationships can become blurred as members of a family might find themselves on opposing ends. By the nature of the forced “growing up” that Boy Soldier is forced to undergo, he becomes a child trapped in an adult situation. He loses his childhood to the war and becomes a militarized child, whose only singular motive is survival.

Madam Alafia, another traumatized victim of the war loses her entire family to the conflict. Her daughter is gruesomely raped by eleven men and shot dead with Madam Alafia watching, powerless to stop them. Madam Alafia's traumatic ranting is pegged on the wedding dress her daughter has worn as she thinks it is the bad omen that attracts the rebels to their hideout. When Madam Alafia narrates how the war has claimed her children, she includes the destruction of her daughter's beautiful wedding dress. In *Lamp of Peace*, Iyorwuese highlights not only the physical destruction caused by the war but the psychological and mental impact of the war on the survivors.

Soji Cole's *Embers*

Embers is Soji Cole's incursion into the experiences of trauma and its impact on Internally Displaced Persons (IDP). *Embers* which won the 2018 Nigeria Prize for Literature award follows the life experiences of three girls, Memunah, Idayat, Atai and a middle aged woman Talatu who serves as their guide and mentor. These women through the Boko Haram inspired conflict have been displaced from their homes and villages of origin. They are gathered at the IDP camp under the mercy of the Nigeria Military and Humanitarian agencies. Soji Cole explores through memories, recollections and direct narration the impact of the Boko Haram insurgency on women. In *Embers*, we see the direct effect of trauma on people that have been exposed to violent extremism and conflicts. For these people life holds no meaning anymore and survival is the only thing that matters.

Soji Cole's *Embers* follows the narration of the traumatic experience of three young girls Memunah, Idayat, Atai and a middle aged woman, Talatu. These females have all suffered the devastating effect of the Boko Haram crises and have lost their homes and family. They have been resettled in the Internally Displaced People (IDP) Camp which is set up in an old and abandoned school building. Talatu by means of expressing her past through the therapeutic action of talking and sharing, seeks to inspire in the younger girls hope for a bright future despite their sad experiences. Talatu's narration of her past life

serves as a coping mechanism and a healing process for the girls. Talatu also encourages the girls to talk and through the dialogue of the play we partake of their negative experiences not only in Sambisa forest but at the IDP camp as well, by the camp workers and soldiers who have been mandated to protect them.

In *Embers*, Cole uses Sambisa and the IDP camp as the location of traumatic memories. Sambisa forest, the hideout of the Boko Haram insurgents and the IDP camp organized as a safe haven for the displaced people is the place or site that influences their perception of the world and holds centre-stage in their traumatized memories. The experiences of the girls in Sambisa forest informs their cryptic outlook and their experiences at the IDP camp defines the side of the law on which they end. Each girl associates a place as a site of hope or of pain. For Talatu, Kano city is the place of hope and an escape from a childhood of sexual abuse and exploitation.

Atai, regards the IDP camp as a safe heaven and despite the destruction of her village by the Boko Haram boys and the army, she wishes to return home. Atai, is the only one that is reluctant to share her story, forcing Idayat to call her secretive. But, Atai shares her fears that the war would never end. Her dreams are troubled by the images of her brother's horrible death at the hands of the insurgents and even though she had been raped by the government soldiers she would rather live her life at the IDP camp than return to Sambisa forest which is the symbol of her pains and loss. Atai's refusal to talk about her pain is based on her unwillingness to accost the trauma (Pederson) rather than the inability to remember and express it (Caruth). As Atai states:

ATAI: I hate to talk about it but it has become part of my life now...

TALATU: You don't have to talk about anything if you...

ATAI: Even if we don't wish to talk about our story in the forest of Sambisa, the memory cannot be erased. It will live with us forever. Sometimes memory is pain. But to forget is itself a crime. It is the pain of memory that nudges us clearer to the failure of our humanity. (55)

Atai thus, against her will holds on to the traumatic pain of her experience in Sambisa and the memories of the death of her brother. These memories come in the form of dream symbols that upset the psyche. It is the images of the repressed memories that haunts her when her defense her down. As she says, she finds it impossible to achieve closure as the memories hunt her every night.

ATAI: That is impossible, Goggo. I watched as they put a knife to my brother's throat and slice off his head like some Eid ram. How do I achieve closure when I dream every night of that horrendous moment? (81)

Memunah on the other hand regards the IDP camp with the officials and the soldiers as the den of death and suffering. Memunah would rather live in Sambisa forest under captivity than in the "freedom" of the Internally Displaced People's camp. She justifies life with the insurgent based on the personal treatment they receive from the rebels. This contrasts sharply with life at the IDP camp where they are subjected to survival sex and the hypocrisy of the government officials. It is this that influences Idayat position as well.

MEMUNAH: Goggo, I tell you that life was better in Sambisa. The men go out to find food for us but here the camp people and the soldiers steal our food. The men in the forest took care of us. They learn to coax us even when they are having sex with us. With time some of us even came to enjoy it when... (59)

She further justifies her position when she says:

MEMUNAH: That is why I say the forest is better. This is where the Boko Haram really operates. Look at those soldiers; every night they go into the tents to rape the girls. The camp officials also rape us. They threatened us with food and other supplies if we don't have sex with them. The governor would come here with ten bags of rice, and tell the world that he brought a hundred. Then at night his driver comes to pick up one of us. Tell me how this place is better than the forest when all we do here is to kill ourselves and live on the carcass! (60)

Idayat, a secret member of the Boko Haram sect also holds the same views with Memunah as she notes that:

IDAYAT: He taught me that the real Boko Harams are here and not in the forest. Those you call Boko Harams are a group of young agitated men and women, but those who empower and use them are here right now- the politicians! They are those who snuff lives out of the people they are supposed to lead. (93)

At the end each girl goes through a traumatic experience but the reaction to it is diverse and the implications different. For some, the answer to violence is more violence. For the other, survival is the basic instinct at whatever cost. The location of Sambisa and the IDP camp as landscape imagery symbolizes insurgent forces and government forces respectively.

In conclusion, we find that trauma is a real condition and dramatic literature can stand as witness to the pains and sufferings of an individual or a people. Idayat makes a conscious choice to blow up the IDP camp as a suicide bomber. Atai, chooses to betray the girls, an

act that leads to the horrible death of Memunah. Boy Soldier loses his childhood and innocence too and suffers from post-traumatic stress. Madam Alafia lives with the memories of her dead children in her mind. The deliberate loss of narration and her inability to tell what becomes of her sons is a lack of agency on her part. This has been taken away by the playwright who leaves the audience to fill up the gaps in the memory in their own ways. Through the analysis of the selected plays we see that literature can stand as witness to the traumatic experiences of a people. Trauma from a negative experience is real and its impact is pervasive. At the end of it all, we realize that in violent conflicts, there are no victors or victims, only traumatized souls.

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