



Laurel Chikwado Madumere

University of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences (Umuagwo, Nigeria)

Traumatic Memories, Histories and Sexual Exploitation of Women in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* and Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms*

ABSTRACT. This study examines the traumatic effects of violence, human trafficking and sexual exploitation of young women. The intent is to discover the extent and complexity of the problems of human trafficking, sexploitation, violence and the resultant trauma; and how literature as imitation of life has captured the phenomena in form of fiction. Therefore attention is paid to Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* (2008) and Abubakar Adam Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms* (2015) as canonical novels that have portrayed the issues from a unique Nigerian perspective. The paper is qualitative in approach and adopts Cathy Caruth's and Kali Tal's strand of trauma theory as its framework. The reason for the framework is to enable the researcher, on the one hand, to probe the emotional and psychological states of the characters and on the other hand, to relate the experiences of the characters to those of real human situations, in the societies that gave birth to the novels; to identify how fiction and reality come together, literarily, to hold conversations. In that case the paper pays very close attention to the subject matters that are associated with human trafficking and violence such as: sexploitation, slavery, trauma, healing, psycho-social problems, genocide, ethnic cleansing and others. The significance of this paper is its ability to identify the therapeutic essences of art, especially the literary art; the power of storytelling in healing emotional injuries. It discovers that trauma is a wound of the mind which requires greater attention than it receives in postcolonial Nigerian literature.

KEYWORDS: injury, sexploitation, slavery, trafficking, trauma, therapeutic essences

Introduction

One of the distinguishing features of humans is the ability to recollect and transmit a recollected experience into history. Most times, people pass through grievous experiences like natural or man-made crises, illnesses, wars, sexploitation, slavery etc. that wound them psychologically. The

memories of those events seem to, presumably, send shock waves down the spines of the people who survived it or others who merely witnessed such events. The scars of such psychological or emotional injuries seem to haunt the memories of the victims or the witnesses each time they remember or come in contact with a symbol or are at the site of such events.

As a form of therapy, most times, victims and witnesses tell and retell their stories (or histories) so as to purge themselves of emotions that are chaotically bottled-up in their memories. This is where literature comes in as an art form which is capable of relieving (through stories) the burdened victims; of the tensions that trauma had induced in them. Accordingly, "literature, in other words, because of its sensible and representational character, because of its figurative language, is a channel and a medium for a transmission of trauma which does not need to be apprehended in order to be present in a text..." (Ramadanovic, 2001, p. 1). Literature is imaginatively culled from the mind, which is the site of trauma, therefore, what Ramadanovic (2001) seems to imply is that literary art is in a privileged position to be a medium for the expression of trauma.

A Synopsis of Trauma Theory

Sequel to the publication of Cathy Caruth's and Kali Tal's seminal books entitled: *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) and *World of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma* (1996) respectively, trauma theory has progressively become topical in literary studies. No doubt, trauma studies had been ongoing especially in the works of Sigmund Freud, but it is in the works of Caruth (1996) and Tal (1996) that it is brought down to literary criticism and perhaps postcolonial studies. Concerning the introduction of trauma theory to literary studies, Balaev (2014, p. 1) has this to say: "a theoretical trend was introduced by scholars like Caruth, who pioneered a psychoanalytic poststructural approach that suggests trauma is an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language." Thus, it is in Caruth (1996) that a theoretical approach was given to the study of trauma especially in literature.

However, Caruth (1996), Tal (1996), LaCapra (2001) and others like them agree that the wound of trauma is one that affects only the subconscious sphere, not physical and quite unlike the physical wound, may not be noticed until it manifests itself spontaneously in dreams and in muted

expressions. Caruth (1996, p. 3) avers that “in its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud’s text, the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind.” It could be in the mind of an individual, like that in the minds of the victims of Hiroshima atomic bomb; in the mind of a race like the Jews after the holocaust or the Igbos after the genocides of Nigeria civil war.

In spite of its obvious universality, trauma theory has faced a lot of criticisms from scholars who only think of “...exposing the Eurocentric blind spots that trauma theory will have to confront if it is to have any hope of delivering on its promise of cross-cultural ethical engagement” (Craps & Buelens, 2008, p. 10). The Eurocentric blind spot, Craps and Buelens (2008) refer to, is an alleged belief that trauma theory focuses more on Euro-American or Western models without fully incorporating indigenous practices that deny subjectification. For instance, whereas in Western thoughts, mass death may be seen as being traumatic to those who witness it, in certain indigenous customs, it might be propitiatory and soothing when considered from its ritual stance. An inference in literary study of trauma could be drawn from the conversation between Olunde and Mrs. Pilkins in Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*. In the play, the Colonialist Mrs. Pilkins is traumatized by the impending death of the Elesin Oba which she sees from Euro-American understanding as being suicidal, whereas Olunde sees it from its traditional dimension as being propitiatory and welcoming. Thus, the custom specific implications of traumatic events have not been fully considered in trauma studies.

Hence Craps and Buelens (2008, pp. 3–4) aver that “routinely ignored or dismissed in trauma research, the chronic psychic suffering produced by the structural violence of racial, gender, sexual, class, and other inequities has yet to be fully accounted for.” No doubt, they seem not to be accounted for yet, but that does not mean that trauma studies has failed altogether in bringing to limelight, how traumatic experiences shape and re-shape people’s perceptions of life. That perhaps is why Visser (2014, p. 111) argues that “postcolonial literature is a major contributor to the trauma process” because at the moment, there is an ongoing “socio-cultural construction of trauma in the post-colony.” Postcolonial literature contributes to trauma studies by highlighting the various colonially-induced psychological complications that plague most postcolonial societies.

What the critics of trauma theory fail to understand is that in the words of Visser (2014, p. 111) “trauma defies the construction of a single theoretical framework to address and interpret its multifarious complexities in

postcolonial literary studies.” For instance, while Caruth (1996) advocates for punctual trauma which arises from an unclaimed experience that repeatedly comes back to haunt the victim; Brown (1995) advocates for what she calls insidious trauma which describes the experiences of women who live in traumatic situations; while Gibbs (2014) campaigns for another kind of trauma which is culled from a traumatic colonial experience and can only be studied via a postcolonial trauma theory. There is still another approach to trauma theory which looks at trans-generational transmission of trauma in form of collective cultural memory. This refers to the traumas that are experienced by generations who did not witness the traumatic event but whose ancestors passed through those traumatic events. Styvendale (2008, p. 203) enunciates what she calls “trans/historic trauma” which is “cumulative, collective, intergenerational” and are derived from “historically specific atrocities.” Trans-generational trauma differs from trans-historic trauma in that the former is the trauma that new generations pass through as a result of the experiences of the ancestors that had ended, like the traumas of the already ended Nigeria civil war in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* which are still livid in the memories of the new generation; whereas the latter refers to the traumatic experiences that have continued from the ancestors to the new generation unabated like “ongoing domestic colonization” or “neo-colonial oppression” (Styvendale, 2008, p. 208). However, in all the approaches to trauma theory, one central concept is that trauma is a wound that cannot be touched. It haunts the memories and histories of those who witness it or those whose ancestors experienced it. It affects the individual’s perception of the world around him/her.

This study subscribes to the philosophy that trauma is universal. It is an approach that Balaev (2014, p. 7) refers to as a more “contemporary pluralistic approaches in literary trauma theory...,” which takes cognisance of the different modes of manifestations of trauma in the actions of an average postcolonial man. This strand of trauma theory accommodates both the punctual trauma of postcolonial violence and the insidious trauma which arises from experiences such as post-apartheid dispossessions.

The Literature of Trauma in Africa

The evolution of trauma literature in Africa has been slower than it is supposed to be. African countries have had civil wars, religious and ethnic cleansings, coup d’état, genocides and even apartheid traumatic experiences

that ought to have aided the spontaneous emergence of a body of trauma literatures. However, all hope is not lost, because in recent years, with works produced by some African novelists like J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Gil Courtemanche's *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*, Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Isidore Okpewho's *The Last Duty*, Kain Agary's *Yellow Yellow*, etc. African authors could be said to be standing up, literarily, to expose not just the physical situations of Africa but the psychological aspect of the African life that has defied representation for some time. Eaglestone (2008, p. 75) corroborates this by asserting that "in recent years, there has been a sudden burst—almost like the eruption of a guilty conscience—of distressing and traumatic narratives from Africa. And, of course, this is an eruption of a guilty Western conscience that has too often passed over the particular and complex problems and difficulties in Africa." Those narratives of traumatic experiences seek to bring to limelight the psychological sufferings of Africans.

No matter the country of its source and the nature of the trauma: the decimations in Darfur—Sudan, the pogrom of Nigeria civil war, bloodbath in Rwanda (1994), the massacre during Great African War in Democratic Republic of Congo, etc. there are traces of colonial failures which either initiated the traumatic crises or catalyzed it. For Eaglestone (2008, p. 76) "it could easily be argued that nearly the whole range of African literature in the second half of the twentieth century is traumatic, from Achebe's description of the colonial encounter, to Fanon's case studies from the Algerian War, to Ngugi's political propaganda in *Matigari* and *A Grain of Wheat*, to Bessie Head's agonized prose in *A Question of Power*." In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the events that surround Okonkwo and the implication of his death could be seen as drawing richly from his neurological disposition and the condition which the colonial project put him. The experiences of Kenyans which Ngugi captures in *A Grain of Wheat* is also traumatic especially when seen from the perspectives of the natives whose sources of livelihood (the land) were violently stolen from them by the settlers. What Eaglestone (2008) suggests is the possible existence of traces of trauma in almost all African literature(s). Hence, the presence of trauma in African literature cannot be avoided.

Traumatic Effects of Sexploitation in Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked*

There is a definition of literature, as a slice of life or mirror held up to the socio-economic realities of the world, which has become a little cliché

in twenty-first century, but adequately captures the essence of literature as a potent and viable scion that carries the social conditions of the world or a glass that reflects it. It is in the light of that definition that we see Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* as a reflection of the realities and psycho-social effects of sexual exploitation of woman. Adimora-Ezeigbo (1990, p. 163) emphasizes on the role of a writer to be that of helping "her society to come to moral awareness." This, one might add, she attempts to do in her novel under study: helping the world to see the trends and effects of sexual exploitation of women, through the characters she selected from the southern parts of Nigeria where female trafficking for the purpose of sex is greater in the country.

Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* becomes, as the title may suggest, a reflection of the life of the trafficked, an exposé on the intercontinental syndicates who engage in the illegal transactions of human beings, the ways they exploit their victims sexually and a journey into the psyche of the victims of such sexual exploitation, as they make their journey towards recovery and healing. So in the novel, she creates female protagonists: Nneoma and Efe who are victims of sexual exploitation and with the stories of their pasts, revisits the stories of numerous other victims of sexual exploitation across Nigeria. By narrating two similar sexual experiences, the characters attempt to certify the preponderance of their stories among the sexually exploited Nigerians in the Diaspora. From their slightly similar stories it becomes obvious that their exploiters target, mostly females from poor family background, who are keen at helping to alleviate their family problems by immigrating to foreign countries where they aim to work and make money quickly without knowing the realities of such engagements. The above is equally the concern of Kaine Agary in *Yellow Yellow* because for her, the male exploiters target the poor and innocent girls who wish to live above the crippling poverty or lack in their families.

One of the things that surprise the reader is the similarity between Nneoma's story and Efe's story of exploitation, since they come from different states, and were trafficked in different countries. The sameness in their stories may be said to be Adimora-Ezeigbo's way of popularizing the encounters of the female folk who are hoodwinked into life of servitude and/or sexploitation in foreign territories, mostly Europe and America. In these foreign territories, Adimora-Ezeigbo's novel *Trafficked* (2008) goes on, through her plausible Nneoma and Efe, (plausible because they embody the tendencies of exploited women in southern parts of Nigeria) to reveal the life of harlotry lived by trafficked women in Europe.

On the Efe subplot, she narrates thus: “well, to cut a long story short, we were taken to Italy and ended up in Palermo. It was terrible. I was sold to a woman called Madam Gold, a Nigerian. She was vicious. She used us shamelessly, made us walk the streets every night...” (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2008, p. 99). They work as prostitutes and sell their bodies to European clients for money. At this point, the narrator remarks the height of the physical and psychological wound that the characters have experienced in this manner: “Nneoma saw that Efe’s story was very similar to hers—they had both been forced to sell their bodies to all comers. Tears ran down her face and she took Efe’s hand” (p. 100). The tears are hurtful memories of the past. It symbolizes her helplessness, the angst, her throes and more importantly, her inability to control her emotions. The similarity in the traumatic experiences of Efe and Nneoma, the sameness of their stories, we will recall, also bears testimony to Adimora-Ezeigbo’s subscription to the notion of the stereotypical lives of the trafficked in Europe.

As Efe continues, she recalls that she was sold to Madam Gold and later “Madam Gold sold me to a pimp—a white man—after four years of slaving for her. I worked for my ‘new owner’ for four years before I escaped,” (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2008, p. 100). Nneoma on the other hand, reveals that she too was sold to one Madam Dollar by different trafficking syndicates but as she goes on: “in Italy I discover I am trafficked. I have no say in the matter” (p. 28) and concerning Madam Dollar she says “nothing comes between her and money. She owns us... she keeps us prison in her flat. Life is hell in Rome—we are always walking the night, selling sex to Italian men and foreigners...” (pp. 128–129) before she (Nneoma) was sold to another pimp called Baron. To this she adds, “...in actual fact, he [Baron] has bought me from Madam Dollar...” (p. 132) and further sexually exploited her like Efe’s pimp did to Efe.

Our attention is drawn to the lexicology of their narrations in the novel *Trafficked*. In both instances, the victims make recourse to the words: “sold” (p. 100), “pimp” (p. 100), “owner/owns” (pp. 100–128), “trafficked” (p. 128), “assaulted” (pp. 129–132), “rapes” (p. 132), “bought” (p. 132), “sex” (p. 129) etc. which bear testimony to the events that characterize life of sexual exploitation. They are sold and bought and owned and trafficked at different intervals for sex and are frequently raped, assaulted, bartered because as Nneoma may suggest “[they] have no say in the matter” (p. 128). So their alleged owners or pimps could afford to exploit them sexually.

Clearly it would be seen that Adimora-Ezeigbo is bent on revealing the methods of female sexual exploitation through her characters. Nneoma re-

marks that, after she was bought by her last pimp Baron, “Baron sends the other girls to brothels and keeps me in the flat. Instead of putting me on the street, he brings me to the flat. Baron is a sadist. He rapes and beats me. I refuse when customers demand oral or anal sex and insist that they use condoms and I’m sometimes assaulted for this,” (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2008, p. 132). With the recurrence of sexual innuendoes that are associated with the circumstances of their life in servitude, the reading audience comes to the realization that they were used as sexual items and it was their (poor) background like Aku’s background in Okpewho’s *The Last Duty* that led them to it.

Through the ugly experiences of sexual exploitation of the two major characters Nneoma and Efe, Adimora-Ezeigbo seems to point out that victims of such exploitation develop traumatic and psychological problems that hinder most of them like Nneoma from associating freely with the human community they assume exploited and dehumanized them over the years. In this case, the victims tend to be reserved, isolated and distanced from the world around them. This is made explicit in the life of Nneoma after her arrival to Nigeria in the novel. She refuses to associate with anyone—male or female—and prefers to keep everyone at arm’s length; even when Efe extends the hands of friendship to her, she recoils and the narrator quickly records that “Nneoma withdrew her hand” (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2008, p. 97). As a result of this reason, Efe opens up saying: “I know we’ve both been hurt. Terribly hurt. I see it in your movement, in your silences. I’m sure you also see it in me, however much I pretend all is well. Nneoma, you brood too much. You must let go and move on. I don’t know what happened to you but it’s not healthy to be so bitter, to punish yourself like this” (p. 97). Efe, as one of those who refuse to allow ugly situations of life weigh them down, continues with her therapy saying: “I just want to be your friend in the real sense, to carry some of your burden, if you allow me and also get you to share some of mine, if you are willing. Nneoma, we’re all broken inside. Look, why don’t we just tell each other what happened to us? Perhaps finding our voices will help us heal” (p. 97). At this juncture, Efe identifies the therapeutic power of storytelling, which taken into larger scale is imaginative literature. So like Aku in Okpewho’s *The Last Duty*, Efe is aware of the healing power of storytelling, but unlike Aku, she is given the chance to tell her story and it leads to her psychological healing.

So, in the course of their storytelling (Nneoma and Efe), which forms the bulk of the novel, they re-live their lives; identify their mistakes and

how to take corrective measures. At the end, they become satisfied that they shared their experiences. Hence Nneoma, after listening to Efe's stories, testifies saying: "Efe, your story is so like mine. Thank you for telling it; I feel as if a load has been lifted off my own shoulders" (Adimora-Ezeigbo, 2008, p. 100). At another instance, after Nneoma has shared her own experience with Efe her final testimony becomes "yes, I think I've actually been healed" (p. 136). Remarkably, for Adimora-Ezeigbo storytelling is a powerful therapy for victims of emotional breakdown especially those who were involved in one form of exploitation or another.

Given the situation above, one realizes that literature and the human society are intertwined; both affect and shape the other. The problems of the society are mirrored and analyzed by literature so as to offer solutions. Hence, the traumatic effects of sexual exploitation are captured by the novels that emerge in twentieth and twenty-first century Africa to fictionalize the situation thereby providing a platform for the negotiation of remedial measures that will adequately take care of the problems. So in *Trafficked* Adimora-Ezeigbo identifies sexual exploitation as inhuman, as something that causes psychological injuries then proffers the solution of the establishment of Skill Acquisition Centres and renewed interests in the affairs of humanity.

The Horrors of Trauma in Ibrahim's *Season of Crimson Blossoms*

Caruth (1996, p. 11) recognizes that there is no single clear-cut definition of trauma, but for pedagogy sake, she defines trauma further as "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena." This definition describes the situation in which after one witnesses a shocking event, it comes back later, perhaps, after some days or even years in clear unhindered outlines to torment one. In the novel, this definition underscores the hallucinations or what the novelist calls "the haunting memories" (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 14) of Fa'iza many years after she saw the brutal murder, of her father Mu'azu and her brother Jamilu, in cold blood, during one the "incessant turbulence of Jos" (p. 14).

Fa'iza from the narrator's account, was a toddler when after a council election result-gone-wrong, an irate mob, led by her maths teacher

and some of their most trusted friends, came to their house in Jos and butchered her father and her brother in full glare of the entire family. She watched, as her maths teacher, raises his “machete and brought it down” on his family and “bright, red blood, warm and sticky, splashed across [her] face and dotted, in a fine spray, the shell-pink nightdress that her father had bought her” (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 84). She watched as her father was butchered in the most horrific way that one can ever imagine. The terrible event begins to hunt her even in her sleep. In her later life, it is discovered that when she sleeps, the sound of machete and blood spurting and flowing “echo in her head. Cracking femurs. Splitting skulls. The first agonised screams. The moans and grunts. And the thunderous silence of disbelief that followed” (p. 84) jerk her up. The disbelief comes from her not ever thinking that “the people with whom they have eaten from the same bowl, mourned alongside and shared laughter, people with whom they have nurtured the verdant canopy of a friendship that was on occasions closer to kinship” (p. 84) will ever hurt her family, let alone kill them.

The pattern of the violence correlates with the ones in Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*. In Adichie’s account, at the onset of the civil war, Uncle Mbaezi was murdered by his closest friends, including Abdulmalik, in the North. The act is gory, “Uncle Mbaezi lay face down in an ungainly twist, legs splayed. Something creamy-white oozed through the large gash on the back of his head. Auntie Ifeka lay on the veranda. The cuts on her naked body were smaller, dotting her arms and legs like slightly parted red lips” (Adichie, 2014, pp. 183–184). The resultant trauma on Olanna, the witness, is unimaginable.

The killing of Fa’iza’s father in Jos somehow corresponds with the method of killing Binta’s husband Zubairu in the same Jos, a decade ago. In Zubairu’s case, Binta tells Fa’iza, he was “butchered and burnt in the street” (Ibrahim, 2015, p. 86) during one of the religious and ethnic cleansings. Unlike Binta, Fa’iza develops the attitude of writing down her traumatic memories and nightmares, the “roaring shadows that prowled her dreams and which were now manifesting in her wakefulness” (p. 78), in an effort to retell them and heal. She validates the therapeutic essence of storytelling. In her wakefulness, her traumatic condition causes her to dissociate. It makes her moody and sometimes throws her off her world. At times, it is Sadiya that shakes her off her reveries or hallucinations, at other times it is Binta that draws her out of her shroud of disturbing calmness, “a serenity that made her uneasy and afraid” (p. 295).

However, it happens that after Abida found Fa'iza's account of the murder of her father and stories of her nightmares and reads them, it gives Fa'iza the courage to speak up, (to speak with Binta about her fears and about Yaro) to come out of her shell, to gradually heal. Afterwards, she discovers that she finds it difficult to remember her dead brother vividly. It borders her though, but it bears testimony that speaking, is healing. She screams in frustrated anger: "I have forgotten what Jamilu's face looked like. ...they killed him, right in front of me"(Ibrahim, 2015, p. 263). Her forgetfulness is her first step towards healing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Adimora-Ezaigbo's *Trafficked* is a didactic trauma novel that teaches moral to young women, by exposing the traumatic effects and ugly sides of sexual exploitation. So from the novel, subject matters such as sexploitation, trauma, feminism, etc., can be deduced. For the purpose of this study, our attention is on the traumatic effects of violence and sexual exploitation of women and children in Nigerian literature. Thematically in the novels, violence and sexual exploitation is inhuman and devastates the psyche of the victims, but through adequate consciousness raising platforms, like the like counselling, sharing, government and non-governmental organizations in the novels, the victims may well find their feet back into their societies and live normal lives. Though finding one's feet after such traumatic experience maybe difficult, through encouragements from family and friends, and through self-determination, the victims will, the novels seem to suggest, overcome their psychological burdens. For Efe and Nneoma, in *Trafficked*, through friendship, sharing of emotions and experiences, bonding with the human community afresh, and the enabling environment offered by Oasis Youth Centre for Skills Development they become healed and re-integrated into the society and finally speak against human trafficking when Baron in the guise of Fynface comes back to lure Efe into prostitution again. In her final analysis, the novelist emphasizes on the need for victims to be among the people who will protect them and make them see their perfections in the midst of their imperfections for it is a major step towards healing. For Fa'iza and Binta, in *Season of Crimson Blossoms*, by writing and sharing their sorrows and encouraging each other, they are able to confront the plague of trauma and its devastating effects.

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