

## TRAUMA (RE-)IMAG(IN)ED: EXPERIENCES AND MEMORIES OF WOLE SOYINKA

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### Abstract

*Wole Soyinka, Nigerian writer and political activist, obviously commands serious academic scholarship. Regrettably, his plays have been basically discussed within the precinct of Yoruba culture, myth and politics. This paper is an attempt to articulate the themes of Trauma and Memory, and justifiably show how Soyinka has aligned his own personal traumas with the characters of some of his dramatic narratives. This essay posits that Soyinka has used his craft to subtly highlight the experiences of the traumatised. Within this context, *The Beatification of Area Boy: A Lagosian Kaleidoscope* and *Madmen and Specialists* are critically analysed; these plays recount the effects of war and oppressive regimes. Towards this end, the paper interrogates in general terms what trauma is, and interfaces it with how Soyinka has (re-)imag(in)ed it and submits that Soyinka whose social vision is hinged on the plinth of social justice creatively enables the traumatised, and (re-)presents their painful experiences.*

### Introduction

Scholarly remarks and discourse on the Nigerian dramatist and Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka reveal a certain level of consensus with regard to the personal methodology he has developed for his artistic purposes. In essence, Wole Soyinka has his roots deeply embedded in Yoruba culture, as a cursory reading of his works shows. But his experience extends far wider; his formal education and his working experience have brought him into contact with ideas from the whole modern world. This other half of his experience is also represented in his works. However, subtly embedded in the deepest recesses of his works is a deep-seated appreciation of the innermost and visceral thoughts and being of his characters.

This may be a response to Soyinka's own life experiences that may be laced with his personal trauma. Soyinka's two major autobiographical narratives *The Man Died* (1972), memoirs of his prison experiences, and *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* (2006) reveal this playwright and activist wrestling with various agents of under-development and political oppression. They basically form his personal encounters with military governments in Nigeria. Indeed, the thrust of the corpus of his dramatic narratives captures vehemently the collective and personal traumas of his characters. This paper is therefore a critical and analytical incursion into the experiences and memories of this Nobel laureate, within the context of some of his dramatic narratives. The essay reflects how trauma is (re-)imag(in)ed from the point of view of these characters.

### **Traumatic Experiences and Memories in Soyinkaen Dramatic Narratives**

It should be reflected at this point that Soyinka's personal commitment is seriously slanted towards a social vision where:

A writer responds, with his total personality to a social environment which changes all the time. Being a kind of a sensible needle, he registers with varying degrees of accuracy and success, the conflicts and tensions in his changing society. thus the same writer will produce different types of work, sometimes contradictory in mood, sentiment, degree of optimism and even world-view. For the writer himself lives in, and is shaped by history. (wa Thiong'o 47)

A detour is imperative here: it is important that we capture the landscape from which Soyinka derives his material and artistic arsenal. Africa is a large continent, and for decades it has been drenched in blood from wars and conflicts perpetuated by colonisers and neo-colonisers. Post-colonial Africa is still embroiled in civil wars and ethnic cleansing with subtle or veiled support from former colonisers. Even when there is a light of optimism in the horizon with the emergence of democracy and so-called "born-again" democrats (some of whom are former military dictators), Soyinka observes that: ... the longer a people are subjected to the brutality of power, longer, in geometric proportion, is the process of recovery and re-humanisation ... (Giants viii)

The implication of this is aptly captured in the Edo proverb "wounds heal scars remain". Soyinka's *The Beautification of Area Boy*, which is subtitled "A Lagosian Kaleidoscope", offers us a reflection of trauma and its effects. The play happens in "the broad frontage of an opulent shopping plaza ..." with "... broad sliding doors of tinted glass" which reflect and distort "traffic scenes from the main street ..." And directly in front of the plaza are "... makeshift stalls vending their assortment of snacks, cigarettes, ... household goods, wearing apparel, cheap jewellery etc." [...] "A partially covered drainage runs in front of the shopping block" and "street-level planks laid across the gutter, provide a crossing ..." (5). The drainage provides and creatively suffices as a metaphorical divide between two worlds, two cultures, two experiences and two memories; the worlds of the rich and the poor, the worlds of oppressors and the oppressed, the worlds of economic scavengers and their victims.

Soyinka skillfully presents the other world through the tinted glass of the shopping plaza, which will either reflect the truth or distort reality. The distortion of this other world is the misrepresentation of humanity. Thus, the blatant suppression of a people's experience and history creates a contestation of space between both worlds, which regrettably results in an uncomfortable experience or trauma. This is obviously (re-)imag(in)ed in *Area Boy*. For how else can we understand the metaphor etched in Judge's speech?

People say the nation has lost its soul, but that is nonsense, it's all a matter of finding where it's hidden (Area Boy 10)

Should we align ourselves to the fact that people are disillusioned and have become lethargic? Should we question whether man is living or existing? Would this be why from the very early pages of this play we find the characters we encounter look up into the sky for what the day brings: a sign of fulfillment, a sign of hope, a sign for a better day? Is Soyinka saying that a nation traumatised leaves its people desolate and also traumatised?

**BARBER.** Wes Matter?

**MAMA PUT.** I no know. No to say my body no feel well, na the day inself no look well. I commot for house and I nearly go back and stay inside house. I no like the face of today, dat na God's truth. Make you just look that sky. E dey like animal wey just chop in victim, with blood dripping from in wide open mouth

**TRADER.** A be you dream bad dream again last night?

**MAMA PUT.** Morning na picken of the sleep wey person sleep the night before, not so? Make we jus' lef am so. (Busies herself with chores.) (Area Boy 12)

Only much later we would understand Mama Put's fears. Lately she has been having series of dreams, nightmares and possibly shellshock experiences. These are obviously effects of her experiences and we can conveniently refer to such as trauma. For in her article, "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History", Cathy Caruth remarks, "In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the events occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrences of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (181). She further elaborates that: "The experience of the soldier faced with sudden, and massive death around him, for example, who suffers this sight in a numbered state, only to relive it later on in repeated nightmares, is a central and recurring image of trauma in our century" (181). And this is reflected, thus:

**SANDA.** (softly). You'll never get over that war. Not ever. Nobody does. It would be abnormal. [...] This is Lagos, city of chrome and violence. Noise and stench. Lust and sterility. But it was here you chose to rebuild your life.

**MAMA PUT.** [...] (Sudden harshness. She waves the bayonet violently around.) [...] Those who did this thing to us, those who turned our fields of garden eggs and prize tomatoes into mush, pulp and putrid flesh...! They plundered the livestock, uprooted

yams and cassava and what did they plant in their places? The warm bodies of our loved ones. My husband among them My brothers. One of them stabbed to death with this! And all for trying to save the family honour. Yes, and children too. Shells have no names on them. And the pilots didn't care where they dropped their bombs. (Area Boy 21)

Mama Put's experiences are part and parcel of our colonial and post-colonial history. It is a subtle reflection of the two worlds this play enunciates. Soyinka creatively mixes her experiences with others in the play, because the play presents a panoramic view of Lagos, which suffices for the African experience. Sanda too has his own "nightmares" even when he tries to play "shrink" or "therapist". The contested space that these characters encounter each other becomes a sight for appreciating each other's fears and anxiety, no matter how fatalistic the future looks. Their street view encounter distorted by the tinted glass doors of the shopping plaza, more and again presents a visceral part of their existence which they are wont to forget:

A ragged procession is reflected on the doors. Men, women and children carrying baskets, boxes rolled-up beddings, bed springs cupboards, chairs, clutching all kinds of personal possessions. [...] An animated 'battered humanity' mural of a disorderly evacuation... (Area Boy 74)

This traumatic sight would trigger this remark:

**MAMA PUT.** I hoped I had escaped such sights forever. While the Civil War lasted, oh yes. It was like that for us most of the time. (Area Boy 75)

The above is indicative of a sad part of post-colonial Africa. The effect of war is obviously retrogressive. From Mama Put's standpoint, we notice children and women as obvious victims of power play; they are abused and traumatised. Soyinka, as has been offered earlier in the course of this essay, is a victim of such power play. Being imbued with the mandate to profess a unified and congenial society, he has encountered a number of obstacles. These obstacles have come in various shades and forms. Governments have never taken kindly to his writings, especially when he employs subtlety and tact in articulating his social vision. He has been imprisoned severally and has twice gone on exile. It was while he was on his second exile he wrote *The Beautification of Area Boy*.

In this play, Soyinka employs his never drying pen full of Soy-ink(a) to lampoon successive military and recalcitrant civilian governments. In *The Beautification of Area Boy*, we are presented with the reality of a nation adrift and traumatised. Soyinka vehemently suggests the need for us to accept our traumas and move ahead rather than deny, we are urged to accept. In fact, he offers the metaphor of the bicycle, as an identity of our traumatised past and a glimmer of our collective hope.

One of Soyinka's latest plays, *King Baabu* (2002) is a result of documentary evidence of the popular Oputa Panel akin to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa. Once again Soyinka presents the collective trauma of a people as a result of a bestial regime or regimes. Indeed, *King Baabu*, is a faction of our collective reality. The play is a reminder of the many traumatic experiences of a people by the military. Indeed, we should not put all the blame on the military alone, but also on civilian collaborators.

As a humanist, Soyinka aptly captures the human condition using his dramatic narratives. Need we remind ourselves that the effects of war which reverberates in some of his writings find substance in his *Madmen and Specialists* (1971), where war, he believes, can turn man into a cannibal, and place him on the borders of insanity? Like *The Man Died*, *Madmen and Specialists* arose from Soyinka's painful and traumatic acquaintance with the forces of evil during the Nigerian Civil War. It is at once a dramatic narrative of the brutalities inherent in any war situation and an insightful political remark on that situation. The play clearly in subtle terms magnifies the traumatic reality of victims of war. The mendicants (each one with a physical deformity) in the play relive for us a sense of lost hope, despair and periods of temporary amnesia. Their dialogue reflects traces of psychological imbalance, personality disorientation, self-blame, incoherence of speech and thought not to relegate the fact these mendicants are internally displaced persons evidently due to the war but indicative of trauma.

In the play he vigorously portrays a father (Old Man) and son (Dr. Bero) who are torn apart by war and its after effects. The play presents Dr. Bero as a quasi-historical Dr. Mengele. Bero's traumas and distorted personality were triggered by war. In this case, the Nigerian Civil War.

Wole Soyinka was an active participant of the war. His *You Must Set Forth at Dawn* clearly portrays a visionary writer who tried to stop the war. He would later be treated as a traitor, and subsequently imprisoned. He succinctly relates his prison experiences to us in the following statement:

I was placed in solitary confinement for a year and ten months out of the period, which I stayed in prison, which was just over two years. Very conscious of the fact that an effort was being made to destroy my mind, because I was deprived of books, deprived of any means of writing, deprived of human companionship... When I first came out, [...] I remember that after a few days I just wouldn't stand so much company. It became too much again for me and I couldn't wait until I could go away and isolate myself somewhere. (Soyinka 2003)

The excerpt above speaks volumes of trauma. Such traumatic experiences are replicated in most of his characters. For in his dramatic narratives, we find what Cathy Caruth in her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* describes as the traumatic paradox when she states, "what returns to haunt the victim is not

the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known" (6). Her idea of the traumatic paradox is imperative for appreciating how trauma is (re-)imag(in)ed in Soyinka's dramatic narratives. Especially, when we fully accept that Soyinka appropriates the characters to represent trauma as an experience that repeats itself, an experience that is not only located in the original event but "in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (Caruth "... Trauma, Narrative and History" 4). Soyinka's dramatic narratives are indicative of Caruth's suggestion that the traumatic paradox and the double wound of trauma a wound of the body and mind, "a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" (4). Thus, the truth of trauma lays in its belated address, in its repetition a repetition than can be re-traumatising and even life-threatening (63). The "striking juxtaposition of the knowing, injurious repetition and the witness of the crying voice" (3) justifiably represent Soyinka's traumatic experiences, which he magnifies in his works.

Like the Old Man in *Madmen and Specialists*, Soyinka gives the traumatised a new mental existence, a new lease of life, a life of ideas:

[...] Father's assignment was to help the wounded readjust to the pieces and remnants of their bodies physically. Teach them to make baskets if they had fingers, to use their mouths to ply needles if they had none, or use it to sing if their vocal chords had been shot away. Teach them to amuse themselves, make something of themselves. Instead he begun to teach them to think, think, THINK! Can you picture a more treacherous deed than to place a working mind in a mangled body? ( emphasis mine)(*Madmen and Specialist* 242).

## **Conclusion**

Soyinka is a man of ideas, an artist in the finest sense of the word but also seen as a veritable threat to the forces of violence and injustice. Through the Old Man, Soyinka seems to relive his prison experience and his artistic mandate. Soyinka's sense of public concern has the class of a dedicated commitment to a thought, in the context of this paper, to the thought of using his dramatic narratives as an explicit weapon to relive the experiences of the traumatised. Above all, he enables them to THINK!

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