

Rethinking Trauma Theory Through African Fiction

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Introduction

Since its inception as a multidisciplinary lense to help us think through atrocity and memory by scholars at the Yale school of holocaust studies in the late 1980s and early 1990s, trauma theory has largely maintained a Eurocentric bias which places the Holocaust at the centre of the first great atrocity of the 20th century. Scholars such as Irene Visser, Michelle Balaev, Stef Craps and Michael Rothberg have pointed out that this bias is primarily due to the Freudian definitions of trauma employed by foundational theorists like Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, definitions which emphasise a singular event and rely on a rhetoric of unspeakability, and are individualistic. These foundational theorists agree on the definition of trauma as the following:

[T]he term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. But, what seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the wound of the mind – the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world – is not, like the wound of the body, a simple healable event, but rather an event that [. . .] is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known.
(Caruth, 1996, p. 4)

It’s apparent from this definition one of the central trauma theorists of the Yale school that the confines of this formulation is less than inclusive. For instance, not only does the definition focus on the inner/psychic manifestations of trauma, but it also polarises the body and the mind, with the attendant assumption that bodily trauma is “simple” and “healable”. Above all, this definition frames trauma as a singular event that cannot possibly be known, except, as Caruth goes on to argue, belatedly.

Of course, this conception of trauma has come under fire from postcolonial scholars for various reasons. Turning to the work of Frantz Fanon, for example, Craps argues for a more inclusive sense of the traumatic in the postcolony that moves away from the singular event towards “collective, ongoing, everyday forms of traumatizing violence” (Craps, 2012, p. 4), Visser maintains that any revision of trauma theory that seeks to be more inclusive must look to sociological and political theories of atrocity, and indigenous knowledges of the communities at hand (Visser, 2015, p. 263). Similarly, Balaev introduces a “pluralistic

model of trauma” that takes into consideration “social, political and economic factors” that may affect our theorising in non-Western contexts (Balaev, 2014, p. 3) in an attempt to disrupt the singular definition of trauma under which the foundational scholars were working. Amongst the more pertinent aspects of Balaev’s intervention is her emphasis on the fact that while discussions of literary trauma rightfully tend to concentrate on “linguistic relationships,” this focus should not be “at the expense of forgetting that trauma occurs to actual people in specific bodies within particular time periods and places” (Balaev, 2014, p. 7).

My own point of contention with trauma theory’s Eurocentric bias in its dealings with postcolonial Africa in particular lies, firstly, in the limitations of ontological location. The theory’s close alignment with Freudian psychoanalysis which takes as its primary subject European experience, the fact that psychoanalysis itself came to Africa in the guise of ethnopsychology in the 1920s, a field which, much like eugenics, only served to confirm European racist ideology by framing Africans as devoid of sophisticated psychic lives. In its dealings with childhood in particular, Hussein Abdilahi Bulhan reminds us, Freudian theory assumes a nuclear family and a white, European childhood. This is a childhood, in other words, which has not considered the existence of any other ontological location, as we see in African contexts in which children are raised not so much by a nuclear family, but also by extended family and the community at large. Secondly, although postcolonial scholars have found issue with Freudian definitions of trauma, none have offered us an alternative definition geared at opening up possibilities of the kind of inclusivity envisioned by trauma theorists at the advent of its establishment. Consequently, my intervention in the field is on two levels. Firstly, I shift the ontological focus of trauma away from the Euro-American context by returning to the primary figure of psychoanalysis itself: the child. Only, the child of which I speak is the black African child we encounter in the fiction emerging from third generation African writers, a generation which arguably begins with Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* in 1991. My method is to invert the colonial notions of Africans as beings with unsophisticated psychic lives, as child-like, in an attempt to map what fiction has to tell us about the ways in which African children suffer and how that suffering is understood by Okri, K. Sello Duiker and Yvonne Vera¹. Secondly, using the insights gleaned from this

¹ For the sake of brevity, I have selected these three texts and will be discussing some of the ways in which their processes fly in the face of conventional understandings of childhood trauma, at least in the theoretical sense.

inversion, I propose an alternative definition of trauma that may specifically be applied to literary analysis.

The excavation of childhood in African fiction must be understood in relation to the historical factors from which this preoccupation emerges. First generation writers of African childhood – Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Camara Laye – tend to conceive of the child as an allegory of the state, a representation which was concomitant with the decolonial project which informs much of their writing. By contrast, fiction emerging in the more contemporary sphere provides a more nuanced perception of childhood. This contemporary moment begins with Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* (1991), a multi-modal novel preoccupied with the inner life of the *abiku* child protagonist Azaro. The failures of the postcolonial Nigerian state are depicted as among the primary reasons for this spirit child’s tenuous grip on reality, a state of affairs which accounts for the surrealistic oscillations of the fictional world. This melding of realism and surrealism in the text is a relatively new mode of representation in fiction from the continent, a mode which is later taken up by writers like the Mia Couto and K. Sello Duiker . And while this melding of genres has largely been attributed to “magical realism”, it is, as Visser notes in another context, consistent with a worldview in which the metaphysical is part of reality².

In terms of its creation of a new type of childhood in African fiction, Okri’s novel presents us with a protagonist who, from the very outset, is tethered to the spiritual realm. Azaro is not only the narrator of his own story, but also relays the choice he makes to remain in the world of the living because of his empathy for his mother, who had already lost several children by the time he is born. As a result of his choice, Azaro is plagued by visitations from his spirit brothers and sisters who relentlessly try to convince him to rejoin them in the spirit realm. His unique position as one tethered to the spirit world also means that he is able to see the essences of the people and spaces he moves through in the real world. This position also renders him more fragile to both his mother’s and his own suffering as part of poorest community in Nigeria, a suffering which is even legible in his father’s violence and alcoholism. Much of Azaro’s trauma arises out of witnessing the erosion of his parents’ will to live by the grinding poverty of their circumstances, an erosion that leads him to feel like a burden on his mother even prior to being born and despite his wishes for the opposite. While we get insight into the life negating potential of grinding poverty, the main insights about the

² There is a lot more to be said about the application of the South American invention of Magical Realism onto postcolonial texts. I am wary of labelling texts as such, and prefer the term surrealism which more accurately accounts for the extended experience of the real in a less polarized form with the spiritual/metaphysical.

child's trauma in this text are explicated in terms of his relation to the spirit world. Instead of dissociating when he experiences or witnesses violent events to numb the awareness of them, for instance, Azaro instead experiences the amplification of the voices of his spirit brothers and sisters, and sometimes loses his grip on his life to such an extent that he slips out of his living body which experiences near-fatal fevers as his spirit wrestles with the spiritual world. His reaction to trauma thus suggests that trauma is not only a phenomenon that interferes with the workings of the mind, but is also an affront to both the spirit and the body, both of which have to be gently coaxed out of the life negating power of suffering.

Another text which complicates our readings of childhood trauma is the South African author Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* (2001) which appears to have Okri's novel as one of its intertexts not only because it also contains episodes of surreality, but also because of its child protagonist is named, Azure, which is far too similar to that of Okri's Azaro to be a coincidence. The blue eyed black street child of Duiker's text shares with Azaro an unstable sense of self due to his ambiguous physiognomy which defies any decisive racial classification and because as a homeless child, he inhabits the margins of society, despite the promise of change that accompanied South Africa's democracy. At the onset of Duiker's novel, Azure, unlike Azaro is already orphaned and spends the entirety of the narrative being exploited by various adults ranging from the affluent white men who sexually abuse him under the guise of prostitution, the gangsters who assault and abuse him for their own amusement, and Joyce who abuses his trust by stealing money from him. In one way or another, therefore, Azure is profoundly affected by forms of violence which are a direct legacy of the country's divisive history, not least of which is the pointed persecution of his person due to the colour of his eyes. This history is most pertinently evoked through the evocation of Sara Baartman through the character of Saartjie during two intervals when Azure leaves the city (Cape Town) in search of some kind of refuge upon Table Mountain, intervals in which he experiences hallucinations linked to the colonial history of the Cape as evoked by the figure of Saartjie.

On the one hand, therefore, Azure's suffering may be attributed to the originary trauma of losing both of his parents under the most macabre circumstances of murder, a fact which informs his refrain throughout the novel: "My mother is dead, my father is dead" (Duiker, 2001). Although the material consequences of this loss are easily legible in the fact that he becomes a homeless child, the psychic impact of it play themselves out in Azure's relations with others. For instance, apart from an old friend he infrequently sees and another street child he attempts to parent, Mandla and Bafana, respectively, Azure is a solitary figure.

Moreover, his hallucinations of Saartjie suggest a yearning for a surrogate mother who nurtures him as she does, and as he remembers his mother doing. This yearning is, however, shortlived, since the apparition he sees dissipates, as all hallucinations do, leaving him not only alone, but also unnurtured and unprotected from the threat of violence that belies his experience of the city. With the loss of the safety he projects onto the figure of Saartjie, Azure's mind enacts an imaginary vengeance upon the city itself in an apocalyptic episode during his second visit to the mountain. His rage is but a mirror of the violence he experiences at the hands of adults, it is a smokescreen for the vulnerability which lies underneath the surface. In this sense, then, Azure's traumas are enacted within the confines of his mind, but reflect psycho-social ills that did not dissipate with the advent of democracy.

On the other hand, his imagined destruction of the city – again, in his mind – is of no consequence in the real world, since he returns to the real city and becomes part of a gang. There is, by the novel's conclusion, a sense that his life will, more or less, remain the same or that he will eventually take up the position of perpetrator instead of victim to the violence that is endemic of the city. Regardless of the future, Azure's vengeance upon Cape Town is the first instance in the text where we see the boy taking any form of agency and it is highly significant that this occurs when rage and grief converge. In a lecture on non-violence, Judith Butler argues that "Perhaps grief is imagined to end with violence, as if grief itself could be killed" (Butler, 2014). She goes on to contend:

The destructive acts born of unbearable grief are perhaps premised on the thought that with this loss, everything is already destroyed, so destroying becomes a redundancy, a ratification of what has already happened. But perhaps there is an effort to bring grief to a full stop through taking aim at the world in which such a grief is possible, rolling over into a form of destructiveness that furiously proliferates more loss, wantonly distributing the unbearable. (Butler 2014)

Read in light of Butler's contention here, Azure's psychic transformation from one at the receiving end of violence to one who perpetrates it presents us with a poignant example of how one might "take aim at the world in which such grief is possible" – with the attendant exception that he does not have the power to enact this revenge in the real world. Instead, it is a psychic drama that cannot but be played out internally. The correlation between rage and grief in the apocalyptic episode, however, denotes a certain slippage between the material and immaterial, in a manner similar to that of Okri's novel. Although occasioned by material circumstances which can be located in historical and psycho-social grammars, the eruption of both Azaro and Azure's traumas ultimately occur in the realms of the spiritual and psychic.

This profound fact means that the material circumstances these children respectively inhabit do not contain the types of support that would enable them to mourn and, as such, their traumas implode internally – having nowhere else to go.

This type of implosion can also be read in the Zimbabwean author Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue*, whose child protagonist, Zhizha becomes mute following being raped by her father, Muroyiwa. Although the narrative may be linked to Zimbabwe's third chimurenga, given the fact that Zhizha's father fought in the war and her mother, Runyararo, is imprisoned in at the dawn of independence in 1980 following accusations that she killed her husband, the primary tension of the text obtains from the child's muteness which links of the adults together. The narrative is divided into two voices: the first voice is the internal one of Zhizha, who explains the unexpected violence of being raped by her father and her inheritance of darkness and death from him which makes it impossible for her to speak, since her speech has not protected her from her father's violence. In fact, her internal voice traces the gradual erosion of her external voice during the rape. Instead of speaking, Zhizha also relays her grandmother's speech as she tries to coax the child out of nightmares and silences. The second narrative voice is that of the all-seeing third-person narrator who provides a detailed history of the mysterious circumstances surrounding Muroyiwa's birth, his youth alongside his own vacant father, his conscription to fight in the Chimurenga and his descent into the futility of darkness and silence. Muroyiwa, we are told, was born inside a calabash and died at birth only to be resurrected shortly afterwards. We therefore get a sense of the darkness of death which brought him into the world, a darkness which becomes reinforced by his father VaGomba's blindness and ultimately eclipses the light following his entry into war. It is this darkness which Muroyiwa gives to Zhizha in raping her, and this is perhaps because he has nothing else to give her.

Nevertheless, Zhizha's muteness eventually comes to represent the transgenerational tension between the words shared between the women on her maternal side of the family, and the darkness and silences shared by the men on her paternal side of the family. Here again, the family structure is far from nuclear, since the grandmother features prominently in Zhizha's internal world due to her role as a primary caregiver following her mother's incarceration. Zhizha's trauma, much like her father's before her, is profoundly infused with indigeneity in the sense that it is represented through the sublimation of her inner state onto the natural world. This indigeneity of the ontological world Zhizha inhabits is primarily suggested by her very name which roughly translates into "the soft fall of rain after harvest, apeaceful rain which is not for growing things but for mercy" (Vera, 1996, p. 15). The

association with the natural element of water embedded within her name is the first indicator of the fact that she inhabits a worldview in which the distinction between the human and the natural is less than discrete. Zhizha's name also forms a contrast to the kind of rain envisioned by the Gukurahundi, "the first rain that washes away the chaff of the last harvest before the spring rains" (Gukurahundi, p. xiii) which was mobilised in the genocidal logic of the Mugabe regime. Her name therefore stands in contrast to the lack of "mercy" that characterises genocidal logic.

In addition to her name, Zhizha's first utterance establishes the profound connection with the element of water: "My tongue is a river" and her grandmother's "voice says that before I learned to forget there was a river in my mouth" (Vera, 1996, p. 1). Her dreaming and hallucinatory episodes are also drenched in water. Following her father's death, for instance, she dreams that her father drowned at sea and repeatedly calls out her name, telling her not to cry because "water is sleep not death", while also attempting to persuade her that what he has conferred upon her are "the secrets of the sea" (Vera, 1996, p. 5). In her dreams too, her father is the bringer of storms who is associated with thunder, lightning and bewildering darkness. These associations are maintained throughout the text and, as such, suggest a continuity between the human and the natural in ways that recall not only Azure's imagined vengeance upon Cape Town, but also the seduction of the spiritual realm which constitutes withdrawal from the world of the living we see in Okri's text.

By way of conclusion, therefore, one of the ways in which trauma presents itself in the text above is through transgenerational cumulative trauma that is linked not to a singular event, but to the accumulation of several private and public events. Secondly, trauma as experienced by the child protagonists discussed here is not only a malady of the mind, but a psycho-social one that interferes with their daily embodied experiences of themselves as alterior. Thirdly, the family structures of these children is less than nuclear or else, as is the case with Azure, they are without a family. Finally, the ontological basis for each of the child protagonists is distinct, but is nevertheless informed by indigenous modes of being that profoundly affect the ways in which these children experience trauma. Consequently, it would be useful to delve more deeply into the meanings of these diversionary models of trauma if we are to expand on what trauma means in the African postcolony.

