

Literary Representation of the Effects of Betrayal in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Zikora: A Short Story"

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Abstract

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "Zikora: A Short Story" (2020) has been studied from many perspectives; single motherhood, maternal mortality, femininity, polygamy, sexism, etc, but little or no research has been done on the impact of betrayal on the protagonist, Zikora, mother. This study, therefore, is on the effects of betrayal, occasioned by discriminating against African values, on the emotions and psyche of Zikora's mother. Employing the method of close reading of the studied text, the study aims to highlight instances where injustice is done to Zikora's mother due to the dictates of her culture. The study draws on betrayal trauma theory to provide the basis for interrogating emotional hurts caused by trusted persons or institutions. The theory helps to identify and explore how she navigates the emotional spaces of intimacy and betrayal in which her culture occludes her voice and experience. The study concludes that Zikora's mother is made to live through hurt and betrayal and still maintain her relationship with those who betrayed her because her culture expects so from her.

Keywords: African values, betrayal, betrayal trauma theory, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Introduction

In many African cultures, a woman's success in life is mainly recognised in marriage and maternity. According to Davies:

In many African societies, motherhood defines womanhood. Motherhood is crucial to a woman's status in African society. To marry and mother a child (a son preferably) entitles a woman to more respect from her husband's kinsmen, for she can now be addressed as 'mother of...' (as cited in Evwierhoma 318).

From the above, it is evident that motherhood is a powerful institution in Africa, as it is the fulcrum of all women's experiences. A woman is born, trained to get married and then bear children. Her purpose is to ensure that the family name lives on through her. A valuable woman is a woman who marries and procreates to ensure that the lineage continues.

In addition to hinging a woman's destiny to marriage and maternity, there is also the preference for a woman to birth male children. If a woman fails to bear a male child, her value and status are affected. Great value is placed on a woman who bears a male child. When the woman does not bear a male child, she will experience some degree of ill-treatment. El-Gilay and Shady's study states that:

Prevalence of son preference in itself does not signify more than an attitude according women a low value. Wherever son preference is strong, it tends to be accompanied by discriminatory practices against daughters, many of which have serious immediate and/or long-term consequences for their health and well-being (120).

These ill treatments take various forms. The woman may be neglected and abandoned alongside her daughter(s); if she has any, she may be asked to leave the house, or she may be formally divorced. The man may secretly have children outside of wedlock. He may also remarry, with hopes that the new wife will bear a male child. These ill-treatments and betrayal by their spouses can be traumatising.

Ironically, a woman's child does not belong to her, be it male or female. An Ogbaru proverb says, "*onwunwe nwata na enwe ewu bu na aji*", translated as "the child's ownership over a goat is only skin deep". This proverb can be used to summarise some women's role in marriage. She is there to bear children and care for them, but does not own them. Chukwuma avers that "the woman is the mother, but the child belongs to his father, whose name and lineage he bears and belongs to" (3).

Traumatic experiences resulting from violence, oppression and abuse are sometimes assumed to be the most damaging because they can have physical manifestations. However, trauma

resulting from betrayal can be equally as damaging. Betrayal trauma is devastating as it violates assumptions of interpersonal bonds and social relationships, and this leads to the loss of critical human connections.

The studied literary work is a 2020 short story by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Zikora*. The story is based on the titular character, who is in labour on the verge of becoming a single mother. In the throes of labour pains and experiencing abandonment by her young lover, Zikora recalls incidents from her past and present in a series of flashbacks. Zikora's past revolves around her parents' marriage, while her present revolves around her relationship with Kwame, her Ghanaian lover, and her resulting pregnancy. The study examines a wife's and a mother's betrayal by her husband and child. It is carried out within the tenets of betrayal trauma theory. It employs an in-depth textual analysis to examine the experiences and coping strategies of the studied character.

Theoretical Framework

Betrayal Trauma Theory (BTT) provides an explanatory framework for the psychoanalysis of the studied characters, Zikora and her mother, whose name was never mentioned in the novel. The concept of BTT was introduced by Jennifer Joy Freyd in 1991. Explaining the concept of betrayal trauma, Freyd writes that "Betrayal trauma occurs when the people or institutions on which a person depends for survival significantly violates that person's trust or well-being" (76). Sivers et al. describe BTT as "a theory that predicts that the degree to which a negative event represents a betrayal by a trusted other will influence how that event is processed and remembered" (169). Although BTT was initially developed with the child-caregiver relationship in mind, it "has since been applied to other adult relationships, including not only romantic relationships but hierarchical relationships (such as that between an employer and an employee, or an institution and its member) as well" (Bernstein and Freyd 18).

Within the theory of betrayal trauma, the concept of emotional detachment is an adaptive strategy in the face of betrayal trauma. Ryan & Lynch explain that "detachment can [...] represent loss and separation, wherein a relatively dependent person is severed from a source of guidance, affection or nurturance" (340). Ingoglia et al. affirm this by defining detachment as:

A more radical form of distancing from parents is associated with an experienced lack of parental support and acceptance, feelings of disengagement from parents, mistrust and alienation towards them. It may be defined as the loss of

developmentally appropriate attachments, representing not merely a casting off of infantile ties but a more general reluctance to rely on the parents and a distancing from them (4).

From the above definitions of detachment, emotional detachment can be described as emotional “distancing” or “withdrawal”. In the studied novel, emotional detachment is defamiliarised as Zikora's mother undergoes an emotional detachment from her family.

Betrayal and emotional detachment in “Zikora: A Short Story”

“All through the night, my mother sat near me but never touched me” (8)

The image above is striking because it defamiliarises one’s perception of the mother-child relationship of eternal connection and love, which is the socially expected perspective. Akujobi opines that “motherhood is often defined as an automatic set of feelings that are switched on during pregnancy and birth of a child” (2). So, what happened to Zikora’s mother’s “automatic set of feelings” for her only child, who is being torn by labour pains? This section of the paper discusses the traumatic events that severed a woman’s emotional attachment to her husband and daughter, Zikora.

After years of peaceful marriage, Zikora’s father announced he needed a second wife to bear him sons. When he informed his wife of his decision, Zikora’s mother felt betrayed as she had thought they had a good marriage and family. Zikora’s father betrayed his wife because of his desire to sire a male child. He broke their marital bond, the trust and security it offered her. He betrayed the institution upon which their relationship was built. She gave him a daughter and went through three miscarriages and a hysterectomy for a chance to have a male child or more children for him. She did everything possible to give him a son, but it was not destined to happen. In the face of her helplessness, and given that her daughter cannot inherit her husband’s property, as dictated by their tradition, she peacefully agreed to let him take another wife.

I’d used my mother’s story: a woman from a wealthy family marries a man from a wealthy family, has one daughter, three miscarriages, and an emergency hysterectomy, after which her husband decides to marry again because he needs to have sons who will inherit the family property.

“My mother is uncommon but normal,” I had replied to the woman, and then corrected myself with, “Uncommon and normal. (23)

Zikora's mother was uncommon because, ordinarily, a woman cannot willingly share her husband with another woman. However, what she did by allowing her husband to take another is normal because it happens within a culture that dictates that a man must have a male child to succeed him. Zikora's mother did not protest because she believed that since she could not bear her husband a male child, she should peacefully step aside for another woman to do so.

To cushion the effect of the shock of his decision on his wife, Zikora's father promised to live with Zikora and her mother while he visits his second wife. She grasped his promise as her lifeline when she was on the losing end. However, even this promise Zikora's father could not keep. He once again broke her trust in him. He decided to move permanently to his second wife's home. His excuse is that his first son needs his influence to grow correctly, but his daughter, Zikora, does not. Hearing her husband's decision to leave the house completely, Zikora's mother was shattered. For the first time, she allowed her rage and pain to consume her. In her enraged mood, she physically confronted her husband.

I remembered that afternoon in drawn-out, static images: my father blurted out the words, eyes trained on the cards in his hand, words he must have been thinking about how to say for days, and my mother staring at him, her body so rigid and still. Later, she stood at the top of the stairs, in my father's way, as he tried to go downstairs. She reached out and pushed him backwards, and he surprised, tottered. "This is not what we agreed!". (25)

Three things happened with that emotional outburst. First, she had channelled and purged herself of all feelings she had for her husband with that outburst, hence she was left empty and numb. Second, her husband still did what he wanted. Third, because she opposed her husband, the tables turned on her. Zikora, her daughter, blamed her for driving her father away.

Zikora's mother remained in the marriage to maintain her marital status, which is highly regarded in her culture concerning a woman's life. However, she detached herself emotionally from her husband. This served as her armour against future trauma from her husband's betrayal. With her emotions detached, she could pretend that all was well. She could act her role as the ceremonial first wife and endure a relationship with her co-wife.

It was my mother who sat beside my father at weddings and ceremonies; it was her photo that appeared above the label of "wife" in the booklet his club published in his honour. Respect was her reward for acquiescing. She could have been difficult about Aunty Nwanneka, fought with my father, quarrelled with his sisters, disrupted things with relatives. Instead, she always bought Christmas and birthday presents for Aunty

Nwanneka's sons. She was civil, proper, restrained... Senior wife. My aunty Uzo, my father's sister, said "senior wife" like a title, a thing that came with a crown. "You are the senior wife; nothing will change that," Aunty Uzo told my mother a few days after my father moved out of our house. (24-25)

When Zikora's father calls to congratulate her on the safe delivery of her son, her mother's withdrawal is observed by Zikora: "I looked at my mother, by the window turned away, separate and apart from the conversation" (24).

Zikora betrayed the family bonds she had with her mother. She broke their mother-child bond. Her mother, who had been betrayed and abandoned by her husband, watched her only child forge a relationship with her rival, her husband's second wife.

On several occasions, Zikora's mother tried to get Zikora to act like a loyal child so that they could put up a united front, but Zikora betrayed her. She once betrayed her mother by accepting food from Aunty Nwanneka, her stepmother. This she did after her mother had rejected Aunty Nwanneka's offerings, telling her they had eaten earlier. Rejecting Aunty Nwanneka would have implied that Zikora does not acknowledge Aunty Nwanneka as family. However, Zikora accepted her stepmother's food because she wanted to be a part of her father's new family and maintain her relationship with him. Zikora would rather please her father, and indirectly her stepmother, than her mother.

The last time Zikora betrayed her mother was when her mother begged her to stand by her by not attending Aunty Nwanneka's birthday party. Zikora left her mother and went on to have fun at the party. This was the last straw. By the time Zikora returned from the party, her mother had severed the emotional bond connecting her and her daughter.

I remembered the night of Aunty Nwanneka's birthday party. A big party. Canopies ringed by balloons had been set up in her compound. My mother asked me not to go. It was shortly after my father had moved out of our house, the strain between my parents still ripe and raw. "Stay and stand by me," my mother said, and I scoffed silently, thinking she was being dramatic. Chill out; it's not as if this is a blood feud. I went to the party. When I came home... My mother was in the living room reading. "Mummy, good evening," I greeted, and she said nothing. She looked up from her book as though to show she had heard me, and then turned away. A recurring image: my mother turning away, retreating, closing windows on herself. (26-27)

Similar to what Zikora's mother went through after her outburst over her husband's betrayal, Zikora's defiance in the face of her mother's emotional anguish made the situation clear to her mother. Zikora's mother realised that Zikora would always be her father's child. She will always choose her father, who left her, over her mother, who stayed. For this reason, Zikora's mother withdrew from her daughter. By doing this, she can stay strong and withstand all of Zikora's insults.

Zikora keeps trying to ruffle her mother's feathers to get her to react, but since her mother's emotions were already detached and guided, Zikora keeps failing. An example was when Zikora told her mother that she had been pregnant before as a teen:

For long moments, I could not find any words to fling at her.
"I've been pregnant before, so I knew very early on," I said finally.
She said nothing...
"Thank God I was able to remove that pregnancy," I said.
Her silence bruised the air between us.
"I was so relieved," I said.
"Some things are better left unsaid." She turned away.
I wanted to wound her, but I wasn't sure why I chose this to wound her with. Now, her indifference grated. Did it even matter to her? (20)

It is worth mentioning that after Zikora is betrayed by her lover, Kwame, she realised and confesses that "I looked at my mother, standing by the window. How had I never really seen her? It was my father who destroyed, and it was my mother I blamed for the ruins left behind" (25). It seems that the sacrifices of a mother are appreciated more when one has passed through some life challenges. Also worth noting is that toward the end of the story, we see a happy side of Zikora's mother, which emerges at the birth of her grandson: "'Beautiful boy,' my mother said, smiling down at him" (17). We see that she is emotionally attached to him, an innocent baby who has never betrayed her: "My son woke up and began to cry. My mother hurried to his crib. I watched her cradle him and lower her head, as though to inhale him, touching the skin of his face with the skin of hers" (28). Her love for her grandson shows that she is naturally a caring woman. It is safe to say that the trauma she went through at the hands of her husband and daughter is responsible for her coldness towards them.

Conclusion

The desire to have a son has left many homes and hearts shattered. Within the context of the African family, one can say that a man's heart is where his son is. Cultural demands can be said to have occasioned women who have no sons to experience some level of trauma. In the novel, *Zikora's* mother lost her husband and child to the woman who bore sons for her husband.

Their betrayal, actions and selfishness caused her to become traumatised. As the study on betrayal trauma has revealed, victims of betrayal trauma tend to continue their relationship with their abuser because they believe that they need the relationship. Zikora's mother did not leave her husband or child because they were her family. Instead, she withdrew her emotional attachment to them. This strategy helped her move on from her bruised emotions and also protect her from future ones. Her emotional detachment from her husband and child seemed to have cushioned her. It protected her well enough because there were no permanent damages done to her ability to connect to others emotionally. The result of her coping strategy can be seen in her ability to connect to a new hope, her grandson.

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