Representations of Memory as Mediator of Postcolonial Trauma in Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love*

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Abstract

Existing studies have shown memory to be inseparable from the discourse of trauma. Memory has been treated mainly as a repository on which trauma thrives. However, its role as an interpretive and negotiating tool through which traumatic experiences within the postcolonial context are judged is often overlooked. Therefore, this paper examines how individual and collective memories are used to interpret characters' traumatic experiences in Aminatta Forna's The Memory of Love, using Pederson's theory of literary trauma as a framework. The novel is analysed through close reading. The study contributes to the argument that trauma is representable by showing ways in which memory is used to augment the narration of trauma within the postcolonial context.

***Keywords**: Postcolonial trauma, memory, narration, representation, mediator*

Introduction

Trauma is a broad subject and can be interpreted in various ways. However, within the postcolonial discourse, trauma, more specifically, is a collective, cultural, memory-driven experience of colonial violence and imperial histories of non-Western cultures (Andermahr 2). Postcoloniality as a concept overlaps with discourses on trauma (Ward 5), while trauma itself thrives on memory (Caruth 4). Postcolonial African literature often depicts dispossession, sociopolitical instability, cultural dislocation, historical violence and other expressions of trauma (Ward 14; Ajibola 2). Like many postcolonial African novels, Aminatta Forna's novel, *The Memory of Love*, depicts representations of traumatic events which characters not only experience, but interpret through cultural memory. Forna's novel is narrated against the backdrop of the Sierra Leone decade-long civil war, which itself is an expression of postcolonial trauma. Postcolonial trauma is not only the

kind of trauma that reminds the victim society of the atrocities of colonialism and imperialism, it also embodies the events, failures and processes that significantly affect the collective identity of the victim society owing to the residue of colonialism and the impact of imperialism (Visser 110). Forna's novel narrates experiences after the Sierra Leone civil war and interrogates the social and psychological effects of violence on individuals and the entire country. While novels like Alejandro Zambra's *Ways of Going Home* and Mbolo Mbue's *How Beautiful We Were* have engage the subject of memory as tool for building cultural identity, Forna's novel bears witness to the role of memory as a trauma site, and the power of narrative testimony to edit memory for self-exoneration as illustrated through the character of Elias Cole who attempts to hide his role in the student riot and the breaking of his family by telling his doctor only selected events from his past. Drawing from Joshua Pederson's literary trauma theory, this study carries out a qualitative analysis of Forna's novel for the purpose of examining the role of characters' memories in interpreting their experiences of postcolonial trauma.

Existing scholarship on the subject of memory in postcolonial trauma novels have examined the roles of memory as a repository of the past, a tool for preserving and erasing colonial histories (Mechkarini, Rutherford and Sebe 831), the transformation of traumatic memory into narrative memory (Mengel and Borgaza 62), impacts of colonialism on collective memory (Shamsan 29), and the intergenerational and intercultural nature of memory (Saxena 11). However, scant attention has been paid to the role of memory as a negotiation tool between the past and the present on the one hand, and self and community on the other hand, which are depicted simultaneously as memory's role in shaping characters' traumatic experiences in Forna's novel. By addressing this, this paper engages the concept of memory within the framework of trauma as an ethically sensitive negotiator of position as either perpetrator or victim, specifically in postcolonial trauma novels.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The centrality of memory to trauma has been engaged over time by various scholars who have established the relationship between the two concepts. The treatment of memory as an interpretive and negotiating tool within the purview of postcolonial trauma is often based on the collective nature of the traumatic experience. Therefore, collective memory correlates with postcolonial trauma discourse the way individual memory correlates with individual trauma in the larger trauma discourse. Brewin argues that memory is at the centre of the cause and healing of trauma, and that through intrusive thoughts, recollections and flashbacks, materials of traumatic memories are often

brought back to the mind (15). Crespo and Fernandez-Lansac examined the function of memory in recalling and narrating traumatic experiences. They found that although traumatic memories are fragmented and intense, narration from memory has therapeutic effects and fosters recovery (154). Cornejo and Badilla assert that collective memory is a significant factor in the interpretation of large-scale and historical trauma, for social healing and justice (2).

Literary trauma theory responds to the claim that "trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity" (Balaev 149) and resists all forms of representation, including narration. It, therefore, is concerned with the literary depictions and expressions of trauma. Balaev defines trauma as "a person's emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual's sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society" (150). She also defined the trauma novel as "a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels" (150).

Caruth's work is taken to be a seminal and foundational work in the development of literary trauma theory. In this work, she examined the story of Torquato Tasso's Tancred and Clorinda and noted that after Tancred unwittingly sliced a tree with his sword after realising he had mistaken his lover, Clorinda, for an enemy soldier and killed her, "a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound" (Craps 15).

McNally, a trauma psychologist, contradicts some of the founding assumptions on which trauma theory was built. Trauma theory, from Caruth's claims, is built on the assumption that trauma is inexpressible and impossible to represent due to the effect the traumatic experience had on the mind of the victim, which causes a dissociation of memory from speech. McNally (29), in his *Remembering Trauma*, however, maintains that not only can trauma be remembered, but it can also be well represented in narration. Pederson observes that "As his critique unfolds, we also realise that McNally's work undermines the two most crucial tenets of Caruth's literary theory of trauma: the notion that traumatic memories are "unregistered" or 'unclaimed,' and the idea that traumatic memories elude straightforward verbal representation" (336). He maintains that traumatic experiences can be appropriately articulated verbally, which contradicts the argument about the fragility of traumatic memory. McNally places the notion of distorted memory of traumatic experiences against empirical findings and faults it, arguing that it is theoretical and divergent from empirical reality. Pederson explains that

> McNally disagrees, again citing numerous studies by other specialists for support: "Contrary to van der Kolk's theory, trauma does not block the formation of narrative memory. That memory for trauma can be expressed as physiologic reactivity to traumatic reminders does not preclude its being expressed in narrative as well (337).

In agreement with McNally, Pederson (338) presents three dicta that summarise his position: first, trauma is in the text itself rather than gaps in the text. Secondly, trauma can be found in augmented details in the text, and thirdly, temporal, ontological and physical distortions are veritable signs of the presence of trauma in a text. This implies that not only is it possible to represent trauma in a text, but it is also possible to make vivid and accurate, rather than vague, representations of such traumatic experiences.

Methodology

This study adopts the qualitative research method. Close reading grounded within the theoretical scope of trauma and postcolonial studies is deployed in gathering data. Using this method, the study examines how memory is used to alter history. Theoretical insights from trauma and postcolonial studies guided the analysis of the selected novel. The novel was chosen for its vivid depiction of memory as interpretive and narrative, as it is used to negotiate postcolonial trauma. Gayatri Spivak's notion of subalternity is adopted in this study to augment the discussion of memory's role in interpreting trauma in the selected text and to situate the study specifically within the confines of postcolonial trauma within the larger trauma framework.

Result and Discussion: the role of witnessing in the interpretation of trauma

In Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love*, Elias Cole narrates his past ordeal to his doctor, Adrian, who has come to Sierra Leone to spend some time. Elias is arrested and questioned after publishing an academic article suggesting policy change. This is where he meets Johnson, a cold police officer, to whom he later gives the names of students responsible for a protest on campus.

Kai, a surgeon, colleague and friend to Adrian, struggles with his trauma of the war during which he loses his sister and her husband. Although Kai tries to drown his thoughts in work, he still finds his mind consistently troubled by the growing number of psychiatric patients. Many of them are boys and young men who committed crimes during the war and lost their minds to drug addiction after the war.

Agnes, one of the psychiatry patients in the hospital where Kai works, experiences fugue shortly after the war. During the war, she lost two daughters and her husband. After the war, her first daughter returns home pregnant with her husband's killer. The novel ends with the death of Nenebah while she is pregnant with Adrian's child. Adrian returns to his failed marriage in England, and Kai is determined to survive amidst the chaos in Sierra Leone.

The temporal setting of the novel suggests that the country had been independent for a while. However, the novel makes other scant allusions to the legacy of colonialism in the country after independence. The civil war in the novel has its historical context in the civil war that occurred in Sierra Leone between 1991 and 2002. The civil war is closely tied to colonialism and is justified as a postcolonial trauma based on the ripple effects it had on collective memory after independence. Having been a colony between 1786 and 1808 (Land and Shocket 2), a protectorate between 1896 and 1936 (Ochiai 3), and a country since 1961, Sierra Leone has experienced trauma in different phases. The war was between the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the government of Sierra Leone led by Joseph Momoh at the time (Shaffer 590). The RUF were supported by the then Liberian president, Charles Taylor, who deployed soldiers in the National Patriotic Front of Liberia to boost the numerically weak RUF (Shaffer 588).

The arrest of Elias Cole also depicts the state of the country at the time. Johnson, a shrewd police officer who delights in playing with the minds of the people he interrogates, speaks with Elias after his arrest. Their conversation suggests that Johnson thinks of Elias as a political troublemaker or activist because of one of the papers he submits for faculty publication titled "Reflections on Changing Political Dynamics" (221), which proposes some review of the constitution. Johnson's suspicion of Elias as either an activist or a supporter of activism indicts the government for oppressing the people. The arrest of Elias further strengthens this indictment of the government as a body that silences the voice of activism, usually regarded as the voice of the people. This reflects Spivak's concept of subalternity, which she discusses as the exclusion and marginalisation of certain groups from dominant structures. Although Sierra Leone is an independent country in this novel, many voices of political activism are silenced. This is illustrated in both Julius' arrest and Ade's secret visit to Saffia many years after Julius' death. Julius is arrested and kept in custody because he is assumed to be a part of a political opposition against the government, whereas Julius is only a bold and carefree academic who expresses his voice through his academic publications

and activities on campus. Ade's visit also reveals that he escapes the country because he is also a target of the government.

Mamakay's explanation of the war to Adrian also shows that it was deeply political. She tells him that "'It was rage. It wasn't a war, what happened here, in the end. It was fury '" (Forna 266). She helps him to understand that the people were angry at their leaders for their uncomfortable lives, and although they take it out on thieves now and then, they eventually turn on the government in a civil war.

Narration and Traumatic Memory in Forna's *The Memory of Love*

Forna's novel depicts how the civil war traumatises characters. The civil war itself is a kind of postcolonial trauma because it is the response of rebel groups against neocolonialism, which not only reminds them of their colonial experiences, but also suppresses them politically, economically and socially. In representing trauma, Forna's novel weaves it intricately with dreams and other activities of the mind. This portrayal reechoes Barrett's claim that memories of past events often return in dreams (3).

This study adopts Pederson's literary trauma theory to analyse Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love*. Pederson's position against the submissions of literary trauma theorists like Caruth (1996) and Freyd (1996) hinges on McNally's argument against traumatic amnesia (96). Balaev (159) supports Pederson's claim that because trauma defies linguistic expression, it is represented in narratives with gaps, silence and other rhetorical strategies.

Traumatic memory often refers to the memory of a traumatic event. As a kind of memory, it is the recall of an event as though it is happening in the present. Schachtel defines memory as "a function of the living personality [which] can be understood as a capacity for the organisation and reconstruction of past experiences and impressions in the service of present needs, fears, and interests" (14). Van der Kolk states that traumatic memories are problematic because they are unreliable (59). But traumatic memory is not only unreliable, but it is also intrusive (Ehlers and Tanja, 405). For instance, the traumatic memory of Abass' father's death intrudes on Kai's sleep. The narrating voice notes that "Kai wasn't woken by dreams about the bridge, or even a dream at all. But a memory, a sudden intrusion of conscious thought upon his world of sleep" (300). In Elias' recount of the first time he makes love to Saffia, he also says that the memory of hearing Saffia and Julius make love the day of the first moon-landing is intrusive: "Instead I am remembering a day. A day when I drove from the university campus to a pink house on the hill

with a truckload of chairs for a party that evening. I cannot halt the memory. It enters my brain like a thief, slipping like the moonlight behind the blind" (Forna 304-305).

McNally undermines the idea that traumatic experiences significantly distort the memory of such experiences and impact narration with the impossibility of representation. He argues that traumatic experiences are remarkable enough to be remembered and narrated as they happened. The character of Elias Cole appears to give credence to McNally and Pederson's claim, going by how detailed and confident he is in his narration. He narrates each of his losses and how he walks through each of the experiences, leaving nothing out. Elias' careful editing of his narration from memory is possible because he remembers every detail of the events. Despite his intention to use narration to buy himself a good face, Elias' trauma was evident in his narration. The collective trauma of the society is also captured in Elias, Agnes and Kai's narrations.

In discussing the rationale behind the critique of trauma studies by postcolonial theorists and the contributors to the 2008 special issue of *Studies in the Novel*, Visser (2015) submits a different view on Caruth's assertion that the wounds of trauma are unknowable and inexpressible. Her interpretation of the assertion moves away from the notion of knowing and expressing traumatic wounds to knowing and expressing these wounds exactly as they happened. She argues that "Caruth's focus on the impossibility of exact and "ultimate" knowing does not oppose or contradict the notion that narrative is curative, and that trauma victims may come to terms with their traumatic experiences" (255). She supports her argument from trauma literature like Toni Morrison's novel *Home* and submits that literature "affirms growth and health to emphasise that recovery, despite traumatic wounding, is possible, and that trauma, although it stands outside precise representation, can be integrated" (255).

Visser also notes that debunking the existing notion that trauma is resistant to representation is an important part of the endeavour to decolonise trauma studies (252). Decolonising trauma studies is not only about making trauma studies accommodate the wounds of postcolonial societies, or an effort to fight for the recognition of non-Western cultures within trauma studies, it rather involves upturning the Eurocentric undertones of the tenets of the original theory. The emphasis of trauma studies, which is heavily influenced by Freudian perspectives on trauma, melancholia and stasis as the defining characteristics of the post-traumatic stage, makes postcolonial theorists reject or critique it. They argue that trauma can be cured by literature/narrative. Trauma studies, which has been accused of "threaten[ing] to reproduce the very Eurocentrism that lies behind those histories"

(Rothberg 28) that it claims to address, include the conversation of the possibility of healing trauma. Narratives that address colonial and postcolonial atrocities have also depicted the role of the narrative in the healing of these wounds. Her position on the matter suggests that she opposes the argument that trauma can be healed through the strategic use of narrative. To strengthen her argument, she refers to "Susan Y. Najita's *Decolonizing Cultures in the Pacific* initially [which] underwrites Caruth's rejection of narratives of recovery, which Najita terms the "fetishised narrative of complete recuperation" ([18], p. 63)" (256).

Ifowodo's position on the "knowability" (127) of trauma runs contrary to Caruth's and aligns more with McNally's and Pederson's. He states that "trauma is not beyond but is merely a more complex form of experience requiring a supple but equally complex theory to elicit its cognitive dimensions" (124-125). He argues further that instead of concentrating on theories that address or attempt to remedy the "unrepresentability" or "unknowability" of trauma, what should be the focus of trauma (and literary) theorists is "an adequate theory of reference" (127), for reference expresses the relation between language or any symbolic system and significant constitutive features of the world" (125). Leys's submission is in tandem with McNally and Pederson's. She notes that language can attest to the horrors of trauma, instead of opposing it (22). This implies that the horrors of trauma can be described in language and depicted in narration. The accuracy of the narration may be debatable, however.

Apart from foregrounding distressing traumatic experiences like deaths, destruction of properties, madness, protests, and sudden arrests, the novel portrays and engages the subject of postcolonial trauma by emphasising the significance of symbolic representation, narrative structures and how language is used in narrating traumatic experiences. From Elias' detailed narration of events, the novel suggests that memories of traumatic events can be recalled. McNally only critiqued the notion of traumatic amnesia, he did not quite argue against the fragmentary nature of traumatic memory owing to the intensity of the emotional and psychological effects. He argued instead that it is possible to recollect memories of traumatic events. However, Elias' memory of the traumatic events he narrated appears to suggest that traumatic memory, especially insidious trauma like the trauma of colonialism or a civil war, can be recollected in profound details.

Despite the seeming accuracy and detail of Elias' memory, his trauma finds expression in the structure of his narrative. The novel employs a narrative structure of time shifts and multiple narrative viewpoints. The narrative voice shifts between the author and Elias, and without prior

warning, the reader stumbles from one person's narration into the other and is only able to tell the difference from the information that is disclosed. The narrative styles reinforce the trauma of Forna's novel. The two narrators- Elias and an omniscient narrator- both bring home the trauma of the novel in their unique ways. While Elias relates his trauma in his stories, the presence of the omniscient narrator aligns with Morag's observation of a no-one's-narrative-view in trauma cinema, which is used to also accentuate trauma in films (97). The narration also shifts frequently from one point in the present to another in the past. An example is when a kite flies past the window as Adrian checks on Elias his patient, and seeing that he appeared to remember something when he sees the kite, he asks if the kite means anything to him. Elias, therefore, begins to describe his first kite, which his father bought for him, how he was forced to give it to his brother and how his brother becomes an invalid. The narration, therefore, takes a nonlinear approach, reflecting the fragmentation of traumatic memory instead of narrative gaps, echoing Pederson's argument

> … critics seeking to engage trauma in literature should turn their focus from gaps in the text to the text itself as the first generation of trauma theorists subscribe to an understanding of trauma as unspeakable, they gravitate toward textual lacunae in their readings. They are put in the quixotic position of searching for textual evidence of things that cannot be spoken. However, McNally's research suggests that traumatic memories are both memorable and speakable. Hence, a new generation of trauma theorists should emphasise both the accessibility of traumatic memory and the possibility that victims may construct reliable narrative accounts of it (338).

The narrative approach in the novel also buttresses Pederson's argument that narration can augment memory (339). This sharply contradicts the existing notion that traumatic memories are fickle, fragile, and hence vulnerable to manipulation and distortion. Pederson, quoting McNally, submits that "emotional stress enhances memory for the central features of the stressful experience. Stress does not impair memory; it strengthens it" (62). He agrees and further submits that "Traumatic memories, then, are not elusive or absent; they are potentially more detailed and more powerful than normal ones" (339).

The bulk and detail of Elias' narration totally contrast with what some trauma theorists like Caruth and Freyd would have expected from a victim of trauma. Pederson submits that instead of seeking a dearth of narration, critics should pay attention to an overload of narration (339). This implies that the victim of trauma is not only able to remember and narrate with words the traumatic

memory, but they are also able to narrate in detail and to recall sensory information, which further agrees with McNally's argument that the remarkable nature of the traumatic event is what makes it memorable rather than the opposite (30). Pederson submits that

> readers looking for representations of trauma may turn not to textual absence but to textual overflow, to event descriptions replete with detail. Further, as the readings below demonstrate, traumatic memory is often multi-sensory; victims may record not only visual cues, but aural, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory ones as well (339).

Conclusion

This study argues that memory is not merely a repertoire of past events but an interpretive mechanism by which characters in Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love* assess and negotiate post-war realities in postcolonial contexts. By using Pederson's literary trauma theory to analyse the trauma of civil war in the novel, this study demonstrated that trauma is recoverable and representable in augmented detail. This study, therefore, contributes to the discourse of memory within the framework of postcolonial trauma by portraying it as a concept that is more than a trauma site and as a mediator of the meaning of postcolonial trauma experiences.

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