

Testimonies As Therapy: Trauma In Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*

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Abstract

*This work focuses on the incidence of trauma in contemporary African literary studies. Using the device of Freudian psychology and Cathy Caruth's postulations on trauma, it discusses Lola Shoneyin's *The secret lives of Baba Segi's wives*, submitting that the testimonies or repetitive telling of traumatic experiences by the trauma victims (the characters in the novel), to a great measure, conduce to the healing or therapy of both the mental and psychological wound (trauma) suffered by the victims of trauma or trauma inducing experiences*

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Introduction

In the wake of certain events in the life of an individual or community, some traces of good or ill are usually left behind for posterity. When these events are of tragically devastating proportions, they leave painful memories that may seem to linger almost perpetually, alternating, in their manifestation, between moments of latency and moments of violent eruptions. Such events are believed to inflict the mental equivalent of bodily injuries on the psyche of their victims. Such psychic wounds, even when they may seem to have healed, often leave an indelible scar which periodically or at the prompting of a stimulus triggers off reactions in the victims. These psychic wounds are called trauma and the reactions they cause range from mild phobias through hysteria to even histrionic and violent behavior directed either at oneself or at someone else.

Trauma-inducing occurrences and the various ways and means by which their victims have sought to cope in their aftermath have been grist to the mill of writers. Put differently, writers down the ages have tried in several ways to immortalize traumatic events whether experienced individually or collectively. Collective traumatic events tend to percolate across a much wider canvas and are often experienced on a communal scale, whereas individual traumatic events often occur on a relatively smaller scale, sometimes as integral parts of a collective traumatic event and at other times as isolated occurrences, and are experienced on a personal scale. A war, for example, may constitute a collective traumatic event, while the rape of a woman by soldiers in an army of occupation in the course of some hostilities or by some armed bandits engaged in act of kidnapping may constitute an individual traumatic event for the victim.

In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, although Lola Shoneyin treats the subject of polygamy and its consequences in a mostly comic vein, the idea of trauma can be used to

account for the actions of some of her characters. It is indeed the opinion of the present essay that only a careful look at the antecedents or background of some of the author's characters, especially Baba Segi's wives, can render a fuller account of what often seems their gratuitously ferocious competitiveness for the affection and attention of their co-owned husband.

A Review of Trauma in Literature

Although the theorizing of the interface between trauma and literature is a fairly recent phenomenon, the representation of trauma and trauma-inducing circumstances in literature has a long tradition dating back to classical times. Glenn W. Most in his reflection on the connection between emotion, memory, trauma and literature in which he identified fury and rage as major symptoms of traumatic experience, traces the tradition of trauma narratives to the ancient Greeks. He maintains that:

[The] tradition begins for us with the *Iliad*, and the *Iliad*, too, opens with a scene of suddenly ignited, swiftly proliferating, and almost uncontrollable anger. Rage is named as the poem's very first word, *menis*, and different forms and degrees of wrath skip at its beginning like a rapid brush fire from character to character, from Apollo, who "quaked with rage" because Agamemnon has scorned his priest, to Agamemnon himself, who reacts wrathfully to Calchas's advice that the god be appeased by returning Chryseis to her father—"furious, his dark heart filled to the brim, blazing with anger now, his eyes like searing fire"—to Achilles, in whom Agamemnon's decision to take Briseis makes the ambient fury rise to a terrifying climax. (443-4)

Glenn W. Most observes that it would have been inconceivable for anyone to expect the ancients to put the general tetchiness and irascibility of the characters in the *Iliad*, especially Achilles, to trauma. Given their belief in the omnipotence of Fate in the affairs of mortals, the ancients simply ascribed everything in the epic to the machinations of the gods. In the light of contemporary trauma studies, however, Most insists that Achilles's all-too-frequent fits of fury can only be accounted for in the light of the epic hero's difficult childhood wracked, as it is, with a plethora of neurosis- and trauma-causing experiences. Achilles, Most reminds us, is the offspring of a vengeful goddess who feels hard-done-by at the indignity of being forced by Zeus into marriage to and copulation with a mortal. Consequently to ascertain whether her children inherited her divine nature or their father's human susceptibilities, she would throw them into a seething cauldron. Achilles is spared this trial by ordeal; Thanks to his father's timely intervention. He is then left to Centaurs, part-human and part-equestrian creatures, who bring him up. He is thus early instilled with subhuman emotions, almost completely destitute of feeling. The trauma occasioned by this complete denial of motherly love at that tender stage in his life when he most needed it, Most holds accountable for the adult Achilles's gratuitous brutality, harking back, no doubt, to William Wordsworth's quip about "the son being the father of the man."

Glenn W. Most obliterates the aeons between the ancient world and the contemporary one by drawing a striking parallel between Homer's Achilles and Salman Rushdie's Professor Malik Solanka, the protagonist of the emigré Indian novelist's *Fury*. Solanka, like Achilles, has had a traumatic childhood. He was a victim of sexual abuse, Most recounts, perpetrated by his stepfather who, besides dressing young Solanka as a girl, also forces him to administer fellatio. In a testament to the varying perception of trauma between the two historical periods, Most observes that whereas Homer nowhere treats Achilles's condition as pathological, Rushdie everywhere makes it clear that Solanka's condition is morbid and requires clinical attention. Trauma patients, as Most sees them, can be categorized into three groups,

depending on the degree of inappropriateness of their response to the external stimuli that set off their hysterical or neurotic behavior. In Most's words:

We can distinguish three kinds of theoretically possible inappropriateness that might be involved: they [trauma patients] might feel the emotion in the total absence of any stimulus whatsoever (they might be fully delusional); they might react to a real stimulus with the wrong emotion (e.g., with fear instead of anger, or love instead of envy); or they might react to a real stimulus with the right emotion but in the wrong quantity (too much or too little). (444)

Most also identifies, following Sigmund Freud, three kinds of attitude of trauma victims to the traumatic event. These are captured in Freud's German concepts: *verdrängung*, *nachträglichkeit* and *iiberdeterminierung*. The first which Most translates as repression means that "a trauma is not forgotten but repressed" (456); he translates the second as *deferral* and explains it to mean that "events produce effects not only when they occur, but also much later" (456); while the third concept is said to mean *overdetermination* and to imply that "no event in psychic life has only one effective cause" (456).

The chief merit and appeal of Most's contribution to the conversation on trauma and literature reside, we believe, in his diachronic approach to the subject. His intervention profits largely from not being situated in a single historical milieu but ranging across periods so vastly chronologically removed from each other as to nearly cover the entirety of human existence on earth.

Kali Tal, for her part, seeks, judging by the title of her work, to inaugurate a special sub-genre which she designates "the literature of trauma." She bases her study on the humongous body of literature (including fictional prose, poetry, drama and non-fiction) spawned by three major world-historical events with eternal implications for the study of trauma, namely the Holocaust, America's military adventure (some might add the prefix mis-) in Vietnam and the high incidence of sexual violence, especially rape and incest, in the United States. She identifies marginality as a feature of this sub-genre. As she puts it, the literature of trauma "comprises a marginal literature similar to that produced by feminist, African- American and queer writers" (17). What this means is that the literature of trauma fits into the vast array of subaltern discourses, being the voice of members of those strata of society traditionally considered to be lacking in agency and therefore consigned to society's periphery.

Tal isolates, for closer examination, "three strategies for cultural coping [with trauma]—mythologization, medicalization, and disappearance" (6). She expatiates as follows:

Mythologization works by reducing a traumatic event to a set of standardized narratives (twice- and thrice-told tales that come to represent "the story" of the trauma) turning it from a frightening and uncontrollable event into a contained and predictable narrative. Medicalization focuses our gaze on the victims of trauma, positing that they suffer from an "illness" that can be "cured" within existing or slightly modified structures of institutionalized medicine and psychiatry. Disappearance—a refusal to admit to the existence of a particular kind of trauma—is usually accomplished by undermining the credibility of the victim. (6)

It can be deduced from Tal's remarks above that there are three main disciplinary approaches to apprehending trauma, corresponding to her three coping mechanisms. These are the literary (corresponding to mythologization), the clinical (corresponding to medicalization) and the sociological (corresponding to disappearance). Although Tal does not say so, it is clear that all three approaches and even novel ones not identified by her will unavoidably and frequently intermingle. Mythologization which is the most relevant to our

present purposes, here, moves the traumatic occurrence from the realm of “event” to the realm of “story”. In other words, it converts it from its original ontological status as “event” to a new one as “text”, thus imbuing it with the properties of *écriture* or discourse—a new state in which it is ready to be subjected to critical literary analyses. In this new state, “form gradually replaces content as the focus of attention” (Tal 6) [emphases added].

Tal inserts into the conversation on the literature of trauma, a very significant caveat. She observes that the textual [both oral and written] representation/codification of trauma is a site of relentless ideological contestation. According to her, “members of opposing interest groups will attempt to appropriate traumatic experiences while survivors will struggle to retain their control” (18). Tal succeeds here in erecting a binary opposition between trauma survivor-writers and their “other.” She then notes that, “two writers [presumably a survivor and an “other”] writing may pen the same words and [yet] tell entirely different stories” (18). Consequently, she suggests that “the critic of literature of trauma may extract the moral that two people can represent the same experience, using similar imagery and descriptive terminology and create literary works with entirely different meanings” (18). For good measure, she adds that “the work of the critic of the literature of trauma is both to identify and explicate literature by members of survivor groups, and to deconstruct the process by which the dominant culture codifies their traumatic experience” (18). Although Tal seems to refer here to book-length accounts of trauma, her theoretical position has implications for the reading of other forms of narrative, say, the novel for instance. In the microcosmic fictional world of a novel, Tal’s survivor-narratives which, as we just observed, she seems to conceive as a book-length account finds a parallel in the narration of a version of a traumatic event by a teller-character. In other words, what Tal says of the literature of trauma can be applied, in the specific example of a single novel, to a character’s own account of a traumatic event—an account which constitutes a self-contained traumatic “text.”

Cathy Caruth, in a trans-disciplinary study on trauma which embraces literature, psychoanalysis, history, philosophy and film, identifies “repetition” as the distinguishing attribute of trauma. She regards trauma as “the unwitting re-enactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind” (2) [emphasis added]. Describing trauma as a “double wound” (3), she traces the etymology of the word to the Greek *trauma* [literally “an injury inflicted on the body” (3)], but adds that in the field of psychiatry, the term denotes “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (3). Drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis, she explains further 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 and healable event, but rather an event that... is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known as is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (3-4) [emphases added]. Caruth’s assertion above recalls Freud’s demarcation of the human mind into the conscious and subconscious compartments. The subconscious compartment is usually the seat of repressed emotions and is often inaccessible even to its owner. It is clear from Caruth’s assertion above that she locates trauma in this mental compartment where it often lies latent beyond the control of the trauma survivor, waiting for any trigger or stimulus which will launch the survivor into a fit of hysteria.

Trauma in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*

Lola Shonenyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* dramatizes, with hilarity, the experiences of four Nigerian wives in a polygamous household. Set in Ibadan, the sprawling metropolis reputed to be the biggest city in sub-Saharan Africa, the narrative centres around the household of Ishola Alao, otherwise called Baba Segi by family and friends. Baba Segi is a barely literate dealer in building materials. A much conceited fellow

who misses being a buffoon by a whisker, Baba Segi reckons himself a super-stud and never passes up the slightest opportunity to flaunt and brag about his putative virility. It is only after his fourth wife, Bolanle, the only educated member of his harem, is unable to conceive two years into their marriage that he becomes a frequent visitor to gynaecologists and all manner of fertility doctors. At first, he simply accompanies Bolanle on these visits, but when test results begin to indicate that all is well with her, he has to undergo his own test. It emerges from the tests that he has never been fertile. When questioned, his other wives admit to procuring their children from adulterous affairs. Two of his wives, Bolanle and Iya Femi manifest symptoms of trauma whose roots can be traced to their childhood.

Although the Alao household has never been a scene of tranquility and serenity prior to the arrival of Bolanle, things take a turn for the worse when she joins the household. The rivalry between the co-wives of the Alao clan rises a few notches with the arrival of a new bride to share the already grossly inadequate male attention. As Bolanle narrates:

Looking back, now that two years have passed, I realise how naïve I was to expect a warmer welcome. I was foolish to think I would just be an insignificant addition when, in reality, I was coming to take away from them. With my arrival, 2.33 nights with Baba Segi became 1.75. His affections, already thinly divided, now had to spread amongst four instead of three. (21)

In an atmosphere such as the one depicted above, it would be entirely understandable if each co-wife resorts to some underhand tactic to secure some advantage over her rivals. However, even this allowance, permissive as it is, hardly adequately explains some of the actions taken by Iya Femi in a bid to outdo her rivals. Some of her actions, pursuant to monopolizing her husband's affection, clearly border on the manic. For instance, after her initial gambit of planting, a voodoo object in the house and pin it on Bolanle flops, she becomes even more vengeful. Next she attempts to kill Bolanle by serving her poisoned food at her son's birthday. Again, this too fails, as the poisoned food is eventually eaten by Segi, the eldest child of the family whose mother, as usual, is Iya Femi's lone collaborator in the latest diabolical scheme.

The roots of Iya Femi's almost complete lack of redeeming features can be traced to her extremely difficult childhood. Indeed hers can correctly be diagnosed as hysterical "reenactments" of traumatic experiences from her younger days. She loses both her parents in quick succession long before reaching her teens. Her uncle who has been a beneficiary of her father's generosity immediately usurps her late father's property and promptly farms her out to the city to work as a maid in a wealthy household. Although her employers, the Adeigbe's, have more than enough to spare, they treat her like scum and deny her access to education of any sort. She is only allowed to sleep on a mat under the stairs in a house with room enough for everyone, she is forced to work without resting and, to worsen matters, as she approaches pubescence she is serially sexually abused by Tunde, the eldest of the Adeigbe children and the only one who, perhaps stung by guilt, manages to occasionally give her some help. All these toughen her and drain her of every dram of the milk of human kindness. Consequently, other people's misfortunes which ordinarily will usually draw pity from any normal person, at best, elicit feelings of schadenfreude from her. For example, she had an "initial joy" (128) when "Grandma [her tormentor-in-chief in the Adeigbe household] slipped in the bathtub and broke her leg" (128). Similarly, a barely concealed note of glee is discernable in her tone as she narrates her return to the village, several years later, to burn her father's house so as to wreak revenge on her uncle and his wife:

I barged past her and locked us both in. I put the key in my bra and poured paraffin on the clothes in the wardrobes, the baskets of food. I emptied the can onto the over-worn shoes stacked in the corner. I even upturned the paraffin stoves for good measure. It took a lot for me to swallow my laughter when she

started banging on the door, shouting, “Don’t kill me!” Don-key me, more like. That would have been closer to the truth! (135)

Iya Femi’s trauma defies neat categorization into any of the three forms of inappropriateness articulated by Most in his classification of trauma cases. As stated earlier, Most divides trauma patients into those who “might feel the emotion into the total absence of any stimulus whatsoever (they might be fully delusional)” (444), those who “might react to a real stimulus with the wrong emotion (e.g., with fear instead of anger, or love instead of envy)” (444) and those who “might react to a real stimulus with the right emotion, but in the wrong quantity (too much or too little)” (444). Clearly there seems to be a hybrid of the last two: the reaction to trauma-inducing stimuli with an excess amount of the wrong emotion.

Bolanle’s case appears even more sharply drawn. Her traumatic experience seems more deeply felt. She appears to be more aware of the change in her life brought about by the traumatic experience. An educated urban girl with educated parents and who holds a Bachelor’s in English to boot, it is entirely unexpected that she condescends to becoming the fourth wife of a semi-literate trader. She manifests several symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. For instance, she is repeatedly unable to attain full coital enjoyment in her marriage as orgasm constantly eludes her. Indeed, intercourse with her husband is little more than a ritual chore incapable of engendering any form of bonding between the couple. Referring to her frigidity, she notes as follows: “Now there is no pleasure in the pleasing, no sweetness in the surrender. Baba Segi only comes to deposit his seed in my womb” (43). She also manifests symptoms of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, especially hoarding, i.e. a compulsive craving for and collection of items which she hardly has any need or use for. She splurges a fortune of what she receives by way of a dole from her husband on crockery and bric-a-brac which she hardly puts to any use. She invests this uncontrollable accumulation with therapeutic/tranquilizing powers. As she narrates, “I’ve been ruffled by the red-thread incident [i.e. the failed attempt by her co-wives to frame her up] and could think of no better way to calm myself than to spend the day at Sango market. I decided to visit the bric-a-brac stall around lunchtime. My intention was to buy something really ostentatious like a copper plate...” (90). Her “abnormal” behavior, we find in the narrative, has its roots in much younger days. At fifteen, Bolanle is clearly the apple of her mother’s eye—the older of Mrs Akande’s daughters; the one who can do no wrong; who is never beaten to second place in her academic work; the one who can be counted upon to be always prim and proper. She is the envy of Lara, her younger sister. All that changes on a rainy day in Ibadan. She has gone to church and, on her way back is trapped in the rain. The roads are so bad, taxi drivers show no inclination towards picking passengers. Along comes a knight in shining armour to offer her a ride which she initially declines. She later succumbs to his entreaties, but is driven not to her own house but to the strange knight-errant’s house ostensibly for him to fetch a trifle before taking her to her home. He ends up raping her in addition to manhandling her. As she recalls, “I touched my face, thankful that the swelling [caused by his blows] was hardly noticeable. What I had hoped to save for my husband has been wrenched from me and all I had to show for it was an excruciating ache and a dishevelled hair” (115). Elsewhere she notes, “after what happened, tried hard to continue to be myself but I slowly disappeared. I *became* Bolanle—the soiled, damaged woman” (16) [author’s emphasis]. Her use of the word “damaged” to characterize her condition recalls an assertion made by Ta! to the effect that: “rape was originally conceived of as a crime against property... at issue in a rape case was a woman’s lowered value (as “damaged goods”)) (155). This is clearly a traumatic experience, if we follow Tal’s claim that “an individual is traumatized by a life-threatening event that displaces his or her preconceived notions about the world” (15). Bolanle is thoroughly shaken by her experience and is incapable of living it down. In fact, Bolanle implies a parallel between her rape and death. She regards her post-rape state as death when she opens her

account of her rape thus: “Ten years ago, I stood beneath that same agbalumo tree not far from here. I was alive then” (110) [emphases added]. It is this life-changing event that informs her decision to marry Baba Segi. As she puts it, “Don’t get me wrong. I didn’t only come here [Baba Segi’s home] to get away from my mother; I came to escape the feeling of filth that followed me. If I stayed at home, I knew the day would come when Mama would open the door and find pools of blood at my wrists” (16) Thus we may conclude that her marriage to Baba Segi, in spite of her mother’s vociferous protestation, is a consequence of her psychic neurosis. This event continues to stalk her even into her marriage. For instance, she lapses into a fit of stuttering when, during an interview with one of the gynaecologists to which she and her husband go in their quest for an offspring, the following dialogue ensues:

‘Mrs Alao, when did you have your first sexual encounter?’ the doctor asked again.

‘I was... I was... the first? I was fifteen and eight months, four months before my sixteenth birthday.’ (37).

Clearly the precision she displays in telling her age at the time of the incident leads one to the conclusion that she is still trapped in time. Her ability to summon the resources of memory at such short notice in answer to an apparently unexpected question shows that she has not moved an inch away, emotionally, from the state in which that life-altering experience has thrust her.

Conclusion

In the foregoing, an attempt has been made to account for the experiences of two major characters in Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, namely Iya Femi and Bolanle, in the light of studies on trauma. Testimonies [telling or sharing] has been identified as a major path to therapy or healing for the trauma survivor, perhaps drawing on the adage that, “a problem told or shared is a problem half-solved.” Accordingly, Lola Shoneyin avails her characters of the therapeutic possibilities of the act of telling. With very few exceptions where omniscient, third-person [authorial] narrator intervenes just to provide some filling, the story is told in turns by each of the characters. The survivor-characters are thus “partakers” in the “writing” of this literature of trauma. As Tal would have us believe, “such writing serves both as validation and cathartic vehicle for the traumatized author [character, in this case]” (21).

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