



TRAUMA IN SELECTED POEMS OF CHINUA ACHEBE, J. P. CLARK-
BEKEDEREMO, AND AKACHI ADIMORA-EZEIGBO.

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Abstract

The essay combines the psychoanalytic theory of trauma and textual criticism to inquire into war and other conflicts and their attendant trauma as reflected in selected poems of J.P. Clark-Bekederemo (a veteran Nigerian poet from the Niger Delta), Chinua Achebe (who played a prominent role in the civil war that raged in Nigeria between 1967 and 1970, a veteran novelist and poet from Eastern Nigeria), and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo (a novelist and contemporary Nigerian poet also from Eastern Nigeria). The paper explores trauma in selected poems of the above poets as both a physical and an emotional wound. The poets' concerns, thoughts, and dissatisfactions about war and other conflicts and their attendant wound whether physical or emotional are explored. The essay concludes that trauma is the product of violence; it has both mental and physical presence; it is both individual and collective. The under-studied poems reflect both trauma and the transfer of trauma from one generation to the other.

Keywords: conflicts, poetry, trauma, violence, war

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Introduction

War and conflicts are inevitable facts in human social interactions (Spencer and Yang 1495). War results from either intra-national or international conflicts as the case may be. Intra-national conflict is conflict among citizens of the same nation. This kind of conflict can arise from differences in culture, race, religion or ideology. Spencer and Yang claim that intra-national conflicts have diverse implications in inter-tribal relations, religious contentions, ideological contradictions, geo-political considerations, racial tensions, and ethnic unity and friction (1496). We live in societies where conflicts (intra-ethnic or intra-national) abound. Some of these conflicts when not properly managed end in violence. Violence often leaves both physical and mental scars on the victims of violent incidences.

In 1967, a war broke out in Nigeria. This war, severally called the Nigeria civil war or the Biafra war or, as Achebe calls it in *There Was a Country*, “the Nigeria-Biafra war” (95), stands as a significant pillar in the history of Nigeria. The war was the result of intra-national conflict that was not properly handled. This war has claimed a spot in the psyche of almost every Nigerian, both those who witnessed it and those who heard of it. Among the latter group are those who were not home when it happened and those who were not born when it happened. Whether equally or unequally, the war has affected every one of us. It is our collective experience whether experienced directly or by proxy. The war is in the memory of all Nigerians. The war represents the collective memory and trauma of all Nigerians.

This essay explores the poems of Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo (two veteran Nigerian poets), and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo (a contemporary female Nigerian poet) who have captured war and conflict in their collections of poems. Achebe’s poetry has attracted the critical attention of Annie Gagiano who concentrated on his “A Mother in a Refugee Camp” and concludes that the poem exemplifies the “Achebean pattern” of registering loss, defeat and failure (1081). The same poem also forms the focus of P. Satyanarana’s criticism. Chike Okoye assesses Achebe’s war poetry from the perspective of pathos, a style depicting emotional appeal.

Clark-Bekederemo’s poetry is topical and concerned with the state of Nigeria as a nation, according to Aderemi Bamikunle (315). Thomas R. Knipp observes his poetry to be linguistically simple and direct. He is classified as a “weeping poet” by Iyabode Omolara Daniel (151), who examines the pain and anguish of the poet over the civil war in *Casualties*.

Niyi Akingbe studies the canvassing for a re-examination of societal ethos while acknowledging the lamentation of the dearth of moral and social values in Nigerian society imbued in the poetics of Adimora-Ezeigbo’s poetry. Godwin I. N. Emezue observes that she writes to “voice her angst against the social and cultural degradation of the woman and the impoverishment of the masses” (50). Olawale Taju Ajayi perceives Adimora-Ezeigbo as a poet whose caustic eyes capture the very essence of the Nigerian mindlessness.

Through their poetry, Chinua Achebe, J. P. Clark-Bekederemo, and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo reflect traumatizing experiences and images, whether individual or

collective, situate trauma within the memory space and life of the victims of war, and depict the signs and extent of traumatic experiences.

Reflections on Trauma

Trauma is a double wound. Its double wound nature is based on its dual definitions. Cathy Caruth identifies these two definitions or meanings of trauma. She traces the first meaning of trauma to its earlier Greek meaning and its second meaning to its definition in psychiatric literature. According to Caruth, to the Greek, trauma is a wound or injury: "inflicted on a body" (3). For trauma's meaning in psychiatric literature she notes: "In its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud's text, the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (3). From the foregoing and its hint at Freud's argument, it can be understood that the wound inflicted on the body can be referred to as trauma just like the wound inflicted upon the mind. Freud, in his discussion on trauma, analyses the effects of trauma when he notes:

The symptomatic picture presented by traumatic neurosis approaches that of hysteria in the wealth of its similar motor symptoms, but surpasses it as a rule in its strongly marked signs of subjective ailment (in which it resembles hypochondria or melancholia) as well as in the evidence it gives of a far more comprehensive general enfeeblement and disturbance of the mental capacities. (6)

The above reveals that traumatic neurosis enfeebles or weakens the traumatized as well as disturbs their mental capacities. It also reveals that the effects of trauma are similar to that of melancholia, a state of extreme mourning.

Caruth explains further on the second meaning of trauma by identifying what Freud suggests about trauma in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 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 and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. (4)

The further clarification on trauma reveals the two ways in which trauma manifests, that is, in nightmares and in repetitive actions of the victims who survived violent incidences, including terror as included by Ann Kaplan. It should be noted that the trauma of war just like the trauma of terror represents a heavy burden on people who have experienced any of the two forms of conflict. Kaplan identifies two types of trauma, individual and collective trauma. There is a symbiotic relation between individual and collective trauma. Trauma is often transferred from the individual to the community and from one individual to a generation. Thus, there is a link between the individual trauma and the collective trauma the same way there is a link between individual trauma and trans-generational trauma.

The perspective on the transfer of trauma is put in focus by Liu Humin thus: "If trauma is transmitted from individuals to the whole community and even the whole people, from one generation to the next, it constitutes the communal or collective memory of trauma for the whole nation" (112). Quoting Arthur Neal's argument, he says:

A collective trauma grows out of the shared experience of a deplorable event that falls outside the range of ordinary human experience...an extraordinary event becomes a

national trauma under circumstances in which the social system is disrupted to such a magnitude that it commands the attention of all major subgroups of the population. (112)

Trauma can be transmitted from one generation to the next through speech behavior or emotions, from one historical era to the next through history textbooks, literary works and records of various kinds. Trauma transmitted through literary texts can represent communal trauma that remains in the collective memory of a people, a nation or even of the whole world. Thus, through a literary text, drama, prose or poetry, the traumas of the past become ingrained in the collective memories of the society and provide reference points to draw upon when the need arises.

Traumatizing Images and Experiences

Poetry has the power to capture events as they happen. Poetry is like a camera, still or moving. The poets chosen for this study display the power of poetry to capture the moment as they capture pictures of war and violence in their poems. Achebe begins his poem, "Air Raid" as quoted below:

It comes so quickly
the bird of death
from evil forests of Soviet technology. (19)

The poem, using the deitic method, captures a single moment which may be individual but with a significance that defies definition. In the first stanza, the poem captures the role of the first world or foreign nations in the propagation of war in third world countries or in less developed nations. The poet highlights the fact that the instruments for prosecuting wars, especially the civil war that took place in Nigeria, come from one of the nations that can be classified as a first world country as at the time the war was fought. The poet continues his portrayal in the deitic manner of presentation in the second stanza:

A man crossing the road
to greet a friend
is much too slow. (19)

The major focus of the poem is the traumatizing moment and image captured in the second part of the second stanza of the poem, captured mimetically. The traumatic effect of this image can only be captured in the picture of a fellow human being split in two which is left in the mind's eye. The poet places this picture before the reader in hypothesis thus:

His friend cut in halves
has other worries now
than a friendly handshake
at noon. (19)

The question we may ask is "what became of his friend who survived the raid? Was he ever the same thereafter? What did his dream become like after witnessing such a traumatic incident?" These questions that are not asked nor answered in the poem will help us define the trauma of the man who witnesses the violent dismembering of his friend. They will help us probe into his life after the violent

incident and what may happen by the time he passes his experiences through his actions and inactions to his children or others close to him. The probing into his mental predicament will help us understand his individual trauma, while the probing into how he passes his experience to others will help us understand how individual trauma becomes collective.

J. P. Clark-Bekederemo captures in poetry another traumatizing image of war in his poem, "Benin Sacrifice":

And yet another screen is rent
Off our bedside...
In the glare before dark,
Two rams are led out,
One already broken and on
A stretcher, the other still strutting
On his own steam... (93)

Clark is more subtle in his presentation. He presents euphemistically, a particularly disturbing picture of the execution of people during the civil war in Nigeria. The two rams that are led out in the above quoted lines from his poem are metaphoric representations of the two people that have been brought out to be executed. The story told is that the Nigerian soldiers during the war went from house to house searching for the Igbos or Biafrans. Any one of them found was brought out for public execution. The caliber of people present at the execution shows that it was a public function. The poet presents the traumatizing execution scene thus:

Before a full arena
Adorned by governor, trader, and
Parlour wife, two rams are led
Hooded to stakes, anchored
To barrels of sand...
They are strung upright.
One seems at a standstill
With the hour, the other
Rippling as the crowd now
And many decades before...
Then the priest commanding
Intones the charge, and the latest
Instrument of slaughter stutter out
A message mortal at once to two rams
Now men again in the city of blood...
And another screen is rent
Off our bedside. (93)

The weight of the event of war, the effects of it, and the reactions its recounting could generate have forced the poet to relay it in metaphoric form. This notwithstanding, the trauma of the witness is still very glaring in the manner of its presentation.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's "Violated Ogoni Women" (*Heart Songs*) presents this traumatic image in an incident that resulted from internal conflict which happened in Ogoni land in the very recent past. It takes time to note the gory details

of the violent rape of women in the cause of carrying out a federal order by members of the country's army:

tears flow down
as blood flows
Delta not lacking
these bizarre
tributaries
one red like your soil
the other
colourless
like your life
savaged first
you watch
your daughters
ravaged
by men armed
to the teeth
some younger than you:
men of blood
on a blood drinking
spree. Virgins' hymen
torn to shreds
with violence
impunity!
their blood
mingles
with the blood and soil
of the land (124-125)

The poem begins with an opening formula, an apostrophic reference to those affected by the psychic traumatic event that motivated the poet to write. The poem is addressed to the Ogoni women affected by the incidence. The central or driving imagery of this poem is water. This is relevant because of the part of the country the affected hail from. Water is significant to the life of women from the Niger-Delta area of Nigeria and it is a part of their natural environment. The poet uses this liquid imagery to highlight the psychological effect of the violence unleashed on these women. She concentrates on traumatic liquid substances like tears and blood to build similes that reflect the effects of violence in the society. The blood spilled in the course of this incidence is compared to the red soil of the delta just as the flow of tears is compared to the colourless life of not just the women but of the entire people of the area. The poet did not leave the trauma of virgin daughters of the Niger-Delta being raped, and the pains of mothers watching their daughters being raped is captured in the line that refers to "torn hymen." The persona marks this historical loss as she looks back in sadness to other similar losses in the past. She alludes to what happened during the Nigeria Civil War in the remote past and the Rwanda Genocide in the not too distant past to situate the trauma which resides in her memory transferred from the past. This psychic event becomes a trigger for the memory, re-calling traumatic events of the past that are still in the recesses of the people's collective consciousness.

The images of trauma are also captured in Chinua Achebe's "A Mother in a Refugee Camp." This poem is a picture that unfolds the images of this psychological state slowly. It can be said that the poet chose this style of telling or portrayal because of the deep emotional grasp he wants the poem to have. The scene painted in the poem is bereft of the action of war, but its goriness is as intense. The poem captures the images of trauma, especially in the characters of the refugee mother and her child.

The first six lines of the poem are dedicated to painting the background of the picture of trauma. This background can as well be called the scene of death. It presents death in all its horror and odour. In the camp, no basic necessity is available – no water, no food, no health care. Mal-nutrition, hunger, and disease are the agents of death in this camp as in all refugee camps in war torn areas.

From the second half of the seventh line, the poet narrows the lens of his poetic camera on the central focus of the poem, the mother and her dead or almost dead mal-nourished child. He begins by pointing out her difference from other mothers in the camp. This difference is a red flag for the traumatized state of most if not all the mothers in the camp. This difference is the first focus for us as a significant indicator of trauma. In trying to get out of trauma, most trauma victims try to distance themselves from the scene and images of their trauma. The other mothers can be viewed in this light. The fact that they have ceased to care may mean that they have actually been fully taken over by their trauma to the extent that they may have become emotional vagrants.

The refugee mother and her child who are the primary focus of the poem are depicted as the true images of traumatized victims or casualties of war. The poet captures the mother's trauma with the following signals: the first signal is captured with her looks – "she held a ghost-smile between her teeth / And her eyes the memory / of a mother's pride..." (16). It is important to take note of the way "the memory" has been used by the poet. The memory is captured in a contrastive position – memories of events before the traumatic moment and the fresh memory of the war. These contrastive memories haunt her as she struggles to stay sane. The second signal is captured in her action and inaction:

... she had bathed him
And rubbed him down with bare palms.
She took from their bundle of possessions
A broken comb and combed
The rust-colored hair left on his skull
And then – humming in her eyes – began carefully to part it. ("A Mother in a Refugee Camp," 16)

The action captured here is as revealing of the traumatized state of her mind as the carefreeness of the other mothers is of their own state. These actions reveal that her trauma has led her to a state of dementia.

Achebe further captures the images of trauma in another of his poems entitled "Christmas in Biafra." In this poem the traumatic moment is described as a "sunken-eyed moment" (17). The eyes are sunken because they have been denied of both physical and emotional nourishment. The traumatic moment is like the malnourished child in "A Mother in a Refugee Camp." The moment is further captured through personification indicating that the image of the moment is the image of the

traumatized victims caught in the middle of it. According to the poem, the moment wobbles, an expression that can be also used to describe the traumatized. His/her path is a downward rocky steepness. The traumatized victim's frame is made of broken bones and his/her psychological disposition is marked and overshadowed with fear and a future that is a hideous concourse of gathering sorrows in the valley – which valley? Probably the valley of the shadows of death!

The war has taken away the sweetness and beauty of the past; in the case of the poem, past Christmases. This past is captured by the poet as “irretrievable.” The poet again like in “A Mother in a Refugee Camp” highlights the dankness of the present predicament by contrasting it with the past. This time, the poet contrasts what is happening in the temporal and physical setting of the poem with what is happening in other lands and in a natural environment which is not disturbed by the activities of man:

Its exploding inferno transmuted
by cosmic distances to the peacefulness
of a cool twinkling star...To death-cells
of that moment came faraway sounds of other
man's carol floating on crackling waves
mocking us... (“Christmas in Biafra” 17)

The next stanzas of the poem play on contrast to highlight the circumstances of the victims of the hunger and trauma of war. This poem can be said to be a sequel to “A Mother in a Refugee Camp.” The child in this poem is also dying of malnutrition, like the near-dead or dead child in the former poem. The contrast in this poem is a shocking one. The mother who is suffering from famine is contrasted against the mother of the child Jesus and the “Child / Jesus plump wise-looking and rose-cheeked” is contrasted against the “infant son flat like a dead lizard” (18).

Again, this poem like “A Mother in a Refugee Camp” is a clear depiction of trauma as well as a medium for transferring trauma to the collective memory of the people.

The Signs and Extent of Trauma

J. P. Clark in his poem entitled “Song” concentrates on one of the indicators or signs of trauma, fear. The poem dwells on the fear that arises from seeing the faces of dead loved ones. It is surprising that the living dread to see the faces of the dead who were their friends when they were alive. This portrayal shows that trauma may not be for the dead but for the living. Only the living fear to see the faces of the dead and this may be because the sight foreshadows their own death. The persona of the poem would rather “look the sun in the face” (61) than look at the faces of the friends he has lost, especially in the war. Looking the sun in the face may cause blindness which is damage to the physical body but looking at the face of the dead will cause damage to the mental intangible part of the human being.

Another sign or indicator of trauma is anger. This is identifiable in the tone of Achebe's poem, “Remembrance Day.” In anger, the persona in the poem challenges the hypocritical activities of leaders on Remembrance Day noting that the dead would have preferred to stay alive. The anger of the persona in the poem is a reflection of his state of mind as well as an indicator for his trauma. Trauma displayed through anger

can result in violence. No wonder the persona warns of an impending violence in the latter part of the poem.

The poem does not only reflect an indicator of trauma but also reflects on the extent of trauma. In the process of lashing out at the hypocritical activities of leaders who may have declared or participated in declaring the war or spurred others, especially the dead, to fight, the persona concedes to the fact that those who are dead are not the only ones affected by the war. He notes that they who could be viewed as the cause of the war or the death of the remembered also suffered the trauma of the war. Thus, the poem becomes significant in trauma studies as it identifies that trauma is not only suffered by the victims of violence but also by the perpetrators of violence. The following lines from the poem are proof of this assertion:

...Admittedly you
suffered too. You lived wretchedly
on all manner of gross fame;
you were tethered to the nervous
precipice day and night; your
groomed hair lost gloss, your
smooth body roundedness. Truly
you suffered much. (24)

Thus, from the foregoing, we establish that the trauma of war is a collective trauma as all suffer. The extent of this suffering can only be determined by knowing when it begins. In the case of the war, Achebe notes that it begins from "the first shot" as indicated in his poem by that title. The poem, "The First Shot" situates trauma within the boundaries of war and thus its first shot marks the beginning of trauma and the war that plagues the nation. Clark takes this further in the poem, "What the Squirrel Said." This poem captures metaphorically and symbolically how the seed of trauma is planted and identifies the different stages in its growth or expansion.

The poem identifies that trauma is not only caused by what is seen or felt but by what is heard, especially rumours of impending dangers. The first stanza depicts what has befallen the strong and mighty. The second stanza dwells on the dangerous effects of rumours of the destructions of war –

The rumour sprang seed
In the throat of a squirrel
The seed grew into a trunk
Inside fangs, inside horns
Wind from its blast blew down forests,
And the rage is not done, coils
Of it about us, about our necks. (71)

The situation of the squirrel in the lines quoted above is the situation of the mass members of the society. Our collective trauma comes more from the rumours we hear than from the scenes we have beheld. Thus, the extent of trauma ranges wide and almost indeterminate. All suffer trauma. This fact is given more credence by Clark in his poem, "Casualties." This is a poem written to show that the trauma of war cannot be said to have affected only a particular group of individuals. The poem shows that the war affected everyone. The war is a collective experience. The trauma of the war is in our collective memory.

In looking at the casualties or those who can be called war's trauma victims, the persona in the poem rules out the dead. The reason for this could be seen in the fact that most people see death as an escape route from trauma. This perspective is a little bit different from Achebe's in "Remembrance Day" who states thus:

you will regain lost mirth
and girth and forget. But when,
how soon, will they their death? Long,
long after you forget they turned
newcomers again before the hazards
and rigors of reincarnation, rude
clods once more who once had borne
the finest scarifications of the potter's
delicate hand now squashed back
into primeval mud, they will
remember... (25)

For Achebe, the living can be rehabilitated from their trauma but the dead, can they regain their lives? He views their trauma as permanent and indicates that the dead have memory too, for they will remember. Achebe's traditional background on reincarnation may have informed his speculation on the trauma of the dead but scientifically speaking this may raise a lot of dust.

Clark continues his poem by giving us a list of those who can be called casualties of the civil war. Those who received physical injuries who await their "burial by instalment" (95) are the first set of identified victims of trauma. The second set consists of "those who have lost / persons or property..." (95). The third set of trauma victims is made up of those who were incarcerated while the fourth set are those who began the war but lost control over it. Next to this set is the set of those who knew nothing about the war but who have been affected by the war anyway. Prominent among trauma victims are those who were caught in the midst of the action of war, "those who escaping / the shattered shell become prisoners in / a fortress of falling walls" (95).

In the third stanza of the poem, the poet extends the list of those who belong to the collective group affected by the trauma of the war to include "a good number well / outside the scenes of ravage and wreck" (95). The third stanza can be seen as the reason for the poem and that is, to show that all suffer trauma in a war situation, both those at home and those abroad; both those who physically fought and those who fought with their pen and mouth; both those whose property was stolen and those who stole other's property; both those who suffered "kwashiorkor" (96) in the refugee camps and those who never neared the camps, the trauma of war is suffered by all. All are casualties. War is a collective trauma.

Adimora-Ezeigbo explores the psychological extent of trauma in "Peace and Justice" (*Waiting for Dawn*):

He who has fought a battle learns vigilance:
Truth for shield
Courage for weapon
Caution for boots
Honesty for helmet
Only then dare to storm

The Rock where the Monster
 And his cubs are holed:
 Haul out the whore of Sycophancy
 Expel the incubus of Ethnicity
 Prosecute the demon of Pride
 Slay the jackal of Injustice
 Cut down the conman of Corruption
 Guillotine hydra-headed Greed.

Then welcome Victory
 Mission accomplished
 Ushering in a millennium of Peace
 And Justice. (55)

This stanza of the poem begins by reminding the readers of the need to be vigilant before they act. The call for vigilance reflects the fear innate in the persona. This fear is the psychological reflection of the trauma suffered in the past which she is reminded of by the nature of the enemies which they have to confront in present circumstances. The enemies are metaphorically referred to as “Monster/and his cubs,” “whore of sycophancy,” “incubus of ethnicity,” “the demon of pride,” “jackal of injustice,” “conman of corruption,” and “hydra-headed greed.” These personified vices, identified as the people’s enemies, are the psychological diseases that are eating up the people’s nation. The personified vices are responsible for the traumatizing war fought in the past. The poem ends on a positive note assuring the people of victory when they attack their enemies following suggested preparation modes. The modes are the different parts of the armour the people need to have in place to confront their enemies. First, they need “truth for shield.” Second, they need “courage for weapon” and third, “caution for boot.” They also will need “honesty for helmet.”

Conclusion

The poems of Achebe, Clark-Bekederemo, and Adimora-Ezeigbo reflect that trauma is the product of violence. These poems reflect that trauma has both physical and mental presence. The physical presence of trauma can be noticed in the victims’ looks – their eyes are sunken, their hair loses gloss, and their bodies lose roundedness. The mental presence of trauma can be noticed in the victims’ behavior – anger is their front, fear marks their actions and inactions, they struggle to distance themselves from reality leading them to emotional vagrancy. Trauma is both individual and collective. The trauma of war and conflict is collective. These poems are not just used to reflect trauma, they are also used for transferring trauma to the collective memory of the society. The poems also serve as voices for the mental wound of our society.

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