

Trauma and black women's identity in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract

Recognition as a notion made relevant by cultural trauma theories occurs in recollection of old suffering. This is actualized in trauma narratives like Morrison's (2008) *A Mercy* and Adichie's (2006) *Half of a Yellow Sun* to necessitate the emergence of cross-cultural solidarity among Black women. This paper examines the similarities of the effects of slavery and colonialism on African and African-American women's identity. It explores the deep cultural trauma of black womanhood and seeks to understand it through a postcolonial approach to trauma studies taken mostly from Fanon's (1967) *Black Skin, White Masks* but proposed more recently by Buelens and Craps (2008). This approach, as well as Eyerman's (2002) concept of Cultural trauma and African-American identity will form the theoretical backdrop of this investigation. The major preoccupation of the paper is to establish a link between the traumatic experiences of slavery and colonialism and the identity of black women. How these experiences and the telling of them can forge cross-cultural solidarity and then healing is the focus because these traumas have been examined from other perspectives that have not isolated Black women's identity.

Keywords: Black womanhood, cultural trauma, identity

Introduction

In trauma studies, definitions of trauma have often been derived from the psychoanalytic perspectives of White people or dominant groups of the Western world, thereby reducing the attention given to what feminist psychotherapist Brown (1995,100) has called "insidious trauma" that stems from "the traumatogenic effects of oppression ... that do violence to the soul and spirit"(107). This insidious trauma is exemplified in Frantz Fanon's (1967) description of being a witness to racial fear in a White child who looks on Blackness as demonic and anything but full humanity.

Fanon's (1967) notion of trauma marks a departure from the Western position, a far cry from the individual-centered positions of Caruth (1996) based on Freud (1931). In postcolonial contexts, Buelens and Craps point out this shift from the person to "larger social entities" (STiN, 2008, p.3) such as communities or nations as the differentiating factor. The social manifestations of the traumas of colonialism and slavery would not be fully done justice in an individualized psychoanalytic model is employed to make sense of it. This is because the whole point of studying these traumas is to strive towards collective healing and not the "salvation of the soul" as Fanon (1967) puts it. He further argues in *Black Skin, White Masks* that:

The black man's chronically neurotic state of mind cannot be alleviated
As long as the economic structure that brought it in him remains unchanged
In addition, there will be an authentic dis-alienation only to the degree to which
Things in the world will have been restored to their proper places. (p.11-12)

In Adichie's (2006) *Half of a Yellow Sun*, postcolonial trauma fiction is exemplified. The novel presents an opportunity to interrogate the representation of women's trauma in war, an often neglected point of

view in studying postcolonial trauma novels. With its setting in the years leading up to the Nigerian civil war of 1967-1970 and after, Adichie's (2006) work reveals horrific pictures of the war- violence, starving children, loss and displacement through the eyes of her female protagonist Olanna. She is a witness to the devastating effects of the war on her family and life as she once knew it. Her story is enmeshed in the war which is an offshoot of colonialism. As a result of the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern regions of Nigeria by the British colonialists, decades of direct rule in the South and indirect rule in the north produce unequal education between the Northerners and Southerners. The predominantly Christian South enjoyed the benefits of Western education more than the Islamic North thereby putting the Southerners in Administrative positions after the country's independence. According to accounts by Michael Gould (2013) in *The Biafran War: The Struggle for Modern Nigeria*:

Northerners had historically failed to embrace Western ideologies continuing to favour their Muslim and Middle Eastern heritage as encouraged by the British. The North's tragedy was because it failed to adapt to western ways, there was a vacuum in its economic, Educational and administrative development. Because the South had readily absorbed Western ideology, its people were only too willing to fill this vacuum. This meant that much of the economic and Administrative life of the North was controlled by people from the South. (p. 2-3)

Tempers run high when a series of military coups saw the installation of an Igbo president. Riots erupt in different parts of the North and a counter coup killed Aguiyi Ironsi, the Igbo president alongside other top Military men of Igbo ethnicity. These riots culminated in the massacre of more and more Christian Igbo people in the north. When efforts to at brokering peace like the Aburi accord in Ghana failed, the Governor of the Eastern region Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Ojukwu was left with no choice than to call for secession of the South East of Nigeria as an independent Republic called Biafra. The war that ensued from this proclamation forms the background of Adichie's novel which derives its title from the Biafran flag.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, De Mey (2011) observes that Adichie intersects history, Literature and trauma hence the author's note at the end of the novel which explains as follows: "this book is based on the Nigeria-Biafra War of 1967-1970. While some characters are based on actual persons, their portrayals are fictitious as are the events surrounding them" (p. 12) invariably, the historical undertone of this novel, similar to Toni Morrison's (date) *A Mercy* is a qualification of sorts for their study as representatives of collective trauma. The Biafran war therefore, represents the result of identity crisis at the end of colonialism. Fanon's (1967) *Black Skin, White Masks* offers an explanation on the link between colonialism and mental disorders. He argues that as a result of the Master/slave relationship obtainable in colonial situations, an invalidation of the colonized group's humanity occurs and lingers. Colonialism amounts to being "fixed into an identity of shame and contempt" (p. 95-96) which can manifest in self-harm. Despite its concentration on postcolonial approach to trauma novels in general, Buelens and Craps (2008) draw from Fanon (1967) to describe the collective nature of trauma precipitated by colonialism. This social situation as seen in the Biafran war narrative affects everyone. However, since trauma studies is an umbrella that embraces across fields, the gender-specific trauma of women in Adichie's work and how their identity is formed as a result opens up discussions here.

Caruth (1996), in her *Unclaimed Experience* recognizes that "Trauma itself may provide the very link between cultures" (p.11), thereby providing reinforcement to the argument of Buelens and Craps that trauma forms a bridge "Between disparate historical experiences... listening to the trauma of another can contribute to cross-cultural solidarity and to the creation of new forms of community" (p.3). This linking of cultural experiences provides the basis for the freshness of perspective that this paper attempts. Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) is also a historical novel which traces important aspects of African-American history from colonial times. Her emphasis, however, is on the effects of slavery on a group of Black women on a Virginia farm. Like Adichie's (date) heroine and war, Morrison's (2008) protagonist witnesses the debilitating events of slavery as a cultural traumatic chain of occurrences. Morrison (2008) offers a glimpse of into the very beginnings of slavery in the colonies of the people's war of 1697 which happens as a rebellion of commoners against Aristocrats. The war, also known as Bacon's rebellion, is led by a fierce-tempered Englishman named Bacon. He unites Black slaves, White servants and Native Americans against the powerful Virginia land owners.

When the rebellion gets aborted by the powerful planters, and its chief players hanged, it was the black slaves who were left to bear the brunt because all the subsequent laws following the botched revolution directly affect them. Morrison (2008) points out that:

By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to any white man to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave's maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever (p. 10)

In his *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the formation of African-American identity*, Eyerman (2002) examines how the trauma of slavery is an influence on the identity of African-Americans. He believes that slavery is a cultural marker with inescapable influence on the Black psyche. He argues that slavery is "something lived and living... inherited and transmitted..." (p.188). Through the use of the concept of generations, he asserts that generations can be defined by their collective memory of events that are historically significant to them. In *A Mercy*, slavery is depicted as a collective memory much like Adichie's (2006) portrayal of the Biafran war and its indelibility on generations of Igbo people. Isolating the experiences of women in the two texts and the implication of such cultural trauma on their psychic identity will grant us a rare look into the resemblance of Black womanhood in Africa and America.

Through descriptive analyses of *A Mercy* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* as two historical novels documenting the cultural trauma of two demographics of Black women, new questions are raised about postcolonial trauma and the indentured remains of slavery and Black women's lives in general. The similarities in the trans-generational identity-crises faced by Black women as survivors of loss and numerous denigrating cultural experiences are investigated with the view to establish solidarity between the shared histories and begin a journey to healing through memory and telling.

Slavery and detachment in *A Mercy*

In *A Mercy*, Morrison (2008) whose works often resonate with recurring themes of childhood trauma presents Florens, a slave on a journey of self-actualization. Florens is in a household different from the one where she once lived with her mother and her 'mother's son'. Her familial connection is severed when her mother's Portuguese slave master decides to pay a debt with a slave. Florens' tortured sense of identity begins to manifest once she is detached from a mother she believes chooses to part with her instead of the precious little boy. This maternal abandonment forms one of the themes of the work. On arrival at the home of her new owner in Virginia, Florens struggles with feelings of alienation from the bond of motherhood despite the close relationship that develops between her and Lina, an Indian slave in the Vaark household. This feeling of loss is far-reaching, because according to the psychoanalysis theorist Carl Jung (1960):

The psyche pre-existent to consciousness... participates in the maternal psyche on the one hand, while on the other, it reaches across the daughter's psyche... every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter in her mother and every woman extends backwards into her mother and forward into her daughter (p. 188)

For Black women in America, this maternal loss is trans-generational; manifesting most during slavery because of the domination of the slaveholders who prevented strong family ties among slaves, thereby invalidating their humanity. Children of the slaves belonged to the slavers to sell as commodity to the highest bidder, often never to be reunited with family. In the case of Florens, D'Ortega, the owner of the Maryland plantation offers her at the age of eight to a creditor without batting an eyelid. Although Jacob Vaark, the new owner is the opposite of the cruel D'Ortega, the little girl is taken from her mother and nobody asks her opinion. Her mother views the taking of her daughter as an act of mercy towards the girl's salvation but Florens journeys through life trying to make sense of her mother's abandonment. Being sexually and physically abused by her master, Florens' mother is faced with the realization that her daughter is unprotected because "to be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below" (p.193)

The dent on Florens' psyche caused by maternal separation, makes her desperate in her relationship with the Blacksmith – a skilled healer whom she sets out to bring, after Varrk's death to heal his wife, Rebekka of her illness. In the Blacksmith, Florens forms the attachment she misses with her mother and the fierceness of the emotions she invests in that relationship is frightening enough to doom the relationship to an unfortunate end. "Your head is empty and your body is wild" (p.168) were among the last words the Blacksmith tells her. The Blacksmith's rejection brings back memories of her mother's abandonment. This second loss is deeper, because once again, another is preferred. Whereas her mother keeps her son in place of Florens, the Blacksmith chooses the adopted boy, Malaik over her. The deep grief of losing the life she plans to have with the Blacksmith soon gives way to self-awareness.

She decides to take his advice literally and own herself and write her story. “I am become wilderness, but I am also Florens” (p.161). She declares.

Florens also experiences double wound on her journey at Widow Ealing’s village, watching a woman and her daughter enjoying the type of bond she imagines having with her lost mother. On the same occasion, she experiences a traumatic incident similar to the one Frantz Fanon (1967) describes in *Black Skin, White Masks* of an encounter with a White baby frightened at the sight of a Black man. ‘Mama! See the Negro! I’m frightened!’ (p.112). In her case, there are White people who react on seeing her, like they have come face to face with an alien. One of the townswomen actually blurts out: “I have never seen any human this Black” (p.111).

In *Minha Mae*, Florens’s mother, Morrison (2008) also portrays an identity formation influenced by parting that only a mother knows. She considers letting go of her daughter as an act of mercy, a mother’s tough love and choice to spare her daughter the horrible possibilities she, herself has faced for years. She is overjoyed when Jacob Vaark laughs on sighting Florens, “On her feet was a pair of way-too-big woman’s shoes. Perhaps it was the feeling of license, a newly recovered recklessness along with the sight of those little legs rising like two bramble sticks from the bashed out, broken shoes that made him laugh (p.24). In the words of Otten (1993), “it is the ‘tough love’ of mother for child that finds most powerful expression in Morrison’s work; however, it is at the same time, a force so absolute that it forbids nothing, manifesting itself in startling acts disguised by cruelty” (p. 83). Like Sethe in Morrison’s (1987) *Beloved*, who chooses infanticide over relinquishing her child to slavery, Florens’ mother chooses abandonment as “the only one mercy that mother can offer in a destructive, dehumanizing world of slavery” (Jovovic, 2016, p.62). *Minha Mae*’s actions as well as her daughter’s interpretation of it and the way they are both affected by that event, contributes hugely to how their identity is formed by the unpalatable effects of slavery.

War and loss in half of a yellow sun

Adichie’s (2006) portrayal of the Biafran war and the women affected by it is achieved through two sisters- Olanna and Kainene. In addition to their shared traumas of the war, Olanna, a teacher at the university in Nsukka, experiences first hand, the horrific massacres of Igbos in Kano. On a visit to her favourite uncle in the Northern city before the war starts, she witnesses the brutal killing of her uncle’s family by a neighbour with whom she had exchanged pleasantries on her last visit. With the help of an old Muslim boyfriend, Olanna escapes Kano with her life but takes a long time to recover from the devastation she witnessed on her return journey. One indelible sight that stays with her, is the mother carrying the dismembered head of her dead child in a calabash (Adichie, 2006, p.149) on the train. After her safe arrival in Nsukka, it takes considerable time before she is strong enough to speak. Her identity undergoes significant evolution as she becomes an informed member of her community. Having been thrust into the middle of the conflict, and now armed with a deeper understanding of the injustice against people of her ethnic group, she begins a journey towards healing. This is made possible when she sees students in a protest burning effigies of the Head of state, Yakubu Gowon. At this sight, she is consumed “With a sweet surge that they all felt what she felt... as though it were liquid steel instead of blood that flowed through her veins” (p.163).

Adichie (2008) situates the war in the novel as a traumatic event necessitated by the effects of colonialism. This results in identity crisis faced by citizens of a young country on the wake of independence. In “Trauma and Nigerian novels”, Trauma critic, Novak (2007) notes that:

Telling the story of the Biafran Republic and the Nigerian civil war, *Half of a Yellow Sun* challenges the concept of the “postcolonial” by connecting the violence in post-independence Nigeria with the centuries of colonial rule. The economic, political and cultural domination of colonialism lingers in multiple ways long after the changing of flags (p.5)

It becomes clear that neocolonialism is traumatic in its effects on Biafran women’s identity. Their losses are deeply seared into their psyche every time a child dies of malnutrition or a spontaneous shelling steals a loved one. This reiterates Fanon’s (1967) stance that colonial trauma transcends just limited acts of domination or century-old conquests. He recognizes the everyday experiences of citizens of neocolonial lands who grapple with the unending trauma of fighting a war that the rest of the west might consider amusing. The reaction of the western media to the Biafran war as we see in Adichie’s (2008) work is not encouraging despite the huge death tolls of malnourished children, massacred adults and raped women. The war is unwittingly dismissed as:

'Ancient tribal hatreds' The Herald wrote, was the reason for the massacres. Time magazine titled its piece MAN MUST WHACK, an expression printed on a Nigerian lorry, but the writer had taken whack literally and gone on to explain that Nigerians were so naturally prone to violence that they even wrote about the necessity of it on passengers Lorries. Richard sent a terse letter off to Time. In Nigerian Pidgin English, he wrote, whack meant eat. (p.166)

All these take a toll on the women in the war. Olanna cannot break free from the image of severed head of the girl she had seen on her way escaping from the North, or the loss of her sister, Kainene. Only a few weeks to the war's end, Kainene crosses into enemy territory to find food for the growing number of dependents in the Refugee centre she runs. This travel to access black market food brings about her inexplicable disappearance. In spite of Olanna's efforts and the efforts of her British Biafra apologist boyfriend, Richard, no trace of Kainene is ever seen again even after the war ends and families begin reuniting. This loss leaves an indelible mark on Olanna and influences her identity. Before the war, we see her as a happy-go-lucky liberated woman who has refused to marry her professor lover, Odenigbo. She discards Ugwu, the houseboy's claim that Odenigbo impregnated Amala, a young village girl because his mother used a powerful juju on him. But at the end of the novel, we realize the lengths she is willing to go to find her sister. She seeks the services of a dibia to locate her lost sister to no avail and declares to our surprise, "I believe in it. I believe in everything. I believe in anything that will bring my sister home" (p.433).

Conclusion

The capacity of trauma to change lives in unimaginable ways has been examined; for this paper, how traumatic events affect black women's identity and how the traumas become a connecting bridge to connect cultures is key. African and African-American women as black women can discover similarities in their shared experiences of slavery and racism. The intent of the paper is to link cultural traumas within a framework of a postcolonial decolonized approach to trauma studies as well as cultural trauma and African-American identity. In Adichie's (2006) work, showcasing the trauma of Black women on African soil, the effects of war and loss shapes the identity of women while Morrison's (2008) story about Black womanhood in displacement indicates the struggle of familial detachments and loss brought about by "otherness" and objectification that comes with slavery.

The two novels project two sides to the story of Black women and this paper has tried to provide a linking ground for the two traumas in order to encourage solidarity across borders and create a sense of community which is necessary for communal healing and material recovery for black women no matter their cultural affiliation. Morrison's (2008) women have to make choices for survival similar to those made by women in Adichie's novel. For instance, Minha Mae chooses to give up her daughter for slavery in a different household to exempt her from the rape and abuse she herself faces at Jublio, the Virginia farm owned by D'Ortega. This choice results in a dent on Florens' psyche and forms her identity of neediness and dependence because she grapples with what she considers abandonment by her mother. In the end, however, she realizes that she can achieve any desired feat and chooses to give up dreams of domestication and motherhood and instead puts her knowledge of reading and writing to use to find healing through telling.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun* Olanna and Kainene make the choice to stay and fight for their young nation instead of taking the escape route their vain mother suggests. When she sees the unbearably increasing number of dying children and wounded people, Kainene decides to make the fated journey into the black market across military lines to get food supplies. Olanna gets a firsthand experience of the brutality unleashed on Igbos and it shapes her identity afterwards, she becomes a shadow of her once vibrant self and a woman, who when her sister goes missing, is willing to do whatever it takes to find her. She evolves into a new type of Nigerian woman, even after the war that remains conscious of the burden of hatred that burns across ethnic divides in a country jumbled together out of a colonial whim.

The link between the experiences of Morrison's (2008) women and Adichie's (2006) women is their Black womanhood and the role that colonialism and white hegemony plays in their different experiences. This study has examined this link and concludes that, as Eyerman suggests, cultural trauma is mainly about representation and "the means and media of representation are crucial, for they bridge the gap between individuals" (Eyerman, 2002, p.12). Through two historical novels about different histories of two demographic of Black women, solidarity is extended, because as Caruth (1996) puts it in *Unclaimed*

Experience,“ history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (p.24). And of course, there is the glaring point that African-American women are descendants of slaves forcefully taken out of Africa.

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