

War and Silenced Weep: Witnessing Wounds of Childhood Trauma in Sierra Leonean Life Writing

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Abstract

Combining autobiography and history in life writing, the memoir is one of the most popular forms of Civil War literature. The trauma of war, a shattering experience in itself, escalates illness in social life, soldiers, family especially women and children. Children in war-torn countries are often victims of violence and witnesses to various horrors associated with war and thus called 'war-affected' children. Examining traumatic childhood memories and ugly scars on the mind and soul in *The Devil that Danced on Water: A Daughter's Quest* (2002), a personal memoir of Aminatta Forna becomes the stuff of this paper. The healing process of the wounds from the war in the childhood psyche is influenced by constructs and focuses on the relationship between trauma and the child's imagination. Forna's trauma emerges as a representative of national wounds of Sierra Leone Civil War during 1990s.

Keywords: life writing, memoir, war trauma, wounds, psyche.

I don't want to remember my past

I fear for what my memory

Might bring before my eyes

I wonder whether I can continue my life

— Itta Benhaïem-Keller

Life writing is an inclusive term to describe the multitude of ways people construct true stories about their lives or the lives of others. It proposes to broaden the parameters of life and self-representation to cross-examine a set of life-story texts. Among writings that involve the recording of memories and experiences that renders pleasure and positive experience in re-living old memories and events - memoir, 'a story from life' writes about moments or events, both public and private that took place in the subject's life. Most of the memoirs are shaped by many influences, mostly adversities in life including war. War is a reality that involves people who are affected by fighting. Cathy Caruth, one of the proponents of the trauma theory remarks in her *Unclaimed Experience; Trauma, Narrative and History*, "Trauma is deeply tied to our own historical realities" (12). The touch of realism as a result of war has greatly shaped literature and other texts. The portrait of war through literature helps people to adjust to the effects of war by defining its significance, later enable them to accept the reality as part of the healing process. Literature of war shaped armed conflict and memories of it and how war affected forms of representation. Aminatta Forna, the daughter of a white British mother and a black African father from Sierra Leone has written her personal memoir *The Devil that Danced on the Water: A Daughter's Quest* (2002) as an act of catharsis and discovery of childhood traumatic episodes. This is an impressive contribution to the literature of post-colonial Africa, the mysterious continent that continues to resist all attempts to remake it in a Western image. As a child, Forna witnessed the upheavals of colonial Africa, danger, flight, the bitterness of exile in Britain, and the terrible consequences of her dissident father's stand against tyranny. People who are affected by tragic loss and trauma are those in general. With growing number of countries involved in armed conflicts, more children have come to suffer the atrocities of war.

The African continent has been ravaged by internal conflicts and insurgencies in the past decade. Writing trauma is a form of testimony to the unspeakable, recognizing the unconscious witnessing of the subject and thus Civil War memoirs drew variously on existing literary traditions. Judith Lewis Herman in *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence* tells that the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma. As the repeated infliction of a wound, the meaning of trauma itself (in both English and German), the Greek trauma, or 'wound,' originally referring to an injury inflicted on a body. 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. But what seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is 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 like Fornà's representations of childhood in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. Children in these war-torn countries are often direct or indirect victims of violence, or witnesses to various horrors associated with war and are thus so called war affected children. There are also children that are perpetrators, and minors who are in prison. These children are also victims of war and genocide. More than one lakh children under the age of 18 are currently fighting in African conflicts. The children are continuously exposed to insecurity and violence. With the background of the increasing traumatization of children in different war zones there is great need to refine the theorizing about the after-effects of the victims when taking their emotional state and character of the trauma in consideration. Children exposed to war manifest a higher rate of mental disorders compared with children in the general population, although prevalence data are inconsistent and likely depend on the nature of the trauma, the duration of exposure, diagnostic criteria used, and cultural discrepancies (Pearn 166)

The Devil that Danced on the Water: A Daughter's Quest is written by a mixed girl with a childhood split between the Africa and United Kingdom, inevitably her father's absence dominates the book. Aminatta Fornà is good at capturing the limited

understanding of a small child caught up in a complicated adult situation. The Sierra Leone she loves and the father she lost seem gone beyond recall. But she glues them together from a few sharp shades of memory, especially her memory of childhood without father. It is the mental echo of the abandoned child, writing back into life that has been taken away. Childhood trauma describes the impact of an event or a series of events during which a child feels helpless and pushed beyond their ability to cope. A range of different events might be traumatic to a child, including accidents, injuries, serious illness, natural disasters, war, terrorist attacks, assault, and threats of violence, domestic violence, neglect or abuse. This resulted in a memoir hand in hand with life, love and anger. Here is a little extract from a period when her father is in prison and she is living in London with her stepmother and her sibling.

“I used to walk down on a road, any road and say to
myself: If I can just hold my breath until I get to the
end of this street, Daddy will be released from prison.
Or, if I was crossing a bridge and a town went
underneath, I wished my father would be freed” (Forna 35).

Forna writes with a childish innocence and an adult maturity borne out of the pain of watching her father, her country and her world disintegrate into many pieces but also with the strength to seek out and reveal the truth. She wrote parallel with the violent politics of post colonial Africa - coups, counter coups, deception, bribery, lies, torture and murder through to the horrendous years of civil war and child soldiers. The effects of trauma are lasting; causing a person to live with deep emotional pain, fear, confusion after the event has passed. Living in war-torn areas is a reality many people face throughout the world (Quota & El-Sarraj 390) hundreds and thousands are affected every year. Many of these individuals and families are forced to leave, because they have been persecuted, or had left and cannot return to their countries because of the fear that they will be. With the growing number of countries involved in armed conflict, more children

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have come to suffer the atrocities of war. Displacement, witnessing violent acts, bearing arms, being victims of direct hostilities is some of the traumatic experiences faced by children in a war affected nation.

Here evaluates the use of trauma in children as a paradigm for interpreting effects of Sierra Leone Civil War in *The Devil that Danced on the Water: A Daughter's Quest*. She says, "My childhood ended in this horrible way. I lived in a country where I didn't trust anybody. Something awful had happened and no one was talking about it." Her father Mohamed Forna, a doctor and leading Sierra Leonean dissident, was executed for treason. After twenty five years Forna was determined to identify her father's killers, her other motive for writing was to clarify her hazy clutch of disconnected memories; seeing snow or tasting Coca-Cola for the first time. "I wrote that memoir because I was completely confused," she says. "No one ever sits you down at age eight and says, 'Aminatta, this is what's happened so far.' You have to work it out for yourself, and by the time you do, its ancient history to many of the players. We're trying to make sense of the past so we start to excavate our memories" (Forna 185). Patricia A. Resick, an expert in Cognitive Processing Therapy explains in *Stress and Trauma* that traumatic stress usually involves a life threatening event accompanied by fear, helplessness, or horror. This causes serious psychological changes in children. Fear of abandonment is among the most anxiety provoking situations in childhood. Children feel an emotional attachment to their parents and feel insecure if this is absent, often going to extraordinary lengths to reestablish it. Life of Forna thus witnessed a state of loneliness and she began to develop a mind full of anticipations. She wrote:

“Three times over three years, as I cut the first slice of cake, I used my special birthday wish so I could have him back. I wished on the full moon and the new moon, and then any moon at all. At Christmas, if I found the silver six pence Mum hid in the pudding, I wished for my father's freedom. I wished for nothing else.” (Forna 115)

As an adult survivor of complex childhood trauma, Forna struggled acutely with the effects of such experience. Adult survivors of complex childhood trauma typically struggle to employ healthy ways of self and emotional regulation due to neglect and not being taught or shown through nurture how to self-soothe and emotionally contain experience. For Aminatta, the youngest of his three children, Dr Forna was the adored and attentive Daddy who commanded her total loyalty through the family and political upheavals that dragged her through nine homes in six years. In the first half of the book she conveys vividly both the joy of her life with her parents in small-town Sierra Leone on the cusp of independence, and the cold years in a caravan park in Scotland, followed by a boarding school in England. In Freetown she lived in an extended family, keeping company with cooks who told endless stories. She evokes this life with a true eye for description of a vanished world. The girls' boarding school, where her best friend casually told her that she could not invite Aminatta to her party because her father "doesn't like blacks", was a terrible place for a child living with loneliness and incomprehension. But the deepest incomprehension underlying everything in young Aminatta's life was caused by the slow disintegration of her father's absence. Her Scottish mother, or Real Mum as the children called her, disappeared from their lives except for one Christmas card each after Dr Forna sued for custody and took his children home to Freetown. It was the time she lost herself and her identity.

Many memoirs seem to be historical than personal though glimpses of one's own tears are seen shed through writings. But Forna has presented personal memoir with heaps of memories as a child about half of the work. She, very precisely opens up the massive untreated wounds in the mind of a ten year old girl. Forna says "I think that my childhood had painful experiences- there was loss, there was pain, there was grief but I'm rather of the view that what happened to me was not unusual in the world that I came from" (65). It is clear that her father had a huge influence on her life and was her motivation for writing the book, with the first page of acknowledgements stating that:

"This book is dedicated to the memory of my father" (Forna vii).

Aminatta Forna shows with compelling clarity, the old Africa was torn apart by new ways of western parliamentary democracy, which gave birth only to dictatorships and corruption of hitherto undreamed-of magnitude. It was not long before Mohamed Forna languished in jail as a prisoner of conscience and worse to follow. Aminatta's search for the truth that shaped both her childhood and the nation's destiny began among the country's elite and took her into the heart of rebel territory. Determined to break the silence surrounding fate of her father, she ultimately uncovered a conspiracy that penetrated the highest reaches of government and forced the politicians and judiciary to confront their guilt. In Sierra Leone, she finds no law, no justice, just the legal trappings of a corrupt colossus that moved enchantingly forward, engulfing everybody in its wake. And the more she discovers about her father, the more she understands his powerlessness in the face of the inevitable slide into corruption and dictatorship.

The recurrence of wars and oppression is increasingly shaping people's view of the world and consequently the growing need to study trauma. Critic James Berger claims that trauma provides a 'method of interpretation' because it makes clear that the effect of a catastrophic event can be revealed in multiple ways that are not directly linked or associated with original event's time or location. When we talk to traumatized children or adults from war zones about their experiences, they often say that they would rather forget the bad experiences and lead a normal life. Traumatizing, deforming, picturing grotesque and painful images in the eye of the innocent, it leaves its imprint in the very core of our being. Children were the most vulnerable victims of war. It is known that massive exposure to wartime trauma overwhelms most psychological defense mechanisms in children, and that children may mitigate war effects in low-to-moderately intense wartime settings, which allows effective functioning after acclimatization. Most children develop strong attachments to their parents, which become even stronger in adverse situations. Children without parents- the unaccompanied children placed in institutional settings at a young age and for a long time are at increased risk of serious psychopathology in later life.

Separation and loss increase the likelihood of various difficulties in children's psychological development. It is known that profound loss in childhood is a precipitant for symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder. Such children need to receive adequate care from their caregivers. The child is still struggling with issues of separation and individuation, evolving definitions of the self and others, and the consolidation of adaptive mechanisms for coping with both internal and external stressors. Chronic forms of social conflict whose violent repercussions in the form of 'total war' could be felt for years or decades ahead. The story of trauma thus, is the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality- the escape from a death or from its referential force- rather attests to its endless impact on a life.

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