

Trauma and Resilience in Osundare's City Without People

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the representation of trauma in City Without People, the collection of poetry by Nigerian poet-scholar, Niyi Osundare. The critical lens of the study also focuses on how the poet employs poetry as a therapeutic means of working through the trauma engendered by the Hurricane Katrina experience in the United States of America. Assumptions from trauma theory serve as theoretical framework for the study. The research reveals that, contrary to the position held by some trauma theorists that traumatic experiences defy remembrance and are unspeakable, Osundare's collection shows the possibility of remembering traumatic experiences and articulating them. Also, there is evidence that the postmemory of slavery connects with the collective trauma of the Katrina experience among the Black community. City Without People also demonstrates a quintessential instance of the deployment of expressive writing as scriptotherapy.*

KEYWORDS: trauma, resilience, Osundare, postmemory, poetry

INTRODUCTION

Niyi Osundare, a renowned Nigerian poet-scholar experienced a devastating and traumatic experience in the wake of Hurricane Katrina that flooded the city of New Orleans in 2005, where he is a distinguished professor at the University of New Orleans. As the tide of the unruly waters ascended, Osundare's house became saturated. He and his wife sought refuge in their house's windowless attic where they almost suffocated. It took the serendipitous intervention of a kind neighbour for the couple to escape being drowned. *City Without People: The Katrina Poems* is Osundare's poetry collection where he versified the painful experience brought about by Katrina.

In this study, I shall examine how Osundare as a Nigerian in the diaspora captured the traumatic experience. I shall also argue that racism accounted for the aggravation of Katrina's pain experienced by the poet and other Blacks in the United States of America. The paper also engages how Osundare employs poetry as a therapeutic tool to work through the trauma.

Scholars have recognized the potential of expressive art forms such as poetry to enhance mental health. In her seminal book, *Poetry and Story Therapy*, Geri Chavis (2011:11) underscores the power of poetry to positively transform the human psyche through images that poems evoke. She goes ahead to enthuse that expressing ones raw emotion through writing provides the outlet for “reflection’ and “putting form to the chaos of raw emotion”(2011:12). Other scholars who have argued in support of the effectiveness of creative writing and other forms of expressive writing to facilitate wellness include Suzette Henke (2000), James Pennebaker(2004), Nicholas Mazza(2017) and Bolton(1999). Henke(2000:xii) posits that reflecting psychological trauma through writing is geared towards therapy. Pennebaker argues that poetry is the most potent genre that can have positive effects on people’s health due to the way it expresses “ the contradictions inherent in most emotions and experiences’(2004:145). Mazza(2017) equally makes copious references to literature from ancient period to contemporary history that thematize the therapeutic power of poetry.

The study draws on insights from trauma theory which shall be engaged in the critical analysis of the psychological wound versified by Osundare. Cathy Caruth, one of the influential trauma theorists was largely influenced by theories of trauma espoused by psychiatrists such as Bessel Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart, assumptions from some of Freud’s psychoanalysis and her deconstructionist leaning. In her seminal publications, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*(1995) and *Unclaimed Experience*(1996), she espouses the idea that trauma is an overwhelming experience whose painful nature makes it impossible for the mind to process because it is “an event whose force is marked by lack of registration”(1996:6). For Caruth, the implication of this is that the victims may become amnesiac immediately after the event. If the memory returns, they are unspeakable and totally leave trauma survivors bereft of any verbal agency. However, she posits that trauma is either beyond depiction and can only be represented through complex literary language: it“must ... be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding”(1996:5). Such literary works are supposed to simulate the elusive nature of trauma through the aesthetics of aporias and gaps. Alan Gibbs (2024:92) observes that “this is a wide-reaching assertion, and one which has had lasting effects on both trauma literature and criticism in the West, imposing formulae that in turn produce a narrow approved trauma aesthetic” . For instance, Laurie Vickroy, an adherent of this Caruthian leaning, avers that an “authentic trauma fiction” should employ literary forms and language that adopt the tenets of (post)modernism. This prescriptive understanding of trauma appears to be a limiting factor in the representation of trauma and how such literary works are subjected to critical appraisal. Alan Gibbs(2024:93) also underscores what he calls the “ anti-

realist” aesthetics of Caruth’s “literary language”, which is not only prescriptive, but also fails to reflect clinical treatment of trauma. He goes further to enthuse that while therapy tends to encourage victims to adopt a realist and straightforward narrativization of their trauma, classical trauma theory discards the realist approach as diminishing the overwhelming traumatic experience. Osundare seems to be conscious of the need to narrate the trauma of Katrina’s experience in accessible and straightforward style. He is consistent with his deployment of simple language, devoid of complex literary language that simulates trauma according to Caruth’s model. Osundare’s accessible style of representing his traumatic memory does not undermine the “sublime” experience of trauma. I shall demonstrate this in the section focused on the analysis of the selected poems.

Joshua Pederson avers that contrary to Caruth’s theory of the amnesiac and unspeakable nature of trauma, it is describable and memorable. He counters this Caruthian assumption, basing his argument on evidence from science, specifically the one from one of Harvard’s foremost psychologists, Richard McNally. In his publication, *Remembering Trauma*, McNally provides evidence to support victims’ ability to remember their traumatic experience and articulate such painful experiences. Based on this clinical evidence, Pederson suggests that literary theory should be amenable to the science of trauma (2014:334). In light of this, he mutes the idea of a revised trauma theory, based on McNally’s assumptions. Instead of being obsessed with searching for aporia in literary works, critics should focus on the text itself. According to Pederson, this has the twin advantage of opening up broad expanses of material for interpretation, paying attention to the accessibility of traumatic memory and the possibility that victims could narrate reliable accounts of the trauma (2014: 338). The ability to express such traumatic experiences could give the victim control over the experience, lend agency and chart the course towards recovery. Literary trauma theorists should also seek out evidence of augmented narrative details and also focus on depictions of experiences that are temporarily, physically or ontologically distorted (2014:339). I agree with Pederson’s and McNally’s theory that traumatic experiences could be both memorable and speakable. I argue that the ability of Osundare to express his traumatic experience through the versification of *City Without People* suggests that trauma is both describable and memorable.

In a position akin to that of Pederson, SakiruAdebayo(2023) has argued for the significance of the memorialization and articulation of trauma towards working through the experience. In his study of Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a fiction of memory, he argues that Adichie is able to work through the generational trauma of the Biafran war through her writing of the novel. His argument also borders on the significance of literary works as sites of memory to counter

institutional silence and injustice. Although his focus is on the genre of prose, his insights could also be applied to poetry, particularly in the aspect where Osundare links the inherited trauma of slavery with the pain occasioned by Katrina.

City Without People and Multi-Directional Memory

One of the factors that aggravated the trauma of Hurricane Katrina is the racist dimension. Some of the literary works on the Katrina experience implicate racism as one of the underlying problems that compounded the anguish of the Blacks when Katrina launched its violent and deadly fangs. These Katrina memorials, including Osundare's Katrina poems could be considered as exemplifications of Rothberg's concept of "multi-directional memory". It is a model "based on recognition of the productive interplay of disparate acts of remembrance and developed in contrast to an understanding of memory as involved in a competition over scarce public resources"(Rothberg 2009:309). Here, Rothberg argues against the idea of conceptualizing collective memory under the logic of scarcity, where the remembrance of one history competes with others for attention. In this context, Rothberg critiques a situation where the memory of one historical event diminishes the significance of others. Instead of this limitation, he proposes a model that takes into cognizance the interplay between different acts of remembrance, thereby paving the way for a more nuanced understanding of how different histories come to play and influence each other. Rather than engaging in a clash of competing for limited resources, these memories can coexist and deepen our understanding of the past and present. In relation to the critical analysis of Osundare's work, remembrance of the Katrina experience intersects with the history of slavery . This idea shall help me zoom my critical lens on the analysis of Osundare's poem in order to engage how these two traumatic experiences intersect with each other and gain more understanding regarding how the past history of slavery influences the Katrina experience in the present. It is also significant to note that this position challenges earlier ideas by classical trauma theorists. Rothberg notes that Caruth's argument in her influential publication is not multi-directional in approach because "the model of trauma remains tied to the expectations of a privileged Western world-view and ignores insidious, everyday forms of trauma"(Rothberg, 2009:91). Apart from Osundare's *City Without People*, some other literary works that reflect the racist perspective to the Katrina experience include: Ward's *Salvage the Bone*, Smith's *Blood Dazzler* and *Zeitoun* by Eggers.

Niyi Osundare: The Poet and His Craft

Niyi Osundare is a Nigerian poet who can be arguably considered as the most popular poet from Nigeria. He has won coveted global literary prizes such as the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, The Noma Award, the Tchicaya UTam'si Award for African Poetry and Fonlon/Nichols Award for Excellence in Literary Creativity. SuleEgya(2017) in his book, *Niyi Osundare: A Literary Biography* enthused the possibility of Osundare clinching the highest global literary prize, the Nobel Literature Prize due to what he called his “bristling lyricism and the breath-taking artistry” in Osundare’s poetic oeuvre.

According to Aiyejina(1987:35), Egya(2017), Adebisi-Adelabu(2023:5), Osundare’s poetic fame is also hinged on the simplicity and accessibility of his deployment of language. This style of writing is in sharp contrast to the obscure Euro-modernist aesthetics in the works of some Nigerian poets. *City Without People* is one of Osundare’s collection of poetry that is largely accessible, despite the atmosphere of pain that pervades the poems.

Versifying Trauma in City Without People

In *City Without People*, Osundare employs vivid imagery, tone, atmosphere and other poetic devices that make it easy for the reader to have a vicarious experience of the Katrina’s devastating onslaught. One does not need to search for aporias or gaps that simulate trauma, like the classical trauma theorists prescribe before having access to how the poet articulates the traumatic experience unleashed by Hurricane Katrina.

In “Katrina Anthem”, there is a representation of faltering expression that suggests a partial constriction. However, it cannot be regarded as silence that deprives the poet-persona the agency of remembering and articulating the Katrina trauma. Joshua Pederson in his revised version of trauma theory underscores the point that although there could be possibility of faltering or failing speech, literature of trauma should not necessarily be a collection of such constrictions, rather one should consider such efforts, “no matter how halting” as an attempt at reconstructing the experience and rehabilitating the survivor. Therefore, when the poet-persona writes;

Kaka Katrina, shameless witch

Who quenched our lights and swamped the switch...(p.14)

The seemingly difficulty the persona passes through articulating the word Katrina is ultimately geared towards reconstructing and communicating his painful experience. Osundare could be

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said to be “acting out’ the suffering of Katrina, with the aim of mastering the experience and recovering from it.

“Mares of Night” is another poem that represents nightmare as one of the symptoms of trauma the poet-persona experienced. The title of the poem plays on the word nightmare. According to the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM -5), “recurrent distressing dreams in which the content and/ or affect of the dream are related to the traumatic event(s)”(2013:271) is one of the diagnostic criteria for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder as a result of exposure to traumatic events like Hurricane Katrina. The poet-persona uses vivid imagery and personification to articulate how some of the losses he suffered haunt him through nightmares, he writes:

Always, they come at night

When darkness walks the streets...

Effigies of remembered texts

Bounteously bound

Now bloated like abandoned corpses

Pages which once smiled

At my probing eyes

Glued shut by dull, illiterate mold

Metaphors dance limbless...

They come, always, at night...

The mares gallop at night

Laden with bloated losses. (P.60)

The lines above are raw emotional articulation of the trauma of loss. This is particularly painful because a number of irrecoverable ideas and artistic materials that contributed to the poet’s creative enterprise and possibly would have promoted his artistry as a poet were consumed by the flood. It is these heavy losses that return in the form of nightmare to haunt the poet. The

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adverbial “always” repeated in the lines of the poem is also worth paying close attention to. This could be interpreted as a form of repetition compulsion. This usually involves survivors of traumatic events unconsciously reenacting the experience through outlets such as traumatic nightmares as experienced by Osundare. Ernest Hartman, a psychoanalyst and sleep specialist avers that some nightmares incorporating trauma are experienced by almost every traumatized individual. He notes that such dreams dealing with trauma could continue for a few days or weeks in some individuals, while for others there could be recurrence for many years; in both cases, the repetitive post-traumatic nightmares are a hallmark of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (2001 :100-101). Whether Osundare’s bouts of nightmares fall into the first or second category in terms of duration is uncertain, what is doubtless, however, is that the loss to Katrina triggered the “mares of night”. The repetitive cycle of the nightmares could be functional after all, as Ganteau(2020: 132) observes because the repetition and protraction are the main ingredients of “working through” trauma.

The poet-persona establishes the link between racism and the pain brought about by Katrina. This is done by striking a connection between the traumatic experience of slavery and Hurricane Katrina. By articulating the trauma of slavery in *City Without People*, Osundare evokes what scholars refer to as “postmemory”(Hirsch,2008, Adebayo,2023). This type of memory is transgenerational and it describes the structures of experience that ensure the continuity of the past in the present. Postmemory is also characterized by the transmission of traumatic experiences from an earlier generation to their descendants. The transmission does not take place through direct communication but could manifest through narratives and attitudes that the next generation internalizes. “The generation after” usually interact with these inherited memories creatively and emotionally often leading to affects that make it appear as if they had first-hand experience of the trauma themselves. In the context of Osundare’s poetry, there is an active engagement with the postmemory of the trauma of transatlantic slavery and the Katrina experience. The poet-persona argues that there is a shadow of the slave trade era in the Katrina experience, particularly because of the aggravated pain of the Black community. The memory of the anguish of the slavery era appears to resurrect through the Katrina experience as what Freud called “archaic inheritance”. In the poem, titled “Path of Thunder”, reminiscent of Okigbo’s versification of a similar painful and traumatic experience, Osundare writes:

Same old route

Same old wind

From Africa

West and Wild

Howling through canefields

And cotton-bales white with Negro sweat

A boiling ocean unleashes its fury

It bottom heavy with nameless bones

So many tales yet untold

Inhabit the lips of these unruly winds(p.20)

The above lines capture the brutal and inhumane experience of enslaved Africans and how they were transported in a barbaric manner to the Americas. The poet-persona argues that the path taken by the slaves is the “same old route” the victims of Katrina’s horror passed through. The “route” is a metaphor of the traumatic link between the past and the present. The postmemory of slavery enables a better understanding and contextualization of the suffering of the Blacks as a result of Hurricane Katrina. The motif of what I call, hydro-trauma is foregrounded in the poem, such that one could visualize and connect the havoc water wreaked during the slavery history and the Katrina period. A harrowing instance of hydro-trauma is the grisly Zong Massacre of 1781, where the crew of the British slave ship, Zong threw overboard more than one hundred and thirty African captives when the ship’s supply started getting decimated on the way to Jamaica (Kaleena, 2023,n.p.). Another similar event was the unpleasant experience during the Igbo Landing of 1803, when seventy-five Igbo and other West African captives from modern-day Nigeria drowned themselves to avoid being enslaved (Kaleena,2023,n.p.). These are few examples of how the traumata of the past continue in the present. In the lines “ A boiling ocean unleashes its fury “// It bottom heavy with nameless bones”, the visual imagery of a very high tidal movement and a personified water filled with fury connect the middle passage experience and that of Katrina. In the line, “so many tales yet untold”, the poet-persona hints at the prospect of uncovering different layers of suffering experienced by people of color in the past and contemporary times. By un-muting these age-long silence foisted by institutions and perpetrators, the poem’s focus is in tandem with the ethical ambition of trauma studies to enhance justice, recovery and transformation. A similar postmemory of transatlantic slavery is in

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the poem, *A Short Essay on Drowning* in Gbenga Adeoba's collection of poetry titled, *Exodus*. The poem versifies the Zong Massacre I made reference to earlier:

... he would start in the space of time

with a glide, yielding us to the

many scenes of rust;

each sigh, a resurrection

of unspeakable things.

And he surely does it well

leading us , in that pitch of memory,

into the deep of each moment.

Now, he is speaking of Zong,

The memories, its handlers as well,

that voyage across the Atlantic,

Fom Accra to Black River,

Jamaica, circa 1781...(p.28)

Despite what presents as an unspeakable and constricted attitude as a result of the trauma of the Zong massacre, the poet-persona is able to excavate the buried memories of this macabre experience in a very articulate manner. These pathos of poetic expressions and aquatic metaphors by Osudare and Adeoba function as postmemory of slavery that bring that past to the present.

In "The City", Osundare articulates the chasm between the people and the government who are supposed to alleviate the pains of the disaster by providing emergency response and safety nests. While the people are "many, many miles below government care", a timely and responsive government's intervention would have reduced the communal trauma. The flooding and submerging of the city is expressed in the poem thus; "the city is 8 feet below sea level" . Still on the argument that Osundare's reflection in the poem could be considered as a work of

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postmemory that links the experience of slavery with Katrina's trauma, Gbogi's interpretation of the poem connects with my position. He notes that: "the poet technically historicizes the sea here, using it doubly to evoke the topographical make-up of New Orleans, on the one hand and the violent accents of slavery that continue to define the city, on the other" (2022: 16-17). The water motif again links the hydro-trauma of the past with the present.

"Postmortem" is another poem that evokes the memory of Africans and African-Americans who lost their lives in the wake of the disaster:

Another skull

just discovered

Negroid

aged about 70

We leave the Coroner's Office

to put a name to the bones...(p.38)

The "Negroid" made reference to in the line above may be long dead and gone, incapable of experiencing trauma. However, when one imagines the possibility of vicarious trauma that could be experienced as a result of the grisly death described in the poem, then the magnitude of the pain the Black community suffered would be better appreciated.

Stanzas of Strength; The Poetic Path to Resilience and Recovery

In his prefatory note to the collection of poetry, Osundare states unequivocally that "Katrina's devastation is the type that cut straight to the bone, necessitating a testimony that transcends trivial versification and verbal placebos". This early background to the poem suggests that one of the cardinal visions of the poet-persona is writing as a form of therapy. A placebo is a pharmacological substance usually prescribed for mental relief. Osundare suggests that an expressive writing that would perform this type of therapeutic function should not be a trivial one. Articulating the pain of Katrina through poetry, therefore, becomes a strategy for working through Katrina's devastation.

In "Solace", the poet-persona reflects on the Katrina experience and views the event from a brighter and optimistic perspective:

We lost our house

But not our home
We lost our books

But not our brains...

I regret our loss

I celebrate our LIFE (P.68)

These are lines that evoke the feelings of individual and communal resilience despite the havoc wreaked by the flood. The poem is a typical example of what scholars term expressive writing and such forms of writing have been documented to have therapeutic value (Pennbaker, 2004). This form of writing is intentionally scripted to enable victims of trauma and other forms of psychological disequilibrium articulate their pains; this is ultimately aimed at mental wellness. Boosting of the immune system (Koschwanez et.al, 2013, Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glasser&Glasser 1998,Lumley, et al.2011) and positive long-term mood changes(Lepore 1997) are some other derivable benefits that expressive writing can offer.

Also, in “Enia Lasoo Mi”- People Are My Clothes and Katrina Will Not Have The Last Word”, Osundare gives the reader insights into the psychological recovery he made as a result of people’s generosity and concern for the well-being of his family. He vehemently insists that he would not be drowned by the psychological wound unleashed on him by Katrina. In the second poem cited above, he intentionally uses the expression, “Katrina Will Not Have The Last Word” as a refrain for the poem. This is significant because the reiteration could consciously assist in cognitive reframing and shifting the perspective of the Katrina experience from negative to positive, building resilience and charting the course towards healing.

CONCLUSION

The present study has critically engaged with how Osundare processes the trauma engendered by Hurricane Katrina in *City Without People*. I have also demonstrated the significance of accessible memorialisation and articulation of trauma in Osundare’s poetry, devoid of the complexity espoused in the classical model of trauma theory .The link between the postmemory of the anguish of slavery and the Katrina experience was also critically examined, revealing that the trauma of the Blacks in the diaspora, particularly in the United States of America, is a painful

continuum. The possibility of negotiating resilience and therapy through expressive writings like Osundare's collection of poetry is also germane to the study.

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