

Submitted: September 9, 2024

Accepted: December 25, 2024

Trauma Response in Wole Soyinka's Kongi's *Harvest*: the Exegesis of Mourning, Grieving, and the Sequelae of Disquieting Events

Adesanya M. ALABI¹

Abdul Serdar ÖZTÜRK²

Abstract

Many literary texts reflect trauma theory as well as psychoanalytical concepts. Different interpretations have been given to those texts in terms of the features that reflect traumatic situations. There are important aspects we can follow in terms of fragmented encounters to achieve the purpose of a traumatic event. In this framework, one can witness traumatic situations in Wole Soyinka's drama, especially where political power is used to traumatise the populace. There may be temporal-structure trauma, but traumatic experience may put someone in a compelling, disquieting nightmare in terms of political tyranny. In Kongi's Harvest, there is a kind of dark encounter in which Soyinka presents the plight of the people both symbolically and emotionally in the hands of a despot. In this view, the pang of trauma becomes preponderant over the psyches of the populace due to the fact that the political dictator turns himself into a monster who devours the mind and rights of the people. As the people collectively experience a traumatic nightmare, the idea of the pathos with which the political despot has refused to consider the plight of the people is reflected. Kongi, the protagonist of the play, makes himself the messiah of pain and terror; he intrudes into the people's culture without considering the implication of its sacredness. His sacrilegious behaviour creates enormous pain for the people he claims to rule over. This paper therefore addresses how political power is used to create trauma for the people. Thus, the events of the traumatic encounter unfold from the beginning of the play until the end, when it eventually collapses.

Keywords: Trauma, Afrocentric instances, political power, African despots, Kongi.

¹ Dr Lecturer, Ostim Technical University, adealabimedia@yahoo.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-3906-009X

² Prof. Dr., Karabuk University, Faculty of Letters, Department of Western Languages and Literatures, asozturk@karabuk.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-7780-7107

Introduction

Over the years, the definition of trauma has been debated among scholars, and many of these scholars have come up with different definitions that suit their theories. However, understanding the concept of trauma and its effects on people who have been through traumatic experiences requires adequate attention. There are many reasons for traumatization; there are many events that could traumatise the psychology and emotions of people. These events could be war, domestic violence, rape, child abuse, racial discrimination, rejection, and political despotism. People react to traumatic events in different ways; there are people who could get over trauma within a short period of time, while others keep on reminiscing themselves in the event that led them into trauma. For instance, when soldiers fight on the battlefield, they go through a series of events that threaten their psyche, therefore, even after they leave the battlefield, they keep fighting it in their psyche. In this sense, they are vulnerable to any event that is capable of drawing them back to the past. They become aggressive as they continue to experience post-traumatic stress disorder. Trauma has an egregious effect on the psyche of the traumatised. For this reason, trauma is actually experienced as a result of unfavourable and bad events in the past. The concept of trauma has been presented in various ways as a result of different developments of the concept established in time. Over the years, there has been much discussion about the impact of trauma on various individuals in society. For some years, the interpretation of trauma has been constantly narrowed towards the specific incidents that have negative effects on people's emotions, physical bodies, and psyches. This paper investigates the psychological trauma experienced by Wole Soyinka's characters in *Kong's Harvest*. It accentuates the effect of trauma and how it sequentially revolves around the events that take place in the text. The individuals and the events that contribute to the traumatic experiences of certain characters in the text are examined. Also, different features and instances that explain the nature of the trauma that the specific characters go through are brought into focus. In other words, some characters who experience trauma as a result of one or more events are examined.

The Concept of Trauma in Literature

The term "trauma" is derived from the Latin word "trauma," which was discovered from the Greek word "traumatikos," and this can be interpreted as a severe injury in someone's body (Beck et al., 2014, p.8). Trauma is therefore described as an injury inflicted on one's emotions that leads to psychological pain or a situation that makes one go into terrorizing despair and despondency. Looking into the definition of the American Psychological Association, trauma is described as a psychological reaction to a tragic event.

In 1996, Cathy Caruth's book "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History and Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literature of Trauma*" had a significant part in highlighting the body of knowledge regarding trauma and brought significant attention to the study of trauma in literature. In the last few years, researchers have carried out studies on literary trauma theory in which they have accentuated the concept of trauma as a topic that is not worth representing (Banducci et al., 2014, p.5). Scholars including Caruth, the Pioneer of Psychoanalytic Psychostructural Method, presented a conceptual viewpoint that assumes trauma is a problem with no solution other than the stupefied state that brightens the innate

opposite encounter (Chou et al., 2013, p.11). Thus, this Lacanian method establishes a standpoint of trauma as a condition of truancy that divides understanding of the uttermost encounter, and this negates the lingual merit instead of the referential disposition (Zeidner, 2013, p.5). In literary studies, the inexpressible was presented as the main idea in criticism for conceptualising the effect of trauma. This concept of trauma appeals to a large number of scholars who work at the intersection of poststructuralism as well as the irreversible psychological injury that trauma must have caused (Cowell et al., 2015, p.10).

When considering the concept of trauma, it is critical to remember that it does not have the same impact on everyone. Traumatic encounters happen on a personal basis. For this reason, what is traumatic to one person may not be traumatic to another. Trauma reactions can be caused by a variety of factors, including genetics or a previous traumatic experience. Trauma has been described as a phenomenon in which a person is faced with terrifying experiences that are difficult to overcome as a result of post-traumatic stress disorder (Finkelhor et al., 2015, p.15). Trauma has significantly touched every area of life. Its effect is great, and it goes beyond race, personality, status, creed, and level of education. Trauma typically causes a flashback of the traumatic event, which causes emotional and psychiatric damage, and this can progress to mental disorder, psychiatric illness, animosity, unreasonable violence, and worry (Handley et al., 2015, p.10). Trauma can also evolve as a result of neglect or rejection, which can easily degenerate into emotional pain and depression.

Therefore, trauma theory investigates and surveys how traumatic encounters evolve. Trauma theory is established in different disciplines such as literature, cultural studies, sociology, psychology, history, American studies, and anthropological studies (Jung et al., 2014, p.12). In the seventeenth century, literary writers discussed human situations, social criticism, and decadence. However, the concept of trauma in connection with cognition evolved in the 19th century; this concept was established by Jean Charcot, a neurologist—he was a French medical practitioner who was treating women who had experienced trauma as a result of violence, sexual violation, and rape. He discovered the nexus between hysterical indication and segregative complexity (Sivikis, 2015, p.6).

Sigmund Freud, a neurologist and psychoanalyst, did, however, also establish a major idea of trauma. Charcot's research on hysteria had a significant impact on him. Trauma is the central theme of Freud's work from start to finish. Trauma is a major factor in Levenson's 19th-century research on hysteria (Levenson, 2014, p. 13). There are various forms of trauma, such as natural disasters, sexual assault, childhood trauma, complex trauma, and PTSD (Levenson, 2015, p. 12). Being subjected to numerous horrific and traumatic events can result in complex trauma, which can have a lasting impact on an individual. The consequence of complex is connected to knowing, controlling, and expressing the emotional condition of a person. This type of trauma also has very severe consequences for a person's mental order, personal ideas, learning ability, and subsequent education. Childhood trauma refers to traumatic experiences that occur in a child between the ages of zero and six (Levenson, 2016, p.10). It is assumed that young age makes the children less vulnerable to trauma and its effects. However, there have been several questions in the subsequent studies that challenge whether the children are actually affected by the traumatic experience (Levenson, 2016, p.11). Thus, this type of trauma is serious because of the cognitive impact it has. Children are

supposed to be protected, but their protection can be interfered with loud noises, violent visuals, and aggressive motion.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is connected to psychological injury caused by war and brutal violence, but people of different eras can experience this type of trauma. Hence, according to the statistics, it is said that 3 million children and teenagers are exposed to traumatic experiences in the USA every year. At the age of 16, nearly one in every three of these teenagers is sexually or physically abused (Perera and Digiacom, 2015,p.8).

Sexual abuse is terribly traumatic for children; there are many traumatic responses from children who have gone through sexual abuse. The reactions include fear, worry, anger, hostility, insomnia, depression, etc. Many sexual abuses are capable of having a long-term traumatic effect on a child, both physically and mentally (Oshri, 2013, p.6). Natural disasters can also leave behind a very traumatic experience. This includes earthquakes, floods, fire accidents, hurricanes, harsh weather conditions, etc. (Tarren-Sweeney, 2013, p.6). The consequence of this disaster can be very traumatising because it makes people experience the loss of loved ones, relatives, properties, and investments; it also brings hardship. As a result of disaster, many go through depression, shock, dependency, worry, and trauma (SAMHSA, 2015, p. 9). Therefore, even as researchers continue to uncover clues regarding the underlying origin of trauma, the subject has been fiercely debated and presented in several areas of knowledge. Since many writers continue to use their art to express themselves and include traumatic events and characters in their texts, trauma has thus gained importance in literary studies. This paper thus provides a critical explanation of the traumatising context in Soyinka's work.

Conceptualising Trauma in Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest*

As it has been critically reviewed earlier, trauma has the ability to create long-term damage in one's cognition. The reasons for these traumatic encounters are enormous, and in this section, the main reason for traumatic experiences is observed to be political. Hence in *Kongi's Harvest*, a series of issues come up, and the "play is a satire on the rulers of a fictitious kingdom of Isma, somewhere in Africa, during the preparations for celebrations and aftermath of a New Yam Festival. The ruler of Isma, Kongi, is a repressive, ambitious autocrat who is assisted by a ubiquitous organising secretary. He is advised by a fraternity of largely sycophantic Aweris and enthusiastically supported by a brutal carpenters' Brigade" (Kumar, 2013, p.3). . Kongi deliberately trespasses into the hallowed territory of custom. He establishes himself as the Almighty and renders existence miserable for those under his control. The man Kongi, who declares himself to be the people's saviour, takes over the yam festival, which is customarily observed by the guardians of culture. He introduces modernity, which infiltrates the general population's customary ethics and culture with profanity. The intentional sacrilegious attitude is not well received by people in general. However, Kongi captures and holds them all, including their king, when they retaliate. On the day of the festival, Segi, the ex-girlfriend of Kongi, delivers a severe blow to him in public when she gives him the head of her father, who is hanged by Kongi, in a gourd as a gift. The greatest public embarrassment results from this. Kongi meets a horrible end because he believes he

has the ability to do and undo. This therefore marks the end of a despotic era in the land of Isma.

Looking into Wole Soyinka's *Kongi's Harvest*, as many existing literary evaluations of this text have always been channelled towards the symbolic features, the fact is that the text also reflects trauma, which many research studies have failed to identify. In this analysis, the events and features of trauma and how certain characters inflict trauma on their subjects are accentuated. In this text, Soyinka tells the story of a military despot whose attributes are those of a tyrant. The main character, Kongi, plays a very significant role in which he represents different pictures in line with negativity. However, as a postcolonial African ruler, President Kongi represents the disparity between modernity and the old order; he subjugates his subjects, intrudes into the sacred order of the land, subjects the traditional ruler Oba Danlola to unspeakable ridicule, and puts him in detention. Kongi decides to change the order of tradition; it pleases him to take charge of all traditional and customary functions of the land, which is against the norm and custom of the land (Isma). Every individual who opposes his opinions, on the other hand, is either imprisoned or executed. Kongi's brutality becomes so unbearable to the extent that the people of the land wail, cry, and gnash their teeth in trauma. There are many instances in which Kongi himself becomes a trauma for the people. There is a yam festival that is strictly traditional; in this festival, the yam will be tasted by the king, Oba Danlola, but this tradition has been hijacked by Kongi, and he decides to eat the yam first. This is against the tradition of the land. By taking over the tradition of the people, it is tantamount to disconnecting them from their source and spiritual roots. The festival is like a ritual that determines their lives and deaths. It is the traditional ruler and his cult members of Ogbo Aweri who are supposed to defend the essence of the tradition. They are the custodians of the tradition who have the right to conduct any ritual at the festival. This plays a very important role in people's lives and cultures. But being a military dictator, Kongi takes over all these traditional functions, and the king is relegated to being a mere criminal in detention.

The new regime depends for its continuance on its own propaganda; the 'government loud speaker' is thus central to its political machinery. In Ismland, this is a device that pours out propaganda but admits no reply—even if reply were worthwhile: 'My ears are sore/But my mouth is agbayun' (62). This tyranny of words is later given physical shape in the Reformed Aweri Fraternity, which, in its isolated word factory, manufactures the words that go into the talking boxes. The satirical anthem silently comments on the value of such words—the very repetition of 'words' throughout the anthem effectively devalues their worth (Kumar, 2013,p.4). Kongi has not only inflicted trauma on the king but also on the people of the land. The people are concerned about this situation, and they are traumatised. Kongi never cares about the debate, and all that he thinks always takes preeminence. Hence, as it is clearly demonstrated that trauma is connected to different events, disregard for people's traditions and customs could be viewed as a traumatising instrument. Their king is humiliated, the king's aids are arrested, and the people are restricted. This causes trauma in people. This is how Soyinka establishes the reality of trauma caused by a political leader who uses his power to terrorise his subjects.

Features and instances of Trauma in *Kongi's Harvest*

In the text, Soyinka reflects certain features of trauma through certain characters. He makes Kongi apply political repression to his subject, and he subjugates the people to a painful condition. In this sense, he humiliates the king and also asks him to deliver the yam into his hand on the day of the yam festival. This humiliation causes trauma not only for the king but also for the people. In the land, the king is considered the second-in-command to the gods; how then will he be subjected to such ridicule? Not only that, Kongi arrests Segi's father, whom he feels has been one of his antagonists. Segi's character is very important in the play; she is Kongi's girlfriend before falling in love with Daudu, the King's nephew. Segi is a prominent prostitute—an indispensable harlot who also has a clubhouse. When her father becomes antagonistic towards Kongi, he is arrested and put in detention. Upon this, Kongi plans to execute some of his political prisoners, Segi's father escapes but is eventually recaptured and killed. This is an event of trauma not only to Segi but also to the people of the land. Criticising the head of state will always land one in jail or the grave. Political murder and illegal detention are tools of trauma that Kongi employs on the people. Looking at this situation, Soyinka expresses a significant view on how African leaders apply draconian measures to traumatise their own citizens. In this regard, he criticises this style of leadership. The use of force is more common than the rule of law in the African political system. Soyinka also makes it clear that taking pleasure in the people's discomfort as a leader leads to their trauma, and many of them never recover from this trauma. Therefore, creating this understanding establishes a significant discourse in this study. One can as well understand that people go through trauma during the yam festival, during which Daudu, the King's nephew, makes a speech. In Daudu's speech, he reflects on the trauma of the people and how their pain has been caused by Kongi, who claims to be omnipotent and omniscient. He creates his own Aweri as a replica of the Ogbo Aweri, who propounds theories and disputes with him. Members of the new Aweri embark on a long-term fast in order to participate in an exotic exercise in which they speak in riddles and cryptic tunes of Delphic philosophy. Their fasting indulgence can also be considered a traumatic encounter in which they are only fasting under duress at Kongi's command. This is postulated by the Fifth Aweri during his conversation with his fellow Aweris.

Fifth Aweri: Don't look at me. I've told you I can't think on an empty stomach.

Third Aweri: Can't you lay off your filthy stomach?

Fifth Aweri: I can't. Why the hell couldn't Kongi do his fasting alone? I'll tell you why. He loves companions in misery. (p.25).

From the conversation above, it becomes obvious that even Kongi's philosophers are not satisfied with his leadership style. They complain every time and even quarrel among themselves. Kongi serenades himself with his carpenters-brigades while also using the organising secretary to carry out several cruel orders. Kongi never takes advice, and whatever he thinks and says takes precedence. One can also feel the pang of trauma in the song that the people sing; they sing a dirge to express the agony inflicted on them by the man who has assumed the position of a Messiah. In Daudu's monologue at the festival, he makes it clear that it is the pleasure of the despot to make him suffer. Here, Daudu represents the pain and

the interest of the people. He expresses his traumatic encounter through his speech. Daudu maintains that:

Daudu:

An impotent man will swear he feels the pangs of labour; when the maniac finally looks over the wall, he finds that there, agony is a raw commodity which he has spent lives to invent. Where I have chosen to return in joy, only fools still insist that my fate must be to suffer. This trip, I have elected to sample the joys of life, not its sorrow; to feast on the pounded yam, not on the rind of yam; to drink the wine myself, not leave it to my ministers for frugal sacraments; to love the women, not merely wash their feet at the well. In pursuit of which, let this yam, upon which I spent a fortune in fertilisers and in experiments with a multitude of strains, be taken out, peeled, cooked, and pounded; let bitter-leaf soup simmer in the women's pots and smoked fish release the goodness of the seas; that the Reformed Aweri Fraternity may belch soundly instead of merely salivating; that we may hereby repudiate all Prophets of Agony, unless it be recognised that pain may be endured only in the pursuit of ending pain and fighting terror (p. 78-79).

However, as the situation evolves, "Kongi desires, by using illegal ways and forcing Oba to present him the New Yam in the festival, which is actually, traditionally, to be presented to Oba. This act will show, according to the tradition, to the public that legally Kongi has become the King and the reign of Kongi has started. And again, he does not want that people should blame him as a usurper of Oba's rule" (Londhe and Panade, 2014, p,75). From Daudu's festival monologue quoted above, one could feel and understand the negative emotion expressed by Daudu, establishing the fact that the oppressor finds out that the only thing he has spent his lives inventing is agony. He concludes his speech by saying, "Unless it is recognised that pain may be endured only in the pursuit of ending pain and fighting terror" (p. 78-79). It is a clear reality that the people are subjected to trauma by Kongi, who has decided to rule the people with an iron fist and their rights are forcefully taken. They have no freedom of expression—in this context, no expression of happiness or grief. The people have no reason to rejoice at the same time because if they demonstrate their displeasure towards the cruel system, they will be imprisoned and tortured.

Conclusion

In conjunction with trauma studies and postcolonial literature, one could identify the impact of trauma on *Kong's Harvest* characters and how Soyinka satirically presents the character of Kongi as the inventor of trauma. Looking at this from a socio-political point of view, Kongi becomes a political terror to the people, and through his actions, they go through trauma. Soyinka accentuates the antics of dictatorship in the postcolonial era of Africa and how African leaders inflict trauma on their own fellow citizens. In trying to establish a cogent standard and an accurate nation-state in Africa, African writers like Soyinka have expressed their views about the standard that should be established. In the process, they condemn the act of repression, which has become common practice among African leaders. By taking advantage of the political power at their disposal, African leaders go further and terrorise their subjects beyond human imagination. In this situation, the essence of quality leadership is forfeited, and the people are subjected to severe trauma as a result of bad and despotic

leadership. Soyinka presents a situation that demonstrate the image of Kongi: “These are, the stage direction informs us, “a series of ‘Last Supper’ poses—iyan (pounded yam) serving variation”: “A Leader’s Temptation,” “Agony on the Mountains,” “The loneliness of the Pure,” “The Uneasy Head,” “The Face of Benevolence,” “The Giver of Life,” and “A Saint at Twilight”” (Londhe and Panade, 2014, p.75). The character of Kongi is a direct representation of those whose pleasure is in the pain of others. The terror inflicted on the people makes them go through unspoken trauma due to the fact that their rights as humans have been seized. In this regard, the development of socio-political metamorphosis is crucial in the African context. The impact of draconian measures on the people makes them lose their confidence in African nationalism in the contemporary world. Therefore, looking at the socio-cultural and political realities of African society, Soyinka has used *Kongi’s Harvest* to address certain issues in postcolonial Africa. In this case, Soyinka, as a literary writer and social critic, has used literature to fulfill a positive gesture in African society. As politics and repression are used as an instrument of trauma in the text, Soyinka therefore points an accusing finger at the African political leaders, saying that most of the trauma that the people go through is caused by their bad and despotic leadership style.

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