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Traumatic Neurosis: An Alternative Prognosis to Feminism in Gloria Ogo's *While Men Slept*

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Abstract: A closer look at Gloria Ogo's *While Men Slept* provides another critical approach through which the novel can be explored as against feminism that occupies a wider space in the reading of the text. This study, therefore, by means of trauma/traumatic neurosis examines the actions and conducts of Ikemba in the novel. It provides an alternative basis for the 'why' of his hostilities towards his wife and children especially after he returned from the war. It was observed that albeit not physically wounded, Ikemba was psychologically and mentally scarred by the pain, shame and vulnerability he harboured within him causing an emotional disconnect from himself and everyone. Based on this, this paper 'pleads' that he not be sentenced so easily without a consideration of the rationale for his provocation as this will be similar to sentencing him to a judgement from a 'kangaroo court'. Moreover, Ikemba's plight and experiences present a call towards awareness and enlightenment of the impact of trauma on an individual. It is equally hoped that through this, victims of trauma will be amenable to speak up and speak out about the challenges they face.

Key words: Feminism, Trauma, Hostilities, Victims, Provocations

INTRODUCTION

Gloria Ogoo's *While Men Slept* (2018) is a text that vividly brings to the fore the never ending war between the sexes in most parts of the world and in Africa. It tells the story of Uloma who found herself in a pathetic marriage where she unfortunately had only female children and dies birthing the highly sought after male child. Her encounter

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highlights pertinent issues of gender preference, physical, emotional abuse and especially the pain of betrayal that she bore all through her married life, for it seems that the husband who lovingly wooed and adored her at first, later became emotionally withdrawn and thereafter visited all manner of abuse on her. This Ihueze (2022) claims in an article, "Trauma behind Closed Doors in *While Men Slept*", where she believes and showed through many instances of betrayal, that Uloma, "... suffered humiliation, intimidation, neglect, brutality and disgrace from her husband" (314). Other views as well, echo the feminist viewpoint of domestic violence, devaluation of the girl child and women being exploited and oppressed (*Introduction to and Praises for WMS*). Even though that these assertions are true from the novel and that the abuse of any human- male or female is not encouraged, however, there seems to be certain gray areas in the character and actions of Uloma's husband; Ikemba that elicits another critical perspective. Therefore, this paper will focus on Ikemba and attempt an inquiry into his actions in the novel through the lens of traumatic neurosis.

Trauma, since the 1990s, has been an area of inquiry in literary scholarship. However, over the decade, trauma has been linked to the consequences of modern life- the emergence of technology, warfare, the holocaust experience, terrorism and the likes. This has enabled nomenclatures like "hysteria, railway spine, traumatic neurosis, neurasthenia, and more recently, shell shock, war neurosis, combat fatigue, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and Gulf War syndrome" (14). Notwithstanding the appellation it goes by, we are made to understand that trauma, especially; psychological trauma is a deeply wounding experience. Van Der Kolk (2014) adds that "trauma, by definition, is unbearable and intolerable". He goes further to elucidate that "... traumatic experiences do leave traces ... on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even on our biology and immune systems ... whether on a large scale ... or close to home, on our families ..." (1). Trauma leaves one vulnerable and easily susceptible and in a family setting, just like in the case of Uloma and Ikemba, one often finds that the other partner bears the grunt of the pain and displacement of anger. It is important to note that traumatic neurosis, according to Van Der Kolk (2014) is what today "we call posttraumatic stress disorder" (11). With traumatic neurosis, "soldiers returning home from combat may frighten their families with their rages and emotional absence" (1). They;

> feel out of control ... [and] begin to fear that they are damaged to the core and beyond redemption ... [they] carry the memory of trauma and the shame of utter weakness and vulnerability ... [they] have the tendency to superimpose their trauma on everything around them and have trouble deciphering whatever is going on around them ... when people are compulsively and constantly pulled back into the past ... they suffer from a failure of imagination, a loss of mental inflexibility

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> ... there is no hope, no chance to envision a better future, no place to go, no goal to reach. (1/2/17)

The above seems to be Ikemba's position from the novel. In literature, trauma helps us read the wound and the pain. As such, even though the tone of the novel glides towards empathy and sympathy at Uloma's burden, it becomes imperative to foreground Ikemba's plight as well.

The event of the story took place at the threshold of post colonial Nigeria and progresses to the outbreak of the Nigerian Civil War. At the time, it was a society riddled with patriarchy, cultural and traditional mores that valued male children more than females. It was a society where "societal desire for children [and] ... strong social demand and desire for a mother to bear boys ... [become] avenues "through which women are exploited and oppressed" (*Introduction*). Against this background, the author mirrored the man, the society versus the home situation. Uloma, prior to her marriage, was described as beauty per excellence with a height that gave her "a poise, an elegance that made her conspicuous ... the ebony of her skin, lovingly polished with fine palm kernel oil ... each time she smiled ... dimples appeared on both cheeks like whirlpools, giving her a shy demeanour that the men found irresistible". The author made sure to capture the fact that "it was her eyes that captivated Ikemba" (62). So, it was not farfetched that before the outbreak of the war, Ikemba described as "fearless and despite his towering height, had never taken a fall in a wrestle contest" (65), lovingly pursued and wooed the object of his desire. Their marriage and the birth of their first daughter was blissful as the author acknowledges thus;

> Ikemba returned from the farm earlier ... to welcome the birth of his first daughter [and that] Uloma cradled the suckling baby in the crook of her arms ... admiring the way her husband's eyes lit up each time they rested on their daughter ... he caressed his matted beards and lowered his face to plant a light kiss on the child's small forehead. (121)

Even when Uloma expressed concern on not birthing a male as was expected, Ikemba still lovingly addressed her as 'bug eyes'; a name he reserved for only her. Telling her "there was enough time for sons ..." (122), he pulled her into an embrace that both of them "... alone in their world ... swayed to a beat only they could hear" (122). Uloma acknowledged that "all [she] could ever want was in that small room, and it was exactly where she was meant to be" (122). Even with the birth of the second daughter Irunna, Ikemba's home and relationship with Odozie; his mother-in-law was convivial.

However, societal pressure and the trauma of war intercepted this blooming love story. In a conversation with Ngozi, Uloma confessed that, "that cruel war ought to bear the greater brunt. In exchange for my man, it returned a demented stranger" (170). As hitherto observed, trauma is pain, deeply entrenched in the mind. For Ikemba, the psychological wound he nursed over "tragic death tolls garnered in the East, wasted lives which amounted

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to nothing and abundance of sickly children with swollen bellies, birthed in him a rage so cold, its intensity frighten[s] Uloma" (1). Accompanied with the pain of wasteful deaths around him during the war, Ikemba suffered a head injury where even though the doctor assured him it was nothing, later proved otherwise. Thus, the war becomes Ikemba's traumatic situation and traumatic neurosis (PTSD) which the novel acknowledges as 'bouts of insanity' began. PTSD has been described as a response to pain that is often delayed and "takes the form of repeated ... behaviours stemming from the event" (Caruth 1995, 3-5). In Ikemba's case, the text describes an episode. Ikemba had been sleeping and canon shots unrelated to the war, "... penetrated Ikemba's siesta and hurled him off the bed. His head slammed into the wall in blind panic for an escape route out of the battle front where his mind was trapped. Excruciating pain ... seized him as his head seemed to shatter into a million pieces" (140). In another episode, a loud crash, similar to sounds heard during wars from an Ukwa fruit caused Ikemba to lose "... his footing ... his knees caved, Ikemba raised his head ... over which he had no control. His mother saw the maniac glint in his eyes ... he picked up the knife from the ground ... and chased her into the dwarf umbrellas of vibrant cassava tendrils" (52). Here, a cursory reading of this scenario will show Ikemba as an oppressor, desiring to kill his mother. However, from these instances, it becomes obvious that Ikemba is possessed by the image and event of war and he daily re-lives that traumatic experience from the past. His character portrayal especially after the war shows a victim that is deeply scarred and sees no means of redemption, even after Agummuo had cleansed his head and given him a clean bill of health.

Van Der Kolk (2014) posits that emotional numbing is a consequence of PTSD. He elucidates that traumatic neurosis makes it difficult for the victim to engage in close relationships. In the episode with Ikemba's mother, the novel's narrator observes that Ikemba's mother, "... reached out to touch his hand, but he shrugged it off and moved away. He walked past her and exited the barn, blinking against the harsh afternoon sun" (49). When the situation is like this with his mother who only visits his home occasionally, one is left to imagine what life will be for Uloma and their kids who lived with him always. With Uloma, nothing she does is good enough. Her apology to his fall which was no fault of hers only elicited violence and an outburst of rage. The narrator tells that, "he grabbed a tray and flung it at her face [and] Uloma's scream filled the afternoon" (142). Aside from the manifestation of physical abuse, emotional abuse is equally thrown in. Uloma explains to her mother-in-law that, "I have become visible to him, the way one would notice a fly perched on a wall. He has not touched me for eight moons, neither has he tasted any of my meals. The few times he bothered with me, were either to pick offence or express displeasure" (47). In like manner, their daughters did not fare any better as they suffered one form of brutality or the other at the hands of their father. Here, even though that one's

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sympathy will easily be swayed towards Uloma and her children who have to bear the grunt of his acting out, it is necessary to acknowledge that Ikemba was angry in himself and with himself. He was passing through difficulties that he had no control over. With this unfortunate situation comes the feeling of hopelessness and helplessness and for one who before the war had a vibrant personality, this feeling does no good to improve his mental and psychological state. He tells his mother, "I have often wondered about my ... ailment ... each day is a constant puzzle, committed to wondering it would be the day I would submit to its whim and be stuck; unable to pull through. A perpetual lunatic" (50). Moreover, his inability to recognize his situation as an ailment signified by the pause in his response that the author depicts with the linguistic device '...' before 'ailment' portrays a denial that often comes with PTSD. This denial elucidates Ikemba's emotional numbing and shows his perplexity at this alarming reality that had characterized his life. Even his mother, Omasiri admits being "unfamiliar with this new Ikemba whose hurt scorched anyone who tried to reach him" (50).

The wrestling match with Soludo after Ikemba's return from the war corroborates Van Der Kolk's (2014) opinion that victims of traumatic neurosis carry the memory of trauma and the shame of utter weakness and vulnerability. The match which was supposed to be a healthy competition between villages and a test of manliness; a feature that enables young women catch the eyes of viable young, courageous men for marriage turned sour when Ikemba, unable to recognize the camaraderie of the match views Soludo as a combatant enemy. With Soludo defeating Ikemba at the match, the narrator notes Ikemba had a maniac episode, "a maniac growl lumber[ing] from his throat, Ikemba grabbed [Soludo's] neck and secured it in an arm lock. Teeth bared in a vicious snarl, his mouth ... swooped on Soludo's ear. The blood curdling screams of the bitten man rend the air; his bloodied ear a few feet from where he knelt, writhing" (3). The shame and vulnerability he felt with the anger of Soludo's defeat prompted a hasty relocation from his father's compound, driving him into a life of recluse and a disdain for pity. It is therefore no wonder that his wife's heartfelt pity was misunderstood, misperceived and misinterpreted that "he built Uloma a separate hut in their new compound" (3). With the physical distancing between them, the emotional detachment becomes pronounced. With the physical distancing, cracks- physical, emotional and psychological is bound to show in the family set up.

Moreover, beyond the physical pain inflicted by Soludo is the psychological pain of wounded pride and the often intrusive thought of not being man enough. These unfortunate happenstances, alongside societal demand and pressure for male children, engineered his aggravation and oppressive tendencies towards his wife. He narrates to his mother, "At the Okolobia gathering, Amadi, a mere carpenter, told me to *keep quiet when*

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better men are talking" (50). This societal pressure, rooted in cultural norms alongside his state of psychological incontinence made Ikemba venomously spit out, "let her stop pushing out female children to shame my manhood" (51). Because of Amadi's words, laced with overt scorn and cynicism, Ikemba took a personal offence at the one person who will naturally be the bearer of his displaced anger. Shaming his manhood thus foregrounds his insecurities and feelings of inadequacy. In his mind, Soludo's defeat, his maniac responses that he cannot explain despite the rituals performed to heal him, the gap created by his inability to have a male child and the pressure to produce a heir to take over the homestead all culminates in his feelings of being damaged and utterly useless and his struggle against a wilful surrender to his perceived state of worthless spurs the violence and abuse that feminism often highlights in the reading of the text.

It is equally important to reiterate that Ikemba was clearly not in his right frame of mind. PTSD highlights an impulsivity, recklessness and dare devil schemes that victims always engage in to escape their pain. Van Der Kolk(2014) avers that these schemes can range from heavy consumption of alcohol, reckless driving at breathtaking speeds to cutting oneself to enjoy the pain. In Ikemba's case, on the whim of a misperceived threat to his manliness, usefulness and self worth, he brings in another woman into their matrimonial home. Ihueze (2022),condemning Ikemba's infidelity posits that it is the unequal power divisions between the sexes that foster male promiscuity and that Ikemba denies Uloma the affection she deserved on account of not birthing a male child. Leaning on feminist interpretations, this assertion and denunciation of Ikemba's betrayal of the wife's trust is viable. However, insight into the varying impacts of traumatic neurosis (PTSD) helps us to come to an understanding that Ikemba actually feels nothing for this woman he is consorting with, for in his present state, he is emotionally numb and withdrawn from everyone, even himself. He is like a man stuck in the past, whose heart and emotions have been frozen living in the present and who sees no hope for the future, therefore, the woman he brings in was there only as a misdirected route out of his trauma. She was there only to provide a distraction from the realities of his new condition.

True, Uloma in the novel acknowledges that there was a "... woman who shared her husband's bed" (20). However, we see that Ikemba stole her in on a night when "there was no moon in the starless sky" and "It was too dark outside ..." (20). The author also described Ikemba and the woman's laughter as a "ghostlike howl" (20). Knowing Ikemba's pedigree in Okwuohia and the nature of the society where polygamy is acceptable, it will normally not be a difficult or shameful task if he were to take a second wife. But his actions of stealing this woman in on a night when no one would see them and shooing her out before daylight lends credence to his emotional detachment and numbness. Again, the description of their laughter would have been to show pleasure, however it symbolizes a

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ghoulish experience for the woman and Ikemba himself. Akin to a man who indulges in excessive drinking and orgies to escape certain realities of his situation or circumstance, Ikemba's act of infidelity is only a reckless behaviour that stems from the need to deaden and escape his pain and the taunt by the memory of pain, for according to Van Der Kolk(2014), "... trauma is not just an event that took place in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience ... [and] this imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present" (21).

Conclusion

Albeit the disapproval of the violence and abuse Uloma went through in the hands of Ikemba that feminist discourses highlight, it is necessary to point out that an understanding of the traumatic and its impact on the victim reveals that the root of that abuse is psychological. Mentally and psychologically, Ikemba in the novel *When Men Slept* was scarred and angry. However, this anger is not directed at his wife but at himself, the world and the society that places covert demands on him to be perfect, in the sense that he being a champion before the war must still continue to be the same, even after his engagement with the traumatic situations that changed the course of his life. Not only was he expected to continue being the same unchallenged champion in Okwuohia, his domestic situation was expected to be perfect as well before he will be accorded the manliness, he felt he lost as a result of the war. Consequently, on account of this pressure and ill managed stress, Ikemba "acts out". Unfortunately, Uloma was just a victim of anger displacement and the recipient of his "acting out" and internal crisis that one often encounters living with people who had been through traumatic situations and have no way or avenue of opening up about the helplessness and hopelessness they feel or problems they are passing through. In Nigeria where mental and psychological imbalances are often overlooked, Ikemba's experiences depict a call for change towards a wholistic wellness of every man.

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