

Trauma behind Closed Doors in *While Men Slept*

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Abstract

Women have had traumatic experiences at the hands of domineering males, whose views and attitudes are shaped by society's patriarchal customs and beliefs. These cruel practices frequently left the victim bruised and terrified. This study examines the notion of betrayal trauma theory by Jennifer Freuyd in Gloria Ogo's *While Men Slept* in assessing the symptoms of this sort of trauma in the text and their impact on the protagonist. It was observed from the analysis that social ideals encourage activities that demean and traumatize women. It then concludes that women should not be intimidated, but rather stay strong, and not droop under the weight of the painful experience. There is also a need for women's education and mental freedom so that they can break free from the patriarchal rule in certain areas due to the economic empowerment education provides. The study recommends that more female writers should get involved in revealing events that leave indelible physical and mental scars on women.

Keywords: Trauma, Betrayal Trauma, Romantic trauma, patriarchal, abuse relationship

Introduction

The restlessness of African women today, as well as their skepticism about their status in society is direct repercussions of years of oppression. This is shown in the patriarchal burden, which favours male children over female offspring, since she must be married off. The marital system is not a partnership, but rather an unequal relationship in which the wife is under pressure to prove herself by bearing children, particularly male offspring. A wife loses her identity, and when she becomes a mother, her power and prestige are reflected in her offspring, but if she only has female children or none at all, she loses any real standing. Gender influences how women are treated and also dictates the treatment. Women suffer as captives to culture, tradition, and patriarchy at the hands of males. This novel depicts women's brutalized predicament at the hands of males.

To this end, the man becomes a lord, dominating, oppressing, degrading, and dehumanizing the woman. The resultant effect of these patriarchal notions that encourage man's inhuman actions against the woman is pain; a deep searing pain that transcends the physical. This pain is usually heartfelt, emotional, and psychological: a trauma of sorts.

Michelle Balaev defines trauma as ‘a person’s emotional response to an overwhelming event . . .that disrupts previous ideas of an individual’s sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society’ (149). She further identifies an important characteristic of trauma as, “the transformation of the self, ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that informs the new perceptions of the self and the world” (149). By this, Balaev seems to acknowledge that trauma is a painful and horrifying experience that leaves in its victims afterward a sense of new awareness of self, perception in the world around her, and due to this, reactions to these episodes of trauma may vary.

Critical Analysis

This paper relies on a particular type of trauma called Betrayal trauma theory.

The word Betrayal trauma was coined in the 1990s by psychologist Jennifer Freyud to describe what occurs when the people or institutions on which a person depends for survival significantly violate that person’s trust. (Freyud 76) This betrayal trauma happens in Romantic relationships of mostly husband and wife and can often be seen as infidelity in marriage. Michele Scheinkman writes that “When evaluating betrayal trauma in romantic relationships, earlier literature focused on the impact of infidelity in monogamous relationships. Within this context, the betrayal is present in the relationship as a breach of an unspoken agreement” (18). Betrayal trauma in the novel depicts how betrayal can destroy the victim’s self-identity and relationship with others.

This paper reflects the brutalized plight of women in the hands of men. They suffer in their hands as slaves to culture, tradition, and patriarchy because it projects that a male child sustains the name of a family. This abuse, as a result, triggers off emotional distress where the victims might experience lingering trauma when someone they depend on to respect their needs and generally help safeguard their well-being violates the trust they have placed in them.

While Men Slept tells the story of Uloma, a young lady who was deceived and discarded by society because she was unable to bear a male child. It took place before, during, and after the Nigerian Civil War. In the narrative, Uloma, a young and attractive girl, married Ikemba, and, sadly for her, she was unable to have a male child but had three female children. Her spouse was so bitter and ill-treated her that she lost her self-esteem. She continued to strive to please him and regain his devotion but to no effect. She died on the ground after giving birth to her long-desired son, where she had been beaten senseless. She gave birth to a baby boy but did not live to see him grow up.

When an individual is betrayed, they suffer from different symptoms such as anger, severe lack of trust, including difficulty trusting others and oneself, depression, irregular eating, poor sleep habits, repression, constant reminders of triggering incidents, guilt, restlessness, emotional dysregulation, self-doubt, self-harm and many more emotional issues.

When a person is deceived by a loved one, such as Uloma, they may exhibit symptoms such as a profound loss of trust, including trouble trusting others and oneself. This is obvious in Uloma's attitude toward everyone around her; she is skeptical of everyone, including her mother-in-law, who has been so kind to her. The deceived victim is filled with rage and self-doubt. She is irritated by everything around her, especially herself. She is continuously self-conscious about her inability to bear a male child for her husband. She considers herself a failure.

The unequal division of power among traditional and occasionally modern African marriages fosters betrayal pain and has also allowed the consequence of male promiscuity and rampant wife abuse. In *While Men Slept*, Ikemba took another lady into their marital home while depriving his wife, Uloma, of affection for failing to bear a male child. Thus, Unoma complains bitterly,

Six moons have passed, she still waited, but he had not sent for her. The chill of his old indifference seemed to heighten with each day. . . thoughts of his new mistress, keeping Ikemba amused and his bed warm, kept her awake. . . the laughter that had woken her, rang out again in a ghostlike howl, she cringed, burying her face into the lumpy pillow. She thrust a fist into her mouth and muffed a scream. (19-20)

The experience was too painful, it kept her restless, gave her sleepless nights all because she was producing female children only. Helen Chukwuma states that “the female character in African fiction hitherto, is a facile lackluster human being, the quiet member of a household, content only to bear children, unfulfilled if she does not and handicapped if she bears only daughters” (215). Most African women were not given the chance to contribute to decision-making in their households as daughters, wives, and mothers, even when the decisions directly affected them. Women were frequently engaged to spouses without their permission. In *While Men Slept*, Kasiobi was promised to Agummuo, the local chief priest, who was old enough to be her grandpa, and her mother said nothing.

Once the woman is not able to sustain their husband's lineage by bearing sons, she has failed in striving for the success of her marriage and to maintain her husband's affections. Uloma failed by giving birth to female children and as a result, she suffered humiliation, intimidation, neglect, brutality, and disgrace from her husband. For Uloma, “it was too dark outside to make out this woman who shared her husband's bed. She clenched the wooden sills of her window, feeling something wilt inside her” (20). This has made Uloma withdraw from her association with other women which led to them not reaching out to help her.

Hence,

Everything had changed. The charade to keep up a front, that things were as they ought to be, exerted Uloma. The pretense eventually took its toll and birthed the beginning of her reclusive existence. The insidious withdrawal had crept stealthily upon her. It started with declining

women who offered to have her plait their hair and hers plaited in return. Then blossomed into putting off a visit for the next day, defer it to the next moon. . .

As days went by, the silent demeanor, tinged with shy aloofness, was constructed for snobbery and no one bothered to reach out anymore. (4)

She grew estranged from everyone, and no one understood her predicament. A woman is expected to withstand the anguish imposed by her husband, and no one is ready to assist her. The majority of current research on betrayal trauma theory in romantic relationships has focused on the inclusion of domestic violence. Domestic violence involves a betrayal of trust when one partner is repeatedly beaten, degraded, and violated, and has been linked to deep feelings of shame and anxiety in the victim, particularly when the victim remains with or returns to the abuser, does not report the abuse, or underreports the severity of on-going abuse, all of which have been linked to deep feelings of shame and anxiety in the victim. Uloma continued to be abused by her husband without protest.

Uloma was beaten and harassed at the slightest provocation by Ikemba. She called him one day and said, “Dim”(172) and Ikemba looked at her before replying,

“he glanced at her as if disturbed by an offending fly, gave a long hiss, and took an angry bite of his corn.

“Useless woman” he erupted when she drew nearer.

“Just one son, you cannot give to me. The day you say my name again, it will be the last word you would utter Rubbish (172)

Uloma begged,

“Please tell me this unforgivable wrong of mine of which I am unaware”. (173)

Uloma has been degraded to the point of embracing the potential of future betrayals, as evidenced by this exchange. Her condition had deteriorated to the point that it had harmed her self-esteem, emotional well-being, and capacity to form bonds with others; she had become lonely in the midst of others and refused to share her difficulties.

The community and the institution failed to protect her since they might have aided her while her husband was assaulting her, but they deceived her and she remained in the relationship. The effects of betrayal trauma are sometimes exacerbated by the fact that the person who was wounded may be required to remain in the abusive relationship, which is contrary to their natural response to betrayal, which is to move away from the person who betrayed them. However, when the person relies on someone to supply specific demands, this reaction is impractical. It is a unique trauma that occurs in critical social connections when the betrayed person needs to keep a

relationship with the betrayer for support or safety, according to Freud. Uloma remains in the relationship despite all she is going through at the hands of her husband, Ikemba, because she is afraid of the potential ramifications of admitting the betrayal. This is because, in the perspective of society, she is a failure for not providing what the community values - a male child. Even though Uloma is financially reliant on her husband, she has a greater need to disconnect experiences from conscious awareness to sustain their relationship. As a result, she frequently hides the pain of abuse and betrayal by removing the knowledge of the abuse and betrayal from consciousness and memory.

However, while Funanya was abusing Ofufe, her husband, the kinsmen came to his aid. They did not attempt to assist Uloma since she deserves what she is experiencing for not delivering her husband a male child. At this, Helen Chukwuma writes that, the husband always has the upper hand in disputes and a woman who fought back against her husband was viewed as “he” woman, possibly a monster. It wasn’t that he was physically stronger than her; rather, a woman should always be obedient to men and never attempt to defend herself against their assaults. When her spouse abuses her, a nice woman shouldn’t even scream out loud.

Conclusion

Even now, women see marriage and having children as their highest desire. Even educated, contemporary, and wealthy urban women are observed wanting to adhere to their home culture, which connects them to their rural counterparts, who are often traditional, impoverished, and illiterate. They all fall to the African reality that marriage is not established on partnership and that the woman is tested on fertility as well as having children of the appropriate gender, which is the preference of male to female offspring. There is need for women's education and mental freedom so that they can break free from the patriarchal rule in certain areas due to the economic empowerment education provides. As a result, women's education and economic viability are highlighted as a way of repositioning women. Women should be aware that their identity inside marriage should not be static, but rather a territory through which they may reconstruct a new identity; a fellowship in which they can find strength among their kind.

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