

MEMORY, THE RETURN OF THE REPRESSED AND HEALING IN JOHN RUGANDA'S *THE FLOODS*

Sambai Caroline

Department of Literature, Theatre and Film Studies, Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya. E-mail: csambai@cartafrica.org

Abstract

Memory, the agency of speech and the impossibility of forgetting traumatic experiences is central towards the healing process of survivors of violence. Witnessing through narration, although somewhat traumatizing and damaging in itself, is ironically therapeutic and the only way towards coming to terms with a painful past. This article interrogates how memory and remembering is not only a healing process for victims of abuse in an abusive state but also as a strategy that John Ruganda uses to testify to/against a tyranny of the past in "The Floods" to preserve a nation's collective memory of repression in a violent political era.

Key Words: Memory, Trauma, Violence, Uganda

Introduction

Torture, displacement, dislocation and deaths are characteristic of any violent political moment. People who escape death end up with psychological traumas having witnessed various forms of horror. Survivors of violence live with both physical and mental scars which end up as indelible marks in the victims' everyday lives with some trying to comprehend while others may not. The scars from past violent experiences do not leave the victims even as they try to move on. Freud (1922) notes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that victims of trauma may not fully comprehend what they are experiencing and may even resist testifying their horrendous past. However, 'unless individuals have sincerely come to terms with their past, they exhibit a marked incapacity to live in the present' (Sharpe, 1961, pp. 243-244). Memory and testimony are therefore key towards the healing process after a violent past. The tensions between attempts to forget and remember are usually played out in the survivor's psyche through fragmented speech, hallucinations and daydreams that exhibit the nature and severity of the trauma suffered. Memories of traumatic experiences get impressed upon the victims' psyche and repressed in the subconscious and upon recurring, do not do so in an orderly manner but as painful fragments that survivors must let go of. About the dilemma of remembering and forgetting, Herman notes that, "despite the painfulness of their memories, survivors usually fear that letting go of the past not only means forgetting but also the negation of that historical fact" (Herman, 1994, p.195) and thus the reason for preferring silence over narration. In trying not to

remember, survivors shield themselves from the terror of remembering their painful past yet telling and narrating their past is important in dealing with such fears.

According to Hirsch (1995) memory is the ability to recollect and remember past events. Memories are produced out of past experiences. It [memory] implies a certain act of redemption. In the case of a violent past, survivors opt for selective amnesia because remembering is a painful process. By selective amnesia, victims of violence who do not wish to remember their traumatic experiences because of the intensity of the painsuffered choose to willfully forget or censor their memories. However, remembering, narrating and testifying to a violent past are important processes through which survivors deal with the trauma that comes with its experiences.

Naturally, memories of some happenings melt and eventually get lost while some end up being narrated into historical processes. In an analysis of the Hutu refugee experience in Tanzania, Malkki (1995) notes that the genocide victims' past was evident in their present and the only way of dealing with such traumatic memories was to speak them out. Speaking out helped the victims to come to terms with their present. Having witnessed the murder of their family members and friends, the painful memories and narrative accounts of violence helped in the integration of the victims into the Tanzanian community. In this article I argue that in Ruganda's *The Floods*, the struggle of memory against forgetting principally serves to help witnesses and survivors of terror heal as well as testify to the atrocities of a violent regime that should never happen again.

Undoubtedly violence shapes the history and memory of a people who suffered brutality either physically or psychologically. Priebe notes that violence is 'an inseparable part of our shared humanity whereby the wrongs of the past reverberate in the present' (2007, p.91). For most victims, the pain of the past is not just history, it is a living present that is difficult to retell. According to Connerton (1989), there is an important connection between what happens in the present and what happened in the past. We experience the present as being intricately connected to/with the past. A violent past makes permanent imprints that keep recurring in survivors' minds as fragments. Such marks hardly get erased. On the indelibility of such violent marks, Soyinka notes that the 'crimes that the African continent commits against her kind are of a dimension and unfortunately of a nature that appears to constantly provoke memories of the historic wrongs inflicted on the continent by others' (Soyinka, 1999, p. 19).

The Floods

The contextual setting of *The Floods* is Uganda, in the 1970s, the period of the brutal and dictatorial leadership of Idi Amin. The play which was published in 1988, almost a decade after Idi Amin's brutal regime, is an imaginative representation of Amin's tyrannical regime in Uganda. Activities in the play span the period in which Amin ruled Uganda ruthlessly. The play intricately mirrors how the Ugandan state used its power abusively and meted violence against its citizens. The play is replete with scenes of violence. The massive

killings that characterized Amin's regime are represented in the play through scenes of violence remembered and re-enacted by two characters Nankya and Kyeyune who try to relive and reconstruct their violent pasts to each other throughout the play.

In a historical study of the social origins of violence in Uganda, Kasozi (1994, p. 12) notes that 'the application of violence by the state's leader appeared to be a demonstration of his desire to show his ability to control and stay in power'. He notes that, the brutal leader's aim while in power is merely to show and wield power (Kasozi, 1994, p.104). It is for the purpose of the pleasure of being in charge and to make others instruments of their will that those in power often mete out violence on others.

The setting of the play is a lake which served as a dumping site for dead bodies. *The Floods* is divided into three parts called 'waves'. Floods symbolize the amount of blood let out from the mass killings committed by the state. The metaphorical sense of the word alludes to massive bloodshed that was witnessed during Idi Amin's reign in Uganda. Waves refer to a swell or a ridge on a large body of water. The waves also denote disturbance and a rising trend involving large numbers of people. In the literal sense, waves in a large mass of water rise and fall when there is lack of calmness. In the play, waves represent different forms of violence at different levels ranging from physical, structural and psychological violence. The waves also represent the displacement of people from their homes. This is seen in the way people fled their homes to other places for safety. Generally, the structural setting of the play, *represented* through the use of 'floods' and 'waves' enhances the understanding of the various forms of violence *represented* in the play as is aptly captured here:

Kyeyune: *The lake is stale and stinks of rotten fish and human corpses...Lorryfuls of wailing civilians driven to their deaths over the cliff... (The Floods pg.19)*

The Violence of Memories, Remembering to Forget and the Healing Power of Narration

Memory is a very instrumental strategy for the writing and the re-enactment of violence in *The Floods*. Memory here not only includes the acts of remembering but it also encompasses the ways in which the state and its agents try to impose forced amnesia in order for people to forget the acts of violence committed against them in order to wipe away that memory. John Ruganda in *The Floods* has offered an analysis of the internal processes through which survivors cope with their past experiences of violence. As such, Ruganda shifts from what we would call the 'spectacle' of violence in order to trace how characters struggle with remembering and forgetting. Considering the extent of violence as inscribed in the survivor's lives allows for the exploration of the psychological dimension of violence, trauma and the victims' personal responses which constitutes a large part of the experience of violence. Ruganda guides the reader through the violent past by use of narration, flashbacks, hallucinations, daydreams and fragmented speech which allows the

reader to connect with what Chan (2005, p. 372) describes as the ‘interior of disproportion, dislocation and terror’.

Scheper Hughes notes that, “violence can never be understood solely in terms of its physicality; force, assault or the infliction of pain alone. Focusing exclusively on the physical aspects of torture, terror and violence is missing the point” (Scheper, 2004, p.1). In analyzing the intensity and the severity of violence, Ruganda pays attention to how survivors’ psyche was affected by violence and its varied forms. Dreams and instances of hallucinations are interpreted as displaying repressed feelings and bottled up pains that need to be purged out. According to Freud, dreams are a means of exploring the pre-conscious. For him, ‘dreams are an invaluable clue to a repressed major traumatic situation’ (Freud, cited in Sharpe, 1961, p. 71). Dreams have meanings to be decoded and analyzed through a re-telling of the events which constitute past events. Freud notes that dreams have the psychological function of helping our minds to process and eliminate trivial or threatening material. Every dream is a meaningful psychological formation which can be given an identifiable place in what goes on in waking life.

Testifying to the past has always been many an authors’ desire in an attempt to preserve a people’s collective memories of repression. Writing affords one the space to explore the happenings of an unpleasant past while at the same time highlighting survivors’ struggles to remember and forget past traumatic experiences. Survivor’s attempts to relive their past are met with a desire by their violators to censor their memories yet in such circumstances there is a necessity to return to the past for purposes of healing.

The killing of all the islanders in the first wave at the beginning of the play is explained by the desire of the state to totally eliminate all witnesses and survivors of violence. The idea of the ‘rescue boat’ which islanders thought would rescue them to safety later sunk killing all the passengers on board was meant to wipe away witnesses of state violence. Such mass killings can be regarded as attempts by the state to institute national amnesia and erasure of a people’s memories of the atrocities committed against them. Connerton (1989, p. 13) notes that one of the ways in which a totalitarian government attempts to mentally enslave its subjects is by taking away their memories.

For Bwogo who was an agent of the state research bureau (SRB) and actually oversaw and facilitated the killings, it is no use remembering the past:

Bwogo: Things of the past are best unraked. We would have no time for the present. We must forget things of the past...forget all things (Ruganda, 1988, p. 34).

This moment invokes feelings of guilt and shame and should thus be forgotten yet in order for the reconstruction of that people’s history, there is need to redeem that particular moment through remembering and narration.

In his analysis of how societies remember, Connerton (1989) asserts that, “what is horrifying in totalitarian regimes is not only the violation of human dignity but also the fear that there might remain nobody who could ever again properly bear witness to the past” (Connerton, 1989, p. 15). Simon (2005) maintains that practices of remembrance are integral to the production of a historical imaginary that allows for a critical introspection into the practices that perpetuate animosity. Barstow (2000, p. 592) maintains that though remembering violent experiences is painful, ‘the first step towards transcending violence is the act of remembering, refusing to forget it, no matter how painful that may be’. Barstow goes on to add that failing to ‘remember’ or speak about violence means censoring that historical moment (p. 592). For victims of violence, she says that the greatest fear in forgetting or choosing not to speak about violence is that the same heinous acts might end up being repeated.

Throughout the play, the reader explores this historical moment through narratives of disconnections that are also fragmentary. By reconstructing and narrating their memories (through Nankya and Kyeyune), Ruganda offers survivors of violence the space to speak out about their traumatizing experiences of brutality. These memories of physical assault and psychological violations do not come at once but mostly through series of flashbacks that are disjointed and fragmented pointing to the severity of the trauma suffered by survivors. Caruth (1996a, p. 3) explains that... ‘Trauma narrativists endeavor to expand their audiences’ awareness of trauma by engaging them with personalized, experientially oriented means of narration that highlight the painful ambivalence that characterizes traumatic memory’.

Nankya remembers how her mother was gang raped by the military men under a directive from the state and how she herself was later raped by Bwogo who disguised himself as her lover. She also remembers how, on government orders, innocent people were whisked from their homes never to return again. The family of Nnalongo (she and her twins) is said to have been bundled into a lorry that emptied people into the lake (Ruganda, 1988, p. 40). Similarly, Ssalongo who was whisked from his shop in a government vehicle was later reported as having been shot while he tried to escape. Nankya further remembers how Rutaro, her friend was killed by the security men on Bwogo’s orders for having danced with Nankya (p.31). These traumatic memories for Nankya are difficult to forget. In a quest to understand this moment, Nankya relives this painful past both as a testimony and to seek answers from Bwogo.

Victims of torture do not have memories but have hallucinatory representations of the violent pasts because experiences of horror disable the psyche and alter the work of memory, (Sabatini, 1999). Caruth (1996a) indicates that the violent moment gets frozen around the traumatic events and hurtful memories and is exhibited as painful memories. Caruth further notes that, “the traumatic experience is not fully registered but experienced as

trauma where it resurfaces as a form of traumatic nightmares, intrusive thoughts and repetitive re-enactments” (1996a, p.3).

Kyeyune in a hallucinatory moment sees military men bundling innocent people and hacking them to death before leading them to the lake for dumping. Kyeyune who witnessed the state agents committing these atrocities keeps going back to that moment and even fears that he is being tracked by the ‘security agents’. At one point he asks to be protected from them:

Kyeyune: *They will. They will. The ambassadors of darkness. I saw them.*

Tell them to leave me alone. (Ruganda, 1988, p. 37)

Though Kyeyune did not suffer direct physical abuse, the constant return of Major General’s dead body not only disturbs his peace but it also instills fear in him. The Major General was killed, beheaded and his body dumped in the lake with three nails sticking from his head. While fishing, Kyeyune fishes out the body. Kyeyune keeps seeing the image of the dead body re-appearing to him even when others do not see it:

Kyeyune: *Three stabs. Three nails. The man with three nails, his limp body in my net...*

Kyeyune: *The man with the irresistible beckon. Three nails stuck in his skull.*

(He looks for reassurance. His fright is abating) (p. 37)

Just after the boat has left, Kyeyune remembers seeing the man with three nails shooting up like an agitated dolphin as he gathered the bodies into his net and disappeared into the lake:

Kyeyune: *....so I paddled on and on to the centre of the lake then all of a sudden, the net on my right became heavy ...I knew it was a big catch, do you know what it was, son? A man. A military man. Dead. Three long nails in his head....that man, son, that military man still haunts me (p. 10).*

Kyeyune: *but the man with three nails in his head...he comes in many guises. Sometimes as a fisher of men, lonely and subdued...(p. 12).*

Kyeyune’s trauma is expressed through the constantly recurring image of the dead man which is engraved in his memory. The terror of remembering is as damaging and of equal force as the violent moment itself such that this process almost renders him mad.

Bwogo: *Is he alright? Or is he gone mad? (p. 39).*

Being a sign of mental disorder, madness symbolically denotes both the state of affairs and the psychological wounding from violence that characterized Idi Amin's rule in Uganda. It is a motif that speaks of the social and political fragmentation of the Ugandan nation pointing to the disintegration of the society and its values and of the self. It is a writing strategy that aptly captures the context being explored. The absurdity of such situations, as of depicting the madness in the society, demands a technique that adequately captures the situation in order to represent the reality. In her discussion on the perspective of 'writing madness' in African literature, Flora Veit Wild notes that, "listening to the speech of madness in literary texts means seeing that literature from a different angle. It means looking at it through the lenses of writers who have ruffled up the surface of realist representation and have explored issues and styles that represent a trespassing of borders..." (2007, p. 2). Madness reflects both individual and collective narratives of fragmentation and of the level of inhumanity witnessed during a violent regime.

Madness in the play is most importantly read as a space for subversion and 'self-therapy' (Gramaglia, 2008, p. 8) in a context where narrating a past is important for healing. Repression of memory through the use of violence in order to silence witnesses or institute forced amnesia is common in violent regimes. Veit Wild notes that 'a mad person is someone whose voice society does not want to listen to, whose behavior is intolerable, and who ought to be suppressed', (2007, p. 2). Madness then becomes an important strategy of subverting abusive power and at the same time a space for camouflaging in order to remember and narrate painful past experiences fear of retribution. Kyeyune has the courage to speak the unspeakable in a situation where speaking out is risking one's life because he is mad. Societal silencing of madness paradoxically affords it the opportunity to speak out.

Aesthetically, this is Ruganda's strategy of speaking against attempts of national amnesia and silencing of survivors and witnesses of a violent regime by its agents. Major General's dead body is both a testimony of the atrocities committed by the state and it at the same time 'speaks' of dead bodies' power to transcend death. In his attempts to erase past memories, Nankya rightly reminds Bwogo that:

Nankya: *The dead are no longer dead, Bwogo. They are up in arms to right their wrongs* (Ruganda, 1988, p. 37).

Bwogo who feels condemned becomes unnerved by the talk and turns violent and slaps Nankya.

Bwogo: *(slaps her hard) Stop it!*

Nankya: *You slapped me very hard* (p.38).

In most cases where the oppressors are guilty of committing violence, there is always an attempt to institute amnesia as is even evident in the excerpt above. Bwogo, the symbol of power in the play attempts to erase the memories that Nankya and Kyeyune have about the violent past and his involvement in the killings. Bwogo resorts to the use of physical or verbal abuse in order to silence them whenever they try to remember the past. Hirsch (1995, p.23) notes that the ability to control and manipulate a people's memory is a form of political power. Connerton also indicates that one of the ways in which a totalitarian government attempts to mentally enslave its subjects is by taking away their memories (Connerton, 1989, p. 13). Bwogo insists that, after a violent moment, there is a 'future to think about and nasty memories to forget' (Ruganda, 1988, p. 69). However, the inability of characters to overcome such memories means that affected people continue living their present in the shadow of their past injustices. Such memories become part of the survivors' everyday experience that they constantly relive. It becomes part of the survivors' identity and is compulsively performed in the present (Freud, 2003a, p. 36).

Conclusion

Remembering and narrating a painful past aids in forgetting and coming to terms with that past. While it is violent in itself, testifying to a violent past is therapeutic and key towards healing. Despite survivors' attempts to forget, past events keep recurring in the form of fragmented memories and images that keep pressing for expression. The return of the repressed serves to challenge repressive authorities and are an embodiment of the nature of inhumanity suffered during a violent regime. Hayden White (1987) notes that fiction informs reality and thus by remembering past accounts, we are able to deliberate about the present and future. He regards fiction as 'imaginary constructs that teach about reality'.

Memories of violence for Nankya and Kyeyune are emblems of victimised identities. The characters are presented as having suffered forms of violence which left indelible and severe imprints and images in their minds. The effects of violence go beyond the physical and are presented in the play through the daydreams, fragmented speech and hallucinations. Ruganda's mission in *The Floods* is to allow his characters remember by refusing to forget the past injustices committed against them. Memory here serves as a historical source through which Ruganda imagines and constructs an apt image of a tyrannical past which defines a historical moment of the people of Uganda. It is also a narrative space through which characters return to their past and remember in order to come to terms with a violent past. Their personal testimonies speak of a desire for sanity. Narrating and speaking out becomes cathartic at the point of reliving the memory in order to deal with the fear of a return of the terror of the past.

Works Cited

- Barstow, A. L. (2000). Violence and Memory: The Politics of Denial. *Journal of American Academy of Religion*, 68(3), 591- 602.
- Caruth, C. (1996a). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Chan, S. (2005). The Memory of Violence: Trauma in the Writings of Alexander. *Third World Quarterly*, 26(2), 369-382.
- Connerton, P. (1989). *How Societies Remember*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Freud, S. (2003a). *Types of neurotic nosogenesis*. (Vol. 2). Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva.
- Gramaglia, L. (2008). *Representations of madness in Indo-Caribbean literature*. (PhD thesis), University of Warwick.
- Hirsch, H. (1995). *Genocide and the Politics of Memory: Studying Death to Preserve Life*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Kasozi, A. K. (1994). *The Social Origins of Violence in Uganda, 1964-1985*. London: McGill- Queens University Press.
- Malkki, H. L. (1995). *Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press
- Priebe, R. (2005). Literature, Community and Violence: Reading African Literature in the West, Post 9/11. *Researches in African Literature*, 36(2), 46-58.
- Ruganda, J. (1988). *The Floods*. Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers.
- Simon, R. I. (2005). The Touch of the Past: The Pedagogical Significance of a Transactional Sphere of Public Memory, in *The Touch of the Past: Remembrance, Learning and Ethics*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Scheper, H. (2004). 'Making Sense of Violence' in *Violence in War and Peace*. (eds.) Scheper, H and Bourgois, P. US: Blackwell Publishing House.

Sharpe, F.E. (1961). *Dream Analysis: A Practical Handbook for Psycho-analysis*. London: The Hogarth Press Ltd.

Veit-Wild, F. (2006). *Writing Madness: Borderlines of the Body in African Literature*. Oxford: James Currey.

White, H. (1987). *The Content of the Form*. London: John Hopkins University.