



# The Pain Behind The Veil In Ann Iwuagwu's Arrow Of Destiny

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## ABSTRACT

Women have over time encountered heartbreaking experiences in the hands of dominant men whose perceptions and attitudes are fostered by the patriarchal cultures and values of our society. These inhuman treatments often left the woman battered and traumatized. As a result, this paper tends to examine the concept of trauma in Ann Iwuagwu's Arrow of Destiny. Adopting the contemporary literary trauma theory, the paper showcases the manifestations of trauma from the text and its impact on the protagonist. It was discovered that our societal values help to encourage actions that degrade and traumatize women. It then, concludes that women should refuse to be daunted, but courageous and not sag under the weight of the traumatic situation. The study recommends that more female writers should get involved in the task of exposing situations that leave indelible marks of physical and psychological torture on women.

**KEY WORDS:** Trauma, abuse, rape, abandonment, marriage of convenience and determination

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Unarguably, literature as an art form is a product of the society. According to Austine Akpuda, [1] literature cannot be divorced from its society because it is this society that provides the material that breathes life into it and it is to this society that literature has its supreme obligation. Consequently, despite the aesthetic attribute of this art form, literature must be 'functional', encoding and decoding the realities of its birthplace. By being realistic, Ferdinand Asoo [2] refers to the literary work's attempt to tell a story that is convincing to the readers, 'a story that can conceivably have happened to real people living in our natural physical world' (Huck, 464). Lending credence to the above treatise, Helen Chukwuma [3] narrows it down to the African hemisphere purporting that, 'the world of the African novel is usually a world of reality, known and identifiable. There is hardly room for flights of fancy as the present is too real and pressing to be ignored' (ix).

One of the realities in Africa today and indeed the world in general is the subjugation and relegation of the woman to the background. In many cultures of the world, the woman has been at the receiving end of a 'man's world'. Her biology and gender roles as a keeper of the home, manager of the kitchen and a brooder of children, especially male children, seems to have conspired against her. Gloria Chukukere [4] is of the view that;

. . . the woman's major functions revolve around the family. These include her responsibilities as mother, wife and home administrators. The role of the mother is considered vital as it is through her that the lineage is perpetuated. This child bearing function encourages early marriages . . . A woman's importance and stability in her husband's home are judged by the degree of fertility, especially her ability to bear sons. If she is childless, she is considered a failure in her primary duty and often suffers considerably as a result . . . (2)

Since this is the case, the woman is not deemed fit to be seen, let alone heard. She is not allowed to be educated, to take interest or make any input in issues concerning her life or her affairs. Her allegiance is to the

man and total submission to his whims and caprices makes her a 'good woman'. 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 inhumane actions against the woman is pain; a deep searing pain that transcends the physical. This pain is usually heartfelt, emotional and psychological. This pain in literary studies is termed 'trauma'.

Trauma is originally a Greek word meaning 'wound'. The *Oxford Dictionary of Psychology*[5] observes that it is 'a physical injury or wound, or a powerful psychological shock that has damaging effects' (755). Negin Heidarizadeh [6] is also of the opinion that it is 'a state of mind which results from an injury . . . a devastating and damaging experience' (789). This is to say therefore, that trauma can be interpreted in the context of physical or psychological wounding and whether it is deduced from the milieu of the trauma itself or the traumatic event, the underlining trait is that trauma is horrifying, a distress or an upset that is deeply wounding to the self and to the mind.

Trauma may result from a single distressing experience or a chain of recurring events that can range from sexual abuse, rape, domestic violence, abandonment, abusive relationships, physical assault to mass interpersonal violence like war, terrorist attacks, sex trafficking or verbal abuse. Notwithstanding the form it takes, trauma is usually distressing – it causes damage to the mind and it heaps an overwhelming amount of stress that exceeds one's ability to cope or integrate the emotions involved with that experience. Needless to say, people react to trauma and traumatic events in different ways.

Margaret Fofu Nutsukpo [7] states that little attention has been paid to the physical, emotional and psychological impact of various forms of patriarchal abuse has on women in African literature. Although a lot of commendable effort has been made by different African feminist writers to deconstruct the wrongful depiction of the female image in the body of African writings, Nutsukpo seems to be pointing towards an area that has perhaps not been properly elucidated in the African literary atmosphere. Based on this foregoing, this paper's intent is to highlight the various forms of subordination that women go through in African societies and some other parts of the world, where the women are culturally bound to adhere strictly to the culture whether consciously or unconsciously and the resultant traumatic effects that these experiences have on them.

On the other hand, contemporary literary trauma theory as postulated by Michelle Balaev [8] argues that;

A single conceptualization of trauma will likely never fit the multiple and often contradictory depictions of trauma in literature because texts cultivate a wide variety of values that reveal individual and cultural understandings of self, memory and society (8).

Here, the above argument seeks to establish that a unilateral view and interpretation of trauma cannot align with its often several forms. Michelle Balaev [9] 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 [9] further identifies an important characteristics of trauma as, 'the transformation of the self, ignited by an external, often terrifying experiences, 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). Inette Swart,[10] lending voice, observes that trauma, ' . . . brings to mind associations of pain, shock, disillusionment, life altering experiences, human aggression and betrayal, and not uncommonly criminal deeds' (194). By this, Balaev and Swart seems to acknowledge that trauma is a painful and horrifying experience that leaves in its victims afterwards a sense of new awareness of self, perception of the world around her and due to this, reactions to these episodes of trauma may vary.

The contemporary literary trauma theory also focuses on repetitions that exist within the text as the mind evokes memory. It is in mind that survivors of trauma may likely repeat aspects or the entire event that was traumatic to them. This is to say that repetition of the tragic situation that elicited the trauma in the first instance is likely to re-occur. Trauma in the novel depicts how traumatic events can destroy the victim's self-identity and relationship with others. Using the above theory, the paper analyses the traumatic experiences of a childlesswoman in Ann Iwuagwu's *Arrow of Destiny* to ascertain whether the protagonist was actually abused. It also seeks to address the physical, emotional and psychological impact of various forms of patriarchal abuse on the woman in the novel.

The text, *Arrow of Destiny*[11]chronicles the story of young Cynthia who was thrown out of her husband's house on account of childlessness, being branded a witch and wanting to kill the child of her husband's illegitimate wife. The story told through intersections between flashback and the present reeks of the pain and trauma that Cynthia had to go through in the hands of her uncle's wife and Idris; her husband. The paper tries to x ray some of the painful experiences of women in our society.

#### **ABANDONMENT, ALIENATION AND DEPRIVATION**

In the text under study, the major character (Cynthia) suffered abandonment, alienation and deprivation from those who should have cherished and given her love. Her parents abandoned her with her grandmother and

travelled to USA in search of greener pastures. Cynthia again faced the pain of alienation when the cold hands of death snatched her grandmother. Her father disappeared, never writing to ask after her welfare, and never caring. Her uncle Paul who should have picked up the mantle of being her guardian did a good job in throwing her out of his house and never bothered to find out what happened to the little girl left in his care. She was left to fend for herself, left with nobody to share her joys and sorrows with, left with nobody to speak to or to get help from and this made her easy bait for Mrs. Isa. Cynthia was left to grapple with the emotional trauma that emanates from the fear, anxiety and uncertainties of abandonment.

Inette Swart [10] writes that trauma 'brings to mind associations of pain, shock, disillusionment, life-altering experiences, human aggression and betrayal . . . (194). This also clearly depicts Cynthia's situation when at the beginning of the novel, "she stood in the rain with her luggage at Chief Perekulu Street not having anywhere to go to but not wanting to remain in "an environment [that] reminded her of failure and made her feel dejected" (1). Oblivious of the pouring rain, "she had more on her mind and the pain she bore numbed the stinging effect of the heavy drops of rain on her skin" (1). The reader in this haunting narrative comes in contact with the deep psychological torture and trauma that Cynthia had to deal with for ten years. She recounts, "after all the torture and torment of the past ten years, she was ready for the worst. She had endured ten long years of anguish, where she was considered unimportant. Ten years of fruitless venture where her best efforts were regarded as nothing" (2). The reason for this 'ten years of fruitless venture. . .' she tells Boma; the patrol man on duty the night Idris, not minding the heavy downpour threw her out of the house is as a result of marriage of convenience. Cynthia as a little girl was left in the care of her grandmother by her parents who travelled abroad in search for greener pasture. Tragedy rained in torrents as Cynthia's mother died and her grandmother who did not recover from the experience died also leaving Cynthia to the care of her Uncles- Paul and Asuwe. Asuwe travelled abroad in pursuit of a Masters degree, leaving Cynthia with Uncle Paul. Cynthia [11] narrates

My life changed drastically. There was no more motherly love for me . . . I was in unforgettable pain. I needed someone to share my secrets with. When I first saw my menstruation, I didn't know what it was all about . . . (31)

Even though she was helped by Mrs Peters, a woman she met in a bus that helped her with the blood stains on her school skirt, she still lamented, 'If only I had my own mother. . .' (34) Cynthia felt the traumatic impact of the pain of abandonment when Fitimi, the lady her uncle married made her life, ' . . . living in hell. I became a housemaid to my Uncle's wife, receiving every imaginable kind of abuse' (37). She declares that her Uncle's wife,[11]

. . . saw nothing good in all I did. She called me a witch and accused me of killing my mother and grandmother. There were times I didn't eat because she wouldn't give me food. There was no difference between morning and night. I worked until everyone else has gone to bed before crawling into mine. (37)

*Oxford Dictionary of Psychology*[5] asserts that trauma also includes physical injuries that can have damaging effects. In Cynthia's narrative, she acknowledges that, 'there were bruises all over my body' and that;

Every new day brought new trouble for me. One day, while she was flogging me with the food turner, she knocked out my tooth . . . she hit my mouth and my tooth flew out with a trail of blood. My mouth bled but she paid no attention . . . (34)

Eventually, the physical abuse gave way to her being ejected from her Uncle's house to nowhere. She lamented, "where do I go from here? Who do I turn to? . . . I had a big hole in my heart that no one could heal" (43). She turned to Mrs Peters who took her in but was handicapped to pay her university fees. Out of desperation, she falls prey to Mrs Isa who promised to pay her fees in return for marriage to her brother Idris. Cynthia claims, "that in her [Mrs. Isa's] mind, she figured she needed no special tricks to catch the fleeing fish from the big river. All she needed to do was to position the net well and take up the fish without resistance because the fish was already weak from fleeing" (51-52).

## **MARRIAGE**

In marriage, we see that Cynthia suffered terrible trauma in the hands of her husband, Idris. She was just seen and considered as a 'continuer of a family lineage' as Idris is an only son. She is not considered as an equal partner of the marriage. Mrs Isa, Idris' sister who contracted the marriage on behalf of her brother only considered that Cynthia will make the right candidate for marriage because age was on her side.

In the text there were cases of physical violence, verbal abuse and emotional pain. Cynthia entered into a marriage contract that was not for the reasons of love, she faced the pain and trauma of a marriage hinged on deception, lies and 'keeping faces'. She was severely traumatized in marriage and had no capacity to change her situation because it is a marriage of convenience.

Marriage of convenience is a kind of marriage that is entered into for personal gain other than that of relationship of love and this subverts the traditional concepts of marriage which in many cultures is love. This depicts Cynthia's situation clearly in "he claimed to love me yet I couldn't see the love in his eyes. He said he loved me but I couldn't hear it in his voice. His embrace felt empty yet he said he was in love with me" (61).

In a marriage of convenience, one partner is always treated as a commodity and when people are treated as commodities, according to Shawn Burn, [12] “they are diminished and dehumanised and do not have the power to make their own life choices” (23). In Cynthia’s case, she was commodified as an object, a channel through which Idris’ family lineage will continue and when that was not coming forth, “. . .he [Idris] was frustrated when . . . [she] could not reciprocate his financial assistance . . .with a child” (65). She therefore faced the trauma of jeers, taunts and molestation from her husband. Again, their marriage, like all marriages of convenience, was hinged on deception and lies for Idris, “. . . wanted to create a false impression on his friends, to make them believe he took care of me” (69). In this situation, Cynthia pretends that everything is good between them while she was being gradually destroyed psychologically hence the title “the pain behind the veil”.

### **BETRAYAL OF TRUST**

There is a strong depiction of trust betrayal as an agent of trauma from the text. Cynthia’s husband, Idris in *Arrow of Destiny* also had her trust shattered when he; Idris introduced Idara to their already traumatic marriage. Cynthia was equally let down by her uncle who yielded to pressures from his wife to eject her from their house on a flimsy excuse. The magnitude of Cynthia’s traumatic episode in marriage climaxed with Idris’s betrayal of trust. Nutsukpo,[7] claims that psychotherapists are of the view that betrayal of trust in relationships can result in trauma and for Cynthia, Idris’s betrayal is a situation she had no choice than to accept to live with, being completely dependent on him as Idris refused for her to get a job. She is totally at his mercy and could do nothing when, “the new girl came in with her two children and heavily pregnant with the third” (83). On account of this, she goes through the pain of domestic servitude and verbal abuse as, ‘the new girl and Idris treated [her] like a rag and practically turned [her] to a house girl. Idris’s mother in-law, ‘. . . addressed [her] derogatorily’, warning Cynthia not to, ‘. . . hurt her daughter or grandchildren because [she] did not have any of [her] own’ (83). Cynthia’s emotional and psychological trauma in marriage also came with physical violence as Idris, ‘...descended on [her] and began to beat [her] mercilessly’ (86).

Eventually, Cynthia was sent packing from her husband’s house following an accident with one of Idara’s children. Having been so deeply marred by the various forms of trauma from her marriage, Cynthia refused to put up with a struggle with Idris as she was sent packing. This aligns with Laura Brown’s [13] perception that the insidious nature of trauma stems from, ‘the traumatogenic effects of oppression... that do violence to the soul and spirit’ (107).

### **RAPE**

Meanwhile, the rape Cynthia encountered in *Arrow of Destiny* is a rape of the innocence of youth. Mrs Isa, seeing an opportunity, exploited it to her advantage. Cynthia’s friend says of Mrs. Isa, “That woman must be crazy. How could she even think of such a thing for you at this age? If you were her daughter, would she have advised you to marry at this time?” (45). Instead of rendering help to this young girl, she took advantage of her vulnerability and pushed her into a life that Cynthia given a lot of options, would not have chosen for herself at that time of her life.

It seems to this writer that the author of the text under study seems to be in mind that wherever women are- on the African continent or beyond the African continent, as long as women are bound within spaces that confine and silence them, and having to daily confront patriarchal injustices, their mental, physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing becomes impaired. In Cynthia’s case, she began to doubt her ability to have children and decided to swallow all the humiliations and take care of the illegitimate wife’s children because she saw herself as a total failure and a cursed person. She was willing to serve them if only she could have a roof over her head but Idris rejected by being insensitive to her plight.

Above all, in spite of all her painful experiences, Cynthia in *Arrow of Destiny* refused to be daunted, she picked up courage and with patient determination made a happy haven for herself.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

Trauma has been defined as a distressing, overwhelming event that can cause damage to a person’s psyche. It brings along baggage of pain, disillusionment and life-altering experiences. The text - *Arrow of Destiny* shows examples of trauma which are represented in the abuse (verbal, physical and sexual), abandonment, and betrayal of trust that the protagonists had to grapple with in some homes. These emotional traumatic incidents were pictured in such ways as to highlight the sadness and the weight of frustration in the victims’ situation.

However, people react to trauma and traumatic event in different ways as trauma and pain foregrounds new perspectives and understandings of the self. In the discussion of the text, even though the protagonist underwent severe traumatic experiences, but she drew strength from her adversity and moved on. Notwithstanding her traumatic experiences in marriage with Idris, Cynthia undauntedly moved on with patience,

perseverance and courage in order to restore her sense of self. She found a job, got married again, of her own volition to Boma and later had children of her own.

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