

Trauma Styling in Athol Fugard's *Sorrows and Rejoicing* and Zakes Mda's *The Bells of Amersfoort*

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ABSTRACT

The study argued that in *Sorrows and Rejoicing* and *The Bells of Amersfoort*, Athol Fugard and Zakes Mda render trauma not simply as a thematic preoccupation but as a stylistic tool that determines the plays' formal and aesthetic contours. Through trauma theory concepts like belated memory, repression, and the compulsion to repeat, the study demonstrates how fragmented temporality, broken dialogue, spectral presences, and the persistent use of silence become stylistic signatures through which the playwrights dramatise the unsettled psychic lives of their characters. In examining these narrative and dramaturgical strategies, the research contends that both texts reveal trauma as an experience that resists linear articulation yet imprints itself on theatrical form, thus reflecting the deeper struggle by contemporary literary artists to reckon with the lingering psychological scars of Apartheid South African.

Keywords: Trauma, repression, silence, fragmented temporality, deeper struggle.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

While the end of apartheid ushered in an immediate termination to the physical and social segregation of blacks and coloured people in South Africa, the emotional and psychological wounds of the period continue to fester in the post-apartheid era. Beside the proceedings of reparation committees, and the monuments erected in honour of apartheid victims, the brutal legacy of the regime lingers in the minds of those who lived through the violence and injustices. It is not surprising therefore that the literary oeuvre of the post-apartheid era largely looks at the tensions left behind by the country's dark past. Ajibola Opeyemi's assertion that the experiences of a people find representations in its literatures is highly resonant here (Ajibola 1). In line with this, J.M. Coetzee also avers that post-apartheid South African literature has been forged under the pressure of the country's historical conditions (Coetzee 3). This is especially true for the genre of drama which has witnessed the birth of remarkable playwrights like Athol Fugard, Zakes Mda, John Kani, Winston Ntshona, Gibson Mthuzeli Kente, Yael Farber, Lara Foot-Newton, Mike van Graan, to mention a few.

The Concept of Trauma Styling

Apparently, the concept of trauma styling is simply a portmanteau of the words trauma and style. In literature, trauma is a familiar concept that scholars engage with in the analysis of texts that emerge from histories of violence, war, genocide, colonialism, slavery, and systemic oppression. But beyond the thematic import of trauma, it also functions as a significant literary tool in the formal and stylistic organisation of literary works. It is on the basis of this intersection between traumatic experience and artistic expression that the concept of trauma styling is borne. The concept of style, on the other hand, generally refers to the distinctive patterns in which a writer organises language, narrative structure, imagery, dialogue, and other formal elements to produce meaning. Simply put, it is a writer's unique way of telling a story through descriptions, dialogues, and temporal sequencing. This means that style is not limited to linguistic ornamentation as it incorporates both the aesthetic and structural choices that the literary artist makes to communicate thematic concerns. In line with the foregoing, the concept of trauma styling is interpreted as the way a literary artist tells a story using trauma as a stylistic tool in the presentation and organisation of characters, dialogues, and events. Against this backdrop, this paper attempts to examine trauma styling in the works of two post-apartheid South African drama; namely: Athol Fugard's *Sorrows and Rejoicing* and Zakes Mda's *The Bells of Amersfoort*.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The growing popularity of trauma studies within literary scholarship testifies to the assertion put forward by this paper that trauma is not only psychological injury but also a germane element in framing narrative structures, language patterns and symbolic ideas in literature. Since emerging in the 1990s chiefly through the works of Cathy Caruth, trauma theory has sought to uncover how trauma deviates from the normative narrative structure and produces alternative stylistic modes such as fragmentation, repetition, symbolic representation, and narrative silence (Azmi 2018).

Extant studies show that literary works on trauma tend to adopt non-linear temporal arrangements, recursive memory structures, and symbolic imagery to capture the psychological disorientation experienced by traumatised subjects. Asati and Tiwari (2025) aver that fragmented narrative patterns and recurring symbolic motifs are usually reflective of the disjointed psychological realities of survivors of trauma, thereby transforming narrative technique into a symbolic portrayal of psychological wounds. Such stylistic deviations function as aesthetic process through which literature attempts to represent experiences that resist linear storytelling. Trauma, in this sense, compels writers to move beyond realist continuity toward experimental forms capable of conveying emotional and cognitive dislocation.

In the same vein, Khan and Wakeel (2025) opine that while depicting trauma in their writings, literary artists often make choices about how characters deal with it, the narrative voice of the story, and how the story is structured. Consequently, these choices influence the thematic development and structural design of the text. From a psychoanalytic standpoint, Shah et al. (2021) see trauma as a psychological wound that heavily influences a writer's creative ability. They posit that the manifestation of recurring memories, disordered emotional responses, and linguistic instability in stories are deliberate styling effects by writers to capture the long-term psychological background of such writers. Similarly, Ajibola (2021), in her study of eight purposively selected African novels on migration, notes that migrant fiction commonly adopts multiple narrative voices, symbolic motifs, and journey structures to depict the psychological distress experienced by displaced individuals. This, she adds, foregrounds trauma within the aesthetic architecture of the plot itself. Such stylistic choices typify the mobility of trauma across across different places and times, and how stories help people deal with tough memories and identities.

Theoretical Framework

The paper adopts trauma theory as postulated in the writings of Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth, Dominick LaCapra, and Kali Tal. The concept of trauma was first systematically theorised by Sigmund Freud, an Austrian psychologist who describes traumatic experience as an overwhelming event that breaches the mind's protective mechanisms and returns at a later time through repetition, dreams, and uncontrollable recollection (Freud 1961: 30–32). Freud's submission highlights two prominent features of trauma: the first is that it is not fully felt by the individual when it happens; second is that it emerges retrospectively through recurring psychic disturbances that affect the individual's memory, perception, and behaviour. Extending it further, Caruth (1996) emphasises trauma's inherent belatedness and incomprehensibility, arguing that it resists straightforward narrative representation. LaCapra (2001) further refines this by distinguishing between "acting out: traumatic experiences and "working through" them; a dynamic often mirrored in post-apartheid South African drama. In analysing the selected drama texts, trauma theory is highly relevant in interrogating the manifestations of historic repression, violence, and systemic abuse of black and coloured South Africans and the traumatic effects that weigh on the national psyche till this day. It is also important in revealing how this shapes the creativity and style of South African playwrights in the post-apartheid era.

Synopsis of the Selected texts

The Bells of Amersfoort

Zakes Mda's *The Bells of Amersfoort*, set in Amersfoort, an asylum in the Netherlands, follows the interactions between Tami Walaza, an exiled black South African activist rendered drunkard and nearly mute by trauma and Katja, a white volunteer caretaker who becomes obsessively involved in her psychological healing. Arrested on

the eve of her wedding to her fiancé, Luthando, Tami is tortured by apartheid agents, including Johan Van Der Bijl, a white Afrikaner man who later reappears in her life. Tami's refusal to betray her comrades during her torture is an act of resistance, but one that carries immense personal cost. Her physical torture is compounded by psychological exile and dislocation, a condition that reflects the psychoanalytic concept of repression and the feminist critique of how women's bodies are often politicised battlegrounds. The institution where Tami is housed in Amersfoort, Netherlands has a routine of alarm bells that goes off to indicate the start of each hour and the sound of the bells has an adverse effect on Tami. This routine becomes a metaphor for South Africa's haunted national psyche, where apartheid-era atrocities continue to echo in the lives of both victims and bystanders. The bells, constantly tolling in her mind, symbolises not only the trauma she cannot escape but also the historical violence committed against black South African women during apartheid.

As Tami's exile and eventual betrayal of Luthando, her fiancé, take a toll on her, she finds solace and embrace healing through her friendship with Katja and Martijn, who help her to confront and eventually forgive Johan, who was responsible for her exile from South Africa. In this drama, Mda constructs a dense and multi-layered critique of postcolonial identity, especially as it pertains to gendered violence and mental pathology.

Sorrows and Rejoicing

Athol Fugard's *Sorrows and Rejoicing* follows the story of two women, Allison and Marta whose lives have been heavily impacted by the life and death of Dawid Olivier, a white anti-apartheid poet who left South Africa to London on exile. Set in the aftermath of Dawid Olivier's death in a small Karoo village, the two women, Allison, Olivier's white wife; and Marta, his former black domestic servant and lover, with whom he had a daughter named Rebecca, meet and reflect over their times with Dawid. From their interactions and reflections, it is clear that their identities are heavily traumatised by Dawid's memory. Even Rebecca, Dawid's estranged daughter is not spared from the trauma as she sought reconciliation and closure with the memory of the dead man, just like the two women who shared romantic ties with him while he was alive.

Analysis

Trauma Styling in Zakes Mda's *The Bells of Amersfoort*

One of the most striking features of Mda's trauma styling in *The Bells of Amersfoort* is its reliance on emotionally fractured dialogue that dramatises the disjunction between personal memory and post-apartheid national narratives. In the drama, Tami's hallucinatory exchange with Luthando is representative of how trauma manifests through conflicting narrative positions. Her insistence on emotional fidelity contrasts sharply with his attempt to normalise betrayal within the rhetoric of masculine freedom:

TAMI: Often I pretend to be lost so that I may ask for directions. Today I got lost for real. Lost inside myself. It is a heavy vow that we made to each other, Luthando. That we would keep each other for each other. Come what may. I have won, Luthando. I have kept myself for you, even though my life is not devoid of temptations.

LUTHANDO: Dear Tami, those vows... don't you think we were young and foolish? Yes, we were young and foolish and overzealous. We made promises that were beyond us. Oceans and seasons separate us. We are human. I for one have to satisfy the needs of the flesh. I am a man.

TAMI: I satisfy them at my window. On Mondays and Fridays. I can tell you about this because we have always been open with each other. On Mondays and Fridays my trombone finds work, and I get the fulfillment. It works well for all of us. My body remains pure and untouched, waiting just for you. Yet my needs are fulfilled (Mda 2002: 135).

From the above excerpt, it is obvious how trauma is stylistically encoded through dialogic tension rather than narrative exposition. Tami's metaphorical language ("lost inside myself," "my trombone finds work") reflects the indirect speech patterns often associated with traumatic expression, where emotional pain surfaces through symbolic displacement rather than direct articulation. The fractured emotional register of the dialogue reflects

the psychological fragmentation produced by exile, betrayal, and bodily violation, thereby transforming conversational exchange into an avenue where trauma is theatrically performed.

Luthando's subsequent justification of his infidelity further reinforces this stylistic representation of trauma through ideological contrast:

You have your demons I have mine. We got free, Tami, and I became a highflier. I cannot help it, Tami. It is the fault of freedom. I didn't know I had this fetish ... to make love to powerful women. And there are many of them since we got liberated. Leaders in their fields. In Parliament. In the Cabinet no gal. In the corporate world. What is a man with a fetish expected to do? Wait for a wife... no, a fiancée, for we had not completed our wedding vows when Johan van der Bijl broke up our wedding -. wait for a fiancée who is refusing to come home even long after we have gained our liberation? You could have been one of the powerful women too, Tami. With your university degree and my political party connections you would have been very powerful. And my fetish would have been satisfied (Mda 2002: 135).

The rhetorical dissonance between Tami's language of emotional continuity and Luthando's discourse of opportunistic masculinity dramatises how post-liberation narratives tend to erase the psychological costs borne by women within liberation struggles. Stylistically, this disjunction produces a dramaturgy of emotional asymmetry in which trauma is revealed through the collapse of shared narrative meaning between the two characters.

Beyond dialogue, the recurring tolling bells that structure the temporal environment of the asylum operate as a central stylistic device through which trauma is staged. The repetitive tolling of the bells from the Cathedral in the vicinity where Tami lives out her exilic days functions as an auditory representation of traumatic recurrence, echoing the psychoanalytic understanding of trauma as an experience that returns involuntarily through sensory triggers. Each toll interrupts the present moment, merging the past and present into a single existential frame and dramatising the resurgence of apartheid-era violence within post-apartheid consciousness. Through this technique, Mda converts environmental sound into a narrative mechanism that embodies the cyclical nature of Tami's trauma.

Also, the reappearance of Johan, a white Afrikaner and former church minister who interrupted and arrested Tami back home in South Africa, further intensifies the play's trauma styling. Tami's fateful meeting with her former torturer in her land of exile creates a theatrical reenactment of her confrontation with repressed memory. This aligns with LaCapra's idea of "working through" trauma in the way that the plot is caught in a tension between remembering and forgetting Tami's traumatic experience. However, the absence of a definitive resolution between Tami and Johan resists the conventional dramaturgy of closure and instead affirms trauma as an ongoing psychological process rather than a completed historical event.

So also, in Fugard's *Sorrows and Rejoicing*, the testimonial speeches of Allison and Marta which are characterised by hesitation, silence, and emotional fragmentation are the central trauma styling feature of the drama. For instance, Marta's recollection of Dawid's introduction of Allison dramatises the psychological violence embedded within everyday acts of racial and gendered exclusion:

MARTA: There are some things you can't forget, even if you want to. That tea party was one of them for me. He had phoned beforehand of course to say he was coming down and that he was bringing someone with him...'someone special', he said. But I didn't think too much about it. Once or twice before he had brought a girlfriend down with him but I could see there was nothing serious between them. So, I just thought you was another one of those. But then the tea party and suddenly there it was...'My Bride-to-Be, Auntie Lettie!' My heart nearly stopped. But that's the way it is for a servant...scraps and leftovers from the table (Fugard 2001: 10).

Marta's use of the metaphor of "scraps and leftovers" functions as a stylistic condensation of her racialised and gendered marginalisation. Her narration is structured as retrospective testimony rather than linear storytelling, reflecting the psychoanalytic notion that traumatic memory returns through emotionally charged fragments rather than chronological continuity. The scene's dramaturgical power lies in its restrained emotional delivery: Marta's controlled speech and understated pain foreground the aesthetics of silence as a mode of traumatic

expression. The play extends this trauma styling through Rebecca's confrontation with her mother, where identity itself becomes entangled with the prohibition of speech:

REBECCA: Have you forgotten making her promise that when he came back one day she would pretend she didn't know who he was?... when I stood there in front of him I wanted to say it. Yes, I wanted to say 'Father'... But I didn't! Because you had taught me I mustn't (Fugard 2001: 10).

Rebecca's inability to utter the word "Father" when she met the dying Dawid dramatises trauma as linguistic rupture. The denial of naming functions symbolically as the denial of social legitimacy, transforming silence into an inherited psychological condition. Through this dramaturgical strategy, Fugard stages trauma not simply as past injury but as an intergenerational transmission encoded in speech patterns, memory practices, and family relationships. Her later appeal for liberation from memory reinforces the tension between repetition and release:

REBECCA: You've sacrificed your life for it and you would do that to mine as well if I let you. No Mommy, I am not going to. I am going to live my own life the way I want to.

Pause. Her anger is spent. She approaches her mother hesitantly in a timid attempt at reconciliation.

You're right, Mommy, he's dead and buried. So why don't you now try to live your own life as well? Stop dreaming in here. Say goodbye to this house and its ghosts. There's nothing left for you in here. Lock up like you say, give her your bunch of keys, and come back to the location with me. There's a real life waiting for you there, with real people, our people (Fugard 2001: 10).

Here, the stage direction (Pause) is particularly significant, as it demonstrates how silence itself becomes a dramaturgical marker of emotional processing, signaling the transition from confrontation to tentative reconciliation. Trauma is thus embedded in the rhythm of performance, not only in spoken dialogue.

Furthermore, Allison's reflections introduce another dimension of trauma styling: the dramaturgy of prolonged witnessing. Her confession foregrounds the intersection of racial privilege and emotional dislocation. She admits to Marta thus:

"No. It wasn't easy for me, you know. The situation was so damned complicated... Had I got him, like so many other things in my life, because in addition to all my other splendid virtues, I had a white skin? It's called 'liberal guilt', Marta, and I suffered from an overdose of it" (Fugard 2001: 31).

Her speech reveals how the playwrights stage trauma not only as violent historical memory but also as psychological consequence of complicity, guilt, and emotional neglect. This theme is intensified in her description of Dawid's gradual emotional decline:

ALLISON: So, you see, I have also been a witness to a slow death - only my vigil is measured in years, not in weeks. That is how long it took for the fire in him to die out and turn to ash... I tried everything I had as a woman to give... my love, my caring, my anger... But in the end, like you in this house, all I could do was watch and grieve and poison my own life with self-recriminations (Fugard 2001: 36).

Here, trauma is dramatised through the language of prolonged witnessing in words like "vigil," "slow death," and "watch and grieve." This converts emotional endurance into a theatrical motif. Fugard's stylistic emphasis on reflective monologue, pauses, and memory-laden dialogue constructs a dramaturgy in which grief unfolds gradually rather than climactically, reinforcing the persistence of unresolved psychological wounds. Through testimonial monologues, strategic silences, fragmented recollections, and the lingering narrative presence of Dawid even after death, *Sorrows and Rejoicing* demonstrates how trauma shapes the formal architecture of the drama. The emotional worlds of Marta, Rebecca, and Allison are structured by memory, repression, and deferred recognition, transforming the stage into a site where personal grief intersects with the unfinished histories of apartheid. Fugard's dramaturgy thus exemplifies trauma styling: the encoding of psychological and historical trauma within dialogue patterns, temporal disruptions, and the performative interplay between speech and silence.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the two play texts illustrate complementary modes of trauma styling. Fugard's work foregrounds silence, recollection, and domestic memory as stylistic tools for representing trauma's lingering presence, whereas Mda emphasises sound, exile, and dialogic confrontation as mechanisms through which trauma repeatedly returns to consciousness. Together, these dramaturgical approaches prove that post-apartheid South African literature, particularly drama, encodes trauma not merely in narrative content but in the very formal structures through which stories are staged, performed, and experienced. This convergence affirms that the stylistic articulation of trauma constitutes a crucial aesthetic strategy through which contemporary playwrights explore the aftereffects of the tumultuous apartheid regime.

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