



## CORRELATIONS BETWEEN WESTERN TRAUMA POETICS AND SIERRA LEONEAN WAYS OF HEALING: AMINATTA FORNA'S *THE MEMORY OF LOVE*

BATIYA ÖZGÜ TRAVMA YAZINBİLİMİ VE SIERRA LEONE'A ÖZGÜ İYİLEŞME YOLLARI ARASINDAKİ KORELASYONLAR: AMINATTA FORNA'NIN "THE MEMORY OF LOVE" İSİMLİ ROMANI

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### Abstract

Aminatta Forna has been interested in the representation of trauma and ways of healing trauma in her works. Accordingly, Forna's *The Memory of Love* (2010) centralises trauma and healing by reflecting on dreadful historical facts of Sierra Leoneans suffering from social and political uprisings in the 1980s and the following civil war which lasted from 1991 to 2002. The novel is written in the present tense for the greater part unlike the conventions of a narrative written in the past. In doing so, the novel experiments with time and makes readers witness the chaotic atmosphere of Sierra Leone. Besides, the novel presents non-western trauma coping strategies adopted by Sierra Leoneans such as maintaining an intact sense of purpose and establishing close contact with one's environment. Based on these premises, the aim of this paper is to examine how the novel recounts the trauma of Sierra Leoneans through the employment of the amorphous quality of traumatic time and trauma coping strategies adopted by Sierra Leoneans.

### Öz

Aminatta Forna eserlerinde travma ve travmayı iyileştirme yollarıyla ilgilenmektedir. Bu doğrultuda, *The Memory of Love* (2010) isimli eseri, Sierra Leone'ların 1980lerde yaşadığı sosyal ve politik ayaklanmaları ve akabinde 1991'den 2002'ye kadar devam eden iç savaşın korkunç gerçekliğini yansıtarak travma ve travmayla baş etme yollarına odaklanır. Geçmiş zamanda yazılan anlatıların tersine, romanın çoğunluğu geniş zamanla yazılmıştır. Bu sayede, roman zamanı deneye tabi tutar ve okuyucuların Sierra Leone'un kaotik atmosferine tanıklık etmesini sağlar. Ayrıca, roman Sierra Leone'ların belirli bir amaç edinme ve çevreyle yakın iletişim kurma gibi travmayla baş etme stratejilerini konu edinir. Bu temellere dayanarak, bu çalışmanın amacı, romanın Sierra Leone'ların travmasını travmatik zamanın sınırları belirli olmayan özelliğini ve Sierra Leone'ların travmayla baş etme yollarını kullanarak nasıl ele aldığını incelemektir.

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*[D]eath takes everything, leaves behind no possibilities, save one—which is to remember. (Forna, *The Memory of Love* 439)*

In a conversation with Valeriu Nicolae, Aminatta Forna, a significant contemporary British author with Sierra Leonean and Scottish heritage, brilliantly states that “you can forget [trauma] as it were, once you have taken the time to remember” (80). Accordingly, she has been concerned with trauma and healing in her works. Her first major work entitled *The Devil that Danced on the Water* (2002) is a memoir of her nonconformist father, Dr Mohamed Sorie Forna, and Sierra Leone, a country fully fledged with a traumatic history. In her following works, Forna turns from memoir to fiction writing but her interest in trauma pervades in her novels except for *The Angel of Mexico City* (2014), an e-book about the story of a boy, an angel and a dog. Her first novel, *Ancestor Stones* (2006), sketches the

history of Sierra Leone from 1926 and 1999 through the memories of four aunts of the frame narrator, Abie, a West-African woman living in London. When Abie inherits a family coffee plantation, she visits her native village and listens to her aunts' traumatic stories spanning from the establishment of their village to the end of colonialism and the subsequent social and political turmoil. Her third novel, *The Hired Man* (2013), also centres on ineradicable traumatic affects but this time in Croatia in the 1990s. Her last novel, *Happiness* (2018), explores the nature of happiness through the friendship between Attila Asare, a noted Ghanaian psychiatrist specialized in trauma, and Jean Turane, a wildlife biologist. Although different in its thematisation, *Happiness* centralises a character studying trauma, which strongly demonstrates Forna's interest in trauma studies.

In the same vein, Forna's second novel, *The Memory of Love* (2010), winner of Commonwealth Writers Prize and shortlisted for the Orange Prize in 2011, mainly revolves around trauma and healing by holding up a mirror to the gruesome realities of Sierra Leone wounded by social and political uprisings in the 1970s and 1980s and the subsequent civil war which lasted from 1991 to 2002. The novel gives voice to three main characters, Adrian Lockheart, Kai Mansaray, and Elias Cole. Adrian is a British psychologist working voluntarily to help victims of the civil war in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. Kai is an orthopaedist incessantly disturbed by his traumatic past of the civil war. Elias is an elderly, self-interested history professor relating his life during the post-independence period in Sierra Leone to Adrian. Adrian volunteers to help Sierra Leoneans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) because of the civil war. He relies on his knowledge of western trauma theory but, at the same, witnesses to and acknowledges non-western ways of dealing with trauma. He tries to treat Sierra Leonean trauma victims by helping them to put their traumatic experiences into words but gradually realizes that there are also local ways of healing trauma as exemplified in Kai's case. Kai, who was raped by the rebels during the civil war and witnessed the murder of a nurse in his arms, is haunted by his overwhelming and intrusive traumatic memories. In order to work through his traumatic past, he tries to control his traumatic memories by indulging himself in his work, a trauma coping strategy adopted by Sierra Leoneans after the civil war.

Unlike the conventions of a traditional narrative written in the past, *The Memory of Love* is written in the present tense for the greater part. Elaborating on such temporal shifts in trauma narratives, Jean-Michel Ganteau argues that they

“ge[t] the readers to plunge into the immediacy of the event” (*Vulnerable Form and...* 91) and “collaborate in the witnessing” (94). By experimenting with time, especially in Adrian’s and Kai’s narratives, the novel makes readers witness the havoc wreaked on Sierra Leoneans. Thus, the novel borrows the poetics of trauma literature usually employed in the western canon and blends it with non-western ways of healing adopted by Sierra Leoneans. The novel achieves this by circumventing the conventions of a traditional narrative written in the past tense and relying on the amorphous quality of time, which has been extensively explored in the representations of trauma in the western literature.

Since its publication in 2010, *The Memory of Love* has received considerable critical attention from various perspectives. Madhu Krishnan analyses the ways in which the novel stages “*African conflict against the a priori image of Africa*” and “*a readerly engagement based on alterity*” (1). From a different perspective, Zoe Norridge focuses on the ways sexual pleasure in the novel constitutes “*both a language and strategy with which to explore and contest violence against women*” (18) while Stef Craps argues that “*the novel is marked by an unresolved ambivalence about the applicability and viability of Western treatment methods in post-Civil War Sierra Leone*” (57). Even though the novel has been analysed from these critical positions, little attention has been paid so far to two significant concerns discussed above; the poetics of temporal veering in trauma representation, a strategy commonly explored in western canon, and the function of maintaining an intact sense of purpose in healing traumatic memories, a way of healing one’s trauma usually adopted by Sierra Leoneans. Therefore, this paper will first explore how *The Memory of Love* narrativises the trauma of the civil war in Sierra Leone through the employment of the amorphous quality of traumatic time and then move onto an analysis of its representation of trauma coping strategies adopted by Sierra Leoneans.

On account of the economic, social, and political chaos which started in the 1970s and triggered the civil war in 1991, Sierra Leoneans underwent deeply traumatic experiences. After becoming an independent republic on 27 April, 1961, the country faced social, political, and economic problems. In the early 1970s, Siaka Probyn Stevens’s government gained a remarkable place in the diamond industry and established a close connection with Eastern Europe but the oil crisis between 1973 and 1974 triggered an economic depression in the country (Appiah and Gates 755). When the government faced increasing opposition from the public,

professionals and the trade unions from the mid-1970s onwards, Stevens opted for a one-party state, which only resulted in his resign in 1985. Major General Joseph Momoh, Stevens's successor, won the presidential elections in the same year only to face similar economic, political and social problems. More importantly, such chaotic atmosphere of the country coincided with the beginning of the civil war in 1991. The civil war in Liberia spread over Sierra Leone when supporters of the Liberian rebel leader Charles Taylor invaded the country and initiated the war. These invaders ravaged the country's economy by disrupting agricultural activity and taking control of the diamond trade. Not surprisingly, there was dissatisfaction with Momoh's reactions to these invasions, which resulted in the formation of a rebel army, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in 1994. Together with Taylor's invaders, RUF forces "*reduced much of the countryside to a state of violence and chaos*" (755). Doran et al. argue that the civil war in Sierra Leone was particularly disastrous for its civilians. Some adults and children were forced to join the RUF forces, some were raped and maimed, some were burned alive, and some were victims to cannibalism and ritual murder over different areas of the country (615). The New York-based organization Human Rights Watch summarizes these atrocities as follows:

Civilians were gunned down within their houses, rounded up and massacred on the streets, thrown from the upper floors of buildings, used as human shields, and burned alive in cars and houses. They had their limbs hacked off with machetes, eyes gouged out with knives, hands smashed with hammers, and bodies burned with boiling water. Women and girls were systematically sexually abused, and children and young people abducted by the hundreds. The rebels made little distinction between civilian and military targets. They repeatedly stated that they believed civilians should be punished for what they perceived to be their support for the existing government. Thus, the rebels waged war against the civilian population through the perpetration of human rights abuses.

Consequently, Sierra Leone went through one of the most violent and traumatic civil wars in the twentieth century.

According to Forna, what triggered the civil war and dragged Sierra Leone into violence was losing its way on the birth of its democracy. This civil war was different from similar civil wars in world history because it was not characterised by race, nationality, ethnicity or religion but simply by the "*bond of having nothing to lose*"

(Forna and Valeriu 74). Although it broke out because of the “*the vengeance of the ‘have-nots’ on the ‘haves,’*” it soon turned into “*a mindless rage of those who had nothing against others in exactly the same situation: the have-nots versus the have-nots*” (74). In order to overcome the effects of the civil war, Fornas people remained silent and tried to forget what they experienced, which was their way of survival (77-79). Thus, Fornas concludes that coping with trauma is an important part of their culture because they tend to “*move on from things*” (81). Such traumatic experiences of her country and the way her people dealt with them dragged her into writing. Accordingly, she transformed traumatic experiences of her country into words in *The Memory of Love* which takes its place among a growing body of recent fiction that excavate post-war life in Sierra Leone.<sup>1</sup> The novel explores and presents traumatic affects experienced by Sierra Leoneans through an employment of the poetics of trauma literature, especially the warping of time, as will be discussed below.

The American Psychiatric Association officially defines trauma as one’s reaction to an event “*outside the range of usual human experience*” (236) that includes a “*recognizable stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost everyone*” (238). In this regard, trauma is mainly concerned with the post traumatic stage rather than the traumatic event itself. As Irene Visser states, trauma is correlated with “*the recurrence or repetition of the stressor event through memory, dreams, narrative and/or various symptoms known under the definition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)*” (272). Among most common symptoms of PTSD are nightmares, flashbacks, depression, unresponsiveness, and extreme vigilance which may be seen chronically or occasionally. Strictly speaking, there is a time gap between the traumatic stressor and affect considering the nature of PTSD.

The temporal aspect of traumatic experiences is mostly theorized on Sigmund Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*, which suggests that “*a memory is repressed which has only become a trauma by deferred action*” (356). In a similar vein, Dori Laub accounts for the paradoxical nature of the temporality of trauma:

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<sup>1</sup> Remarkable examples include Delia Jarret-Macauley’s *Moses, Citizen, and Me* (2005) which explores child soldiers in the aftermath of the civil war in Sierra Leone. Similarly, Ishmael Beah’s *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* (2007) is a memoir about Beah’s traumatic experiences as a soldier and his gradual recovery. Beah’s recently published *Radiance of Tomorrow* (2014) might well qualify as an excavation of trauma in Sierra Leone. These texts provide an insight into the predicament of Sierra Leone, as Beah does, by transforming one’s traumatic experiences into memoir writing, or, as in the case of Jarret-Macauley, through fictional writing.

While the trauma uncannily returns in actual life, its reality continues to elude the subject who lives in its grip and unwittingly undergoes its ceaseless repetitions and reenactments. The traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of 'normal' reality, such as causality, sequence, place and time. The trauma is thus an event that has no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after. This absence of categories that define it lends it a quality of 'otherness,' a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery ... The survivor, indeed, is not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and thereby remains trapped in both (68-69).

What Laub suggests is a temporal model of trauma in which sequence and linearity are suspended and non-linearity is adopted in their stead.

The temporal crisis of trauma is observed in its various literary representations. Michael Rothberg argues that in trauma representations, time is fragmented into "*disconnected moments*" (166) and therefore "*the past is at once completely present, because trauma stops time, and completely distant, because such time is not susceptible to transformation*" (167). Therefore, "*progressive history's fundamental chronological articulation of 'before and after' runs aground*" in literary representations of trauma (22). Echoing Rothberg's arguments, Ganteau contends that trauma fiction is characterised by "*temporal disorder and refusal of linearity*" (*The Past Won't Fit...* 25). Trauma novels such as Pat Barker's *Another World* (1998) tends to perform the distorted notion of the temporality of trauma through various devices such as the circulation of events, ellipsis, and most importantly, the use of the present tense (24-26). Such an iconoclastic use of the present tense brings along two significant results. On the one hand, the readers gain the possibility of "*attending the events as they were unfolding*" (26) and, on the other hand, the readers face "*an open temporality: that of time and history in the making. This implies that the events are not closed and set definitely in place, but that we are placed 'in the middle' of them*" (26). Another narrative that Ganteau analyses as a representation of the warping of time is John McGregor's *Even the Dogs* (2010), which is an apt example of trauma narrative experimenting with time as it is written in the present tense throughout and thus extends the limits of time (*Vulnerable Form and...* 91). In doing so, the novel "*get[s] the readers to plunge into the immediacy of the event and make[s] them unable not to witness the havoc*

wreaked in vulnerable populations” (91). Consequently, the present tense in the novel acts as “an ethical device which aims at discreet though consistent defamiliarisation” (94).

Barker and McGregor’s narratives present traumatised and vulnerable people in a western context while Forna’s *The Memory of Love* follows a similar pattern in Sierra Leone. When Adrian goes there to work as a voluntary psychologist and help traumatised Sierra Leoneans, he witnesses to the fact that the wounds of the war still persist in his patients’ lives. For example, Agnes, whose husband is killed by rebel forces in front of her eyes, suffers from PTSD because she learns that her daughter is married to her husband’s murderer (Forna, *The Memory of Love* 308-312). Therefore, she suffers from fugue which is characterised by an “unexpected travel away from home” and “irresistible wandering, often coupled with subsequent amnesia” (325). Rather than addressing and/or talking about her traumatic memories, she wanders around and remains silent. Accordingly, she might be regarded as the representative of Sierra Leoneans exposed to the traumatic effects of the civil war in the country and suffering from PTSD (Appiah and Gates 755). Besides, her disorder best illustrates Sierra Leoneans’ silence after the civil war: “it’s as though the entire nation are sworn to some terrible secret. So, they elect muteness, the only way of complying and resisting at the same time” (Forna, *The Memory* 322). As Laub pointed above, the reality of traumatic experience elides the subject even though it is real; it exceeds the limits of normality and suspends any teleological intent and chronological order and therefore the survivors lose touch with their traumatic reality (69). The Sierra Leoneans in the novel, such as Agnes, are unable to grasp the reality of their traumatic experiences and therefore keep their silence. Paradoxically, however, silence is also their trauma coping strategy because “this is their reality” (Forna, *The Memory of Love* 319). By privileging silence rather than putting traumatic memories into words, the novel seems to edge towards glorifying the fragmented nature of the traumatic experiences and memories of Sierra Leoneans whose silence becomes a place of refuge.

Besides, the novel evinces and reflects on Sierra Leoneans’ traumatic experiences and memories from an ethical perspective by experimenting with time, in consonance with the tenets of trauma narratives (Rothberg 166-67; Ganteau, *The Past Won’t Fit...* 22-16 and *Vulnerable Form* 91-94). The novel traces the country’s traumatic experiences and memories through a westerner’s journey into the country. The extradiegetic narrator describes western people in Sierra Leone as

“[m]odern-day knights, each after his or her trophy, their very own Holy Grail” (Forna, *The Memory of Love* 219). In Adrian’s case, his romantic quests to help Sierra Leoneans only end in vain because they are beyond his reach, as can be surmised from the temporal veering in the country:

Since the first days of his [Adrian’s] arrival in the new country, without the order of his previous life, time had taken on a kind of shapelessness ... Each activity had its own purpose, pitch and resonance, like the notes from a tuning fork. But as the days passed the resonance had faded (20).

Evidently, time is out of joint in Sierra Leone in conformity with the temporal crisis of trauma. Further, the time of *The Memory of Love* blends together past and present as characteristic of traumatic experiences and memories. The novel mostly unfolds through the present tense, especially in the narratives of Adrian and Kai, rather than the rules of the traditional narrative written in the past tense. The use of the present tense in the novel helps readers to gain immediacy to and participate in witnessing the traumatic experiences and memories of Sierra Leoneans. As argued by Ganteau, present-time narration evokes “stretched time or atemporal narration espousing the contourless features of a world from which time has absented itself” (*Vulnerable Form and...* 94). Adrian’s description of the country is germane to such disrupted temporality of trauma:

In this country there is no dawn. No spring or autumn. Nature is an abrupt timekeeper ... The air is heavy and carries the faint odour of mould, like a cricket pavilion entered for the first time in the season. It is always there, stronger in the morning and on some days more than others. It pervades everything, the bed sheets, towels, his clothes. Dust and mould (Forna, *The Memory of Love* 27).

The excerpt above evokes the non-linear temporality of traumatic experiences and memories through its representation of the spreading and ill-smelling mould. The traumatic civil war in Sierra stops the flowing of time as can be inferred from the mould growing everywhere and smelling the whole country up. Also, the novel experiments with and suspends chronology through its use of the present tense, whereby the readers intuit that they are witnessing the events while they are unfolding (Ganteau, *Vulnerable Form and...* 91-94). Hence, *The Memory of Love* brings the readers to bear upon the immediacy of the post traumatic difficulties in Sierra Leone. The impression left with the readers is that traumatic memories of the Sierra Leoneans are, in a sense, ineradicable. At the same time, however, the



novel represents strategies of coping with traumatic memories pursued by Sierra Leoneans.

Paul M. Kline and Erin Mone argue that Sierra Leoneans adopt various strategies of coping with traumatic memories of the civil war, such as maintaining an intact sense of purpose. In their analysis of Sierra Leoneans' strategies of coping with war, Kline and Mone argue that some Sierra Leoneans "*possessed an enduring belief that their life had meaning and value*" and "*found a significant measure of personal pride and self-satisfaction in the recognition that the value and significance of their life had not been destroyed by war experiences*" (325-326). In this way, they could cherish their hopes for a better present and future and overcome their post traumatic hopelessness and desolation. Through such a strong belief in the value of their lives, they could canalise "*their attention and energy towards action that might aid in the construction of a good life*" and "*incorporate new experiences, positive and negative, into this intact sense of purpose*" (326). Strictly speaking, although some Sierra Leoneans were unable to cope with their traumatic memories of the civil war, some others directed their energy towards activities that may result in making a good life for themselves and for others by extension.

Besides, some Sierra Leoneans effectively controlled their traumatic memories and established close connection with the environment surrounding them. Concerning this, Kline and Mone argue that some Sierra Leoneans, especially adolescent citizens, managed to control their exposure to traumatic stimuli by drawing on their beliefs in their future lives (326-327). They approached their traumatic past carefully and kept themselves free from its overwhelming legacies:

This controlled investigation of recent horrific events appeared to be useful only when they maintained mastery of their ability to regulate their cognitive, affective, and behavioural responses to remembering. Conditions that favoured purposeful remembering included the presence of supportive peers and a responsive adult, the structure of exercises and rituals, the ability to suspend remembering at any time, and pragmatic assistance from friends and adults in making useful meaning from catastrophic experiences (328).

Thus, establishing social contact with peers as well as local rituals helped Sierra Leoneans to heal their traumatic past: "*A desire to help others, or to work with others toward justice and a better life, increased the frequency of social contact and appeared to result in a more positive self-image and a more optimistic outlook*

toward the future” (331). Closely related to such social bonding was successful protection against destructive social isolation. Rather than remaining trapped within their traumatic past, some Sierra Leoneans used their abilities to establish close and positive connection with the people surrounding them whereby they could stay away from despair and loneliness.

*The Memory of Love* represents such strategies adopted by resilient Sierra Leoneans. As the narrator tells us, “[w]ar had the effect of encouraging people [Sierra Leoneans] to try to stay alive ... Survival was simply too hard-won to be given up lightly” (Forna, *The Memory of Love* 341). Therefore, most of the Sierra Leoneans represented in the novel show resilience after the traumatic effects of the civil war and struggle for their lives. In this regard, Kai’s narrative stands as a microcosm for the broader difficulties of Sierra Leoneans struggling to come to terms with their traumatic past of the civil war. Kai, an orthopaedic surgeon working in the same hospital with Adrian, is incessantly haunted by his traumatic past as conveyed through his sleepless nights fully fledged with nightmares. In order to move on, he tries to maintain an intact sense of purpose and exerts himself by working hard as a surgeon. He keeps loyal to his duties as a doctor and works hard to heal his patients. During his regular day at the hospital, he deals with arranged operations as well as emergency cases. As the extradiegetic narrator tells us, “[k]eeping busy is the one way he knows to keep things under control” (92). In keeping with Kine and Mone’s suggestions above, Kai maintains mastery over his horrific past by controlling his exposure to traumatic stimuli and helping others, which appears to give him a positive attitude towards life (326-331). Apart from working as a doctor meticulously, he takes notes about surgery or helps other surgeons and writes letters to a friend abroad (92). He attempts at dissociating from his unbearable post traumatic difficulties by immersing himself in his work and daily activities. Thus, the novel presents certain ways of directing one’s energy towards an action that might help for the construction of a better present (Kline and Mone 325-326) and gives the impression that there are ways of overcoming one’s despair by helping people in need and thus bringing purpose to one’s life.

## CONCLUSION

As the epigraph to this article suggests, Sierra Leoneans are left with no other choice than to remember and deal with their traumatic memories. Among various novels that deal with the horrific facts of Sierra Leone, Forna’s *The Memory of Love* represents Sierra Leoneans’ traumatic experiences and memories during the civil

war in the 1990s as well as the chaotic atmosphere of the social turmoil in the post-1970s. Different from the traditional narratives written in the past tense, the novel dramatizes Sierra Leoneans in the present tense, which is in accordance with trauma poetics usually explored in the western canon. By experimenting with time, the novel makes readers witness the traumatic experiences in Sierra Leone. At the same time, however, the readers are left with the impression that there are different strategies of coping with traumatic experiences employed by Sierra Leoneans such as maintaining an intact sense of purpose, controlling their traumatic memories and establishing loose contact with the social environment. In doing so, the novel establishes correlations between western trauma poetics and Sierra Leonean modes of healing.

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