Post-traumatic experience in *Echoing Silences* by Alexander Kanegoni.

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Abstract
Diverse theories reveal distinct meanings. However, in relation to Zimbabwean war novels, it seems that critical scholarship is yet to explore adequately the liminal condition that characterized the distressed psyche of the characters specifically affected by extraordinary and overwhelming encounters during the war of liberation. Therefore, this study employs Kali Tal's traumatic theory of liminality to interrogate the post-traumatic experience of victims of the Zimbabwean war. The paper uses Alexander Kanegoni's novel, *Echoing Silences* to explore the distressed psyche characters affected by the Zimbabwean liberation struggle. Focusing on the issues of social oppression and abandonment, the study analyzes the survivor's post-traumatic behavioral patterns which exposes the deep psychological imbalances of the characters. The investigation reveals not only that a trauma victim is a liminal character who is trapped in a haunted past which impedes his advancement in life, but it also exposes the difficulty associated with healing. Therefore, the work concludes that the victim's post-traumatic life has become a way of life instead of a transitory phase in his life. The study concludes that a victim who is psychologically affected should be rehabilitated and fully integrated back into the society in order to facilitate his healing towards post-liminality.

Keywords: Trauma, healing, liminality, Alexander Kanegoni, *Echoing Silences* and Zimbabwe.

Introduction

In recent times, the subject of trauma has elicited immense attention from diverse fields of human endeavors ranging from psychiatry, psychoanalysis, medicine, law, humanities among others. This simply underscores the complex nature associated with trauma, particularly in its uncanny manifestations among victims of natural and human induced disasters like wars. Some victims who display apparent physical symptoms are also subtly disoriented psychologically. Trauma is sometimes described as 'mimesis' (Leys 8). Ruth Leys has further noted trauma has become a recurrent feature of war narratives in the modern era (8). In view of the socio-political and cultural disentanglements like wars, natural disasters, refugee crises, rape, domestic violence and HIV/AIDS that have bedeviled various societies, some individuals who are exposed to such painful encounters find it difficult to return to their "normal" live once again after the events. It becomes evident that such victims' destinies are, therefore, determined by their attitude towards such traumatic experiences. Some victims respond to trauma with hope that within a period of time they may attain healing and re-integration into the society, whereas some find it difficult to be healed thus are unable to attain re-absorption into the society. In other words, the post-

traumatic life of those victims becomes one defined by liminality. They simply find it difficult to resume their normal lives, because they are still at "wars" with themselves.

Therefore, the paper focuses on the post-traumatic experiences of individuals who have become liminal characters for being trapped in their excruciating past memories. These victims who have experienced what Ruth Leys has described as the "wounding of the mind brought about by sudden, unexpected emotional shock" during the war (4). The paper will focus on the liminal characters to examine how the wound affects them afterwards. As Kali Tal has stated the after effects of this wound thrust the survivors into the "new, permanent, and adaptive lifestyle…" (78). She further reveals that "The permanent transformative nature of the traumatic experience should be obvious…from the normal world to the abnormal world of the war should lead him to perceive a normalcy so permeated by the bizarre encounter with atrocity that it can never be purified again " (78). In the same vein, quoting Bettelheim, Tal reveals the problematic nature of the liminal victim, that is "... to describe the process of psychological adjustment to life in extremity, and the reintegration into 'normal' society" (45).

However, in relation to the victims who are unable to reintegrate into the society after a traumatic event as some survivors of the liberation war of Zimbabwe has shown, the liberation war is among the many wars fought during the colonial occupation of Africa especially among the settler colonies like Kenya, South Africa and Algeria among others. Because of the favorable climatic environment and the fertile land of these countries, their colonial masters found it conducive to live there permanently unlike those in the Western Sahara like Nigeria, Ghana and Togo whose interests were solely for administrative and commercial purposes. As a result, they introduced repressive laws which enabled them to appropriate a greater percentage of the land to themselves, thereby leaving the natives with little or no land to farm on. But, this tyrannical arrangement was met with resistance as the natives rallied among themselves to wage guerilla warfare. During the struggle, many who identified with the war were left physically and psychologically battered after the struggle. They were unable to return to their normal lives. Unfortunately, neither the attainment of the country's political independence could fulfill the yearnings of the survivors, nor was political independence able to facilitate the healing of the wound that engulfed their lives during the struggle. Instead of experiencing a transitory phase of disenchantment, they found their lives becoming disoriented permanently as a way of life. This is the life of victims of the Zimbabwean liberation war as captured by Alexander Kanegoni's war narrative, *Echoing Silences*.

Trauma Theory of Liminality

Various studies show that trauma is a medical term used to refer to a wound which could be external bodily injury or a mental injury triggered by emotional distress. However, the emotional distress of the mind seems to dominate the study of trauma. In the words of Caruth "the wound of the mind is not like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (4). Freud has argued that an emotional psychological shock induces "pleasure" (1). In line with this view, Freud contends that "a mental event is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle… or by a production of

pleasure" (1). Similarly, Kyeong reveals that "Trauma overwhelms our abilities to cope and adjust calling into question the most basic assumptions that organize our experiences of our selves, relationships, the world and human conditions itself" (4). However, Kali Tal limits the definition of trauma to the liminal condition of its nature. She states that "Trauma is enacted in a liminal state, outside of the bounds of 'normal' human experience, and the subject is radically ungrouped. This is because accurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event since, by its very nature, the definition of trauma lies beyond the bounds of 'normal' conception" (15). This condition underscores that traumatic experiences linger unsettled for a long time. The victims continue to see themselves re-experiencing the excruciating events which had interrupted their 'normal' lives and as a result the victims find it difficult to return to their pre- liminal state.

Tal's use of the term "Liminality" is influenced by the work of Eric J. Leed on World War 1. Whereas the application of liminality as a scholastic theoretical framework started in the field of social anthropology with Arnold Van Gennep in the early twentieth century and continued with Victor Turner in the 1960s and 1970s. The French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold Van Gennep employed the word 'liminal' in his book, *The Rites of Passage*. He adopts liminality in the background of tribal rituals by means of which he wanted to reexamine life-crisis rituals and ceremonies of passage. He groups rites of passage into three phases: rites of separation, which detached an individual or a group of individuals from his or their familiarized place; liminal rites, which representatively attach the character of the 'passenger' as one who is in between states, places, transitions, or conditions; and finally rites of incorporation (post liminal rites), which welcome the individual back into the group. In order to illustrate the character of the transition phase within the life crisis rituals, Van Gennep adapted the word 'limen' in order to highlight the in-between status of the ritual subject during the transition period. 'Limen' is a Latin word for boundary. It metaphorically refers to "a transitory, in-between state or space, which is distinguished by indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, possible for subversion and change" (45).

Kali Tal contextualizing on this three-fold structure in her study of traumatic victims, and reveals that a war survivor is seen as an individual going through a rite of passage which normally is divided into pre-liminal, liminal and post liminal stages. The individual has undergone the first stage by going from his normal life into the traumatic experience, but is not capable of completing the cycle of moving from the liminal (traumatic experience) back to his normal life. Tal uses this theory to describe the condition of the war veterans upon return to peace time. According to her, instead of the veterans passing into the post liminal state after their war experiences, they continue to be in a liminal space. In order words, they are in a confused state, unable to move forward or even go back to their original state. This underscores Langer's postulation that "The survivor does not travel a road from the normal to the bizarre back to the normal, but from the normal to the bizarre back to a normalcy so permeated by the bizarre encounter with atrocity that it can never be purified again" (qtd. in Tal 119-120).

War and Liminality in *Echoing Silences*

Alexander Kanegoni's *Echoing Silences* reveals the post-traumatic experience that shaped the lives of the ex-combatants during and after the Zimbabwean liberation war. It

is, however, instructive to note that the author was a guerilla Combatant during the liberation struggle. Using Munashe Mungate, the protagonist of the novel, the author shows the bloody and traumatic violent past of the struggle on the lives of individuals who fought that war. It is an event that underscores the inability of the survivors to return to their normal lives after the liberation war. Divided into three parts, the novel dramatizes the liminality and the impossibility of healing that characterize the lives of the guerilla fighters, particularly Munashe manifesting in sordid nightmares. Through the deployment of flashbacks - in tandem with trauma narrative - the author takes his reader to the various terrifying scenes of the liberation war and, brings in its most terrific forms, the bloody acts of murder, torture and destruction. For Cathy Caruth "The flashback or traumatic reenactment conveys, that is, both the truth of an event, and the truth of its incomprehensibility" (153). In the same vein, Tal asserts that "Survivors have the metaphysical tools to interpret representation of traumas similar to their own. The representations may trigger 'flashbacks' in the survivor…" (16).

The beginning of Munashe's liminal condition is traced immediately after the war. When the announcement ending the war was made, Munashe and his fellow guerillas do not to believe that it was true, nor were they happy about the declaration. In fact, it belies the paradoxical nature of their condition:

> To Munashe, the end of the war, signaled by the signing of the Lancaster House agreement, was an inexplicable non-event. He watched the other guerillas and villagers intoxicated by the news and shrugged his shoulders... 'To those of us who have been involved in the fighting for over seven years, the war was like a monster whose head and tail none of us could envisage: something with neither a beginning nor an ending. It was almost impossible to imagine that we could outlive the war. (65)

True to his statement, the war has no ending particularly for him. His language and behavior clearly reveal his inability to be fully integrated back into the society, hence his liminal condition. While exchanging pleasantries with a fellow guerilla after the war, he remarks: "At Dzapasi, I met someone whom I had fought alongside in Mount Darwin. The man, shaking his head in disbelief, kept repeating that there was no way the war could have ended because he was still alive. I too felt that way" (65-65). This shows that both Munashe and his friend are still in a war psychologically. Munashe's disappointment about the end of the war could be traced to his shock during the war when his section commander advised him against taking *Mbange*: "Munashe remained silent, thinking about what the section commander had said. What shook him was that in all his fantasies, he had never dreamt of the war reaching an end, he had never dreamt of independence. He had not wanted to spoil his dreams of home with thoughts of the war, or its outcome" (34). His thoughts at this time, however, reveal that his post war life will be "spoilt" with memories of the war because he knows his encounters during the war were quite traumatic and may not permit a normal lifestyle. In other words, he knows that his post war experience will be one characterized by liminality.

It is important to establish at this point what informed Munashe's inability to return to his normal life after the war was the psychological shock that he suffered. Why is he certain that his post war life will be engulfed with "spoilt" memories? Among the various traumatic encounters Munashe

experienced during the war, was his killing of a woman with a child on her back. It is an event that stands out in his memory. This is so because; his post war life is filled with the nightmares of that woman which kept him at the bounds of insanity. Munashe's killing of the woman is violently captured:

> Then he looked at the haggard figure of the woman and its lost shape and its edges got torn and the baby on her back became a protrusion of her hunched back and then he swung the hoe, and he heard the blade swishing furiously through the air… the woman fell down with the first vicious blow and the sound of Munashe's jarred and violent cry mingled with that of the dying baby as the hoe fell again and again and again until Munashe was splattered all over with dark brown blood and the base commander held him back and he refused, shouting that he wished that someone had killed him because he could not live with such a memory…(30-31).

True to his prediction, he is unable to live with that memory which haunted him throughout his life until he becomes completely disoriented and dies afterwards. Apparently, his perception about the war changes drastically. This could be seen as an initiation into "manhood" for Munashe because he is forced into submission by killing the woman. Tal captures it succinctly in these words: "The soldier temporarily loses his manhood in boot camp. He is disempowered and thrust into a subordinate role, at times literally called a 'girl' or a 'pussy', until he completes the rites that win him a place in the community of soldiers, purged, apparently, of the last vestige of effeminacy" (141). In other words, Munashe has become initiated into the "community of soldiers" but could not simply return to his normal life after the murderous event. He becomes oblivious of his environment. "… he moved in a dazed way, seeing the things around him as if they were very far away and feeling as if they were not part of him, being there but not feeling there, just moving on…" (31). This synchronizes with Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart's assertion that "A different state consists of a continuous switching from one internal world to another" (178). Unfortunately, Munashe never becomes himself after the murder. He simply hands over his destiny to the war and follows it blindly taking dangerous risks and turns until the war ends. From the foregoing, it is can be argued that the killing of the woman with a child on her back terribly disturbed Munashe such that even after the war has ended his personal "war" begins with the constant nightmares and traumatic recollections. Munashe's first nightmare is captured on the first page of the novel:

> As always, it began with the cry of the baby somewhere – perhaps in his mind – and he instinctively reached for the bottle sedatives in his pocket – but he knew it was hopeless. The baby continued to cry and the sound drew nearer. He thought of his wife in Sakubva as he staggered to the door of his office and wobbled down the narrow corridor jostling people as he passed, his eyes glazed... He flung open the finance manager's door and shouted breathlessly above the plaintive cry: 'She is coming back sir! My wife can handle it. Please call her!' (1).

The above incident pictures the troubled psyche of Munashe while in his office long after the war has ended. He hears a cry "perhaps in his mind". This means he is not sure of where the crying was coming from-whether real or imagined. But, the crying has the propensity of throwing him into disarray. Knowing the psychological torture

that awaits him, he hopelessly goes for a sedative to calm the situation. To Krystal "The tendency is to try to block the distress through medication" (86). In a similar development, Caruth quoted a Vietnam veteran who revealed: "I do not want to take drugs for my nightmares, because I must remain a memorial to my dead friends" (vii). Against the foregoing, the paradoxical nature of medication in the life of a trauma survivor is captured. Some respond positively to drugs while others do not. This brings us to the stark reality that a traumatized mind is incapable of responding to any form of treatment unless the root cause of the matter is identified. However, Munashe's request to call his wife that "she can handle it" (1) shows that his wife is aware of the cause of his wound. His physical movements being described as "staggering" and "wobbling" are not only revealing but underscore the disoriented state of his mind as well. The above episode is just one of the countless nightmares that haunted Munashe. Caruth posits that "What returns to haunt the victim … is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known" (6). This incident reveals that he is trapped by his past experience which impedes his advancement in life. It is instructive also that his getting a job after the war could have brought a re-integration into the society and the resumption of "normal" life but the constant nightmares unsettle him completely.

Given these experiences of haunted memories that trail the life of Munashe, his wife's first problem becomes the incessant nightmares. In fact, Munashe's wife identifies that the night always re-enacts the violent battles of the war. She bares her pains to her mother:

> 'The night becomes a window into his life during the war,' She once told her mother. The woman remained silent. 'One night he is ambushed and he screams at his fellow comrades to take cover and return fire. On another he is pleading with his comrades not to kill an informer. Sometimes he is at Nyadzonia talking to his fellow comrades as they bury their dead. His dreams are all about killing and dying. The night is the most dreadful time for both of us. It's as if the war had begun all over again'. (44)

The statement that "It's as if the war had begun all over again" captures the liminal condition of Munashe. The above conversation reflects the frustration his wife undergoes after the war with Munashe. At a point his wife asks him "Why is it you never talked about ordinary things, with other guerillas? Were they no moments of light relief" (44). Munashe's reply underscores the horrid summary of the entire liberation struggle. "The war was a violent time when people thought about nothing else except killing or being killed. There were no real people in the war. We were automatons. I don't know whether you understand what I'm saying because I can't make it simpler."(44). His answer underlines the position of Tal that "the veteran who is incapable of successfully repressing his combat experience will be disturbed by the intrusion of memories of war time actions into civilian life. This double vision is troubling, intolerable for some…" (129). This captures Munashe post-traumatic experience.

Munashe's futile attempts to still the haunted memories find expression in his consumption of *mbanje*. Given the tranquilizing nature of the weed, the guerilla fighters take solace in it. To Munashe the weed provides a temporal flight from his anguished psyche. The narrator identifies the healing potency embedded in *mbanje*:

> It raised their spirits and it was the only thing, Munashe realized, that reassured him that he could after all survive the routing killings, the unabated savagery and the dying. And it had a special, almost mystical healing effect: he could literally decide what he wanted to think about, what he wanted to dream about, what he wanted to be, what he wanted to happen… *mbanje* provided him the with the chance to escape from the brutal war and its ruthless experiences … and others saw it and they worried about him (34).

What is obvious in a traumatized mind, as earlier pointed out, is the pursuance of healing from a wrong direction. No matter the calming effect of sedatives and the like, they cannot be sustained beyond a temporal period. It only guarantees a solution that is transient and can aggravate the wound because when the effect fizzles out, the victim becomes worse than he was before. It is important to stress that Munashe's colleagues worried about his deep involvement of *mbanje's* addiction. After consuming the weed, Munashe longs for quietness and would not like to be disturbed. At such a period a colleague's "company becomes a crowd". Kai has noted that survivors of trauma "suffered deep shock as a result of their exposure to death and devastation, and, as so often happens in catastrophes of their magnitude, they withdrew into themselves, feeling numbed, afraid, vulnerable, and very alone" (187).

The nightmares of Munashe take a drastic turn when his memories begin to haunt him in his waking moments. This brings him into a double existence of life. This is why Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart have argued that "Many traumatized persons, however experience long periods of time in which they live, as it were, in two different worlds: the realm of the trauma and the realm of their current, ordinary life. Very often, it is impossible to bridge these worlds" Like Munashe "it can never be joined to the worlds he inhabits now" (177-178). While visiting a friend, Munashe in the company of his wife sees a man preparing the head of an ox. Being thrilled by the way the man is flaying the head and removing the horns. As the man takes the handle of an axe and cracked open the skull with blood and broken bone scattering in all directions; Munashe's mind goes back to scene where he killed the woman with the baby on her back with a broken hoe. Typical of trauma, the axe handle reminded him of the hoe:

> And then, oblivious to all else, Munashe jumped over the gate, grabbed the unsuspecting man from behind, and wrenched the makeshift club from his hands.
>
> 'Why don't use a gun? He shouted.' its quicker and less painful.' The man looked at him blankly. Munashe's wife began to pull her husband away, apologizing to the bewildered. By then a small crowd had gathered (56).

This incident begins another chapter of Munashe's traumatic encounter. Relating the axe's handle to that of a hoe he has used in killing, simply calls to the mind the terrible nature of a traumatic event. Mere seeing the axe's handle momentarily reminds him of his earlier atrocity. Tal reveals that "The survivor sees always with two sets of eyes, and in one set – on an endless loop – play the horrors of war, terrible memories superimposed on the most commonplace events" (90). His insistence of using a gun instead of a hoe reechoes the advice of the base Commander. The base Commander has suggested for the security officer to allow Munashe kill the woman with a child on her back with a gun - a very fast and easy way of killing. Not minding the embarrassment,

the wife ignores the man laughing at him and saying that Munashe is not mad but attributes his disorientation to *mbanje*. Tal aptly describes Munashe's experience as "The survivor, unable to reconcile his present and past, becomes a 'disturber of peace'" (84).

Munashe's traumatic experiences are synonymous with what Van Der Kolk and Van Der Hart reveal as "traumatic memories of the arousing events [which] may return as physical sensations, horrific images or nightmares, behavioral reenactments, or a combination of these" (164). Munashe's nightmare as well as his haunted memories gradually reduces him to the level of insanity. In fact, Munashe's post-traumatic life is captured by Ehrhart who argued that "compounded shock – the trauma of war, and the trauma of reentering a world where the trauma of war is inconceivable" (qtd in Tal 80). Given the burden of his psychological instability, his physical wellbeing deteriorates manifesting in his dressing manners. The conversation between Munashe's younger brother and his wife portrays that Munashe is indeed a liminal character:

'Yes, he is my brother but he is mad and he won't admit it.'

'He, is not mad! He needs help and if you don't want to help him, who will?

"He is not mad? Then what do you call a person who wanders from place to place wearing the clothes that he wore in the war? What do call someone who refused to return to finish his degree, although he was more than halfway through the course work? … what do call someone who yaps on and on about battles in Chimanda, Buhera and Chipinge during that lousy war, a war which ended years ago? Show me a thousand mad people and I will show just one. My brother!"

It's the war which has done this to him.' (87-88).

The above conversation clearly shows that Munashe's life after the war is still influenced by the activities of the war; he is trapped by the war memories. Tal's observation is in tandem with the above picture of Munashe. He reveals that the: "… main character is most fully realized as a moral being in his childhood, and his 'trial' of combat is clearly no initiation rite – he is destroyed by war, fragmented instead of made whole, reduced to aimless wandering, and unable to regain his moral bearings" (100).

Given Munashe's disenchantment with his past, any recourse to it always agitates him. It exposes his inability to forge ahead without being entrapped by the memories of the war. His confession when asked by his nephew- Taurayi, confirms his perplexity:

What was it like crossing Devure Ranch and going along the Save River into Bikita during the war?' the little boy asked unexpectedly… 'Telling the stories is an ordeal. It's as if the war has begun all over again. It was a horrible time… 'I move from place to place in attempt to escape from my memories of the war. One day I hope to leave them behind. But ghosts follow me wherever I go. I don't want to think about the war. I want to forget it, but I can't. Terrible memories get in the way of everything I do.' *The man put his face in his hands and began to cry.* (Emphasis mine, 91-92).

That he cried after this confession underscores his helplessness about the problem ravaging his life. His past simply refuses to let him go; to begin life afresh after the war. Munashe's trauma synchronizes with the assertion of Van

Gennep that "He derives all his features from the fact that he has crossed the boundaries of disjunctive social worlds, from peace to war, and back. He has been reshaped by his voyage along the margins of civilization, a voyage in which he has been presented with wonders, curiosities, and monsters-things that can only be guessed at by those at home"(31).

Conclusion

The argument in this paper can now be summed up. The premise is that Alexander Kanegoni's narrative, *Echoing Silences* is a narrative that captures the liminal conditions of war victims caught by traumatic events, using the experiences of the protagonist of the narrative, Munashe. The argument is that *Echoing Silences* appropriately represents the post-traumatic experience that defines the ex-Zimbabwean liberation guerrillas. Realizing the extent of irreparable trauma witnessed in the struggle, Kanengoni uses the narrative, Echoing *Silences* to show concerns with the conditions of individuals trapped in violent situations.

In the end, attempt has been made to analyze the liminal condition that has impeded Kanegoni's characters from reintegrating into normal society after the Zimbabwean liberation struggle. Finally, the paper observed that *Echoing Silences* within the discourse of trauma narrative appropriated the discourse of liminality to study Africa's war narrative. This study within its target has interrogated the liminal characters as it exists in Africa's war fiction.

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