

## **WOUNDEDNESS IN TAYO OLAFIOYE'S *POETRY ON EXILE***

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### **Abstract**

'Exile' as an aspect of the Diaspora concept has been explored in literary writings the world over. Exile could be voluntary or forced. Living in exile has been described variously. However, to live away from one's home or home country is not an easy thing. Whenever one feels maltreated, whenever one feels isolated there is the longing for home. In view of this, Douglas S. Smith describes such experiences as isolation, alienation, separation or loneliness as "both wounding and expressions of our woundedness". Nigerian writers like counterparts in other climes also reflect these experiences in their works. Therefore this paper looks at how Tayo Olafioye in his poems on life in exile portrays woundedness at the physical, psychological/ emotional, social, racial or cultural levels. Physical- movement from home, new environment, absence from loved ones / one's roots; Psychological/emotional- life of anxiety, uncertainty, depression, solitude; Social- class, lack of acceptance/ failed attempts and Racial or Cultural- accents and skin colour, and so on. This paper focuses on Olafioye's three collections of poetry- *Ubangiji: the conscience of eternity*, *My Heart Swims in the tears of Happiness* and *A Carnival of Looters*. Materials are drawn from works and essays of writers and researchers on the Diaspora concept to support this effort. We conclude that living in exile has been a long standing phenomenon and will not cease in the nearest future, in spite of the pains. This is as a result of the economic, political, social and cultural dynamics that are prevalent in our societies. It is also indicated

that Olafioye's approach to the issue of woundedness can in some way ameliorate the despair and debility associated with living in exile.

### **Introduction**

In the discussion of the Diaspora concept the word, exile, is central. Exile which could be voluntary or forced has been described variously in literary writings all over the world. More commonly, it is looked at as a situation where someone moves from his home or home country to another country. In the recent times however, it has been indicated that an individual can be in exile in his homeland or country. James Tar Tsaaior explains it this way:

Exile or exilic consciousness can operate at two broad existential grids. These are the internal and the external. Internally, one can be an exile while rooted in one particular place in one's homeland without physical displacement ... Internally too, one can be within the borders of a nation state but may be dislocated from ones immediate local milieu. Then, there is the external exile, which represents itself in physical flight from one's homeland in a particular nation state to another outside of one's native country.

These modes of exile and exilic consciousness are precipitated by the contingencies of state political repression, economic repression, religious strife, labour migration, racial discrimination and cultural practice, among others. (pp. 99-100)

Henri Oripeloye adds that whereas "Exile involves the physical displacement of a people from their homeland, either forced or voluntary", "It is also concerned with the cultural and psychological disorientation of an individual as a result of estrangement and alienation". Oripeloye moreover refers to Femi Ojo-Ade whose write-up *Exile at Home* (1992) contains "the delineation of a people's suffering,

death and total denial of essence of living with the resultant effect of hunger and want” and whose “idea of being an exile from within is premised upon the ways in which the Nigerian masses have been marginalized and alienated by subsequent governments in the country”. (pp. 155 & 166)

One could therefore assert that it is the different situations of pain and suffering indicated above, that the exile, whether internal or external, undergoes that must have made Henri Norwen to raise the pertinent question, “what are our wounds?” Norwen (quoted in Colleti) goes further to answer the question by stating that words such as ‘alienation’, ‘separation’, ‘isolation’ and ‘loneliness’ “express our wounded condition”. However, Douglas C. Smith (also quoted in Colleti) in answering the same question explains “woundedness” in terms of life’s tragedies such as ‘abuse’, ‘addiction’, ‘sickness’, ‘mental illness’ and so on. But as if summarizing the discussion on woundedness Joe Colleti states that, “Nobody escapes being wounded. We are all wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally or spiritually”. (p 1)

Arising from the above, this paper looks at how Tayo Olafioye in his poetry on exile portrays woundedness at the physical, psychological/emotional and social or cultural levels. We take examples from some of Olafioye’s collections of poetry Sorrows of A Town Crier, Ubangiji: The conscience of eternity, A Carnival of Looters and My Heart Swims in the tears of Happiness.

Olafioye at some point in his career chose voluntary exile abroad. This is beside the poet’s concern for the ‘exile’ in his country, Nigeria. Living away from one’s home, homeland or home [country is not an easy thing](#). Each time one feels maltreated, each time one feels isolated there is a longing for the original home.

In this paper, we indicate that Olafioye makes good use of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronouns – I, my/ we, our. He uses this pattern to speak about himself and his people, Nigerians, and sometimes even Africans. He is the individual and at the same time, the spokesman of the people.

### **Physical**

The portrayal of woundedness at the physical level involves - movement from home, homeland or one's country, being in a new environment and the absence from loved ones and one's roots.

One first gets the impression of Olafioye's movement from his homeland in the poem 'WHEN I WAS AWAY', where he tells us about his presence in the United States of America, "Here in God's own country" (*Sorrows* 21). America is so referred to because of the erroneous belief that all the good things of life are available there and that one can easily 'make it' over there. However, to the chagrin of the emigrants they find that things are not as rosy as they thought. Then in the poem 'LAGOS VIENNA' he talks of "... my painful reminders /Of home today" and wishes he could "... make Lagos/A Vienna today". (*Sorrows* 48) This has to do with "the great small things/ that define a people" which he observed in Vienna.

Furthermore, in the poem 'THE QUIET STORM OF HOME' Olafioye talks about the distance between him and his family: "Wife and daughter/ I miss my family tonite: / the far away home' (*My Heart* 93). He is in a new environment where he is not close to the people he is familiar with. The distance is captured here by "far away".

As a result of the above, Onookome Okome describes Olafioye's situation thus "The reason for this movement into the world where he is not culturally anchored is a painful one" but "yet the inevitability of the choice is even more painful to this poet whose lines reek of painful memories of the geography of home". ("Introduction", *A Carnival of Looters* 5)

### **Psychological/ Emotional**

At this level, woundedness involves- loneliness, alienation, anxiety, uncertainty, marginalization, depression, poverty; to mention but a few.

In the above poem 'THE QUIET STORM OF HOME', the phrase "far away" produces a feeling of loneliness or aloneness in Olafioye for being away from his loved ones (wife and daughter). This feeling of not being with his loved ones is accentuated by the word "miss". These in turn bring about the fear in him. He laments "I hope their memories remain intact/ Regarding poor me". (*My Heart* 93)

The feeling of being separated from his immediate family and thereby his people reaches a peak in the poem 'Abortion'. He says:

Of what use though a beating heart of  
misery, of down the road: insufficiency,  
alienation (*Looters* 78)

[Olafioye sees exile](#), whether internal or external, [as a “beating heart of misery”](#). [What is the usefulness of a beating heart really if all it brings is pain and suffering](#). [Just like the “beating heart”, whether of “misery”, is inevitable for the continuous survival of man, so exile at that point](#) became [inevitable](#) to Him and the Nigerian masses. [But the question the poet sought answers to and which he seemed to ask himself often is: of what importance is exile if all it brings is “insufficiency, alienation?”](#)

However, it is expected that the poet should feel insufficient because he is not with his family. Just as he is living an isolated life in a foreign land, distance has created a gulf between him and his family,

By extension also, the masses in Nigeria suffer “insufficiency” in the midst of plenty. Many of them are undergoing emotional turmoil, resulting from their being alienated from their homes and homelands, because of economic and social repression occasioned by bad leadership, because of terrorism caused by the Boko Haram terrorist group and the ravaging herdsmen. The villages plundered, farmlands despoiled, many people either killed or maimed, several women raped and the people estranged from their means of livelihood. The resultant effect of this situation is that most of them have now become internally displaced persons (IDPs), displaced from their original homes and quartered in camps.

If these people had money or the where-withal they would not live in camps. They would have found better places for themselves. In this situation they do not have any choice, as they suffer “nothingness” and “inertness”. This is what the poet tells us in the poem ‘TERRA INFIRMA’. He says:

... The Nija have-nots on the dole  
Who, all they have, is their nothingness?  
Read their pains in their wobbliness  
Inertness in their faces. (*My Heart* 42)

These words “nothingness”, “wobbliness” and ‘inertness” exemplify the living condition of those in these camps. They suffer from crowdedness, deprivations, hunger, sickness, to mention but a few. They live every day on the fringes, waiting for succour from governments (federal or states) and benevolent donors. These situations of wound are debilitating, to say the least.

Looking therefore, at the sad experiences of the poet, others like him and this section of the masses in Nigeria in ‘foreign’ land Okome explains that, “the alienation of this vast number of people has its debility and the poet who exists in these circumstances is bound to some physical violence”, stating “even the poet who voluntarily lives outside or the poet who lives an exiled condition within is bound to be affected in many ways”. (“Home and Exile”, 2)

Not done Olafioye goes on to tell us that the negative condition has made them voiceless, as the title of the poem tells it all, ‘They stole our voice’. He shows that it is a collective suffering as whatever happens to the people is felt by him. The idea of muteness in the earlier poem is heightened in the title. Because of the suffering, because of hunger they become weary and can no longer speak. Worse still, they are not sure of what lies ahead. The poet therefore explains: “... There is nothing more unfeeling/ than to sleep with uncertainty”. (Ubangiji 27)

The poet speaks the truth about the pains of the downtrodden, the masses of his country. He paints a sordid picture of the situation. According to Alison Croggon, exposure of the truth is important as “...The truth can only ever be an exposure of woundedness” (1). It is because of this truth about pain that David Radavich states that “... Pain comes in all varieties and intensities, and psychic anguish can often prove more debilitating than physical ailments or wounds ...” (1)

Also Olafioye in ‘Area I - The Nation: International map of rumours’ states that the life of “exile” has dealt a severe blow on their souls: “We have so long perched/ on the thorny stones of monotony/exile has sharply castrated our souls ...”. (Ubangiji 17) The situation is quite depressing as the people’s lives hang in the balance “perched”; they have been regimented into a patterned life “thorny”/ “monotony”. This life-style has negatively impacted on the poet

and the downtrodden, and the devastating effect is highlighted in “sharply castrated our souls”. To these people, including the poet, the environment is hostile whether within or outside, through marginalization and absence of freedom. Therefore, [talking further about the life in exile Okome refers to Lewis Nkosi’s explanation that “Exile”, “must then be a heartrending experience,” as “the space of antagonism is forever growing bigger”.](#) (“Introduction”, [Selected Poems 17](#))

In another way, [Olafioye also looks at loneliness in terms of being away from family members, especially loved ones](#), not physically but psychologically. [The first source of loneliness is the loss of his mother to whom he must have been very close. Death](#) has broken the chain of connectedness between mother and son, resulting in [a void. This is what the poet explains in ‘My Mother-Kehinde’: the root/ that connects the branches/we are rich/In loneliness without you...’.](#) (My Heart 119)

In addition, [the poet laments his being far away from his immediate family \(wife and daughter\). He wonders whether his being away from them would not diminish their memories of him. He says in ‘THE QUIET STORM OF HOME’: Wife and daughter](#)

[I miss my family tonite : the far away home I hope their memories remain intact Regarding poor me \(My Heart 93\)](#)

[No matter the attraction exile is a painful experience. Es’kia Mphahlele expresses a similar view he says, “the poet’s travels keep his sensitivities quivering with the compulsion to articulate memory. An experience only the person knows who is living away from his loved ones, his roots”.](#) (16)

As a result of the above, Regan A.R. Gurung explains that the word ‘depression is used variously to describe a wide range of moods, albeit negative. Gurung says: The term “depression” covers a wide range of thoughts, behaviours and feelings. It is also one of the most commonly used terms to describe wide range of negative moods. In fact, there are many types of depression...

Depression can involve the body, mood,  
thoughts and many aspects of life...  
It can range from causing only minor  
discomfort, to completely mentally and  
physically crippling the individual.  
(pp. 648-649)

Gurung and Egun Babalola seem to agree on the fact that depression could bring about a more serious mental problem. Babalola states that "Certain problems in life can lead to mental illness. Anxiety, depression, disappointment, poverty... are all factors which could lead to mental disorder". (38)

As if drawing inference from the aforementioned, Olafioye talks of the pains, the "sadness" and "uncertainties" that these people face. The poet also experiences similar conditions in his "far away" abode. For him and the down-trodden people he states in the poem 'Letter to the dead':

You will find the mute sadness  
In our bones, heavily laden  
For we sleep  
By the liquid mountain  
Of towering uncertainties  
( *Ubangiji* 21)

The poet describes their situation (himself and the masses) as terrible because they are not sure of what life holds in store for them. So in the poem he uses the words "our" and "we" to emphasize that they are all in the same boat of isolation and suffering. The following phrases in the poem indicate this situation: "mute sadness", "heavily laden" and "towering uncertainties". Furthermore, the words "mountain" and "towering" suggest the size of their problems which culminate in the "uncertainties".

Moreover, Olafioye indicates in the poem that suffering makes the people sad and quiet, possibly with no energy left to speak, "You will find the mute sadness/ in our bones". Coupled with this is the fact that the future holds no prospect, it is vague –"towering uncertainties". (*Ubangiji* 21) There is also an indication in the above lines that the people have a low opinion of themselves.



These ‘wounded hearts’ cannot act as the situation degenerates to the point that it begins to affect the poet persona’s mental state. As he says in the Poem INSTINCT OF THE BRAIN’: Now, I am awake, startled With a manic depression Right from the deep chamber of my sleep How many times Will I survey this continent Of imaginary self (My Heart 105) Little wonder Gurung says that depression “can range from causing only minor discomfort to completely mentally and physically crippling the individual”. (648)

### **Social/ Cultural**

This level involves issues relating to segregation, accent and skin colour, acceptance and non-acceptance in relation to the external exile. The white versus black phenomenon often rears its ugly head when people of different races relate. A lot of times the white skinned ones believe that they are superior therefore black skinned ones should see things from the ‘white-man’s’ angle. This is what Olafioye indicates in the poem ‘PYJAMAS’:

One sunny day I wore  
African shirt and pants.  
At cafeteria  
A collegiate  
Whose gaze found  
A strange fancy yelled:  
“Eh Tayo, I like your pyjamas”  
(*Sorrows* 3-4)

The poet’s African dress in the eyes of the collegiate should be described as ‘pyjamas’ to suit his ego. See how the poet scornfully describes this antic of white supremacy, “Whose gaze found/ A strange fancy”. Strange because Olafioye knows what he was wearing but the collegiate expects him to suddenly change his understanding of it. It is a painful situation to the poet. He therefore bemoans this issue of white-black relationship as he says “To be black at times/ The agony of ages”. The word “agony” carries the weight of the poet’s pain. Just like most blacks would do in such a situation, rejecting the insult, he retorts “I will not accept,/ I will never accept”.

Continuing, Olafioye lashes out at colour segregation in the poem 'EBONY AND IVORY'. This title portrays the poet's position. "EBONY" here represents 'black in colour' which could be used to describe the skin colour of a black African while "IVORY" 'a yellowish white colour' could be used to represent people from Europe and the like. According to him, these are just words because all persons are human beings and are the same, "We are not so distant/ From each other/ Whatever the colour". (*Sorrows* 14) However, he laments that because of the black colour, the blackman is not accepted or well received in white societies. This therefore limits the opportunities available to him. The poet says "It is only our limitations/ That instill impurities/ Into our psyche". The pain is reflected in the words "limitations' and "impurities".

The experience of Olafioye and others like him in exile which Mphalele and Okome corroborate as painful is akin to Moses' experience in Samuel Selvon's The Lonely Londoners. The same way Olafioye saw the foreign land as the place to be Moses Aloetta, the unifying central character in the novel, saw London as "the centre of the world". ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The Lonely Londoners](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lonely_Londoners)) This representative character is discriminated against, alienated and lonely because according to Wikipedia "... their accents and skin colour mark them as outsiders ...". The result being that Moses describes the same London which is supposed to be the "centre of the world" as "a lonely city" which "divide(s) up in Little worlds, and you stay in the world where you belong..." ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The Lonely Londoners](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Lonely_Londoners)) The title of the novel, The Lonely Londoners, suggests what to expect, that is, that Moses and his like, in the novel are lonely people and suffer deprivation. To emphasize his point about the difficulties associated with exile, Okome further refersto Lewis Nkosi's explanation that "The exile never wins. His solitariness is heightened with every step he takes to move into the centre of social life in his new home. The space of antagonism is forever growing bigger". ("Introduction", Selected Poems 17) Adding his voice to the discussion, Oshita

explains that such experiences where the poet "suffers from exclusion and isolation" are "in account of his colour". (32)

## Conclusion

The pains and difficulties that the exile, whether internal or external, suffer which are at the physical, psychological/emotional and social / cultural levels include the trauma of living in a new abode or foreign land, absence from loved ones or ones roots, loneliness, alienation, isolation, estrangement, marginalization, racial segregation, acceptance and non-acceptance and so on. These experiences constitute wounds and reflect woundedness as we have attempted to show in this paper. However, exile and negative exile experiences will not cease in the nearest future because the circumstances that brought about such movements are still very prominent in many African countries.

Olafioye as indicated above portrays woundedness at the individual and group or societal levels. The poet's descriptive power and choice of words help to paint a vivid picture of what exiles suffer. In so doing, he seems to strip the pains of their power. This approach can in some way ameliorate the despair and debility associated with the life of exile, whether within or without. The poet has therefore tried to answer the question he asked in the poem, 'My patriotic quest': "How do you write your pain/ in words of comfort...?" (*Looters* 20) It is possibly because of this style of writing that Radavich says: "The most noteworthy literature of any age" and I believe Olafioye's can be said to be one, "serves to articulate our discomforts and to transfigure our pains into form and substance that can vitiate its power and heal our wounds".

(1)

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