

## **DEPICTION OF TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCES IN AMINATTA FORNA'S THE HIRED MAN**

**Dr.R.Sivakumar**

*Assistant Professor of English, Sri Vidya Mandir Arts & Science College, Uthangarai, Krishnagiri, India*

### **Abstract**

*Aminatna Forna is a student of Law, Journalist, activist, documentary filmmaker and she is professor of creative writing at Bath Spa University and Visiting Professor at Williams College in Massachusetts. She is working in Lannan Visiting Chair of Poetics at Georgetown University. She was born in 1964 in Bellshill, Glasgow, Scotland, to a Sierra Leonian father Mohamed Forna and a Scottish mother Maureen Christison. She is now a full-time writer and lives in London with her husband Simon Wescott, though she travels several times a year to Sierra Leone and her family's village, Rogbonko, where she collaborates on a project whose aim is to promote escape from poverty by launching initiatives in the spheres of education, health, agriculture and infrastructure. This project, known as the Rogbonko Project, included the building of a primary school in 2002 on which Forna also cooperated. Thus, her outstanding contribution to African cultures is not only visible in the literary field, but also in the social sphere through her active participation in its development. Her third novel, *The Hired Man*, was published to wide acclaim in the UK in March 2013. Which tells the story of a Croatian village after the war of Independence and the English family who buy a holiday home there and who expose the secrets? It is a tale of war, betrayal and secrets that linger. This article would like to explore the portrayal of traumatic experiences in the novel under study.*

**Keywords:** *Aminatna Forna, The Hired Man, Depiction, Trauma theory.*

### **Introduction**

Aminatna Forna's third novel *The Hired Man* is the written story begins in September 2007, it articulates the view of post-conflict inequality, failures of reconciliation, and the threat of mutiny after the end of the civil war. As in *The Memory of Love*, *The Hired Man* explores the legacy of the past in its focus on Gost, an imaginary village in post-civil war Croatia. Apart from a few scenes where Duro Kolack, the writer and principal narrator of the story, reflects the bloodshed during the war, Forna chooses not to focus on the causes of the war; instead, she presents a picture of a society struggling to come to terms with the meaning of peace. From the outset, it is evident that one of the primary concerns of the novel is to expose the secrets and silences of the past. The feeling of uncertainty is further strengthened by unwillingness of survivors to engage history, and this heightens suspense in the novel. At the heart of the novel is the blue house, the home of the Pavic family, Vinka and Old Pavic, and their children, Kresimir and Anka. Duro, a friend of Anka, has been a regular visitor at the house. At start of the novel, Duro is writing the life of the Pavics and its connections to the history of Gost. The blue house, now almost in ruins sixteen years after the pause of hostilities, is sold to Laura and her husband Connor, who plan to restore and occupy it during their summer vacation, and then sell it to make a profit.

Since the house is in on its last legs, Laura would benefit from a hired hand, preferably a local suitable for this kind of work. Faltering upon Laura and her family upon

their arrival in Gost and helping Laura fix her water Pump, Duro is eventually hired as the helping hand to repair the house: a task he sets out to complete with a lot of passion and commitment. This reconstruction opens the literary space for Forna to explore the symbolic meanings of objects within the house of the Pavics as well as their familial relationships with each other. Within this space, and as Duro continues to unearth and repair objects, their connection, the reader comes to understand the current state of post-war Gost and the events that shape the present.

### **Trauma Theory**

The word Trauma is derived from the Greek word meaning 'wound'. It is first used in English in the mid seventeenth century in Medicine, which refers to a bodily injury caused by an external agent. In its later usage, particularly in medical and psychiatric literature and in Freud's text, the term 'Trauma' is understood as a wound caused not upon the body but upon the mind. Sigmund Freud was one of the first to explore the land of psychology and psychoanalysis. His research on trauma started at the end of the 19th century when he discovered that a psychological trauma was at the basis of women's so-called hysteria. In his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), he explains the hysteria by suggesting that the women were sexually abused when they were young. According to Freud the actual trauma then "consists of two scenes - the earlier (in childhood) having sexual content but no meaning, the later (in puberty) having no sexual

content but sexual meaning” (Caruth 1995, 9). Freud concludes that the actual trauma is caused by the dialectic relation between the two events and the moment of latency between the two moments, when we remain unaware of the trauma. Although this model is especially used to explain the trauma of child abuse, it does explain the importance of the temporal delay, which seems to be inherent to trauma and which Freud calls ‘belatedness’ (Codde 2009).

Freud was the founder of the psychoanalytic school of psychology and writer of groundbreaking works such as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). Freud needed to adjust his theories later on, especially because of the First World War and the soldiers who came back from the battlefield with signs of war neurosis, even though some of them never were on the actual battlefield. This condition reappeared during the Second World War but it was not until the war in Vietnam that the ‘disease’ got real recognition. Freud begins his pioneering work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, with his incredulous meet with the veterans of World Wars, as Freud says,

“Now dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright. This astonishes people far too little.” (13)

Freud’s surprised encounter with the repetitive dreams of the war – the beginning of the theory of trauma, and of history, that has become so central to our contemporary thinking about history and memory – thus raises the urgent and unavoidable questions: What does it mean for the reality of war to appear in the fiction of the dream? What does it mean for life to bear witness to death? And what is the surprise that is encountered in this witness?

Cathy Caruth, one of the central figures who helped earlier the boon in cultural trauma theory in the early 1990’s in her collections of essays named *Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996) says herself in its most general definition, “Trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 1996, 11) Trauma consists not only of having survived but survived without really being aware of it, which is a logical consequences of the inherent latency. It is through i) The Flashbacks /with the mystery of his or her own survival. ii) The mystery of one’s near death experience.

### Traumatic Experiences in *The Hired Man*

*The Hired Man* highlights Fornas’s interest in secrets and spaces as the society of Gost similar in many ways the traumatic landscape of Sierra Leone, which is also trying to deal with its secrets, anxieties, and uncertainties after the civil war. The relationship between characters and history is conveyed in the spaces they occupy and in the significance of their actions. In the context of post-war society, Laura’s arrival and occupation of the blue house is the trigger for traumatic memory. As Duro states:

Laura arrived in Gost and opened a trapdoor. Beneath the trap-door was an infinite tunnel and that led to the past. In the last days of the family’s stay in Gost I seemed to have become trapped in the tunnel, somewhere between a time sixteen years ago and now. When I was a child I had, for a while, been fascinated by Greek myths as it seems to me every boy at some point is. The Minotaur, the monstrous beast created by one betrayal followed by another. (233)

Laura’s arrival and Duro’s reconstruction of the blue house allows for healing. In his focus on specific objects like the Fico, Laura’s small car, and the mosaic, the collection of tiles that conceals the image of the bird, Duro represents memory and the call to break the silence of the past. Through art and human agency, the house becomes the space for political action. In unveiling the past, there is anxiety and tension, especially in the light of those who want to erase history. The narrative tells us that Grace, Laura’s daughter, was the first person to see the damage done to the mosaic: Paint all over the mosaic: white gloss paint. Loops of it cover the rising bird, sliding immensely slowly downwards. Clots of paint lie under the water on the mosaic of fish and weeds. A trail of white between the wall and the fountain.(263) Duro’s efforts to repair the damage indicate his commitment to accountability in post-conflict Croatia. A space, as the Pavic house is to stand in relation to its secrets and a recognition of the fact that as humans, we are defined in relation to the spaces we choose or choose not to inhabit. It is in this perspective that Kresimir and Duro’s position in relation to the house should be understood. Given the history of the house, Duro and Kresimir stand in different relations to it: where Kresimir wants to distance himself from history, Duro wants to preserve it.

Beyond the idea of history, space, and identity, the house is closely linked to time, and Fornas’s description of its present ruin is indicative of the passage of time and its effects on the characters to it. Duro points out:

A stain in the top corner of the room spoke of a leak in the roof. Some of the plaster had broken away and a patch of

lath showed. By the door, a box of junk ready to be taken out: some crockery, an old plate rack, and empty bottles. The gate in the hearth carried the cinders of a long-ago fire, hardened and splashed with bird droppings from the chimney. Though the walls have been done, the blue paintwork of the windows was crazed and flaking. The tendril of a vine crept over the boundary of the frame. (8)

Through the narrative of the house, the voices of the characters that previously inhabit it are heard and their thoughts and feelings are conveyed. For instance, through the symbol of Fico, a window into Anka's life is provided: her drive for independence, her beauty, and love of life. Hence, to renovate the house is to give voice to Anka, to allow her to tell her story. In this way, Duro's rebuilding of the house is synonymous with his desire to bring the memory of Anka, his childhood friend, back to life.

Apart from the secrets it holds for the Pavics, Duro, and Fabjan, the blue house also forces Laura to confront the 'secrets' of her own past and her family. The blue house not only tells the story of its past occupants but also reveals the history of its foreign inhabitants. We learn the reason for Matthew, Laura's son's insolence, Grace's detachment, and Laura's sensitivity to her past. As the family continues to interact with one another, it slowly becomes evident that Laura has to deal with events in her past too. Apparently, her divorce of her former husband, Matt and Grace's father, has not gone well with the children and Matthew particularly is angry at his mother and rude to his stepfather, Connor. Grace is reserved and chooses solitude in isolation. Like post-war, Laura and her family have to come to terms with the past and redefine relationships if the present is to be meaningful.

The narrative is suggested that the mosaic is constructed by Anka, and, by this act of construction, she is not only defining herself, but also ensuring that her identity is preserved by and through it. The mosaic immortalizes Anka, for it survives her absence and tells her story on her behalf. Through the mosaic, the memory of Anka's life is preserved, and in reconstructing the mosaic, Anka is brought back to life. Laura's discovery of the mosaic is worth citing:

When he came back I set down my tools to help carry the groceries from the car. More coffee, which we carried outside again. Laura turned her face to the sun, closed her eyes for a few seconds and then opened them again to take a sip of her coffee; her eyes roamed the front of the house. When she noticed the place on the wall where I had scraped away the plaster she stood up and went over to inspect it, running her fingertips across the tiles. I

watched her for a bit and then I said, 'what is it?' 'There's something under here,' she replied. 'It looks like a mosaic.' (29) The stories of these people are like the tiles in the hands of Duro, for he uses his pen as writer of the novel to put together the mosaic of life in Gost during the war and possibilities of healing after it. In this sense, the mosaic is a metaphor of life, many different colours, shapes, and sizes which when carefully assembled tells a single story: the story of our common humanity, but in this case, one of parallel violence in two geographical spaces, Croatia and Sierra Leone. It is crucial that it is Laura who discovers the mosaic and works to rescue it, for in replicating the action of Anka, Laura is also replicating Anka's life. In recreating the mosaic, repairing the car, and getting Laura to drive around town, Duro succeeds in bringing Anka back to life as a mechanism to confront the past. Anka is the ghost of Gost who returns in the figure of Laura. In the context of the war in Gost, the mosaic shows to the fact of collective responsibility; each story is a constituent tile or part of the mosaic that contributes to the present state of the house named Gost. In describing the mosaic, Duro writes:

A green hand, reaching upward. Two lines of yellow tiles either side of a single, narrow line of red tiles: deep, dark red tiles. These tiles were made of glass. On the far side the mosaic the thumb and forefinger of another hand was in the process of being uncovered to match the one on the left; they were two hands reaching into the air. The three downward-pointed blue shapes remained as they had been. All of this against a white background. The tiles were different shapes and sizes, fitted each to the other accordingly. (45) Forna gives us a glimpse of contribution to the carnage during the war as well as his attempts to rescue the mosaic, rebuild the fountain, repair the Fico, and renovate the house. Duro's happiness in fixing the house goes way beyond the financial compensation he is receiving from Laura. However, in juxtaposition with the happiness of Duro is the displeasure of Kresimir at the fact that hidden memories are about to be exposed. The reader is puzzled at this point as to the meaning of Kresimir's anger and later comes to realize that Kresimir's displeasure is one of the many tiles that Duro has to fit into the mosaic to complete the picture that it depicts and the story it tells.

Duro's position as protagonist and writer of the story implies that the novel is also his own story and that, in writing it, he is also building his own house which will in turn add to the collective narrative of life in Gost. Repairing the house puts him in a position of reflection on the past of

the Pavics, as the blue house tells the story of its former occupants. As he reflects, he also wonders about his own house and the story it would tell of him. Figuratively, as he writes the novel, he is also writing his own house: When I look back to that night I see that the idea for writing this seeded then. Would I take it all with me? Who would tell my story? So many people have left Gost, not like the old days when they stayed away for a few years and came back wearing Italian clothes and carting German fridges. Now they never come back. Of the old crowd, there are just three of us left: Kresimir, Fabjan, and me. (42-43)

Duro's thoughts point to a significant aspect of life: who or what would tell the story of our lives when we would no longer be present on this earth? In the context of the novel, there is the suggestion that art, in the form of the house and the mosaic, is the best storyteller. It is in this regard that Duro contemplates his own after story: Some days I wondered what would happen to my own house when I was gone. I have lived here for eighteen years, and maybe with luck I'll live twice as long again. More than likely I shall die alone, as I live now, and as I have no executor a person or persons will be appointed to come and deal with my estates, sort my belongings into piles and sell and throw. They will go through my papers and when they do they will find this. (43) The fountain is another important symbol within the physical space of the house that highlights the connections between space and identity. In the opening sections of the novel, Duro tells of Grace's fascination. The symbol complements the notion of storytelling earlier explored, the ability of artistic objects as the house to tell a story and preserve history. As mentioned, Grace becomes the archeologist with the task of unlocking or rather unveiling history. The fountain, like the blue house and the mosaic, conceals the image of the terracotta-colored fish entwined in emerald weeds. Like the mosaic, there is the hint of erasure in the possibility of history being buried under the ruins. However, in the tradition of storytelling, closely akin to archeology, the ruins are reconstructed, and, gradually, the history they attempt to bury is revealed. Unlike the bird in the mosaic, the fountain depicts a fish. Its terracotta color makes it less attractive than the blue, red, and yellow bird, but it nonetheless points out a very significant detail: it is entwined in emerald weeds. This image of entrapment is crucial in its symbolic connections to the life of Anka. While the house of the Pavis might be imposing, it nevertheless suffocates the life of Anka. In a similar vein, the fish is entrapped by the weeds regardless of the fact that they are emerald. The Pavic house be beautiful as emerald, but it is

full of weeds that frustrate movement and growth. I suspect that the emphasis is not on the nature of the object in terms of its composition but rather its function as it relates to human desires and aspirations. In repairing the fountain, Grace is articulating Anka's sting and desire for liberation, which the image of bird in flight brilliantly captures.

The car, like the other aesthetic symbols in the novel, is a historian and storyteller. It tells the history of Gost in terms of the changing attitudes and perceptions of its use. In its close association with Anka, resents, a forked perspective that illustrates an attempt to buy its memory, on the onehand, and an attempt to revitalize it and bring it back to contemporary society, on the other. In his description of the car, Duro highlights significant aspects of it: its size, color, power of the engine, and affordability. At the same time, it is indigenous to Gost and its utility is unquestionable. Paradoxically, it is for its attraction and utility, its meaning and use, that society wants to erase all memories of it. Regardless of its service, the Fico recalls something uncomfortable, something society can ill-afford to confront the economic status of its owners, for it is owned by poor people. In reminding people of their lower station in life, one that conflicts with their desire to drive a car that is a status symbol, the Fico preserves an uncomfortable period in the history of Ghost. If Fico is resurrected and brought back to use, it would serve the uncomfortable purpose of bringing back to life unwanted memories. It is chiefly for this reason that Duro spends time on repairing it, to resurrect uncomfortable memories of Anka, ho the car in many ways symbolizes.

Fico narrates the life of Anka is closely related to the car in terms of its physical attributes and utilitarian value, Anka reminds Kresimir and Vinka of their unfulfilled ambitions and unrealized expectations after Old Pavics's death. To Kresimir, Anka represents not only a threat to his perceived inheritance but more painfully a sharp contrast to his nature. While he is meticulous, fastidious, greedy, and exploitative, Anka like the Fico is popular, serviceable, attractive, and well liked by all. Repairing the car then is a reminder of Kresimir's shame, his inadequacies, and inability to match the charisma of Anka. Therefore, by repairing the car and using Laura as a symbolic imitation of Anka as she drives around town in the red Fico and a red hat, Duro is forcing Kresimir to confront his shame and possible complicity in the disappearance of Anka. The repaired car functions in the same way like the mosaic and fountain, it targets the shame and conscience of Kresimir and Fabjan.

Further it conveys the fact that Duro has chosen to remember the message and is seeking justice. The threat to unveiling the secrets of Fabjan and Kresimir's past is brought to life. In addition, like the Fico, Anka in spite of her service is exploited and betrayed by the very people she serves so well and to whom she is closest. That the suspicion lingers whether her brother and Fabjan could have a hand in her disappearance is disappointing, and this feeling of abuse is conveyed in the termination of the Fico's production by the factory. Interestingly, it is the young people who have no memory of the past that are purchasing the Fico not the old guard like Fabjan and Kresimir.

Finally, three symbols worth discussing are the drought, rain, and the rainbow. The drought is symbolic of a life-denying force. It is used to convey the sufferings of the people during the siege, and it signifies the physical and spiritual barrenness and the potential for death and destruction in the society. Further, it complements the hardships, horrors, and brutalities of the war. Duro remembers the sufferings occasioned by the drought, "it began in April and stretched the summer by weeks at either end. The sky was a brilliant blue, the heat weighed heavily upon the town and the people moved slowly" (126).

Against the drought comes the rain as a symbol of purification and cleansing. Duro recalls: Here up the hills the rain washing down my face feels good. I lift up my head and open my mouth and let the water in, it is sweet, pure and sweet. I shield my eyes and look in the direction of the town, invisible behind the torrents of water. Let it run, I think, through the streets, down the gutters, into drains until it is carried away by the river. Let it wash away the shit and the pus and the blood, the things that can be washed away. But let it also wash away the fear and the malice and the spite, the things that are harder to erase. I wish these things that are happening right now weren't happening to us, I wish they were happening to someone else, someone else. I didn't care who. I clenched my fist. Leave us alone. (257) The passage comes across almost as a prayer for divine intervention and healing. There are biblical echoes of "lifting up my head" and "let it run" that parallel the cries of the Israelites in bondage in Egypt. The symbol of water is also biblical in its connotation of baptism and the path to salvation. Significantly, Duro calls for both physical and spiritual healing and cleansing. His call is akin to a cry for salvation or atonement for the sins of the past in both its literal (shit, pus, and blood) and metaphorical (fear, malice, and spite) manifestations. The rain becomes a symbol of both purification and rejuvenation and it is in

images like these that the hope for redemption in this post-conflict society lies.

It is on this note of hope and redemption that the image of the rainbow comes to complete the picture of recovery already started by the renovation of the house, fountain, mosaic, and Fico. The double rainbow admired by Grace and Laura provides a glimmer of hope for the future in the sense of calm after the storm, the end of one era and the beginning of a new. The symbol of the rainbow gestures to possibility of accomplishing something of beauty and of redemption even after a period of ugliness: an ugliness that finds expression in the carnage of civil wars.

Frightened by the possibility of erasure of the truth of his life, Duro takes consolation in the fact that the novel he would have completed by his death would tell and preserve his story. The novel creates the literary space where history is preserved.

### Conclusion

The novel is also memorable of its treatment of war and its legacies of atrocities. She handles post-conflict tensions post-war Sierra Leone in this novel parallels her treatment of trauma in post-war Sierra Leone. Duro is an unsettling character and it is difficult to relate to him, even though one understands the reasons for his actions. Clearly, he is struggling to deal with the consequences of his relationship with Anka and in repairing the blue house and its symbolic objects; he symbolically emerges as restorer of lost values necessary for healing. At the same time, the killings of the soldiers and the manner in which he disposes of their bodies undercut a good part of the positive attributes he demonstrates in his relationship with Laura and her family. This feeling of unease that surrounds Duro is further concretized by the symbolic implications of the label "hired man". Apart from a handyman, the label could also be interpreted to mean a mercenary or hit man, and his days in the army and role in the siege amplify this aspect of his character. Thus, it is clear that he is burdened by the legacies of the past and his heavy drinking and isolation are signifiers of his humanity.

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