

## Embracing Darkness and Silence: A Cognitive Reading of Trauma in *A Small Silence*, by Jumoke Verissimo

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The purpose of the present article is to discuss how *A Small Silence* (2019), by the Nigerian author Jumoke Verissimo, conjures up a provocative approach to traumatic memories. The tropes of silence and darkness—closely bound to the Nigerian context where power outages are frequent—are sensuously explored in evocative prose. Darkness is offered as a refuge against the blinding effect of light, and silence is oftentimes preferred to healing through narrativisation. Desire and Prof, the two main fictional characters, devise a peculiar dialogue of half-uttered and unspoken words—and reminiscences—that are arguably in tune with cognitive literary approaches to individual trauma. In addition, in this article an Oriental aesthetics is deployed to delineate the novel's use of shadows and isolation. In contrast to classical trauma fiction, *A Small Silence* presents a less experimental literary narrative of individual trauma. At the same time, the novel rejects simplistic binaries such as trauma-health, dark-light, forgetfulness-memory and mind-body. Rather, it lingers in a space between individual healing and Nigeria's intricate neocolonial circumstances.

Key words: darkness; silence; sensory experience; memory; cognitive trauma theory

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### Abrazando la oscuridad y el silencio: una lectura cognitiva del trauma en *A Small Silence*, de Jumoke Verissimo

El propósito del presente artículo es analizar cómo *A Small Silence* (2019), de la escritora nigeriana Jumoke Verissimo, ofrece un enfoque provocador para abordar la memoria

traumática. Los tropos del silencio y la oscuridad—estrechamente ligados al contexto nigeriano donde los cortes de electricidad son frecuentes—se exploran sensualmente en una evocativa prosa. La oscuridad se perfila como un refugio que contrarresta el efecto cegador de la luz y el silencio es, a menudo, priorizado en lugar de la alternativa cura narrativa. Desire y Prof, los principales personajes de la novela, conciben un peculiar diálogo de pensamientos a medias o sin expresar en voz alta—y de recuerdos—que, según se argumenta en el artículo, está en sintonía con las aproximaciones literarias cognitivas al trauma personal. Además, el artículo usa como referencia algunos conceptos de estética oriental para examinar el uso ficcional de las sombras y el aislamiento. En contraste con el enfoque clásico de las obras de ficción frente al trauma, *A Small Silence* presenta una narrativa del trauma individual menos experimental. Del mismo modo, la novela procura evitar binarismos simplistas tales como trauma-salud, oscuridad-luz, olvido-memoria y mente-cuerpo. Por el contrario, sugiere un espacio entre la cura individual y la compleja situación neocolonial de Nigeria.

Palabras clave: oscuridad; silencio; experiencia sensorial; memoria; teoría cognitiva del trauma

Esta penumbra es lenta y no duele;  
 fluye por un manso declive  
 y se parece a la eternidad.  
 “Elogio de la sombra”  
 (Borges 1969)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Olajumoke Verissimo—better known as Jumoke Verissimo—is a Lagosian writer who has stepped into the international literary arena with the nimbleness of a genie and the calm of someone who will remain. Having studied English literature in Lagos State University and African Studies at Ibadan, she has worked as a freelance journalist for the Nigerian newspapers the *Guardian* and *NEXT*. She has written two acclaimed poetry books, *I Am Memory* (2008) and *The Birth of Illusion* (2015), as well as a number of short stories for cutting-edge African literary online magazines, *Saraba*, *Praxis* and *Brittle Paper* being among the most salient. *A Small Silence* (Verissimo 2019a) is her debut novel. In her writings, historical and insidious trauma and the difficulty in narrativising grief, the role of memory and agency, sensory and bodily experience, individual and communal healing are recurrent tropes, woven in an intimate, evocative, yet oftentimes angered voice. Verissimo claims her work seeks to resemble the capturing of “emotions in beats” (2019b, 00:04:19).

Electricity outages are commonplace in Nigeria. Verissimo’s story arises from this familiar occurrence, which Nigerians experience on an almost daily basis. “When electricity goes out,” she has observed in an online interview, “everything becomes very quiet” (2019b, 00:08:05). Interestingly, she found herself wondering “what would it mean to live the rest of one’s life in the dark?” (2019b, 00:08:15). Her debut novel is a lyrical attempt to deal with this question, and this article sets out to evince how this third-generation Nigerian writer deftly uses the tropes of darkness and silence in a provocative way.<sup>1</sup> To begin with, my analysis focuses on the historically discredited motif of darkness. In order to do so, I deploy an Oriental viewpoint on art and beauty, namely the iconic “In Praise of Shadows” by Japanese writer Jun’ichirō Tanizaki (1977). To continue, the tropes of silence and sensory explorations are brought to the fore by reference to non-Western approaches to trauma healing presented by Sokari Ekine ([2010] 2011), Stef Craps (2013) and Zoe Norridge ([2012] 2013). Subsequently, a succinct overview of how trauma studies and the representation of trauma in literature have developed is provided. I start by focusing on classical trauma theories such as the seminal psychoanalytic/postmodern stance on narrativity propounded by Cathy Caruth (1995). Likewise, I examine the view posited by Michael Rothberg on the attainable

<sup>1</sup> Third-generation Nigerian authors are, in general terms, those whose work has been published since 2000 as well as those whose thematic concerns are distanced from both the colonial independence struggle and the ensuing critique of its political aftermath (Adesanmi and Dunton 2005).

nexus between trauma and realism (2000). In addition, more recent concepts drawn from cognitive trauma theory, as expounded by Richard McNally (2003) and Joshua Pederson (2014, 2020), are deployed. Eventually, Pederson's alternative model for literary trauma analysis is adopted with a view to examining how the characters of *A Small Silence* are shown as remembering their harrowing pasts through somatisation, augmented remembrance and, oftentimes, distorted self-images.

The plot of *A Small Silence* is defined by the imbricated lives, dialogues, thoughts and memories of two characters: the former political activist Prof—Eniolorunda Durotimi Akanni—and the shrewd young university student Desire Babangida Jones. The narration follows an alternate character focalisation, even though Desire's point of view appears somehow to outgrow and embrace Prof's. The novel starts when a broken Prof is released from ten years of political imprisonment at Maiduguri Prison in Lagos. His mother and childhood friend, Kayo, are deeply concerned when confronted with this new person who craves only solitude and darkness. Rejecting all human presence, Prof adamantly chooses to live in the dilapidated home of his dead father. Desire, on the other hand, emerges from Maroko slums in Lagos having survived a childhood of deprivation and violence. Desire had met Prof when she was a girl during a protest demonstration after a governmental order to demolish Maroko. Since then, he has been in her memory as an idealised paternal figure. Gradually, a very subtle sensuous and intellectual relationship is established between them.

Surprisingly, Prof lets Desire enter into the darkness of his home—and life—as they start to share a very peculiar relation. They exchange faulty dialogues and intellectual musings, listen to their bodies, to the tenuous sounds of the neighbourhood echoing from the background and grope for the surfaces of the house in the dim light. However, what they seem to cherish most are moments of unuttered words pregnant with their wandering memories. The story moves back and forth from the present to the past, from haunting dreams and witty reflections on politics, relationships and art to remembrances that lead towards climactic, excruciating disclosures from their past. Meanwhile, parallel subplots mainly involving parental and couple relations emerge. One of these stories introduces Ireti—in all likelihood Prof's son from a fleeting relationship he had in his youth—who appears to be one of the most important excuses behind Desire's returning to Prof's shadowy house. The lingering ambiguity that characterises the relationship between the two protagonists—ranging from steady arousal kindred to sensual love to paternal idealisation—adds to the sustained and increasing narrative tension. A hinted at secret underpinning Desire's life is eventually laid bare while Prof faces going into the streets in daylight. The final scenes find the two characters gazing at each other for the first time, immersed in an estranged reality devoid of the dusky security of Prof's house—an effect that seems to avoid closure and instead questions given conceptions on light, sanity, remembrance and healing.

## 2. DARKNESS AND SILENCE: AN IN-BETWEEN LOCUS OF SENSORY HOMELINESS

In the acknowledgements, Verissimo reveals that the genesis of her novel was during a few nights of electricity outage when a friend offered her a “space to listen to silence and speak into the dark without fear” (2019a, 243). The author claims to have been undergoing a phase of dazed vulnerability out of which Desire and Prof appear to have emerged. In other words, this silent, dark *and* homely space was the improbable material and intellectual locus out of which thinking, dreaming and—as will be shown—healing could be engendered.

### 2.1. Darkness and Light

Verissimo also admits to having a penchant for exploring in-betweenness, “being in a place, being a thing or being anything” (2019b, 00:20:33). Thus, a liminal space for the deployment of silence and darkness is established from the very start in her novel. Darkness is welcomed in *A Small Silence* as a site for therapeutic care. Consequently, Prof’s atypical way of dealing with his protracted, traumatic prison isolation establishes an unfamiliar tone in the narrative. He seems to be longing for darkness; “it was dark, but never dark enough” (Verissimo 2019a, 7), the narratorial voice declares. He rejects human company and goes out at night with a cloth covering his head like a burqa. The uncanny situation is further delineated by some evidence of Prof’s mental instability. He hears voices in his head, the most frequent of which is given a name, Desanya: “Prof observed the way the darkness of the flat established itself before the world around it. At these times, he would tell Desanya of how bothered he was that the little brightness encroached on the darkness of the area” (10). The former political activist constantly fears what could happen to him if light were to flood into his home. As a result, the dimness of his house seems to shroud him and he “settle[s] into it to brood over his past” (10). The nonverbalised memories are latent and contribute to the growing tension of the narrative.

Desire, on the other hand, is introduced in a contrasting, vital manner. She is a university student living with her friend Remilekun in a poor neighbourhood, Abesan. She is told by her flatmate that Prof has been released from prison and lives nearby. Remilekun also mentions to Desire the man’s weird behaviour, which people in the area gossip about. She decides to tell her flatmate about Prof because she knows about her attachment to him and also because she understands the news may help Desire overcome her persistent insomnia. After several failed attempts to visit her Maroko hero, Desire finds herself knocking on his door at night. Although her initial intention might have been to save her former benefactor, Desire gradually learns how to feel at ease in this alternative, peculiar space, where she can allow her memories to ramble, so she “did not ask him to put his lights on because she welcomed the darkness, which covered her unease” (63). She starts exploring the contours of the place, almost bare except for the conspicuous presence of a grandfather clock: “Desire was attentive to everything in the flat, so much so that she could even tell when Prof moved to the edge

of his seat or relaxed against the backrest. She followed the faint white of his eyes which were comparable to candlelight striving on a windy night" (64).

Evidently, the novel challenges conventional allegories and tropes of light and obscurity. Western culture has traditionally viewed light as a symbol of unlimited progress and knowledge. The philosopher Byung-Chul Han claims that

the metaphor of light, which dominates philosophical and theological discourse of antiquity over the Middle Ages up to the Enlightenment, offers strong referentiality. Light springs from a well source. It provides the medium for obligating, prohibiting, and promising instances of God and Reason. Consequently, it gives rise to negativity, which has a polarising effect and produces oppositions. Light and darkness are coeval. Light and shadow belong together. The Good has Evil as its corollary. The light of reason and the darkness of the irrational (or the merely sensory) bring each other forth. ([2012] 2015, 39)

Oriental cultures have, on the contrary, historically dwelt on shadows and darkness in a different fashion. In his iconic essay "In Praise of Shadows," Tanizaki nostalgically ponders the mutual imbrication between shadows and dim-lit spaces and mystery, trance, serenity, consciousness loss and, above all else, the appreciation of beauty. What is more, the Japanese writer closely associates simple sunless corners with being immersed in an atmosphere where "complete and utter silence" can reign (1977, 20). "In the darkness immutable tranquility holds sway," he suggests, and also refers to the uncanny nature of dark places where mystery lies: "Were the shadows to be banished from its corners, the alcove would in that instant revert to mere void" (20). Light, he continues, is repelled by darkness, "creating a world of confusion where dark and light are indistinguishable" (22). "Have you never felt a sort of fear in the face of the ageless, a fear that in that room you might lose consciousness of the passage of time, that untold years might pass and upon emerging you should find you had grown old and grey?" (22). Tanizaki argues that the West has never been able to experience the joy associated with shadows and contends that Westerners have always felt compelled to "improve" their condition: "From candle to oil lamp, oil lamp to gaslight, gaslight to electric light—his quest for a brighter light never ceases, he spares no pains to eradicate the minutest shadow" (31). In contrast to the Western obsession with illumination, the Japanese have traditionally experienced no discontent with scarce light, seeking satisfaction in environments as they are, even when full of grime. As if echoing Tanizaki, Prof finds himself telling Desire that she "shouldn't make the mistake of thinking darkness is bad. Sometimes having light is the problem. Darkness is a cypher. Things, potentials, are created in darkness—think of that Bible story in Genesis; the total darkness that engulfed the earth brought light. What brings darkness? Darkness welcomes light all the time. We can see in darkness, only if we let our eyes master the dark" (Verissimo 2019a, 103).

Significantly, in the welcoming darkness of Prof's home Desire's meandering thoughts gradually lead her to confront her most secret memory: she killed her father when she

was nine years old. At this point, light becomes a means to obliterate her anxieties, so much so that she cannot sleep with the lights off: “*How can you hope for a better sleep in your fear? People don’t like the dark,*” she ruminates (204; italics in the original).<sup>2</sup> While before “she slept in the dark [...]—eyes shut to welcome the dark should be enveloped in the dark,” now “leaving the lights on, she returned to her bed and tried to sleep” (204). In chapter thirty-two—almost at the end of the novel—there are several images describing the sun and light swallowing everything. Desire wants to forget the paternal killing she has not dared to tell anybody about. Thus, her attitude towards light differs from Prof’s, who avoids it. The meanings of light and dark are, therefore, ambiguous in the lives and memories of each character. For Prof, light means remembrance of torture and suffering in prison. For Desire, it means covering a buried time of her past, her fear, the possibility of oblivion. Eventually, she realises that forgetting is not possible.

## 2.2. Silence, Sounds and the Sensuous Experience

As darkness opens up as a locus of healing, so too does silence—and the sensuous explorations it enables. The talking cure has historically been a synonym for mental health rehabilitation in the Western world. However, in “Beyond Eurocentrism: Trauma Theory in the Global Age,” Craps reflects on the tendency of classical trauma theory to marginalise the experiences of non-Western cultures. He argues that there has been a pernicious overgeneralisation of the notion of the single traumatic stressor as the cause of grief and a persistent recourse to nonlinearity and aporia as literary textual representations of stressing conditions (2013, 46). He claims that there are other mechanisms of survival and coping—alternatives to the talking cure—that have been disregarded by Western health workers and writers. The occidental insistence on verbalising the troubling experiences has tended to overlook other possible healing practices (51). In this connection, silence, Norridge propounds, is “another manner of bounding pain—instead of seeking narrative closure, barriers are erected by not allowing the stories to circulate actively (even if they do unconsciously or implicitly) within the social space” ([2012] 2013, 196). By the same token, in “Women’s Responses to State Violence in the Niger Delta,” Ekine confronts her interview subjects’ resistance to speak about their past grievances. Interviewing one such victim was for Ekine a powerful experience:

Standing face-to-face with her silence was overpowering, as was her grief and loss. She chose a strategy of insulation by disengaging herself from her surroundings and continuing to live

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<sup>2</sup> As this quotation shows, there are moments in *A Small Silence* when the omniscient narrator offers direct contact with the characters’ thoughts, always evidenced by the extemporary use of italics. While the narratorial voice can fluidly and easily access Prof and Desire’s memories, dreams and thoughts, certain personal musings are singled out in this way so that the reader is given the chance to witness the characters’ actual internal monologue at first hand, as when Prof shares thoughts with his imaginary friend Desanya (24, 53, 190) or Desire mulls over her difficult past (116, 120, 125).

with dignity, refusing her violators any sense of victory. In this instance, she had to face her son's murderers every day, possibly even selling them foodstuffs from the stall she runs to support her surviving children. Her silence, her stance, and her body language did not allow them to take away what was left of her. ([2010] 2011, 241)

Although at first glance such behaviour may seem passive, Ekine believes that for many people the silent response is turned into a powerful, and proud, act of reaffirmation of their pain in an effort to manage it inwardly on an entirely personal—though sometimes, communal—level.

In *A Small Silence*, inner musings about silence and sound are at play from the moment Desire decides to stay in Prof's indefinable place: "She entered the flat, acknowledging fugitive silence that would become a major guest in their many conversations" (Verissimo 2019a, 62). Tanizaki's effect of the pulverising of time is evinced in the extended moments they each spend lost in their reveries: "Soon, a small silence drowned their intermittent sighs, deep breaths and pounding hearts. Neither of them gave an inkling of the thoughts in their minds" (184). Fifteen minutes can easily elapse while Prof and Desire do nothing but listen to their breathing patterns. Desire's point of view is described in terms of a gradual forgetfulness of her material existence. The reader is led to believe that the passing of time is blurred: "When she opened her eyes, it was still dark, and she hadn't asked any questions. There was even more silence in the room and it was as if they had both stopped breathing," Desire ponders. Steadily, she becomes aware of life outside—"the humming of generators in the distance sounded like a trombone in her head" (185). The unspoken words do not seem to be a cause for concern or anguish even though she perceives that "a stillness reigned asking that they both hold a one-minute silence for the death of important discussions" (205).

The novel foregrounds silence and, in the process, brings much attention to sound in a subtle yet compelling manner. The narratorial insistence on unuttered words gives prominence to the minutiae of sounds that are sieved through the protagonists' muted calm. Every nuance, even of a muffled sound, is perceived: Prof's voice was "wafting into [Desire's] ears like the rustling of leaves in the wind. [...] He spoke so softly that she strained to hear him" (61). Desire's initial reticence to being with an alleged madman in a dark room is gradually superseded, since "she noted the uncertainty in his voice. She sensed expectation in the way he responded although he tried to conceal it with rashness" (61). Prof's craving for peace is also shown in the tone of his voice: "he paused and made an attempt to talk louder but his voice still sounded like a whisper" (61). On the other hand, his peal of laughter echoes with vibrancy and delicacy: "soft at first. He then rushed into a soft monotony of rippling laughter that grew in tempo until it sounded like a chorus she was required to join" (63).

The sensual experience is also present throughout, as signalled by a steadily increasing arousal of bodily responses in the main characters. The reader is placed in an ambiguous position when it comes to deciding whether the relation between



Prof and Desire is emotional, intellectual or mainly physical. In answer to Desire's insistence for him to turn on the lights, Prof "found her hands in the darkness and tucked them into his [...]. Desire could hardly hear him over her pounding heart, like the sound of a horse's hoof stamping the ground" (154-55). After Desire first comes into his house, Prof feels as if he had had "slow, unhurried sex that begged for intensity after long years of abstinence. He felt ashamed but at the same time, he felt unwound" (71). Although their skins barely brush, the sensuous feeling suggested in the narration is evident. In chapter twelve, Prof broods on his bodily craving for Desire and his fear of losing her if he straightforwardly invites her to stay over. And yet, the nature of their bond appears to be eminently spiritual since he dwells on the time when they recited Niyi Osundare's "Not My Business" together. From chapter thirty till the end, there is an intense climactic movement in the plot. Prof is intently yet randomly looking for Desire in the neighbourhood, while she is planning to see him at his place for the last time. Paradoxically, she also looks forward to the possibility of seeing him in daylight. They both seem to have a constant question in mind: "Could this be love or what do we call this?" (204). Unexpectedly, in the last but one chapter, Desire comes across a clownishly dressed, handicapped man in the street, who happens to be no other than Prof. He looks vaguely familiar to her and she can clearly read "shame and confusion" in his eyes, so she decides not to meet Prof again and move ahead (233).

### 3. PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA: A COGNITIVE LITERARY APPROACH

Much discussion on trauma theory in the literary sphere has been shaped by Caruth's pioneering work *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), as well as the theorisations of other prominent figures such as Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, Dominick LaCapra and Dori Laub. In Caruth's early writings, traumatic experience is viewed as "unclaimed," that is, the ability to recover the traumatic past is tied up "with the ability to have access to it" (1995, 152). And she continues: "what returns in the flashback is not simply an overwhelming experience that has been obstructed by a later repression or amnesia, but an event that is itself constituted, in part, by its lack of integration into consciousness" (152). Although Caruth's work builds on ideas from a well-known corpus of prominent authorities from psychiatry and psychology such as Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk, she considers they confuse "the survivor's unwillingness to talk about or to recall trauma for an *inability* to do so" (Pederson 2020, 277; italics in the original). Simply put, classical trauma theory pivots around the idea that the emotional fear produced by wrenching events overwhelms the psychic structure and that, consequently, the narrativisation of traumatic experiences is hardly going to be a linear or straightforward undertaking. By the same token, postmodern literary narratives are seen as being particularly suited to conveying such fragmented consciences, as well as the involuntary, abrupt irruption of otherwise repressed memories.

Classical trauma theory was partially brought into question by Rothberg in *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*. Focusing exclusively on the Shoah or Holocaust, Rothberg suggests that realism and trauma are not necessarily mutually exclusive and puts forward a middle-ground position between the traditional understanding of literary trauma and cognitive psychology theories, which will be discussed subsequently. Fragments of the real, Rothberg claims, can be turned into a narrative—that is, provide an illusory coherence—by means of which realism can surface. Additionally, Rothberg’s groundbreaking contention is that *traumatic realism* both emerges out of and articulates a negotiation between the extreme circumstances of trauma and everyday experience. In other words, traumatic realism is an attempt “not to *reflect* the traumatic event mimetically but to *produce* it as an object of knowledge and to transform its readers” (2000, 140; italics in the original). Arguably, Rothberg’s position stands at a crossroads between realistic and antirealistic representation, or between a view of trauma as the trite “banality of evil” identified by Hannah Arendt in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) (quoted in Rothberg 2000, 4) and as an unutterably exceptional experience. In the light of Rothberg’s framework, there is a productive interrelation between reality—in the case of *A Small Silence*, what actually happened to Prof (torture in prison) and to Desire (domestic violence)—experience—that is, the characters’ bodily and emotional pain as well as their memory reenactments—and representation—that is, the narrator’s fictive actualisation of these realities and experiences, which, although mediated, can conjure up a glimpse of the real. To put it simply, although it is never easy, trauma can be narrated by deploying realism as a highly “non-reductive articulation of the extreme and the everyday” (Rothberg 2000, 118).

Pederson takes a step ahead in the discussion by contending that trauma theory in literature has much to learn from recent insights in the field of cognitive psychology and neuroscience and by moving away from the classical postmodern stance (2020, 277). He points out that there have been new discoveries in relation to the ways the brain and the body process and react to acute grief and that neither these nor recent theorisations on cognitive trauma—built upon the issue of memory accessibility and how remembrance can be revealed through bodily or mental constructions—should be ignored (277). Paraphrasing Harvard psychologist McNally in *Remembering Trauma* (2003), Pederson notes that “traumatic memory, rather than being unclaimed, is deeply etched and perhaps preternaturally detailed” (2020, 277). “Traumatic amnesia is a myth,” McNally claims, “and while victims may *choose* not to speak of their traumas, there is little evidence that they *cannot*” (quoted in Pederson 2014, 334; italics in the original). In other words, for McNally not only is trauma memorable, but also describable. In fact, recent cognitive trauma studies focus both on cognition as such—that is, how the individual consciously thinks about grieving and/or experiences fear and pain in their mind—and on somatic symptoms of trauma, reaching the important conclusion that there may be treatments that leave the iconic talking cure behind and

instead involve practices aimed at healing the mind through the body or through explicit thinking (Pederson 2014, 337-38; Pederson 2020, 282-85).

Bearing in mind the different processes involved in the storage of memory, new researchers in cognitive trauma have put forward a distinction between situationally accessible memories (SAMs)—which are usually “visually based” and not easily retrieved—and verbally accessible memories (VAMs)—which can be both remembered *and* put into words (Pederson 2020, 278-79). By the same token, a single traumatic event may trigger different responses in different people. Two main reactions can be distinguished: trauma-related altered states of consciousness (TRASC)—that is, feelings of numbness, depersonalisation or derealisation—and normal waking consciousness (NWC)—with symptoms such as intense anxiety, arousal and increased heart rate being among the most prominent (Lanius et al. 2003). Ultimately, since according to the cognitive approach traumatic memories are not suppressed, Pederson poses a question that is key to literary trauma studies: “Is it possible to tell a trauma story straight?” (2020, 280). In other words, can one convey trauma processes through realistic modes of narration? He answers in the affirmative—as Rothberg partially does—and argues that literary critics should trace mind-body responses to trauma in contemporary realistic fiction.

Pederson’s alternate model to that of classical literary trauma theory is underpinned by three premises. Firstly, critics should “*turn their focus from gaps into the text itself*” (2014, 338; italics in the original). In other words, instead of gravitating around textual lacunae and experiences that cannot be uttered, critics’ attention should focus on searching for textual substantiation of the possibility of characters—or narratorial voices—having access to memories, irrespective of whether or not they can actually narrativise them. Additionally, he postulates that “*trauma theorists should seek evidence of augmented narrative detail*” (2014, 339; italics in the original). As McNally claims in *Remembering Trauma* (2003), “stress does not impair memory, it strengthens it” (quoted in Pederson 2014, 339). Finally, “*trauma theorists should focus on depictions of experience that are temporally, physically, or ontologically distorted*” (Pederson 2014, 339; italics in the original), that is, memories that are inf(lect)ed by affect, as in “peritraumatic dissociation,” where “time may feel as if it is slowing down. Spaces may loom. The world may feel unreal or the victim slip outside of his or her own body” (339) and the protagonists may feel as if they were spectators to their own lives, watching a film. In sum, “evocations of confusions, shifts in place and time, out-of-the-body experiences, and a general sense of unreality” mark these distortions (340).

### 3.1. Memories Written on the Mind and the Body

In *A Small Silence*, both Desire and Prof can remember their distressful experiences. In both cases too, it is their bodies that clearly reveal the burden of what they are reluctant to narrativise. Prof underwent recurrent torture with bright lights and fire during his long imprisonment, while Desire is tormented by memories of her alcoholic father

beating up her mother on a regular basis until she was nine years old. Although Prof strongly wants to tell Desire about his excruciating plight, the moment is delayed and, in all likelihood, the opportunity of verbalising it is entirely lost: “He wanted to tell her about how he screamed in the prison when the warders came to pick him for the usual routine. He would have loved to tell her how he decided light was not for him” (Verissimo 2019a, 156). On her part, Desire provides hints of her traumatic young years early in the narrative. “For the first time, she told someone everything—well, *almost* everything,” Desire muses while she is giving her mentor Mama T an account of her childhood on the beach (45; italics added). She often avoids talking about her parents with Prof. Her secret, however, is always hovering nearby and her obsession with the impossibility of forgetting is repeatedly mentioned: “She wanted so much to forget [Prof]; the way a young tree forgets a leaf when it falls, but the leaf never forgets the tree, it rots so that it can become nutrient—and strengthens the tree. There really is no forgetting” (217). Oblivion becomes Desire’s fixation, so much so that she feels a growing need to expunge Prof from her life. Eventually, however, she seems to accept the fact that she will always remember.

Predictably, Desire’s memories of Oshodi, her childhood neighbourhood, are often tinged with fear and anguish: “There was no better way to preserve a landscape than in the agonies of a childhood suffering. Just how the memories of Oshodi rested in her head like dew settled in the early morning on leaves,” the narratorial voice reflects, “Oshodi, the place she was born in, was soaked in a terror which was beyond the pictures of a street with a panorama of dilapidated tenements, clinging side by side and running in bends” (127). Her remembrances of this area are especially foul and seedy, even though she was, at a later time, homeless in Maroko, one of the poorest slums in Lagos. Although her family had a proper house in Oshodi, she recalls playing with balls made with rags and used condoms, the water drains with brackish water where the children used to bathe, the stench of urine and faeces, “the airlessness,” the garbage and flies, the idle local boys smoking weed, the screams of women being robbed (127-28). She finds herself telling Ireti: “We all turn towards imaginative questions, questions that empower us, so we can bury those stories that we won’t give words to because they’ve corrupted our memory.’ [...] ‘I’ve always considered how some stories will never get told. It’s the way it is, Ireti. Silence is where we go to listen to these stories. Sit in silence and listen. Silence tells stories too, you know” (115).

Desire and Prof both hate Nigerian policemen. Desire’s father was a policeman. Gradually, the memories of him creep into her mind. The tension in the plot is sustained by the reluctant unfolding of the secret that ties Desire to her father; the understated and ironic “small silence” of the novel’s title. Memories that do not seem to have been spoken aloud before are bound to be released and, with them, overwhelming pain too. However, when she actually has the chance to tell her friend Remilekun what happened during her childhood, Desire purposefully changes the story. She admits to making the story “juicier” by fabricating the idea that Prof had paid her secondary school fees. Desire’s shame—or

pride—compels her not to disclose that she killed her father. “My mother killed my father’ she began and it sounded true to her ears” (220). She even asks herself while telling the story of her father’s murder whether she has “reinvented the things that had really happened to her father” (221). Knowing she is lying, she vaguely explains to her flatmate: “You see, it is kind of complicated. I didn’t see it happen. You know, I wasn’t there, how can I explain this? I was there. I just knew. It was as if I made it happen” (221). However, a solid idea seems to have been etched on her mind: deciding that her mother killed her father is her way of restoring her mother’s lost dignity. Desire is eager to talk to Prof, to tell him what had happened to her. She feels free in his murky, homely abode, free to ruminate on her past. However, she decides to forge ahead without revealing her deepest injury to him, probably due to the fact that she has accepted that living with her secret is the best option at her disposal: “She shrugged, as she reminded herself that he was now to be forgotten. Prof would be forgotten—and forgetting meant rewriting her narratives” (229). Desire’s decision very much mirrors the previously mentioned active silence of the Niger Delta mothers described by Ekine, a “small silence” that lingers on as does the young protagonist’s inner quest to conceal her experience—and, possibly, heal.

In tune with Pederson’s concept of VAMs, Prof and Desire evince no memory block. Additionally, they manifest bodily responses when they are faced with certain traumatic stressors. In the case of the activist, he experiences a reaction against light and noise. This has a tangible cause: as mentioned earlier, light was the instrument of torture used by his jailers. In chapter twenty-eight, there is a minute description of the physical response Prof experiences when he tries to switch on the lights of his house: he trembles, his hands are sweaty and shaky, he rests his head on the wall and sobs, winces, his heart races, he weeps and wails loudly, he squats and crouches on the floor, twitches uncontrollably, feels a slow pain in his neck and, on the whole, feels drained (190-92). However, he tells himself it is time to stop remembering (209). As far as Desire is concerned, when her visits to Prof bring her to the brink of narrativising the memory she is intent on burying, she starts to feel a distaste of the darkness she initially enjoys. Chapter thirty-two starts with many references to Desire’s restlessness, the sunlight “swallowing” even the light of the electric bulb (216), her compulsion to clean the room, her mind appearing to drift from reality, her hearing Remilekun’s voice “as if it is from the end of a tunnel” (218). She is sweating, “as if something unsaid wished to crack the state of intimacy and mutual respect that always existed between them [herself and Remilekun]” (219). Remilekun wishes she could open her up and throw out the dirt in her friend’s life. Desire “crie[s] softly, thinking to herself, *she wouldn’t understand the lights*” (219; italics in the original).

### 3.2. Augmented Memories against Oblivion

Prof’s and Desire’s memories hover and are often on the brink of verbal disclosure. Whenever these recollections are reinstated, details of sounds, images and somatic

exertions are minutely evoked. As such, when it comes to considering Pederson's claim on the need to search for fictional evidence for augmented trauma memories, chapter twenty-eight is full of these magnified actualisations in terms of Desire's detailed account of her father's maltreatment of her mother and his eventual death. In the case of Prof, chapter thirty-two provides a precise, exhaustive account of the horrors he experienced in jail, particularly at the time of the military dictatorship headed by Sani Abacha. The narratorial voice painstakingly provides the reader with facts. We are made aware that Prof was detained on "3 October 1995. It was two days after Nigeria's independence celebration and four days before his 45th birthday" (20). Moreover, we learn that the young, arrogant university activist Eniolorunda Durotimi Akanni had a relatively good first year in jail, recalling "those days when he thought the worst thing was complaining and planning with other prisoners over the prison food; soups that lacked condiments: just 'water, a sprinkle of dry pepper and salt.' He was strong for the first year. He yelled at the warder and proclaimed how the country would become a better place because the people would fight back soon" (156). During the second year, however, the punishments inflicted on him became far worse and are described in detail: from being exposed to the scorching sun naked, to the use of strobe lights for interrogations; from being deafened by Fújì music at full blast to being subjected to solitary confinement with a hood over his head for days on end.<sup>3</sup> As a result of the hood torture, Prof developed a sort of ease—or peace—with being in the dark: "This was the routine until the head of state who threw him in jail died and another military government came to power. There was no longer any need for the warders to put the hood over his head. Yet, in the five years of having his face concealed, he had enjoyed the way it sealed the darkness and enclosed him in his own thoughts" (157).

As far as Desire is concerned, chapter thirty-two opens with the gradual disclosure of her violent childhood. Her mother used to be a prostitute before she married and her father, the drunken policeman Babangida, hated his wife and daughter as he believed the child was not his. In fact, Desire's father named her "Undesired" and her mother, so the reader is told, called her "Desire" for short (108). "Desire's mother was not ready for anything but hope that her husband would change and love her again," the reader is informed (147). However, Desire "remembered those mornings when she woke up to Babangida beating her mother until she was arranged like a torn puppet on the floor" (147). The girl was also cruelly punished whenever she attempted to help her mother. A description of the night of her father's death is provided, including an account of how he insulted and belted her mother. Desire remembers her mother's screams until she "fell asleep or fainted" (224). A very revealing dialogue shows what the young daughter felt towards her father:

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<sup>3</sup> Fújì music is a Nigerian popular genre originating within Yorùbá Muslim communities. It is characterised by Arabic vocal style, Yorùbá praise poetry and percussion (Klein 2020).

'I think you should run away-o.'

'And who will take care of you?'

'What if he dies? At least someone will take care of me.'

Her mother pinched her nose slightly, 'What will kill him? He's your father, okay? Don't say such things again.'

'He's not my father. He says it. If I was the one he beats like this, one day, I would just kill him.' (224)

Desire remembers her mother embracing her, how "the sweat on their palms mixed and their pain came together" (225). At the end of her story, Desire makes explicit to Remilekun her deep-rooted fear: "I never want to be married. I have the fear that I will kill my husband or maybe my child" (226). "You know the blood of a killer is inside me" (226), Desire banters while her friend nervously giggles. The uncanniness of the situation is given perfect closure as Desire covers herself with the bedspread. Once again, her secret is inside and concealed.

As has been pointed out previously, in *A Small Silence* the narratorial voice navigates across the two characters' thoughts smoothly, thus acting as a mediator or conduit between the characters' experiences and the witnessing reader and forging a fictional contract or alliance between them that seeks to keep the memory of structural Nigerian violence in the foreground. Clearly, the narrator does not exercise the role of psychoanalyst leading a healing cure, since there are many traces in the story that show that there is no forgetting—even though the characters would very much like to do so.

### 3.3. Memories and Distortions of the Self

The third and last feature Pederson lists in his argumentation in favour of a cognitive approach to literary representations of trauma is related to depictions of memories as temporarily, physically or ontologically distorted. Such enactments are also found in *A Small Silence*, further evidencing the characters' constant grappling with traumatic past events. Prof is described as a broken man from the beginning of the narrative. The reader might somehow imagine him to look like a shadow of the handsome, egotistical political leader of the 1980s, but in the penultimate chapter—thirty-three—we are brutally confronted by his physical decrepitude. When Prof refuses to allow his mother—Maami—to stay in his house, she starts reciting to him his *oriki*—a Yorùbá birth praise chant. At this moment, he becomes acutely aware of the absence of that self that his mother used to know: "he felt like he was disappearing from his skin; with a cannibalistic void taking the place where he should be. He would be there, but suddenly feel absent and inexistent" (34). When Maami insists her son should stand tall again and come back to her, Prof thinks "of prison and the feeling of himself floating up to the skies. When was he ever himself? How did deciding to live in the dark become the criteria for judging the total life of a man?" (170). He is described in the distorted

versions of the neighbourhood people as a monster, a ghost, eating cockroaches and even human beings. A neighbour who has repeatedly seen Desire knocking on Prof's door warns her: "you will not know him again. He has changed from human being to something else" (59). In one of their meetings in the dark, Prof tells Desire, "I am not the one in this body any more. They took me away" (107), and ends up describing himself as a "lighter without a flame" (107).

Similarly, Desire tends to project her moods onto her surroundings and the people she meets. Thus, she makes her own interpretation of the fear she perceives sometimes in the eyes of girls: "Desire did not know if she was the one making assumptions, but the fear in the girl's eyes as the man approached mirrored the one she felt for her father as a child, those days in Oshodi, before she and her mother moved to Maroko" (127). The night Desire decides to tell her story to her flatmate, Remilekun gradually comes to suspect that Desire is not of sound mind, especially when Desire insists on going to Prof's flat at 3:45 a.m. The protagonist herself is, for the first time, afraid she is mentally ill: "it dawned on Desire that she was losing control of herself. She closed her eyes, placed her back against the door and slipped to the ground shaking" (203). Hollowness and failure seem to be the outcome of her confronting her childhood predicament. In the last chapter, she walks along the street to fetch water and her defeated mood seems to be projected onto the place: "It appeared as if everybody around walked with their heads bowed and their shoulders drooping" (229). She has voluntarily avoided telling her story, so her future is bound to unfold with her in a position of surrender. However, she is intent on cleaning her house as yet another attempt to cleanse her memory and face her plight with silence as her only witness.

Prof's memories are released in a torrent when he is compelled to deal with the light and the pain it brings to his mind—and body. Desire's unfolding memories, on the other hand, are much subtler. Eventually, she acknowledges her harsh, deprived childhood, though she is reluctant to put it into words. It remains her untold secret. In this sense, Prof's scars are more visible—he is clearly a deranged man in the eyes of the people—but he can face his past ghosts, or at least one is led to believe so. However, Desire's more normal life and countenance have only the appearance of healing. What is more, her personal wound will probably stalk her for life. Hence, the dishevelled, broken-hearted Prof achieves a sort of redemption that Desire has to keep fighting for. Her journey to become whole remains inconclusive because of her conscious refusal to narrativise her story. "How easy would it be to forget, was there really something called forgetting?" (199), she rhetorically asks.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

These times are particularly uncertain. Chaos looms large when the future is imagined. Literature seems to be, once again, a site for contestation and hope. Can darkness and isolation mean something positive? Can silence eventually connect us with our



intimate fears, ghosts and contingent existences? *A Small Silence* is intent on answering these questions. The association of darkness and silence with the long-standing negative Western history of irrationality, gloom and ignorance is openly questioned and turned instead into its obverse. The tropes of darkness and silence provide the fictional characters with a space of homeliness in which vivid remembrances could eventually be confronted head-on. Healing can take different paths, the novel seems to suggest. Some Nigerian structural social conditions could engender a kind of normalcy through alternative ways—different from the established Western trauma cures—of dealing with grief and endurance. The narrativisation of one's traumatic past may not necessarily bring about the desired healing. Alternatively, acknowledging one's deeply etched injuries and grappling with them, even in complete isolation, could be a way towards openly regarding them as part of one's history and drawing on them as bodily experience. Light may not always bring about deliverance and progress. On the contrary, it may blind and cover and conceal the subtle dimensions of half-truths and half realities. Navigating uncertainty is our contemporary onus, one that Oriental people seem to know about and have learned to accept and relish. Verissimo's novel is a lingering poem, an extended sensory experience in which mirroring stories—in a Borgesian style—speak to each other along parallel channels. *A Small Silence* is, above all, about the arduous individual persistence towards healing and pride, even in stifling conditions. The evocative ending is an invitation to let imagination and experience loose. Prof walks down the street considering “going home to lift the curtains of his house, so that the lame lights [*sic*] of the moon could walk in” (242).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The research underpinning this article is part of the project “Literature in the Transmodern Era: Celebration, Limits and Transgression,” funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness (FFI2017-84258).

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Received 21 October 2020

Revised version accepted 20 January 2021

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