

On *Happiness*

Aminatta Forna

The publication of *Happiness* in 2019 marked a near twenty-year immersion in narratives that dealt with notions of war and trauma, an inquiry that began with a memoir *The Devil that Danced on the Water* (2002), written at the time of the civil conflict in Sierra Leone, and continuing through four novels, culminating in *Happiness*. In *The Memory of Love* and through the character of British psychologist Adrian Lockheart, a trauma specialist who arrives in Sierra Leone in the wake of the conflict, I engaged most directly with conceptual notions of trauma. It is in this novel that Attila Asare, a Ghanaian psychiatrist who runs a mental health facility in postwar Sierra Leone, makes his first appearance. Some years later, following publication of the Croatian-set novel *The Hired Man*, I found myself compelled to return to the character of Asare and the subject of trauma in my most recent novel, *Happiness*.

The clinical recognition of trauma and of PTSD is relatively recent and has been the focus of intense interest since the 1970s, one that I daresay has not yet peaked. Thus definitions of *trauma* remain rapidly evolving and fluid, both in terms of what we mean by the designation “trauma,” as well as the ways in which trauma is expressed by victims of violence. Developments in clinical research and corresponding critiques have been evolving contemporaneously to my own writing. A parallel and unfolding discussion among literary trauma theorists has also taken place, one that has included my work.

The natural world and physical landscape have always played a significant role in the development of the characters of my novels; in particular, I’m interested in the way individuals are shaped by their environment. The physical world in which my characters have been raised and live informs their choices, models their behavior, and ultimately shapes their outlook on life, one that is contextualized in tradition, culture, and history. This includes the response to violence, suffering, trauma, and resilience.

Ernest Cole,¹ Oumar Diop,² Ankhi Mukherjee,³ and Eustace Palmer⁴ have each taken the trauma narrative of *Happiness* as the cornerstone of their interpretations of the

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1 Ernest Cole, “Re-Reading Violence and Trauma in Post-Conflict Societies: Aminatta Forna’s *Happiness*,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 6.3 (2019), 400–403.

2 Oumar Diop, “Happiness, the Wound and the Word: Aminatta Forna Joins the Conversation on Trauma,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 6.3 (2019), 388–399.

3 Ankhi Mukherjee, “Eco-cosmopolitanism as Trauma Cure,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 6.3 (2019), 411–417.

4 Eustace Palmer, “Aminatta Forna and the Concept of Happiness,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 6.3 (2019), 404–410.

text of *Happiness*. Mukherjee focuses on cosmopolitanism as an antithesis to Western constructs of trauma. Diop similarly positions the text within the current trauma theory debates by postcolonial scholars and uses the term *transuasion* to describe a reshaping of the concept of trauma. Cole focuses on the connection between events in the former Yugoslavia and Sierra Leone (settings for my previous two novels) and Attila's experiences of trauma in those theaters and that in *Happiness* serve to inform Attila's views on trauma. Palmer forefronts the book's descriptions of the natural world. I'll talk about my intentions relating to *Happiness* and trauma first and the allegorical significance of the natural world thereafter.

On "The Gaze"

In an interview with the *Telegraph* newspaper in 2012, Toni Morrison said of her own work: "Take away the gaze of the white male. Once you take that out, the whole world opens up."⁵

In *The Memory of Love*, Attila Asare, a relatively minor but important character in that novel, brings into question Adrian Lockheart's ideas about trauma, rooted in Western norms, and his proposals to treat Sierra Leonian victims of trauma. Elsewhere in the novel, Adrian's friend, the Sierra Leonian surgeon Kai Mansaray, challenges Adrian's assumptions about the purpose and benefit of Western postconflict intervention in Sierra Leone.

In "Eco-Cosmopolitanism as Trauma Cure," Mukherjee describes Franz Fanon's critique of Dominique-Octave Mannoni's claim that a dependency complex on the part of colonized people was at the true root of the harm done to the psyche of the colonized, rather than (in Fanon's view) the psychic violence and racism of colonialism. Fanon challenged Mannoni's supposed objectivity, the scope of which was, argued Fanon, limited by his membership of the colonizing class and reflexive repetition of their modes of thinking.

Decades later the trauma theories of the 1990s, in particular those developed by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman, have been critiqued by postcolonial scholars for applying a universal and Western-oriented definition of *trauma* and failing to take into account the specific and complex circumstances of victims elsewhere.

In *The Memory of Love*, I chose to play with a popular trope, which I call the "white man in Africa" narrative, namely the protagonist whose adventures and misadventures on the Dark Continent are followed by the reader (or viewer) until his eventual return to the safety of the West, an earlier incarnation of the "white savior" trope to which Mukherjee also refers. In the opening of *The Memory of Love*, in keeping with those kinds of narratives, the gaze belongs to Adrian; Sierra Leone and its people are seen through his eyes. In my novel, however, the perspective soon shifts to Kai Mansaray, with the effect that the gaze is reversed and Adrian, his actions, judgments, and errors, are viewed and scrutinized through the lens of an inhabitant of the country. The elliptical structure of the novel sees the perspective shift entirely, so that although Adrian opens the book, it is Kai's story that closes the story.

Reading Mukherjee's reference to Fanon's critique of Mannoni put me in mind of W. E. B. Dubois's concept of "double consciousness," one interpretation of which is the way in which African Americans see themselves reflected both through the lens of their

5 Ariel Leve, 'Toni Morrison on Love, Loss and Modernity,' *The Telegraph*, July 17, 2012.

own gaze and that of a wider, White society. At the time of writing *The Memory of Love* (though not then with particular reference to W. E. B. Dubois), my thoughts were concerned with how members of a dominant social group may fail to recognize the subjective experience of members of a weaker group, particularly those considered inferior. This inability, this very absence of double consciousness, blinds the dominant group to a view themselves and their actions from the outside, to the views and judgments of others. What might we call it, this inability to see beyond the scope of one's own experience, to imagine oneself into the mind of another being? In this case it is a form of ethnocentrism, but in the wider world need not always be related to ethnicity, though is typically related to power. The myopia of the powerful. In the novel it is Kai who brings Adrian to self-awareness and with it a new way of seeing himself and his own preconceptions, thus also of Sierra Leone, its people, and his patients, thus paving the way to greater understanding on Adrian's part. Though Attila too plays a role in Adrian's (rude) awakening it is Kai, to whom Adrian is closest, in a sense Mukherjee's "cosmopolitan," adept at inhabiting two sensibilities, of moving seamlessly between Western and West African modes of thought; he is capable of harmonizing Adrian's Western psychiatric diagnosis of his patient Agnes's "fugue," contextualizing it within Sierra Leone's social, cultural, and political history.

In *Happiness* I went further and decided to reverse the gaze fully, this time with the idea of taking an African character to Britain, specifically to London, to offer the reader a view of the city and its people from the outside and through a (West) African gaze. The reader familiar with *The Memory of Love* meets Attila for the second time, on this occasion in a more significant role, one in which he (a self-aware Mannoni?) is charged with appraising the psychological state of a country's people, their values and modes of thinking.

In London Attila, as Cole observes, makes the point that violence is in the nature of humans, that potential killers walk the streets of London as much as anywhere else. Attila, steeped in the experience of civil conflicts in different parts of the world, namely Bosnia, Iraq, Sri Lanka, and Sierra Leone, offers an observation drawn from his own experience and also a critique of a tendency in contemporary Western culture: first to view outbreaks of violence in other countries as exceptional—perhaps the result of some cultural or moral weakness—and second to position the European and American experience of post-World War II peace as normal. In Attila's view what can happen in one country can happen in another. Furthermore, Attila observes that because it is the victims of violence and not the perpetrators who attract international sympathy and therefore resources, trauma has become the subject of psychological inquiry (rather than say, understanding the impetus to violence) and that in turn has driven the expansion of research.

A man with an international experience of war, whose sensibility has been honed by an awareness of the White gaze, and of his own assessment of the deficit of that gaze, Attila is possessed of a gaze of his own of which he is acutely and intelligently aware. Thus from this position he challenges the diagnosis of PTSD given to Adama Sherriff. Attila asks his colleague Greyforth to consider where the pathology lies: in the individual, Adama, whose reactions Attila considers to be within the range of normal human emotion or in the response of her neighbors, who are unable to offer her comfort after the death of her husband. "In her relationship with the medical apparatus and the judicial

system, the patient has to be silent or be silenced,” writes Diop. “Such silencing is the hallmark of epistemic violence.” Attila appropriates the one-time intellectual property of the former colonizer, namely psychiatry, and transforms the European into the subject of scrutiny. In so doing he identifies the problem as not residing within Adama, the solution not in extending the symptomatic criteria and definition of *trauma*, but in a culture whose self-protective terror of pain manifests itself in (apparent) indifference to the suffering of others. The narrow focus of Greyforth’s gaze propels him to misdiagnose Adama’s response to her circumstances as a traumatic response to her husband’s death, as opposed to the avoidant reactions of her previously friendly neighbors.

Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking coined the term *looping*, by which he describes the circumstances whereby certain conditions, once they have gained professional recognition, begin to replicate society-wide. Hacking argued that professional and personal beliefs and expectations about a condition can interact to reproduce symptoms and broaden diagnostic criteria. In other words, mental health professionals can inadvertently create that which they seek to describe. Some years ago Hacking published *Mad Travelers*, a book on “fugue,” in which he described the sudden emergence and disappearance of a psychiatric condition in France during the time of World War I that had all but vanished as a diagnosis by the early twentieth century as an example of what he calls a “transient mental illness,” limited to a specific time and place. And “fugue” is the diagnosis Adrian alights upon in *The Memory of Love* to describe the itinerant wanderings of his traumatized patient Agnes.

Diop references a scene in *Happiness* in which a woodpecker that frequently interrupts a conversation Attila has with another psychologist, Kathleen Branagan, about Adama. “The opacity of the ‘language’ of the woodpecker is suggestive of how cryptic the language of the patient can be.” In this sense the “multilingual” Attila is better able than his monocultural colleagues to decipher the meaning of Adama’s case.

On Nature as Metaphor

Throughout *Happiness* I chose to depict a natural world coexisting, often unseen and yet frequently intruding upon and connecting the lives of the humans in the city. In the opening chapter, a fox on Waterloo bridge crosses the path of all the book’s main characters; the flight path of a parakeet takes it past Attila’s hotel bedroom to Jean’s terrace via Rosie (Attila’s former lover and colleague) in her old people’s home. The immeasurable adaptability of urban wildlife struck me as an allegory for resilience, for the greater the threat to the animals, the more behavioral and evolutionary strategies for survival they seemed capable of producing. This is something Jean, an urban wildlife biologist who specializes in canids, understands. Further, Jean views human adaptation to the presence of animals in the city as the key to human/animal coexistence, for any attempt to eradicate the animals is bound to fail.

Animal resilience arises out of the ability to adapt. Attila offers the same analysis of human behavior and psychological well-being. Contrasting the European desire for greater control of the lived environment and of life with an African inclination toward acceptance, Attila tells Kathleen Branagan (in the woodpecker scene) that Africans rarely ask, Why me? In his view Africans have a greater degree of tolerance for the vagaries of human

existence, more willingly accept the impossibility of eradicating all of life's difficulties, and are therefore better prepared to handle those challenges when they do appear.

Jean, through her view of the natural world, and Attila with his internationalism, recognize the interplay between societal context and outcome (Mukherjee's "eco-cosmopolitanism as trauma cure"). Or in Palmer's assessment, "Happiness does not consist in achieving the perfection of nature . . . because nature is not perfect. . . . Happiness consists precisely in realizing nature's imperfections."

Conclusion

Cole, describing a scene in which Attila comes upon a dance taking place in a village square in a town in rural Cuba, a country undergoing rapid industrialization but one that has not yet arrived at the town, asks whether he is right to conclude from his reading of *Happiness* that: "coping mechanisms and other strategies are more important than focusing on the symptoms of trauma and the medication of those symptoms?" Yes, would be Attila's answer, as Cole himself concludes, to accept the inevitability that life will sometimes bring suffering is to open up to the possibility of transcendence.

Thus both Jean and Attila, posed with different dilemmas, ask the same question. Is there a problem that requires treatment? Or does the problem lie in how a situation is viewed? Jean and Attila, from the perspective offered by their own disciplines, integrate their vision into an interconnected whole, one that offers release and thereby the possibility of equilibrium.