

Tropes of Memories in Jumoke Verissimo's *I Am Memory*

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Abstract

Memory is a significant feature of literary imagination, which is evident in contemporary Nigerian poetry. Scholarly works on literature and memory studies in Nigeria have mainly focused on prose fiction, with little or no attention to poetic exploration of tropes of memory, which are recurring ideas or themes that reflect past experiences. In *I am Memory*, Jumoke Verissimo recalls past events that reflect sociocultural, historical and economic realities. Existing studies on Verissimo's poetry seem to undermine her obvious effort on memorialisation, and tend to give more critical focus to her stylistic use of language. This study, therefore, examines depictions of tropes of memory in Verissimo's poetry collection, *I am Memory*. This volume of poems was purposively selected because it features poems that recall different African socio-historical realities and create awareness of prevailing happenings. The poems were subjected to qualitative, literary analysis paying attention to different tropes and sites of memory which are conveyed through images. This study adopts the tenets of New Historicism, to account for the representations of the past through memory tropes in the poems. The analysis of the poems reveals different tropes of memory like: emotional memory, memory of disappointment and disillusionment, memory of exploitation, memory of slavery and racism, memory of sociopolitical violence and memory of anguish. Beyond the creating of awareness through the exploration of different agonizing experiences, the poet inspires hope and redemption. The critical discussion of Verissimo's poetry shows that contemporary Nigerian poetry explores different socio-historical experiences through memory tropes, which facilitate remembrances.

Keywords: Memory, Tropes, New Historicism, Nigerian poetry, Jumoke Verissimo

Introduction

The interface between literary and memory studies has gained some scholarly attention in contemporary

times. Since cognition is a vital part of creative imagination, literary writers often recollect the past to reflect on the present and the future. The sociological and psychological functions of literature,

which include remembering and recreation of human experiences, attest to its connection with the field of memory. Skopijanac (2012) declares that literary studies and memory studies have something significant in common, which according to him, “may be broken down into heuristic triads: author/text/reader and encoding/storing/retrieval, respectively” (p. 197). Skopijanac’s assertion shows that literary studies share a complementary role with memory studies, and this further validates the fact that literary imagination and expression utilise the tools of recollections or memorialization. Milevski and Wetenkamp (2022) argue that the mutually beneficial relationship between literature and memory studies has not been sufficiently evaluated. They further argue that, “when analyzing texts in the context of Memory Studies with its numerous methodological obligations, for example with regard to Cultural Memory Studies, a literary theory should always be at least a reference theory” (p. 198).

According to Bosch (2016), memory studies is a multidisciplinary field which began with individual memory growing outward to focus on broader dimensions of social memory and the politics of public remembering, especially those channeled through communications media (p. 2). Memory studies is an emerging field of study that draws from a range of disciplinary traditions to

examine the forms and functions of representing the past. It is a multidisciplinary field which brings together intellectual strings from diverse fields such as history, sociology, art, international relations, literary and media studies, anthropology, philosophy, theology, psychology and the neurosciences. Thus, in a unique way, memory studies unifies humanities and natural sciences (Siep, 2021). Memory studies is a broad field of study which has spread into different fields or disciplines with a purpose to investigate how past events or occurrences are recalled. Memory studies emerged in the late 20th century as a new way for scholars to examine the past.

Historians who study collective memory, which is a significant area of memory studies, use the work of French sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs (1925), inspired by his tutor, Emily Durkhiem, as a main theoretical reference point (Bosch, 2016). Collective memory refers to common memories like beliefs or experiences which are shared by a group of people. Halbwachs’ *Social Framework of Memory* was published in 1925, and reveals that memories are social and are passed from one generation to another (Olicks & Robbins, 1988). Hobsbawn and Ranger in their *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) have also motivated much research in the area of memory studies (Hoelscher & Alderman, 2004, p. 349). These works

express the historical, cultural and psychological dimensions of memory studies.

Over a century now, different scholars including philosophers, historians and psychologists have examined the multidisciplinary relationship between memory studies and other disciplines (Roediger & Wertsch, 2008). Ebbinghaus (1913) started an experimental study on memory using serial recall. Scholars over the years have classified memory into various processes and systems. In psychology for instance, there is a distinction between short-term and long-term memory, episodic, perceptual and conceptual and so on (Roediger and Wertsch, 2008). Tulving (2007) investigates the concept of memory in his essay, titled "Are There 256 Kinds of Memory?". Here, Tulving was able to compile a list of 256 phrases which have memory as the noun and some other terms as the modifier. Some of the listed included auditory memory, false memory, distributed memory, unconscious memory, state dependent memory and so on.

The field of memory studies intersects with literature, history and psychology. According to Nalbantian (2003), "historically speaking, late-nineteenth-century French psychology provides a backdrop to the literary exploitation of memory and, interestingly and not fully acknowledged, a point of departure for

current debates in neuroscience" (p. 6). As stated earlier, literature plays a significant role in the field of memory research due to its reliance on imagination as a tool to manifest various social, political and cultural issues (Kumah, 2022). Literature and memory are often presented as closely related disciplines. Over the years, scholars have outlined the relationship between literature and memory. Neumann (2010) describes the relationship between literature and memory as two-fold. Neumann further argues that "literary works explore culturally predominant ideas of memory in the creation of their world, and through literary techniques these ideas are revealed in a beautifully crafted form" (p.335). Literature requires imagination. This imagination has to do with mental processing, which exposes memorial processes of their characters. It portrays the unspoken thoughts, feelings and perception of the characters. Memory is portrayed in literature through the characters who look back on their past. It involves the character recalling events that happened in the past and constructing experience through the recollected memories (Neuman, 2010).

Contemporary Nigerian poets like Jumoke Verissimo, deploy tropes of memories to portray different sociocultural experiences, which bear autobiographical tones. A close investigation of the tropes of memory in such poetry will give a clear picture of

the poets' background and social vision, which is necessary in unraveling their sociocultural worldview. However, existing works on memory studies in Nigeria have not quite given attention to this idea of tropes of memory in Nigerian poetry. Irele (2000) examines the crisis of cultural memory in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, and argues that Achebe's recollection of history is presented with a utopian perspective, which exalts the Igbo or African culture. This researcher, however, disagrees with Irele's perspective, and argues that Achebe realistically portrays the Igbo cultural memory in *Things Fall Apart*. Adebayo (2023) deploys the concept of memory flaneur to show how Teju Cole's novel, *Open City*, portrays the relationship between American capitalist urbanism and its memory culture. Unlike the current research which is focused on poetry, Adebayo's study which is focused on prose fiction, did not examine tropes of memory in the text. In another study, Adebayo (2023) examines frictions of memory in past experiences, which are recreated through the power of imagination. In the study, Adebayo selected literary texts, especially prose narratives, from four countries in Africa, namely, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Rwanda. Though the relationship between literature and memory studies has been examined in Nigerian literary works, inadequate attention has been paid to the portrayal of tropes of memory

in Nigerian poetry. This is the gap that the current study intends to fill.

The concept of tropology is derived from trope, which means a recurring theme or a frequently used literary idea. Trope is viewed as a literary technique or figurative use of words or expression to reflect recurrence of meanings and sequence in a literary text (Abrams, 2009, p.200 & Miller, 1990, p. 9). According to Cuddon and Preston (1998), over the years, the meaning of trope has been expanded, and it is now referred to as a literary term used to refer to writer's deployment of commonly recurring events, situations and characters in a literary text (p.9). It is also commonly known as motif. In the context of this study, tropology is utilised to refer to the collection of tropes of memory in the selected poems of Jumoke Verissimo.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts New Historicism to account for the recollections of past memories that evoke remembrances in the selected poems. New historicism is a literary theory formulated in the late twentieth century, to examine the relationship between literature and its historical context. Its emergence is credited to the work of Stephen Greenblatt, a great literary critic in the 1980s but gained popularity in the 1990s (Greenblatt, 2007). According to Bonsu (2022), new historicism seeks to unravel

the relationship between texts and their socio-historical and cultural contexts. It holds the fact that literary works function in the time and place in which they are produced and should be studied in that angle. As opined by Lyu (2021), New Historicism views literature as the reflection of the worldview of a period. Lyu further states that from the perspective of the new historicists, history is not merely the background of literature anymore—that literary texts not only represent the conclusion of a cultural conversation in one historical period but also participates in the conversation. This suggests that literary texts act as both mediator and effects of cultural change and are part of the documents which constitute the history.

Proponents of New Historicism try to establish the connection between literature and history. According to its major advocate, Greenblatt (2007), New historicism rejects the fact that anyone can know exactly what happens at a particular time and place. This implies that what we have as history is what has been handed down in artifacts and stories, which makes history subjectively set down and woven in accordance to the cultural context of the recorder who is perceived as a superior person of power (Dobie, 2002). Sharma (2014) argues that New Historicists believe that a literary work 'should be considered a product of its time, place and circumstances of its composition rather

than an isolated creation of a genius' (p.2). The political and cultural context which New Historicism provides in the evaluation of any literary text makes literary studies to re-establish a connection with the political and socio-historical world that gave rise to it (Howard, 1986).

Scholars have applied the tenets of New Historicism for the analysis of literary texts by Nigerian poets. Awhefeada (2007) deploys New Historicism to examine the representation of history in the poetry of Tanure Ojaide and Niyi Osundare. Though his research is not specifically on the tropes of memory, it highlights the recalling of historical memory through poetic expression. Similarly, Etim (2019) draws on Andrew Abbott's thesis of historical continuities to investigate what he terms 'individual historicity' in the selected poems of Niyi Osundare and Joe Ushie. Very recently, Ilechukwu (2024) has also applied New Historicism in examining depictions of corruption in Kola Eke's poetry. Unlike the current research, Ilechukwu's perspective, like that of Awhefeada and Etim, is on the poet's effort to historicise political and cultural history. These studies differ from the current research significantly in terms of theme, scope and texts.

The tenets of new historicism are relevant in investigating the recollection of past events in the examined poems.

That way, Verissimo's collection, *I am Memory*, is read as a body of poems that recall past memories through the use of topes.

Tropes of Memory in Jumoke Verissimo's *I am Memory*

The study argues that in Verissimo's poetry collection, *I am Memory*, she deploys different tropes of memory to convey experiences that reflect her background and worldview. Memory is used in the collection as the persona takes the reader through which different social and psychological experiences. The structuring of the collection into four parts— Memory Lane I, Memory Lane II, Memory lane III and Memory Lane IV validate the construct of memory by a persona, whose narratives reflect different memory tropes. These tropes are: emotional memory, memory of disappointment and disillusionment, memory of exploitation, memory of slave and racism, memory of anguish and memory of sociopolitical and economic crisis. Through what begins like emotional exploitation and betrayal, the poet deploys memory to recollect different experiences of exploitation, betrayal and disappointment in Africa. Thus, for example, from what seems like a private experience of emotional betrayal, Verissimo's poet's persona reflects on universal betrayal.

Some poems in Jumoke's *I am Memory* recounts emotional memories,

as a trope, which conveys intense affection of the poet through a relatable poet's persona. This suggests that the poet's persona relates the personal feelings of the poet, which is evident in the use of the first personal pronouns that depict autobiographical perspective. In "Sequence (of desire)," Verissimo explores emotional memory, by conveying an experience of love and love-lost. The images of passion that permeate the poem reflect the poet's persona's yearning for a once stable spousal relationship. The poet declares:

Ajani.

Coursing my streaming blood.

cutting my waves of resistance
I became a stream, the stream,
flowing with no water.

I am a stream with no course
a maiden with charred beads;
Memory of once-intense affection
(*I am Memory*, p. 2).

The lines above reflect the trope of emotional memory. The use of the first personal pronoun, 'I', reflects an autobiographical tone. Through the use of enjambment, the poet relates moments of sexual desires and betrayed emotions, which are portrayed through the image of 'stream.' The streaming nature of water reflects the streaming of the persona's emotions, while the beads evoke the

memory of affection and desire. Ajani is characterized in the poem as the persona's spouse with whom the bond of affection was once shared. The idea of emotional betrayal is conveyed through passionate images, which the poet's persona, suggestive of being a female, uses to relate her emotions as recreated in "I am a stream with no course/a maiden with charred beads" (p.2). The image of a stream without a direction underscores the confusion caused by the betrayal of love. This sense of emotional and psychological breakdown is further captured with the image of "a maiden" that bears "charred beads." Beads are cultural symbols used to portray femininity and seduction in the poem. New Historicism evaluates literature through an elaborate analysis of the social and cultural events that surround the situation being described (Bonsu, 2022). Verissimo has taken note of this sociocultural and historical context which is portrayed through poetic tropes. According to the her, what she has expressed is a "memory of once-intense affection" (p.2), which suggests that such moments are no more. The following lines relate the intensity of the affection shared between the poet's persona and Ajani:

Ajani.

The beads on my waist,
the heat of my passion
the pleasure of my ache,

the memory of a burning groin.

The beads are waiting
the beads are wanting
the beads are weighty.

I wait.

(I am Memory, p. 3)

The lines above depict the yearning of the persona's desires for Ajani, her lover, and this precipitates her brokenness. The device of repetition helps to convey the intense emotion of the persona. The poet's persona's remembrance of past moments of love with Ajani seems to enliven her present emotions and offer her a positive view of life. Gerbar demonstrates this point when he states that "recollecting those positive emotions of a time we consider to be simpler and more positive can help counteract emotions of anxiety, loneliness, and depression" (cited in Jana, 2022, p. 98). The sensual and sexual mood portrayed in this poem shows that strong emotional commitment to a relationship can trigger a happy feeling. Here, there is a mixture of joy and pain since the poet's persona's sexual craving is despised by the lover, who seems to have withdrawn from the relationship. This is portrayed in the following lines: "My waist pines for your searing/it is burdened by despised beads/which lightens in admiration" (p. 3). So, the poet's persona craves the touch of Ajani, which she believes will heal her of her emotional turbulence as

revealed by the lines: "In your touch/my singed waist comes alive, /my beads become my flesh" (p.3).

Emotional memory as expressed in some of the poems reflects the emotive and psychological bitterness that is caused by betrayal of love. The poet's remembering of such memory of affection gives rise to emotions of bitterness. As a result, the poet regards Ajani, the object of emotional betrayal, as a kola nut that has bitter-sweet taste. This oxymoron relates the persona's feelings of confusion and aches. The poet asserts:

Ajani,
You are a kolanut.

My aftertaste of loin tussle,
Sweetness that follows bitterness.

There is no memory without you,
You are the store house of a quest.
(*I am Memory*, p. 3)

From the extract above, trope of memory is depicted in the image of kola nut, which is a metaphor for the bitter-sweet taste of the persona's spousal relationship with Ajani. This implies that the kolanut symbolically evokes the recollection of the persona's experiences of love and love-lost. The New Historicists believe that in order to understand a text, one must seek to understand the ideology of the age, time and situation (Mukesh, 2003, p. 118).

While there is bitterness in the persona's realisation that her lover is no longer there, there is sweetness in her recollection of the passionate experience she once had with Ajani. This revelation in the poem agrees with Bergson's (1965) submission that memory is a remnant of images that influence our perception of the present, by enriching the lived experience through acquired experiences. The portrayal of emotional memory in the poem suggests the lived and acquired experiences of the poet.

Poems in Verissimo's *I am Memory* also explore disappointment as a trope of memory. In the poem, "Association", the poet's persona recollects experiences of disappointment. She recounts memories of heartbreak and pains she experienced. This recollection of past memories echoes the duty of the New Historicist who seeks to understand literature from a historical perspective (Bressler, 2003 p.182). This idea is evident in the following lines of the poem:

I am the memory of asking and
not getting of seeing and not
beholding of brokenness waiting
for succour and fantasising
recompense.

(*I am Memory* p. 18)

The lines of the poem presented above capture the persona's experience of disappointment and disillusionment. The use of anaphora which is evident in the

repetition of words at the initial position of the lines above emphatically reflects the mood of the poet's persona. The trope of disappointment is evident when the poet's persona regards herself as a memory "of asking and not getting/of seeing and not beholding" (p. 18). By metaphorically regarding herself as memory, the poet suggests that memory is deployed as a trope in the collection. These poetic lines reflect the persona's recalling of frustrating moments where she sought helps that did not come. There is a swelling dissatisfaction and hopelessness which reflects the bleak realities in the Nigerian society. This is further captured when the poet laments that "Times have not changed/pain has: it has grown bolder" (p. 18). This suggests an inherent disappointment, frustration and disillusionment. Through the personal pains and disappointments of the poet's persona, the poet exposes experiences of communal hurt, which depict the sad sociopolitical and economic challenges in Nigeria:

My desires have gathered moth:
It's a thickened skin; it is a
spectator of communal hurting, of
sour desires, of minds slivered
while forgetting

(I am Memory, p. 19)

The trope of disappointment in the poem above begins from personal experiences to communal, public experiences which

are made concrete through the poet's intense imagination. That is, from the individual experiences of the poet's persona, the reader is exposed to disappointments in the public space. As discussed above, the poet deploys the power of imagination, to recreate different experiences through relatable images. This is an artistic approach utilised by the poet to communicate the challenges bedeviling the Nigerian masses. Verissimo, therefore, employs concrete images in her poems to recollect past experiences of disappointment as a way of conveying private and public realities.

Another trope of memory evident in Verissimo's *I am Memory* is the memory of exploitation. The persona recollects the experiences of exploitation, using autobiographical tone which suggests personal experiences. These experiences glide from personal to public socioeconomic realities. According to Jana (2022), "individual or personal memories become instrumental in transporting one to the very roots of communal, collective and social discontent" (p. 97). The poet recounts different modes of exploitation in the poems. Memory of exploitation is explored in the poem "Association". In the first stanza of the poem, the persona recollects memories of how she was used for cheap labour and notes that she is still experiencing such exploitation till date. Through the trope of exploitation, the

poet's persona becomes a representative of the exploited. The poet states:

I am memory;
of cheap labour and chipped
shoulder.
even now, times have not
changed...

(*I am Memory* p. 19)

The image of "cheap labour and chipped shoulder" depicts exploitation. The poet's persona likens herself to that memory of exploitation and dehumanisation, which further evokes the exploitation in the larger community imagined by the poet. Again, in "Association," the persona recollects how she is used to satisfy the desire of others and to her detriment. She laments that "I am the scattered leaves of an oak tree/fertilising the grounds of strange whims" (p. 22). Perhaps, the idea of exploitation and mistreatment captured in the lines above is drawn from personal experiences of the poet, which is conveyed to universal audience.

The trope of exploitation is also foregrounded in Verissimo's "Retrospection". In this poem, the poet reflects on the memory of exploitation of Africa by the economic powers of the world (Europe, America and China). The poet notes that such nations are only interested in the exploitation of the African continent. In order to achieve their exploitative tendency, they deceive

African nations through false aids. The following lines portray this idea:

I am memory.
I know brokers of diamond
dreams, they Copulate in mines
when mates are in fetters.

I know IMF.
International misery Fellows,
whose Kindness borders on
wretchedness.

I know desire that flowered
trauma, tales of protection
weaving destruction, stories of
UN- desirable aid-givers, World
Bank of unmeasured miseries (*I
am Memory* p. 23).

The poet plays with the images of IMF (International Monetary Fund) and UN (United Nations) as sites of memory that reflect the exploitation of Africa by Europe and America. Again, in "Retrospection," Verissimo explores memory of exploited African slaves, who were made to labour in the plantation for their white masters, dehumanized and debased due to the colour of their skins. Through the voice of a persona, the poet notes that she comes from this generation of slaves. The stanza below also foregrounds the exploited and neglected in the society:

I am the next-of-skin to plantation
workers,
Next-of-kin to worldly neglect,

I am memory. (*I am Memory* p. 24)

The lines above are evocative of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Images like “next-of-skin” and “plantation workers” are recollections of the memory of slave trade, racism and dehumanisation. There is a portrayal of collective or cultural memory when the persona expresses a connection with the African slaves: “I am the next-of-skin to plantation workers” (p.24). The kinship between the persona and the slaves is measured on the basis of skin.

The memory of exploitation is further related in the poem “The Rape”. Here, the poet recalls and decries the exploitation and exploration of crude oil and gas in the Niger Delta, leading to the destruction of the flora and fauna without any form of protection. Oil companies explore crude oil in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, which engenders the devastation of the ecosystem. The following lines convey the memory of oil exploration and exploitation in the Niger Delta:

This discharge; is it oil or blood?
or conscience pricking vulvas into
pillars of mangrove guilt?
This discharge; Consuming
hymens of virgin skies; Enraging,
flaring splintered hopes.
This discharge, from a fluid-less
pen Is: oil or blood?

...

Is it oil or blood that strained the
foetus From the womb aborting
oracular births, with cordless
umbilical

...

These once-virgin thighs; over-
raped Plead for menopause...

(*I am Memory*, 34)

The poet deploys images of female’s anatomy and male’s reproductive system like ‘pricking vulvas’ and ‘pillars of mangrove guilt,’ to decry the plundering of the Niger Delta landscape. While the image of ‘pricking vulvas’ symbolically reflects the oil well, the ‘pillars of mangrove guilt,’ metaphorically evokes the memory of oil drilling. The poet’s infusion of such sexual images helps in conveying the extent of environmental plunder which the oil extraction has brought upon the Niger Delta environment, an experience portrayed as ‘rape’ in the poem. Furthermore, in exploring the memory of exploitation, the poet recounts how the destruction of the Delta environment exposes the people to different ecological hazards. This is why the poet asks: “Is it oil or blood that strained the foetus/From the womb aborting oracular/births, with cordless umbilical” (p.34). Images like “mangrove guilt” and “flaring” are sites of memory that depict experiences of oil spillage and gas flaring in the Niger Delta. The New Historicists deploys such

social contexts as a way of recalling the past. James (2012) argues that new historicism is a modern theory that evaluates how events, places and culture influence the content of a literary work. While the poet laments the heartless plundering of the Niger Delta, she also portrays a pathetic picture of exploitation of the indigenes of the region thereby making the Niger Delta region a troubled landscape. The poet further laments the memory of exploitation and insurrection in the Niger Delta region by recounting different insurrectionary movements:

Why is MOSOP soppy?

Is it this oil: this blood that has
leeches its peak?

What is MEND mending?

Is it this oil: this blood that has
bleached its own

...

Those leeches, those *boil*
companies those diseased, whose
partnership, steers our blood to
riot those who steer Boro, Wiwa
to no return those woes who suck
our rivers dry.

(I am Memory, p. 36).

Acronyms like MOSOP and MEND convey the memory of exploitation and dehumanisation in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. The poet deploys this trope of memory to recall the devastations caused to the region by the oil extractors and explorers. Ken Saro-Wiwa, an Ogoni born revolutionary fighter from the Niger

Delta, formed the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), to fight for the economic and ecological emancipation of Ogoni from the necocolonial oppression of the oil companies. Henry Okah also formed the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), to protest against the injustice meted on the people of the Niger Delta by the oil companies in connivance with the Federal Government of Nigeria. As shown in the excerpt above, there is a feeling of discontent and protest. The use of alliterations like “MOSOP soppy” and “MEND mending” does not merely convey a musical effect; it emphasises the memory of exploitation and rage in the Niger Delta region. Images like ‘leeches’, ‘blood’ and ‘suck’ evokes the history of exploitation and plunder in the region. The eventual killing of Isaac Adaka Boro and Ken Saro-Wiwa is connected to their revolutionary movements. The exploration of oil and gas in the Niger Delta region destroys the region and impoverishes the indigenes, leading to social aggression in the form of revolutionary activities. The poet deploys rhetorical questions thus:

Why does ambition in the
South-South go South-South?

Is it because they are in the
South?

Or because their vulva is looking
south, Promises are heading

south. all is going down, getting
drowned.

Their dreams go South-South
thoughts drift South-South:
against renewal and
contemplation.

Is it this oil or blood
that makes desire head South-
South?

(I am Memory, 34)

Verissimo utilises different figurative devices like pun, metaphor, alliteration and rhetorical question to recall the negative impact of the activities of the oil exploiters in the Niger Delta. In the lines, “why does ambition in the/South-South go South-South?” the poet uses pun and rhetorical question to express the over concentration of attention on the Niger-Delta region (South-South) which leads to the plundering of the region. The poet reveals that indigenes of the South-South region of Nigeria are disturbed by the exploitation and devastation of their land.

Migration and slavery are tropes of memory inherent in Verissimo's poetry collection *I am Memory*. The poet in these poems memorialises and decries the dehumanisation caused by forced and voluntary migration. In the poem “Association”, Verissimo recounts the feeling of disillusionment, which further engenders an upsurge of voluntary

emigration. This is captured in the following lines of the poem:

I am the memory
of souls who voyaged
into seas of persecution.
seeking liberation in bloodied ties
(I am Memory p. 19).

The image of “seas of persecution” is used to capture the memory of racial discrimination which is experienced by African migrants. This surge of self-slavery is caused by the hopelessness experienced in the migrants' homeland or county. The poet notes that it is the quest for economic liberation that leads to the recent upsurge of migration. Here the poet recollects the memory of forced slavery (forced migration) which she juxtaposes with voluntary slavery (voluntary migration). In the following lines, Verissimo historicises the transatlantic slave trade, reflecting on the dehumanisation of the slaves during the middle passage which is the connecting route of divergent world (Africa and West):

I am the middle passage;
reflections of the Atlantic,
the mirror of a century's groan.

...

The Middle Passage is death;
disease- the dame that courts her,
ambition- an ally that lures her,
war- the mother that births her,
I am a clan's dearth.

(I am Memory pp.19-20)

The “middle passage” is a site of memory that evokes the history of the transatlantic slave trade, where Africans were shipped and transacted as slaves to the West. Words like “Atlantic”, “century’s groan” and “death” conjure the dehumanisation of the black slaves during the era of slave trade. The middle passage, as reflected in the excerpt above, is a highly symbolic site in the transatlantic slave trade. The memory of slavery is further discussed in the following lines:

I have the memory of death of
passages and passers-by, passing

...

I am the trader, who sees
difference as conquest,
the traded who brands humility as
servitude. (p. 20)

Migration as a trope of memory runs through the above lines of the poem. The Trans-Atlantic Ocean and the Middle Passage conjure up the memory of forced migration. The trope of mobility is portrayed by the poet when she regards herself as a memory “of passages and passers-by, passing” (p. 20), which suggests the migration of the poet persona and her exposure to global experiences. The memory of slavery is foregrounded in the poem “mnemonics”, where the poet recollects the pathetic experiences of black African slaves

during the slave trade era. This is evident in the following lines of the poem:

Forgetfulness is the villain’s not
the victim’s.

I do not forget, for;

I am death and life, infliction in a
festival of transgression.

I, the whips, chains, ships, waters,
sand and cowries...

Begging the Atlantic to massage
centuries of hurt

(I am Memory p. 28)

The lines of the poem above explore the repressive and transactional atmosphere of slave trade, showing the slaves’ craving for freedom. Words such as “whips”, “chains”, “ships”, “water”, “sand” and “cowries” evoke the history of slavery and the African root. The use of “chains” signifies memories of the iron chains which were used to attach African slaves to each other while they were transported to American and Europe. The word “whips” is deployed to recollect the inhuman treatment meted on the black African slaves in form of punishment. During the eighteenth century, accused or guilty slaves were punished publicly by whipping. This was to teach the accused or guilty slave a lesson and to serve as a deterrent to other slaves on the plantation (Sibley, 2018). The use of “cowries” arouses collective or cultural memory, which is reflective of African indigenous root. The word ‘cowry’, is reminiscent of African

identity and consciousness. The following extract depicts the memory of forced migration, recollecting the dehumanisation of African slaves in the new settlement:

You: *agbadagri*, now Badagry,
the bereaved antiquary
weaving a face with no past
you have lost it in scarless yester-
shame.

You are the maiming earth that
lured men into wailing seas
you are a reminder the retention
of our past

(I am Memory p. 30)

The lines of the poem above recall the experience of slave-trade. The poem reveals that in the history of slave trade, slaves were captured and taken to Badagry, a major sea-port, for transatlantic slave trade, awaiting to be shipped to the Western world. “Badagry”, in the poem, is a site that evokes the historical memory of slave trade. The dehumanisation of the slaves triggers the memory of anguish which runs through the following lines of the poem:

I ride on the tears of the seas,
on men with merchandised minds
of a race that raced into
retardation, while its
generation faded like darkness
consumed at dawn.

I am the middle consumed by the
beginning:

though time has wiped out my
grudge:

time has not changed

pain has: it has grown bolder.

a generation of grief,

a generation rift,

a generation of fief,

a generation adrift. (*I am Memory*
p. 30)

The poet laments the commodification of human beings by slave merchants, which she considers as a debasement of humanity. According to the Verissimo, the slave merchants’ quest for money, what she considers as “merchandised minds,” has brought about a deflation of the ego of the black race, giving rise to a “generation faded like darkness consumed at dawn” (p.30). This suggests that the enslavement of Africans has left a feeling of inferiority, which continues to affect the advancement of the black nations. The poet persona further states that though the anger and grudge of the experiences of slavery have been wiped away by time, the memory of pains of slavery have not changed.

The memory of anguish is further expressed in the poem “Retrieval”. The poet’s persona, decries the memory of the depressive state of the slaves; the memory of pains of the debasement and

dehumanisation of the African slaves who yearned for freedom and succour. The poet states:

The memory of a pain that pines
for esteem, a pain cracked in any
physical embrace will my
memory brighten a darkness
incited clime?

(*I am Memory* p, 31)

The persona reveals in the lines above the difficulty of forgetting the memory of slavery. The poet expresses both individual and communal distress through her exploration of the different memories of anguish. The rhetorical question, “will my memory brighten a darkness incited clime?”(p.31), suggests the persona’s effort towards liberating self and the community through the power of memory recollection. Here, the commitment of the poet’s persona is to brighten a clime that is incited by darkness of slavery, violence, dehumanization and exploitation.

Sociopolitical violence and economic crisis is another trope of memory foregrounded in a good number of poems in Verissimo’s poetry collection, *I am Memory*. In the poem “Retrospection”, for instance, Verissimo recollects memories of different politically motivated violence in different African nations which led to extreme economic challenges. Countries like Sierra Leone, Liberia and Sudan were exposed to serious economic crisis as a result of

political unrest and instability. The poet states:

I am the memory Of Sierra Leone
serial loan of enchanted bitterness
of Liberia lying burials of ailing
serenity of Sudan sedating hunger
and impaired righteousness

(*I am Memory* p. 23-24)

As evident in the extract above, the poem explores memories of economic challenges in African countries like Sierra Leone, Liberia and Uganda. Because of the political instability and economic crisis in such African countries, they continue to survive on foreign loans or international aids. The poet’s play on words in the lines above is an artistic strategy aimed at emphasizing the political and economic instability in Sierra Leone, Liberia and Uganda. Sierra Leone is known for enchanting “serial loan” that leads to bitterness among the people, Liberia, due to its experience of social violence, is described as “lying burials of ailing serenity” while Sudan, an economically unstable nation, is described by the poet as a nation “sedating hunger.” The use of pun here helps emphasize the memory of political and economic instability in such African nations.

Conclusion

The analysis of the poems in this study shows that Jumoke Verissimo deploys tropes of memory to recreate the past. Through the critical evaluation of

selected poems in Verissimo's first collection of poems, *I am Memory*, different incidents depicting tropes of memory are highlighted and discussed. The different tropes of identified in the poems are: emotional memory, memory of disappointment and disillusionment, memory of exploitation, memory of slavery and racism, memory of anguish and memory of sociopolitical and economic crisis. The poet, through these tropes of memory, awakens and enlightens the minds of the people on some salient socio-historical experiences confronting the Nigerian society and the African continent as a whole. The tenets of New Historicism help in accounting for the poet's effort at recalling the past through memory tropes. Therefore, Verissimo's quest in remembering the past is beyond merely documenting experiences—the poems call for societal and economic improvement.

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