



**From Trauma to Recovery: Mending  
Wounds in Kopano Matlwa's  
*Evening Primrose***

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Post-Apartheid South Africa is torn because of maladies such as violence, rape, xenophobia economic decline, poverty and corruption to name a few. As a result, people mainly women, suffered and this consequent suffering is reflected in the writings of South African men and women. Trauma is a great problem that renders women weak and defenseless. Normally, trauma is a concomitant byproduct that accompanies rape and overrides women and renders them vulnerable for a quite long time but this is not the case in Kopano Matlwa's *Evening Primrose*. The paper explores trauma and rape as represented in the heroine who suffered due to several reasons, among which is a gang rape. This paper hinges on Caruth's concept of trauma and Dominick LaCapra's reading of 'working through' as a concept applied to *Evening Primrose*. The paper concludes that the heroine has worked through all her problems and managed to rid herself from her grief and achieved a normal life.

**Keywords:** Kopano Matlwa, rape, trauma, *Evening Primrose*, work through, Caruth, LaCapra

### Introduction

South Africa was a country which endured the bad impacts of colonization for 46 years. Through this time, racial segregation or what is known as apartheid ripped the country apart; its black and coloured individuals were hushed and exposed to physical and mental violence by the white colonialists. Despite the fact that apartheid was annulled in 1994, there is still, far reaching racial and social discrimination between the blacks and whites from one hand and the blacks themselves from the other hand in Democratic South Africa. So as to continue onward as a democracy, it was necessary to free the country of its social troubles that apartheid produced, consequently a Truth and Reconciliation Committee was formed.

South African people lived a very long life of oppression, humiliation and racism under the apartheid era. South Africa experienced severe discrimination and racist system of segregation and apartheid. William Beinart and Saul Dubow (2003) contend that "Segregation was the name coined in early twentieth century South Africa for the set of government policies which sought to regulate the relationship between white and African colonizers and colonized" (1). One of the important discrimination laws that withheld Africans from possessing or renting lands from other people's land who were not Africans.

Apartheid refers to "apartness, and this term was chosen by the Afrikaner government to dictate the physical separation of the four main races of South Africa: white, black, colored and Indian" (Bond 35). Blacks suffered from harsh regulations through this era. "There was geographical and physical separation between the sexes" (3<sup>o</sup>) and men were not allowed to interact with women, the married couples see each other once or twice a year due to the harsh rules of labour. In addition, the apartheid introduced the 'pass laws' in order to limit people's entrance to the city unless for labour purposes. Africans enter the cities are expected to leave as soon as they finish their works (Smith 2). So they enter the city only when the White economy requires their entrance.

The economic growth, political stability and reconciliation sent South Africa as a favourable destination to emigrate to from neighbouring African countries. Due to the economic and industrial decay in the neighbouring countries beside the civil wars and the fighting, SA became the destination of a large number of refugees and immigrants from Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Mozambique and other African Countries. South Africans believed that the migrants are responsible for crime and disease (Gqola 218) and they come to compete with citizens over jobs and women, they should be resisted. There were disappointment and dissociation because of the huge number of refugees, citizens complained that the migrants came to "steal our jobs and that the immigrants are flooding to our country" (Neocosmos 112).

The massive flood of outsiders is seen to be a threat by the citizens in SA who are living in an environment where the simple amenities upon which they depend are already under danger. The migrants are accused to compete with the citizens over the already 'rare' country incomes. South Africans were frustrated and disappointed because of the uncontrollable influx of refugees, an increased rate of unemployment, spread of HIV disease and the unchanged reality of their lives since 1994.

The end of apartheid as a political power helped launch the post-apartheid era. However, post-apartheid South Africa tries to free itself from the ramifications of apartheid and precursors. The multiscalar spatial reach of apartheid influenced every aspect of life for people and communities in a complex, interlinked manner.

As a witness and a product of this turmoil, Kopano Matlwa emerges as South Africa's new youth voice who focuses on issues of poverty, gender, women and others in her oeuvre. Matlwa is a young writer born in 1985 was only few years old while apartheid was at its peak. Being a physician justifies her closeness to such themes especially in her novel *Evening Primrose*. We can notice some autobiographical elements in

the novel due to the heroine's identification with Matlwa who are both doctors working in South African hospitals during the peak of xenophobia where she used to help and heal people from different African countries such as Zimbabwe. Masecheba the heroine, as a child, suffers from bleeding troubles and inconsistency in her period for some unknown reasons which haunted her childhood and adulthood that pushed her to pursue a career in medicine may she cure herself and get resolved from that long suffering. This justifies why the novel carried the title *Period Pain* in its early publication. She then graduates from medical school with a degree and starts serving in the hospitals. She has suffered from a traumatic past alongside with the death of her brother and a belated gang-rape which set her life in turmoil. This paper seeks to highlight the incidents and events of trauma and also underscores the means by which the heroine abjected her traumas and worked through to relieve herself.

### Trauma and 'Working Through'

Postcolonial literature is rich with people's suffering and ordeals, the reason pushed writers to register what they felt unbearable and what should be told to next generations. All kinds of people suffer, men, women and children but it could be noticed that women are mostly targeted in colonized countries for several reasons which rendered them victimized. As such, they are starkly portrayed in literature and specifically fiction. Female suffering is mainly represented in trauma. Women are traumatized for various reasons so the purpose behind such texts is not only to "make terrifying alien experiences more understandable and accessible" (Vickroy 222) but to provide a means of "witnessing or testifying for the history and experience of historically marginalized people" (Vickroy 221). Accordingly, Whitehead confirms that trauma fiction often refers to "the denied, the repressed, the forgotten" (Whitehead 82).

Literary texts on trauma usually communicate that which could not be narrated or remembered, that which resists representation and comprehension. It normally raises significant questions on the possibility of speaking the unspeakable, narrating the unnarratable and extracting meaning from that which is incomprehensible. Luckhurst claims that trauma "issues a challenge to the capacities of narrative knowledge" (79) or in a more general sense, a challenge to language, understanding and narrative. Luckhurst contends that most trauma texts point to the "narrative/ anti-narrative tension at the core of trauma" which refers to the tensions between "narrative possibility" and "impossibility" (80).

One of the pioneer theorists in the field of trauma is Cathy Caruth's influential publications *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* have set a solid paradigm of trauma as a theory which sets scepticism towards narration. She permits the possibility of trauma to be transformed into narration which attempts to make a meaning of that which is obscure but she holds that such texts are more likely to distort the truth of trauma and weaken its influence. Caruth describes trauma as widely encompassing "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (Caruth 1996, 11). According to Caruth, trauma requires a way of representation that expresses it textually and performs its incomprehensibility through, for instance, gaps and silences, the repeated breakdown of the language and the collapse of understanding (Caruth 1996, 115). When and how trauma occurs? It is not specific to certain people or individuals and can be a consequence to several reasons. Kate Schick in her "acting out and working through" contends that: Trauma also affects larger social groups, particularly where individuals experience political violence or natural disasters. Trauma is not only experienced in the aftermath of single, dramatic events; it can also be ongoing and structurally induced as, for example, in the case of extreme poverty or ongoing civil war, where day-to-day life is a struggle for security and survival. (4)

Schick's claim corresponds with trauma narratives in Africa and more specifically South Africa. Post-apartheid South Africa suffered these insecurities and hence rendered women mute and suffering. As such, trauma is begotten not only from personal psychological incidents such as death, accidents or rape, it also could be an outcome for more general and collective issues. Lindsey Collen in "the rape of fiction" confirms that *slavery and colonialism are also traumatic experiences* which never died because of the apartheid mechanisms in South Africa (210). Many techniques are adopted to help resolve trauma and get rid of it to free the subject from suffering. Ever since Sigmund Freud and his *Studies in Hysteria* (1895) attempts are made to decide a perfect method to cure such psychological disturbances. Freud through treating some of his patients came out with the talking cure which refers to extracting the events that cause trauma from the individual and throwing them out by discussing the original trigger that caused the trauma. Helen Cixous, a French philosopher and critic, developed the 'écriture feminine' which urges women to

write themselves by inscribing their suffering into writtern materials. Following these figures, Cathy Caruth and Dominick La Capra have developed techniques by which they address trauma and urge the subject to be absolved from his/her suffering. 'Working through' is a technique developed by Dominick LaCapra which involves struggle, self-examination and critical engagement. If trauma is worked through, it might entail pain and suffering. LaCapra reveals working through as an 'articulatory practice' which gradually generates ability to differentiate between past, present and future. It is not a linear process, otherwise, it is complex and never tidily resolved (Schick 11). Working through necessitates going back to problems, working them over and probably changing their comprehension. LaCapra claims that even when these problems are "worked through, this does not mean that they may not recur and require renewed and perhaps changed ways of working through them again. In this sense, working through is itself a process that may never entirely transcend acting out and that, even in the best of circumstances, is never achieved once and for all" (2014, 148-149). Hence, working through as a means of getting over trauma can be achieved by expressing pain and loss in the mid of a traumatic experience, though it is difficult but, Schick agrees that it "is an important part of working through" (13). Schick also believes that creative expression can support individuals and even communities begin to think of the influence of that loss and to relate aspects like emotional, physical, psychological and spiritual which are normally hurt after deep suffering. This goes along with Judith Herman's claim who describes story-telling as a "work of reconstruction" that changes the traumatic incidents and enables it to be incorporated into the traumatised subject's life story (157). However, working through involves showing grief after violence, telling the story of what has happened, meditating on the circumstances that gave rise to suffering and engagement. These processes "allow traumatised individuals and communities to do several things: to work towards a less *fractured existence*, *integrating* those aspects of themselves that were shattered in the wake of trauma ... and *to communicate with others*" (Schick 18) (emphasis added). Trauma and working through are to be applied on Matlwa's *Evening Primrose* in order to highlight the heroine's trauma and explore how she has worked through to mend her wound and get over her suffering.

### Discussion:

*Evening Primrose* is one of Matlwa's famous works, published in 2017 with a different title, originally *Period Pain*. It highlights post-apartheid South Africa and how people coped with African emigrants from neighboring countries especially Zimbabwe. Masecheba is the heroine whose ordeals start with her in a very young age when she used to bleed, signifying her restlessness and unstable psyche. She recounts her fears and turbulent moments when she hears her mother saying that "the doctors had said that a short of hysterectomy, the only thing that might work was to burn the lining of the womb" (12).

Masecheba's traumatic experiences with bleeding and fears can be traced in her comment, she says "when your tongue twists in your mouth and your neck turns round and round and round, making you want to scream but only knotting tighter each time you try. That sucks. And having to go back every day. That really sucks" (24). Suffering and pain are present in Masecheba's life as she narrates

I want to cry, but it takes too much time, too much energy. I want to run away, to escape, but to where? ... I feel like I am drowning in myself ... I feel like the air in my lungs is choking me. Like there is a small me inside the big me that is sinking, struggling. Somewhere deep inside of me there is a thing in need of saving. Something in there is in trouble. It is screaming, it is gasping, it is dying. (28)

This descriptions entails a heavy burden, a load that the heroine feels on her chest "There's a weight on my chest, and I try to breathe it off, but I can't" (29). She suffers because she still cannot work herself through or get rid of this pain. The havoc of violence that surrounds Masecheba might be a result to a public reason that render her traumatized alongside her suffering from personal pains. Such violence, when exists, is detrimental in that the subject is victimized, subdued and psychologically colonized by an oppressing power. The general atmosphere in which Masecheba lives is haunted with suffering and problems as she works as doctor in a hospital and gets involved with various cases of death, rape, and labour and a lot of blood that normally recalls her suffering and pervious traumatic moments. South Africa at this stage was a perfect destination for other African nationals, so people start to jump over the borders and live like normal citizens with similar rights. Masecheba considers them as humans like her own people and abhorred the way they treated. She recounts "they ask them why they fill up our wards" and "shout at them" (43). Lindsey Collen asserts that "slavery and colonialism" can also cause traumatic experiences (201) which is the best that describes Masecheba's state. Her people think that Africans are colonizing their country and this whole atmosphere is incurring havoc in the whole country. This leads Masecheba to get lost and she

confirms “I don’t know who I am anymore. I don’t know what defines me. I feel like a failure” (51) which also explains her fears as she often says “I am so scared” (84).

According to Caruth, trauma is an overwhelming experience of surprising disastrous events that subjects cannot accept or deal with writers normally represent these events in various ways, such as gaps and silences and recurrent breakdowns of language. This is embodied in *Evening Primrose* where the heroine sometimes is unable to express herself. She cannot speak full meaningful sentences in reference to her psychological state such as her expression of her case when she is scared:

I am bleeding again

Fix me.

Fix me.

Fix me.

Heal me.

Heal me.

Heal me. (90)

The surge of xenophobia that occurred in South Africa targeted the foreigners as they represent a threat for the nationals. So people started to attack them and those who defend them (Masecheba). Because of her insistence on equality and her urge to help these foreigners through different means, she becomes the subject of violence and she is exposed to rape which is sometimes “depicted as a natural product of a biased society that considers women as weak and objects of rape” (Salih, Bahar and Hasan 286). She recounts her experience of rape “what is it about this time of night that drags me from sleep, pulls my eyelids open, shakes my mind awake? There were three men and they divided me in two?” (93). She then describes her case after the gang rape by three people where she does “lay motionless on the cold floor” (95). Such events normally render the subject weak and motionless with visions, according to Caruth, of hallucinations and many different intrusive phenomena (1996, 11). This is what Masecheba experiences when she says “I think I see a cockroach” but in reality “it’s a scratch in the wall” (96).

The heroine’s traumatic experience never comes to an end as she cannot be rid from the visions, flashbacks and memories of that event easily. She “see[s] their faces from time to time. The one with the striped T-shirt, his belly protruding beneath it. I instinctively force my eyes shut, hope the tears will wash the images out of my mind” (101). This corresponds heavily with the key symptoms of trauma which according to Kirkpatrick and Heller, involves one of the key symptoms of intrusion re-experiencing which includes “recurrent and intrusive memories, images [and] thoughts” (338). Masecheba expresses her ordeal saying:

There is no vocabulary for the pain I feel. How do I construct a sentence that explains that they made me into a shell of myself? Not “like” a shell of myself, but an actual shell of myself? How do I explain that what they stole from me is more than just my “womanhood” or any of that condescending stuff people like to talk about, but a thing that once lost can never be found because it is unnamed? How do I explain that the languages at my disposal can’t communicate the turmoil I have inside? That it’s more than my “dignity” they stole, it’s more than a “violation” they subjected me to? That it would have been better to die than to be spooned out and left that way? (102).

This suffering that Masecheba has encountered is attributed to her interference and defense of the “kwere kwere” the Africans. The aftermath of her traumatic experience of rape has led her to develop more traumatic symptoms. She starts to have “hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 1996, 11) which were embodied in her discussion about her dead brother. She claims that she “called Tshiamo’s phone today” who has been long dead. Masecheba’s traumatic life is starkly represented through many aspects ever since her childhood. She suffered many incidents that bequeathed personal trauma and some of these reasons is not purely personal. She is easily influenced by the political trauma present at the country in a consequence to colonialism and slavery. After this traumatic past, a dead brother and gang rape, Masecheba manages to employ a technique by which she could absolve herself from these troubles. She resorts to LaCapra’s ‘working through’ to free herself from these memories as the next section will demonstrate.

### Working Through in *Evening Primrose*

Major depression and psychotic features are symptoms that Masecheba is diagnosed with in a result to her horrible rape. In consequence, she has to go through an “articulatory practice” (LaCapra) in order to express her feelings and throw her burdens to get relieved. She suffers from what Schick terms “fractured existence” and she has to mend her situation by “communicat[ing] with others” (18). Hence, Masecheba

starts regular visits to Dr. Phakama whom she consults for help. This situation brings to the foreground Freud's 'talking cure'. She starts recounting her negative experiences to her consultant and manages partially to relieve herself. Based on these consultations she decides that she "I can't lie here forever. I have to get up and move past this. It's done. There's no point kneading it any further" (134). This seems to be the first step on the way to recovery.

The trauma Masecheba experienced was a result to political violence as it could also be induced in a result, says Schick, to "extreme poverty or ongoing civil war, where day-to-day life is a struggle for security and survival" (4). But she manages to find herself in this aftermath and proves herself as a solid powerful individual that can withstand this dilemma. She mourns her loss and this process is part of her recovery, which means that this mourning is an aspect of working through. She confirms in more than one instance that she has "no vocabulary for the pain [she] feels" or when she mourns her loss of her "womanhood" or her "dignity" (102). Revealing her sadness for the loss and pain she is exposed to is part of mourning. But she is able to use words to express her grief which consequently enables her to work through her ordeal. This is how "story-telling helps with healing process because it counteracts the isolation, silence, fear, shame, or unspeakable horror" (Yoder 53).

After her rape, Masechaba becomes pregnant which can be considered another act of working through that helps the subject be released from any traumas and visions. She never thought that she could be pregnant "until she [fetus] moved like a heartbeat in my tummy" (138-9). She describes her feeling when she gave birth how she could accept that creature which is a result of violence and suffering and how she would accept it. On the contrary, this represents her optimal therapy and hence recovery. She describes her baby girl as "she looked like nothing, like a blank page, like a fresh start. *My fresh start*" (141) (my italics). She describes her as a blank page to be inscribed with letters and words far from suffering and pain.

Masecheba accepts her reality and even tries to reconcile herself with the rapists who caused her all this havoc. She admits that there is "some goodness in them ... came together to form her, despite their evil intentions" (143). Her life has changed after giving birth to this baby who "named her Mpho" which means a gift "she's my Mpho, my gift" (143). With this step Masecheba comes to her recovery and gets over her trauma by working through using different strategies. Mpho, the means of recovery, suggests Masecheba's mother, is just like the nighttime flowers which only bloom when the sun is long forgotten, just like the evening primrose with all its healing power.

### Conclusion

*Evening Primrose* centers on post-apartheid South Africa and the violence wreaked because of colonialism and the instability in the whole African region. The novel discusses trauma as a consequence of political and personal issue. Masecheba the heroine is subjected to traumatic experiences not only for personal reasons but also for public political reasons because of the insecurity in the country. She was unable to get passed the painful memories of her tragic present and this shattered her sense of peace and security. In spite of her traumatic present and her exposition to gang rape, she manages to employ LaCapra's 'working through' and transcends her suffering by engaging with psychotherapy with her doctor and above her new born baby that gave her a high dose of life. This paper concludes that trauma could be solved and overcome by some means if there is enough efforts and will power. It also can be concluded that the author highlights woman as a symbol to the land and nation that, although injured withstands adversity and becomes the physical and metaphorical repository of futurity.

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