

(Re) membering the Traumatized Other Through Resurrecting the Dead in Dennis Scott's *An Echo in the Bone*

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Abstract

This paper examines the presence and impact of trauma in Dennis Scott's *An Echo in the Bone* (1974). It discusses the traumatic effects of slavery and colonization on the individual and the society in Jamaica and the Caribbean. The action of the play takes place in Jamaica where people struggle against the oppression of European system of slavery and British colonial system. Scott retrieves the grievous memories of slavery, where the phrase 'echo in the bone' refers to racial memories of oppression and exploitation. Scott's creativity appears through recalling cinematic flashbacks with concentric notions that depict the painful experiences of slaves and colonial policies. Recalling the continuous effects of trauma, which contemporary Jamaicans had been encountering since the history of slavery until the postcolonial era, are explored. The framework of the play's action is provided by the Nine Night ceremony of the dead – a tradition that transcends the mourning manifestation of funeral traditions to glorify and liberate the dead person's spirit. To this end, the researchers argue that recalling trauma through Jamaican tradition is a means of asserting that trauma is a heritage that was passed down through several generations. The researchers conclude that the play resurrects all the traumatic experiences of oppression and exploitation under the systems of slavery and colonialism to address the traumatic conditions encountered by the contemporary post-independence society in Jamaica.

Key words: Psychological trauma; Dennis Scott; *An Echo in the Bone*; Postcolonial Drama

INTRODUCTION

Rather than recalling a tale from faraway places or times, Dennis Scott closely depicts the suffering of his fellow Jamaican people at the hand of British Imperialism. He perspicaciously dives into the souls and minds of a nation crushed by oppression, poverty, and exploitation. His play *An Echo in the Bone* (henceforth *An Echo*) portrays several manifestations of trauma that Jamaican citizens went through during the colonial era and continued to experience even after the end of these decades and their aftermath. Scott witnessed those traumatic symptoms, which all Jamaican people suffered from. He portrays the Jamaican life with all of its accurate details.

Recalling trauma in *An Echo* demands understanding the present in terms of the past. As Renu Juneja rightly observes, the whole ceremony in the play is "a means to remember what might otherwise be forgotten" (100). When one of Crew's friends, P commemorates Crew in the ceremony, he remembers the long suffering of Crew and other Black farmers in Jamaica and says, "...and nobody remembers how strong you were. And when they squeeze the canes nobody knows how much blood it takes to make the rum hot and sweet" (86) to which Rachel, Crew's wife and the organizer of the ritual ceremony, responds: "I remember, I remember. Thirty years long like three hundred" (86-87). In this sense, Crew's immediate personal experience is recalled to demonstrate the painful history of exploitation and docility under slavery in the West Indies.

Scott's play mainly focuses on post-colonial trauma and examines the traumatic effects of the overall policy of

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colonization on the psychological and social relations of the colonized. Also, the impact of the pre-colonial history of slavery and colonial times in this play is worth noting. In reference to the history of slavery in *An Echo*, one must note that history's crossing with drama is, as Denning puts it, not merely by chance. Instead, "history and drama are both based on a conscious interpretation of events" (p.295).

Scott embodies history as a form of awareness of a past which revives trauma to serve present and future aims. Dennis Scott's *An Echo*, on the one hand, reveals that it is very obviously about the necessity to live the present in terms of the past which means the present events are not significant without the past. The fact, as Scott realizes, is that black West Indians have been deprived of a good past. But recalling history will not be more than a chaos series of events if it is not arranged or rather reordered. Not all the relationships are intrinsic in themselves, they come into present through a kind of historical mirrors. As Paul Ricoeur says in *Time and Narrative*, "history aims at knowledge, an organized vision, established upon chains of causal or teleological relationships on the basis of meanings and values" (p.99).

The creativity of Scott's play appears through recalling cinematic flashbacks with concentric notions that depict the painful experiences of slaves and colonial policies. The cinematic and dramatic recalled scenes in the play are equally intended to portray the effects of continuous trauma which contemporary Jamaicans had been encountering since the history of slavery until the postcolonial era. As John Thieme puts it, the play has given total authority to the theatrical scenes in which history has been repossessed and based on the continuities of shared Afro-Caribbean rituals and cultures, which the play has revived and extended through its own theatrical recalling without the need for European mediation (p.16).

Scott uses the expression '*An Echo in the Bone*', because it is used in Jamaican society to refer to memories of racial oppression. His play explores the past and how it affects the present. The play highlights several themes, prominent ones such as slavery, poverty, racism, history, power and wealth. He uses many dramatic techniques to portray these themes such as the use of stage directions, the setting and multiple roles of actors. However, Scott's most noted technique in recalling trauma is his use of flashbacks and tales of the past.

Scott adopts different perspectives in recalling trauma with the need to go back to the past and give life to the oppressed in order to convert what will otherwise remain a crippling legacy. He achieves this through a combination set of variations on the transformative power of role-playing. Drama becomes the means through which the past can be imaginatively recalled. Also, he is intent on recalling the trauma of slavery and insisting on the continuing effects of its legacy on the twentieth

century Caribbean peoples, but his confidence to set the present performance of a play which first appeared in the post-independence period in the 1930s is arguably considerable. Scott indicates that history recalls the present; the events depicted would seem to have had connection for the 1970s in Scott's mind. As mentioned earlier, and given that the earlier historical scenes are all set within a fairly short period in years (1792 to 1834) before and after the abolition of the slave trade, the play continues to have resonances that echo into the next generations. These resonances reveal Scott's insistence on recalling the horrors of slavery, demonstrating the interpenetration of past and present and encouraging the Jamaican people to regain the legacy of their civilization.

Scott's play uses the theatrical space functions to suggest the possibilities of transferring reflected images of history. The place is an old sugar barn. Scott's hallmark on staging reveals the need to management of props and scene shifts, along with scenes in which the present is penetrated with the history of slavery and the Middle passage era.

Objects present in the beginning of the play (i.e. the present) may be used as substitutes for props in scenes from the past. Similarly, the set should provide playing areas requiring a minimum of resetting to suggest the various places of the action.

The barn is large, with thick but deteriorating walls, and anonymous articles of rusting metals creating a feeling of age and disuse. Perhaps the ceiling slopes. Four huge girders rusting, support the roof and its gaping holes. The stage is dominated by a huge chain that is looped to the roof in two places, falling to the ground in coils past a broken shelf of wood a few feet across, on one side and ending in mid-air on the other (*Echo*, p.75).

So, just as the different roles performed by the play's ten characters are suitable for staging purposes in recalling trauma, as they avoid the need to have a large cast, the possibility problems ingrained in acting a play with overlapped scenes are carefully solved by the conversion use of a single scene. This change in stage directions facilitates the dramatist's performance in recalling trauma that accurately addresses the emphasis of the play on the interpenetration of present and past.

DISCUSSION THE NINE NIGHT CEREMONY

An Echo is definitely focused on issues of proprietorship and possession, particularly the question of who the owner of the real history is. Scott who had received awards at the Jamaica festival literary competitions in the 1960s, expressed the view, when an ex-slave society "imposes discipline on itself from within, it begins to wipe out a tradition of submission. [...] It is the beginning of a freedom to choose" (Quoted in Stone, *Theatre: Studies*

in *West Indian Literature*, p.146.) The best choice that Scott makes in *An Echo* is to demonstrate the traditions of Jamaican civilization by recalling incidents from the past within the context of the Afro-Caribbean ritual of the Nine Night which not only confirms the cultural continuity with African traditions but it is also associated with direct rejection of colonial practices.

Scott's recalling of the Jamaican tradition is a means for confirming that the trauma is rooted from the past. As Valéré Bada notes, the role of the mute "rattler" (drummer) in the play points to the crucial but incomplete function of language in reconstructing the past (2000, p.86). In fact, the traumatic events that authorize the recalling of the past in the play are simplified and even connected with each beat on the drum which works as a compensatory side, not only for the silent Rattler, but also for all the oppressed and silenced Africans in the West Indies.

The framework for the play's action is provided by the Nine Night ceremony of the dead - a tradition that transcends the mourning manifestation of funeral traditions to glorify and liberate the dead person's spirit. (Other plays that draw on the dramatic potential of the nine nights include Edgar White's *The Nine Night* (1983) and *The Nine Night and Ritual by Water* (1984), and Glenville Lovell's *When the Eagle Screams* (1992).

Recalling the Nine-Night ceremony is, of course, an intelligent dramatic technique. Because the episode of spirit possession is the crux to this ceremony, Scott is able to integrate his characters and reverse the past proficiently to recall events without making the action fragmented or disjointed. Martha Beckwith writes in *Black Roadways*, "The Jamaican Negroes believe that for nine nights after death, the ghost rises out of the grave and returns to its familiar haunts" (p.77). As one of the informants reports: "On the last night he visits all his relatives and his associates, overlooks all that are his, and then departs altogether" (Beckwith, p.77).

Similarly, Olive Senior elaborates on the Nine Night as follows: "[It is an] Old folk custom which is still observed in many parts of Jamaica. It is similar to a "wake" [...] details of the nine night ceremony vary from place to place in Jamaica" (118). Basically it is a ceremony held on the ninth night after death at the home of the deceased. The idea is to give the dead person a good departure from this world. It is believed that unless this is done, his spirit or duppy will hang around to haunt the living. [...] Although nine night in its various forms is held to fulfill a specific function it has also served as the means of preserving a great deal of Jamaican folk culture as this is manifested in songs, fables, riddles, stories, etc. (Olive Senior, *A-Z of Jamaican Heritage*, 1987, p.118.)

Scott's recalling of the Nine Night as the crux on which his play turns is, however, far from lucidity. So he dramatizes this tradition, then he depends on his creative thought as a dramatic role to protect Caribbean civilization

and he specifically relates it to revival possession of spirit-like "myal" and "pocomania". As the Caribbean writers such as Kamau Brathwaite and Erna Brodber maintain, Scott's emphasis on "possession" involves more than one meaning of the word. To be possessed is to be taken over the creolized African tradition in Caribbean culture and to claim ownership of one's history, land and language and most importantly one's "birthright that say I am not a slave anymore" (Echo, p.128).

In Renu Juneja's words: "The use of the Nine-Night ceremony is, of course, a brilliant theatrical choice. Because the phenomenon of spirit possession is central to this ceremony, Scott is able to multiply his cast of characters to take us back to the past effectively and economically to selected episodes without making the action appear disjointed or incoherent. ("Recalling the Dead in Dennis Scott's *An Echo in the Bone*" (p. 98).

The first setting in the play is 1937 when Crew's family and friends assemble for the Nine-Night ceremony. The past that is brilliantly selected for recalling the roots of trauma brings us back to a slave ship in 1792. Aboard the Ship, they are nude, defeated, dehumanized, suffering physically and emotionally. The Rattler's tongue is cut off for spitting on a White slave trader. The scene directly moves to two days before the wake in Madam's shop where it is shown that Crew's blood-stained dagger, shirt and a bottle of Rum have been discovered by Lally by the river but the items are confiscated by the Police to be used as a proof that Crew killed Mas Charlie, the White plantation owner. The scene suddenly moves to 1820 where three slaves are sold out in dehumanizing conditions. The scene again shifts to 1833 in a jungle where a White man is chasing his run-away slave who has run to the hills. Jacko intercepts him, he tries to kill Jacko, but Sonson arrives in time to save Jacko and tries to kill the White man. Jacko interferes and then he ties the White Slave master's hands and feet and stuff a handkerchief into his mouth to humiliate him.

The second act also opens while the characters are still in the wake ceremony and it portrays the harrowing experiences of slavery and the 'fake' freedom they have obtained due to the fact that they are still considered as 'dirt' because they are blacks. They also criticize the Mulattoes who stand beside the Whites against the Blacks because of their lighter skin. Now the flashback appears. Rachel recalls four years before the Wake ceremony when Mas Charlie returns from England and requests to employ her as a House keeper in the 'Great house.' She rejects his offer though he reminds her of their sexual intimacy and her adoration of the Whites.

The scene shifts to 1934 when slave trade is abolished. A slave girl flees from her master after she realizes that she is now free. Her master moans his love for the Island and his loss. The scene again shifts to 1937 which is the major reason for recalling trauma in this play. In Crew's

farm Sonson Crew's son, still possessed by Crew's spirit complains about the sufferings of the Black particularly about the drying up of the River that flows into his farm. Rachel tells him that due to their poor financial state she would work in the Great House for Mas Charlie. Crew sees this as a loss of dignity and pride and rejects this vehemently. He decides to talk to Mas Charlie to channel some of the River's water flowing through the Great House to his farm. He is a bit drunk and Mas Charlie turns his request down abusively and in a degrading manner. To retain his pride, Crew strikes Mas Charlie on the chest with a sharp cutlass and he dies. Crew immediately plans to commit suicide to avoid going to prison and possible hanging. Sonson, still possessed by Crew's spirit, climbs to the roof of the house and tries to jump. Jacko, his brother persuades him to climb down so he would not kill himself. Sonson climbs down and as soon as he washes his face, Crew's spirit leaves him. The characters who were formally in dispute are brought together by the revelation of the secret behind Crew's death and murder of Mas Charlie. They all realize that their past experiences, present events and future occurrences cannot be reversed but that together, they can overcome. They celebrate this unity though they are mourning.

As we notice, the play evokes trauma, from the past through the traumatized historical events which are mentioned above, then scenes from the more recent past of the initial characters from Crew's life overlap in this historical past as well as four years earlier and in the days immediately before the Nine Night. Similarly, the rusting timbers and the chain become a backdrop for a harrowing scene set aboard the slave ship, which indicates, again, the continuity of the past and particularly that the legacy of the history of slavery had trodden down the possibility of regaining total freedom in the post-colonial eras.

Symptoms of Trauma in An Echo in The Bone

According to Herman, (1992), "traumatic events destroy the sustaining bonds between individual and community" (p. 145). Trauma affects not only the individual, but also the society and the survivor loses the sense of connection with family or society. They want to take revenge not only over the colonizers, but also over their community or their families. The colonized become anxious, which Nigel Leask (1992) defines as a state of being "troubled or uneasy in mind about some uncertain events being in painful of disturbing suspense; concerned solicitous, fraught with trouble or solicitude, distressing, worrying" (p.3). He finds out that anxiety can "block or disable the positivists of power" (p.3). The colonized find themselves trapped in painful thoughts with trouble surrounding them. They spend their time in solitude, being unable to do anything positive. The colonized suffer from trauma, which makes them seek to find a way to protect themselves and their psyche from their agonies and negative thoughts. The "unbearable agonies," according to

Michael Eigen, "prompt easeful lies and falsity to escape pain and helplessness" (p.2). The traumatized people try to fill their hollowness by using revenge as a kind of self-assertion which helps them to survive and pass their agony.

Colonization affects the colonized people sorely. The tragic events cause psychological or emotional trauma which results after "intense fear, physical or mental stress or distress, or threat to one's life...or even witnessing violence" (Jackson, 2006, p.231). Most colonial subjects suffer from oppression, which is not the only thing remaining as a result of colonization. Colonization damages the cities and the souls as well as social composition. The colonized find themselves struggling with different kinds of post-traumatic troubles. They suffer from violence, confusion, loss of identity, social isolation, and anger. At the same time, they find it difficult to narrate their past and they would rather bury the past. In the play, Brigit counsels Rachel, her mother-in-law, to forget the past: "Why you don't make the dead stay dead?" (78). The older generation insists that it is necessary to "remember what is dead and gone" (107), and they lament this lapse in memory on the part of the young. When Lally asks her grandmother about the song she is singing, her grandmother complains: "you young people don't know a thing about the past" (108). *An Echo* addresses various signs of postcolonial trauma such as fear, violence, denial, despair and isolation. The play manifests this trauma in the public sphere and explores the private trauma experienced by its main characters.

Several events reveal the trauma effects that can be found throughout the scenes of the play. Although these recalled pains portray the traumatic history of slaves, they allow us to hear the pains of these slaves, their complains, and their mockery. Indeed, the recalled scenes empower the black subjects whom the dramatist employs to imitate the colonial acts, speeches, and behavior of British merchants, officers, slave holders, and slave traders.

The White Man's (or Woman's) supremacy is evident through many re-enactments in the play. For instance, in the first recalled memory in the play, Brigit reenacts the role of a haughty English lady who is traveling aboard the slave-ship to meet her father, the plantation owner on one of the Caribbean islands. She looks at the huddled slaves contemptuously: "[T]hey're filthy. What dreadful animals!" (Scott 91). The "white" lady then starts to read a newly-published volume by Mr. Bryan Edwards about the islands. She reads aloud a passage in which the English historian describes the nature of different African slaves distinguishing them in terms of their subjugation into a variety of classes.

Scott's play insists on recalling trauma from the history of slavery, demonstrating the overlapping of the past and the present and encouraging ordinary Jamaicans to possess their own history. At the beginning of the

play there is a little mystery surrounding Crew's murder of Mr. Charles. Then, the audience finds out that his action has been instigated by a dispute over land rights: Crew has gone to see Mr. Charles after a river has been diverted, effectively depriving him of his livelihood, since without irrigation farming his smallholding is no longer sustainable. Crew, played by Sonson in the imagined re-enactment of what has happened, naively believes that Mr. Charles will understand "how a man like me feels about the land and [...] will listen" (Echo 128).

An Echo portrays the colonizers' exploitation of and oppression against the colonized people and the effects of such practices. Most of the characters in the play suffer from helplessness, alienation and denial symptoms. For example, Crew lives in the dark and suffers from colonial exploitation. The colonized people are detained in a big stronghold in their homeland; they suffer from siege and repression. The fortresses of this prison are so impregnable that their dream becomes independence, and they lose hope for true freedom. Crew's suicide is a way to prevent imprisonment conditions and possible hanging. This act of suicide is also indicative of how the colonized is compelled to get rid of their pain, poverty, and torment through relinquishing their lives. As a result of depression, the oppressed feel that they are isolated and defeated. Barlow (2002) claims that "death by suicide is an event most often associated with depression... patients diagnosed with anxiety disorders may subsequently develop major depression or alcoholism as a complication" (p.12). Depression and anxiety result from trauma. They are harmful because they kill the desire for life or make the victim confused.

The reaction to trauma may also appear as an apparently inexplicable lust for revenge. Many traumatized people have a desire to take revenge over their oppressors in order to cure themselves or find a way to cushion the effects of trauma on their psyche. Thus, trauma is harmful for the human psyche since the traumatized may turn vindictive. In the episode of the Maroons, Scott enacts these choices. Sonson, in the role of one of the Maroons, wants to kill the captured white man. Jacko, representing the other, asks: "You going to kill and kill till the whole island run red, and then what?" Sonson responds, "Then we can start again" (p.105). Jacko answers, it is impossible to begin anew, to eliminate one element of the past: "They not going to stand for it. As long as we hunt and keep in the hills they will leave us to hide. But the whole island will blow up if it look like we can molest the landowners and get away with it" (p.104). Another aspect of trauma appears here which means traumatic effects of colonization cannot be easily erased from the minds of victims who have been exposed to all kinds of degradation and exploitation while being forced to migrate and face the unknown. The painful past follows the victims of trauma to the present. It could be

a confession of self-defeating on a psychological and spiritual level. This appears when the colonized people find it difficult to accept their reality as traumatized victims of colonization. Hence, trauma is kept hidden as the traumatized have a strong desire to keep it as a secret or even deny it.

Denial related to repression is a common reaction usually seen as a sort of psychological defense intended to relieve traumatic effects and their devastating impact on trauma victims. "I white too," Jacko reminds the estate owner in this scene, and this is something of which he must remind himself as well. According to Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, denial is "an ego defense mechanism that operates unconsciously to resolve emotional conflict and to ally anxiety by refusing to perceive the more unpleasant aspects of external reality" (6th ed.,1. 2016). The colonized employ denial in different ways, such as lying, not admitting that something happened or justifying things to reduce the harm, blaming others and minimizing the painful event or its effects. In *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*, Benjamin Sodock defines denial as a "Defense mechanism in which the existence of unpleasant realities is disavowed; refers to keeping out of conscious awareness any aspects of external reality that, if acknowledged, would produce anxiety" (2009, p.1499).

Scott wants to recall the sense of loss that most Caribbean people suffer from in their past. (In reference to history of slavery) Slaves seem to have no options in reconciling with and overcoming their enormous losses including loss of land, loss of hope in a better life, as well as loss of identity and dignity. Having no names is a sign of loss of identity. The colonized people lost their identity when the colonizers, who had stolen the land and the houses, killed them or culturally erased their identity. In the case set in the great house just before emancipation, the aging and sick estate owner irritably asks the doctor who is taking care of him: "Where's the girl?" The doctor asks: "What's her name?" And he is told: "Name, what name. Girl, that's her name" (p.123).

Another aspect of recalling trauma appears here. The identity of the slaves is erased because they are seen as chattel. Scott recalls this aspect of the past clearly through a ring set up in an auction office in 1831. Two young black women up for sale are paraded in front of a prospective buyer and their valuable features noted: "please make note, the wide hips, the breasts just filling out. . . . Calves, well muscled" (p.99). The inspection is completed by the buyer who gets up to feel the shape of the woman, "presses on her jaws to make them open. Runs his hands up between . . ." (p.100).

Similarly, the Colonizer dehumanizes the colonized and treats them badly. All the workers, regardless of their rank, are exposed to different forms of bad treatment. Scott's play shows the suffering of the poor who has

erupted in bloodshed, and hears rumblings and complaints from the characters of the play. Such issues clearly do not only spring from economic exploitation. It is a matter of self-respect as well. It is not enough to have freedom when, as one of the female characters in the play, Brigit, says, there is “no respect.” How, she asks, can anyone “live easy without respect?” (p.109).

The tragic events that synchronize with colonization such as racism, dehumanization, exile and sexual exploitation intersect with trauma symptoms such as pain, flashbacks and forgetting. Trauma events uncover the unspeakable experiences of the people who got exposed to different kinds of unforgotten and muted psychic wounds by highlighting the suffering of various groups of marginalized peoples (for example, oppressed women, war veterans, the sexually or physically abused and the terminally ill), trauma studies draw attention to those who are often forgotten. It also highlights the importance of addressing the pain of wounds to the psyche in order for individuals and collective groups to recover (Neeves, 2008, p.109).

The traumatized usually suffer from deep grief and a sense of loss in every aspect of life. Considering colonial violence and the damage it causes, it is no wonder to find traumatic symptoms in the behavior of colonized nations. For instance, white history of exploitation, treating slaves as objects and legitimizing colonial inhuman treatment, abolishes the possibility of becoming the land owners to the white masters. It appears that this acquisition of home that will legitimize the colonizer to live among the blacks is ironically contrasted with the defeat of the colonial masters to find a land. Mr. Charles, the absentee owner of the estate, tells Rachel that in returning he has “come home.” Their interchange is revealing. Rachel asks, “You staying long, Mr. Charles?” Mr. Charles insists that he has come back “[f]or good. I’ve come back to my people” (p.117). The events of the play emphasize the deception of such a claim because Mr. Charles knows he does not belong to this place. He even admits that it is the memory of his sexual escapade with Rachel, another manifestation of his sense of ownership, which has brought him back “home.” He blames his sense of estrangement on his dead wife, and Rachel rebukes him sharply: “How you speak ill of the dead like that?” (p.118).

Colonization left the colonized people with emotional scars. Colonization also affects the colonized badly and makes the colonial experience unforgettable. According to Visser (2011); “Trauma [...] denotes the recurrence or repetition of the stressed event through memory, dreams, narrative and/or various symptoms known under the definition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” (p.272). The colonizers keep insulting the colonized people and consider them as animals. There is also a continuous affirmation of the black human personality which has been degraded with the use of animal metaphors in the

speech of Europeans in a scene set on the Guinea Coast in 1792 being repeated and discorded in the words of Crew’s daughter-in-law, Brigit, in an episode set four years before the contemporary action. Brigit says: “Black people used to work this land for nothing and they used to treat them like beast, they could amount them anytime. I not breeding for any man just because of pleasure. I is not an animal. I am a human being” (p.115). Similarly, the conviction that little has changed across the centuries is repeatedly asserted throughout the play. Sonson takes the view that “from slavery days them don’t change” (p.112), an opinion shared by the ironmonger Stone, who says that nothing has changed since “two hundred years ago, when all of us worked the land for nothing, like animals” (p.109).

An Echo shows how colonization affects the colonized people sorely. The tragic events cause many of them psychological or emotional trauma, which according to Jackson results after “intense fear, physical or mental stress or distress, or threat to one’s life...or even witnessing violence” (2006, p.231). Most of them suffer from detachment, which is not the only thing remaining as a result of colonization. Distortion damages the cities and the villages as well as social composition. The colonized find themselves struggling with different kinds of post-traumatic disorder. They experience sleeping difficulties, confusion, social isolation, and anger.

2.3 Colonial Racism and Trauma in *An Echo in the Bone*

Race-related trauma is considered as “emotional or physical pain or the threat of emotional or physical pain stemming from racism in the form of harassment, discrimination or discriminatory harassment hostility” (Elizabeth et al ,2010, p.132). The colonizer considers the natives as the other who cannot represent themselves; they are uncivilized, childish, savage and less human. Insulting such negative ideas in someone’s minds makes them feel inferior. Elleke Boehmer (2005) claims that “the colonized made up the subordinate term in relation to which European individuality was defied” (pp.75-76) and at the same time he adds that they “categorized colonized people as primitive, inferior to European” (p.76). The idea of inferiority dominates the colonized men. According to Fanon (2008), “the negro is enslaved by his inferiority” (p. 42). Fanon also adds that this slavery makes the native live “in a shaky position, to be always on guard, ready to be rejected” (p. 55).

Scott’s play *An Echo* shows many examples of racism. He makes racism as a crucial theme in the play. He also shows black characters as being oppressed by a white society. Scott, also, reveals the character’s struggle to overcome the trauma caused by slavery and racism. The notion of race as a major theme in *An Echo* debunks the hostility inculcated between both blacks and whites resulting from the latter’s colonial policies in the form of chattel slavery over the other. This animosity is best

depicted in the conflict between Crew and Mr. Charles and their deaths. This confrontation, explains the magnitude and effects of racism within the new world, more particularly in Jamaica at the time. Carlos Hoyt Jr in his article "The Pedagogy of Meaning of Racism: Reconciling a Discordant Discourse" states that although several key concepts in the study of diversity, social bias, and social justice are somewhat nebulous and overlapping, for example, culture, race and ethnicity, there is perhaps no term that provokes the level of confusions, consternation and conflict that the term racism does (p.225).

An Echo is based on the post-colonial period in Jamaica where the whole status is based on race. The ranks system is structured with the whites at the top of the social hierarchy and the black at the bottom. Racism flowed within the veins of the oppressed and the oppressors alike and covered the whole circumference within post-colonial era in the play as well.

Scott shows the central struggle in the play, which is the murder of Mr. Charles, and how it occurs when the white rich land-owner diverts water and thus prevents Crew and many other black farmers from yielding crops. To Crew, the murder of Mr. Charles is warrantable because "he was a bad man, and the earth was calling for his blood for what he do to us ... All of us..." (87). In this view, the murder event is not just an act of racial violence. Rather, it indicates the economic exploitation of the colonized peoples in a post- colonial era.

Crew suffers from racism. He suffers from an overwhelming amount of stress. According to Fanon (1967), the colonizers "repudiate the one whom they have shaped into their own image" (p.46). Absence of trust, gratitude and appreciation marks colonizer-colonized relationship, contributing to the sense of loss associated with the failure of this relationship. Scott intends to show that the crime is not just a reaction against racial violence. Actually, it is explicatory of post-colonial economic exploitation in Jamaica. Thus, in this play the economic deprivation of the black farmers by white land owners is illustrative as a one manifestation of the colonization policies which is practiced by the white colonizer. Discussing this issue, Scott's characters confirm their doubts about those things which will not be changed even if the country had attained its political freedom:

STONE. Stone. You should get yourself a little piece of land, that's what Crew tell me, last time we was together. Settle down, Stone, he say, and raise a crop. For what? I watch how the big land-owners they corner up with their own and sell the sugar back to us for four times what it cost us to raise. I know. I see inside of the office sometimes, and the big house that they build from two hundred years ago, when all of us worked the land for nothing, like animals. You think things change any?

P. We are free now. That is a big change.

Brigit. You feel so? You skin white, then Mass P.? To

them you is still dirt, nothing you can say will change the way they look at you. No respect... How can a man live easy without respect? (p.109)

The main reason for killing Mr. Charles is to highlight the idea of the white man's exploitation of the colonized which has been a major concern of critical studies of many writings from post-colonial regions. Scott portrays the colonizers' exploitation of and oppression against the colonized people and the effects of such practices. Thus all the characters who participate in Crew's commemorating ceremony share the status of poverty and exploitation and thus are able to identify with one another.

Being exposed to violence makes the colonized commit violence without being aware of its results. In his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon asserts that "the native... is ready for violence at all times" (p.29). The violence the colonized people are exposed to affects them, making them traumatized and thinking of getting revenge.

In fact, Scott's recalling of pre-colonial and colonial economic exploitation can be seen as illustrative post-colonial or rather neocolonial policies and their traumatic impact on the Jamaican people in post-independence Jamaica. As Imad Khawaldeh and Baker Bani-Khair put it, "Scott's play resurrects all the experiences of economic exploitation under the systems of slavery and colonialism to address the problems encountered by the contemporary post-independence society in Jamaica specifically, the socio-economic problems that faced the country during the 1960s and 1970s" (p.76). Khawaldeh and Bani-Khair maintain that after Jamaica had attained its full independence in 1962, strong economic growth marked the first decade of the country's post-colonial era under the conservative governments, which were led successively by Prime Ministers Alexander Bustamante, Donald Sangster, and Hugh Shearer. Specifically, investments in the industry of bauxite/alumina fueled the relatively high rates of economic growth in the country. However, this industrial boom did not ameliorate the actual lives of the majority of the Jamaican population. Most of the major economic projects were run by either non-black and white Jamaican minorities or international franchise corps especially British companies (p.76). Thus, the majority of Jamaicans became poorer and poorer and their abject poverty aggravated their state of psychological trauma. Such were the miserable conditions that Scott's play reflected in its re-enacted scenes. Accordingly, the events of the play –which start in the old barn behind Crew's cottage moves through spirit possession back to a slave-ship in 1792, an auctioneer's office in the slave market in 1820, woods near an estate in 1833, a Great House in 1834, Crew's field in 1937, Crew's house four years ago, and outside Mr. Charles' Great House last week –are no more than echoes of contemporary historical events that are witnessed by the playwright.

In recalling trauma, *An Echo* confirms that

independence brings freedom from slavery; it does not bring self-independence. The white man is still in authority, till the 1930s, the play's present time setting. The people assembled to change their own past life. Stone remembers how Crew had urged him to settle down. "For what? I ask him that, you see. I watch how the big land-owners they corner up with their own and sell the sugar back to us for four times what it cost us to raise." For Stone, things have not changed any with Emancipation, though P insists that "[w]e free now, Stone. That is a big change" (p.109).

Scott wants to emphasize that Crew's violent behavior should not be considered a clumsy act by a troubled person or an alcoholic, but as a traumatized person the best elaboration of his behavior should be in terms of the recalling of an oppressed past, not just the immediate past of this farmer's life, but also the entire view of the past which relates to the history of slavery in the West Indies..

This accident left a deep scar on the colonizer's psyche, and becomes a sign of degradation and humiliation. Visser (2011) explains that "behaviour and memory has quite opposite patterns from emotional numbness to extreme alertness or even explosive excitability" (p.272). A traumatized person cannot pass by the accident, and it is still fresh in his mind and weakening him. Gabriele Schwab (2010) touches on this issue when he states that: "Traumatic memories come in flashbacks or nightmares. They come in the memories of the body and its somatic enactments. Traumatic memories entrap us in the prison house of repetition compulsion. To the extent that we are successful in banning thoughts and memories, we become a body in pain, leading a somatic existence severed from consciously or affectively lived history" (p.2).

Crew suffers from extreme confusion and insecurity. As a result of colonization, he suffers from an overwhelming amount of stress. The colonized people's life with their colonizers is superficial. They know that the colonizers come to their land to poison their present and their future.

The feeling of inferiority, their suffering and the violence the colonized people face make them think of revenge in order to make other people suffer. Fanon (1967) explains this fact in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*; "I will make someone else suffer, and desertion by me will be the direct expression of my need for revenge" (54).

The dehumanization of the Africans' life maybe behind their misery from internalized persecution, which shows itself in a negative sense like "self-hatred, self-hiding, fear of violence and feelings of inferiority, resignation, isolation, powerlessness and gratefulness for being allowed to survive" (cited in Williams, 2012, p.32). Living under oppression after losing their lands and freedoms creates a sense of loss and depression among Africans. They suffer from self-degradation as Fanon claims that "there are latent forms of psychosis which become overt as the result of a traumatic experience" (*Black Skin*

1967, p.62). Human beings have a specific ability to bear traumatic events and this capacity differs from one person to another. When the person becomes unable to endure the traumatic events he/she becomes unable to think properly and starts to insult and punish him/herself, thinking that everything in life is against him/her.

Scott's *An Echo*, which also involves a mute character, Rattler, lays bare the cause of who silence. Rattler has had his tongue cut by slavers, an action that seems to embody as a synonym for the silencing of the dispossessed slaves. At the end, the play ends with the mute Rattler's drum beating "louder and louder" in "celebration" (*Echo*, pp.136-7). So the conclusion confirms the possession of the society's spirit and Rattler's drum as a rooted tradition. These are the echoes in the bone which emphasize that the disadvantaged will survive.

This triumph of traumatized slave/colonized people appears at its best when we know the fact that Scott's stage directions dictate that all the roles of the male and female white and black characters (throughout all the historical periods performed in the play) "must" be played by only black performers. This, of course, makes the experience of recalling trauma very special as the traumatized person experiences both sides of the process of racial subjugation and oppression, thus understanding the perspectives of all who are involved in creating trauma and being affected by it through history.

CONCLUSION

This paper asserts that colonization makes the colonized imprisoned in their inner pain. The pain they live in cannot be healed easily. The pain resulting from racism, sense of inferiority, political persecution, economic exploitation and social alienation makes the colonized or newly decolonized people face a number of psychological troubles that assume the shape of trauma. Members of these disturbed communities suffer from loss of confidence and anxiety, which makes them lose their faith in life; they do not have any hope for tomorrow, and many of them live their present with utter fear. It is noticeable in the studied play that the author resorts to special dramaturgical strategies that help him achieve the counter-historical functions of his literary work in recalling trauma, (i.e.) the play presents the version of history that is maintained by the traumatized colonized subjects to counteract and even subvert the colonial version of history or (His)story. One of the interesting characteristics that distinguishes the studied dramatic text is the assertion it puts on the notion of the cyclicity of history in recalling trauma. Thus, the dramatist sets the scenes of his drama in different historical periods to emphasize that the trauma his people lives in because of colonialism has existed since ancient times, and keeps on recurring over and over again. The history of slaves and their descendants is still present in the current frame of *An Echo* by recalling a

meaningful ritual that is dedicated to the dead to confirm these historical traumas.

Both the structure and content of Dennis Scott's play is an interesting application of Paul Ricoeur's supposition that "history aims at knowledge, an organized vision, established upon chains of causal or teleological relationships on the basis of meanings and values"(99). In fact, Scott recalls these expressive historical fragments and reorganizes them to fit in the overall counter-historical discourse of the black "Other" in a very telling way. He tells us in the stage directions that "all" the roles of the play, ranging from the characters that live in the contemporary times to those that populate the historical eras resurrected in the other historical cycles; should be performed exclusively by black actors. Thus, not only does the playwright present the world view of the black subjects using black actors and actresses, but he also endeavors to understand the other side of the trauma equation, the white oppressors' through allowing black actors and actresses to play the roles of these white oppressors. The characters of *An Echo* have a passion to shake off the stains of having been regarded as property and to endure the mental, emotional, and spiritual transformations that take them back to a time when they were proprietors of their own destiny.

Recalling trauma in *An Echo* demands understanding the present in terms of the past. The play portrays several manifestations of trauma that Jamaican citizens went through during the colonial era and continued to experience even after the end of these decades and their aftermath. In conclusion, one may confidently notice how Scott's play resurrects all the traumatic experiences of oppression and exploitation under the systems of slavery and colonialism to address the traumatic conditions encountered by the contemporary post-independence society in Jamaica. In this sense, Scott embodies history as a form of awareness of a past which revives trauma to serve present and future aims.

Interestingly, recalling the past also dominates many famous post-colonial dramas such as Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests* (1960) where traditional legends and rituals supports the notion of resurrection of dead souls in confirming rooted trauma from the past to reflect the contemporary present of the play. Like Soyinka's recalling of the history of the traumatized African, many other postcolonial plays (such as Derek Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain* (1967), Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa* (1970), Jack Davis' *Kullark* (or *Home*) (1987), and Girish Karnad's *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (2004)) do resurrect buried histories and retell traumatic stories that operate in the same manner of the studied play. Hence, this study is meant to call the researcher's attention to the manifestation of trauma in historical postcolonial drama – a subgenre which like its broader genre, postcolonial drama, has always been neglected in the field of postcolonial studies

which tend to prefer responding to and analyzing fictional literary works. Thus, this paper is in essence a humble attempt to ignite the spark for postcolonial critical studies to engage more dramatic works in the everlasting arguments about the relationship between the (White Self) and the (Black or Colored Other) and the consequences of their traumatic encounters.

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