

**TRAUMA DRAMA: VICTIMS' TRAUMATIC MEMORIES IN KAY
ADSHEAD'S *THE BOGUS WOMAN* (2001) AND TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER'S
CREDIBLE WITNESS (2001).**

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Abstract: In our contemporary society there exists a fascination with trauma and testimony. Thus, my paper looks at traumatised protagonists in the above-mentioned plays that testify to the manifold victimization of asylum seekers. First they were tortured and persecuted in their home countries, and then subjected to new traumatic humiliation in prison-like detention centres in Great Britain. Both plays assume a political position by appealing to the individual conscience of the audience who, through the characters' outrageous narration, become witnesses to appalling violations of human rights.

Keywords: Adshead, detention centres, persecution, testimony, trauma/asylum drama, Wertenbaker, witnesses.

Introduction

Wiesel (qtd. in Felman and Laub 6) has written "our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony". Thus, the question can be asked: "What is the relation between literature and testimony, between the writer and the witness?" (Felman and Laub xiii.) As theatre audience, we witness the narration of traumatic experiences through the testimony transmitted by victims of violence. Witnessing implies an ethical obligation towards the Other, to assume our responsibility for the victimized. In Trauma Drama, traumatised protagonists show signs of clinical syndromes, referred to as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a term that has replaced "shell shock" or "traumatic neurosis". "Trauma Drama engages with a concept that has been prominent in a number of contemporary Western discourses, among them psychiatric, psychoanalytical, artistic, journalistic, legal and cultural theoretical discourses" (Wald 93). Scholars describe British society as "traumaculture"

(Luckhurst 2003) and North American society as “wound culture” (Seltzer 1997, 1998); “trauma” literally means “a wound in the flesh”. Wald explains that “[t]rauma was first used to indicate a general form of injury and came to be associated with a wounding of the mind by the end of the nineteenth century, when it designated the sudden prostration of the nervous system through surgical shock” (93). Present-day psychiatric explanations of traumatisation are based on Freud’s and other physicians’ psychoanalytic theory, which designated trauma as “an event in the subject’s life defined by its intensity, by the subject’s incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychical organisation” (Laplanche and Pontalis 465 qtd. in Wald 93).

Wald refers to the “fascination with trauma in contemporary society which is reflected in literature and film” (94). Trauma drama stages the person’s response to the traumatic event that necessarily involves intense fear, helplessness and horror, and often provokes the re-experiencing of the traumatic event or recurrent, distressing dreams (Wald 94). One of the most common issues of Trauma Drama is child sexual abuse, as explored in a series of plays written in the last fifteen years by Mark Ravenhill, Alan Bennett, Sarah Daniels, Phyllis Nagy and David Eldridge, to name but a few. In recent years, however, several authors have explored the trauma suffered by asylum seekers in their repressive home countries and in prison-like detention centres in a supposedly democratic country such as Great Britain. Among stage work that deals with the asylum seeker, the following should be mentioned: Jonathan Dove’s modern opera *Flight* (libretto by April de Angelis, performed 1998), Sonja Linden’s *I Have Before Me a Remarkable Document Given to Me by a Young Lady from Rwanda* (2002), Tanika Gupta’s *Sanctuary* (2002), Kay Adshead’s *The Bogus Woman* (2001) and Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *Credible Witness* (2001). I have chosen the two last-mentioned plays as examples of trauma or asylum drama. Both plays narrate the persecution and violence migrants endured in their homelands and the hostile circumstances they were confronted with in the UK.

Trauma Drama or Asylum Drama

Significantly, asylum drama started to be written at a time when the asylum issue was at the forefront of public awareness. Globalisation and political conflicts around the world have caused an ever-increasing number of refugees to ask for political asylum in democratic countries such as Germany, France and Great Britain. “According to a special BBC report published in 2003, one person in three hundred globally is a refugee” (Kritzer 199). The Refugee Council in the United Kingdom stresses that, “[a]pplications for asylum

have soared in the United Kingdom, from 4223 individuals in 1982 to 103,080 in 2002” (Kritzer 199). Kritzer explains that “[a]lthough only one out of four applications is granted, the increased costs of immigration control, along with demands on the NHS, social service, and the state education system, have created resentment” (199). Not only the tabloid press such as the *Daily Mail* but also the liberal press have expressed their fears about social impact, terrorism and crime. It should be recalled that “all people have the right to asylum from war or persecution” (Aston 5), something established in the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees and promised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, the asylum seeker is seen as an “unwelcome supplicant and encourages racist and nationalist thinking so that seekers are viewed as “bogus” rather than genuine, despite evidence to the contrary” (Aston 5). The Labour Government, rather than guarantee the welfare of refugees, adopted penalizing measures and placed “[a]sylum seekers without housing or resources in detention centres while their claims are reviewed or appeals considered” (Kritzer 200). Kay Adshead states in the Author’s Note (2001): “I could not believe that the violation of human rights of vulnerable people was happening in England in 1997 (outside Oxford no less) and more shocking still in the first year under a Labour government for which I had waited eighteen years!” In such a hostile climate, “it was left to theatre-makers to give an insight into the experiences of asylum-seekers and other migrants”, as Sierz (115) expresses it. This is precisely what Kay Adshead hopes to achieve in her play, to give “an insight into what it can really be like to seek asylum in this country” (Author’s Note, 2001).

***The Bogus Woman* (Traverse Theatre, 2000; The Bush Theatre, 2001)**

Adshead’s play *The Bogus Woman* was directed by Lisa Goldman and acted by the black actress Noma Dumezweni. In this one-woman show, a nameless young black woman from an unnamed African country (allegedly Zimbabwe) narrates her traumatic story in the form of a poetic monologue, giving vent to her indignation and anger. She also embodies some forty roughly-observed characters and their viewpoints, through making subtle changes in her accent and posture: the members of her murdered African family, and the people she has met during her refuge-seeking odyssey to England. Aston (7) has rightly observed that there are two parallel stories: that of atrocities in a war-torn African country in which the black woman, a human rights journalist, witnesses her family, including her new-born baby, Anele, being shot in front of her eyes, while she herself is brutally raped by the soldiers who have murdered her family; and that of how she is treated in England once she has managed to

flee from her homeland. “In the juxtaposition of the atrocities in Africa with the woman’s detention in England, Adshead superimposes the treatment the young woman receives by the various British authorities with the brutality of the crimes committed against her and her family” (Aston 7). In fact, “[t]he play not only dramatises the horror of the massacre, but also denounces the woman’s treatment in Britain” where, indeed, “she is treated as a bogus refugee and subjected to one humiliation after another” (Sierz 116). Rather than finding protection and freedom after her traumatic experiences, the young woman is detained, distrusted, dehumanised and ill-treated by an English immigration system that finally sends her back to Africa.

Based on Adshead’s personal research, the work of The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture and source material from the Refugee Council, the play is set in the infamous Detention Centres of Campsfield--which was the scene of a real-life protest riot by detainees in 1997 (Campsfield Nine)--and Tinsley House. Adshead states in her Author’s Note (2001) that (she) read hundreds of stories of refugees seeking asylum in this country. “All of them were sad, but some were sickening, so horrifying as to be almost unreadable”. It was out of these shocking stories that Adshead created her own story of *The Bogus Woman*. In this sense, as the spectator is participating in the real experience of asylum seekers, Billington has observed in “The Theatre of War” that theatre that “establishes the importance of fact”, providing real information, is “[t]he key to the political drama of the future” (qtd. in Aston 9).

Aston explains the set of the production of *The Bogus Woman*, designed by Ti Green, as follows: “a stark, bleak construction [was] designed to create a diasporic “space” of Africa and England and visually impressed upon spectators that England is not the safe, civilised haven one might imagine it to be” (10). Roughly-hewn pieces of wood on one side of the theatre space were evocative of Africa while on the other side there was a corrugated sheet, suggestive of England. The young woman imagines a country that is “holding out/ its one good hand/ ... its one good hand to me” (Adshead 22). Distressingly, that dream gives way to her astonishment when she finds herself in “Campsfield Detention Centre. A tangled tower/ of twenty foot high razor wire”, uttering the anxious question: “Where am I?” (Adshead 22-23). In this appalling, prison-like institution, the deeply traumatised woman is subjected to bureaucratic incompetence, official prejudice, a lack of compassion and casual racism. In spite of all the atrocities the young woman has suffered and continues to endure, “she demonstrates a strength and will to live that are rooted in her desire to communicate the story of family members who are now dead” (Kritzer 200-201). “And I would like one day/ to write

a history/ of my people". Hence, she imagines "a hole in the sky" made by the strong magic of "her grandfather, the witch doctor" (Adshead 39), through which she may be able to get in touch with her ancestors.

But what actually happens is that her need to tell her story is belittled by the doctor at the centre, whose sarcastic reaction is deeply shocking in that he disbelieves her terrible account of rape and subsequent conception: "I had a baby/ then miscarried/. I was raped/ the day/ after giving birth/ to my husband's child. [...] I got pregnant/ then miscarried/. God has been good to me/. Not your God" (Adshead 28).

To my mind, it is significant that the young woman denies the goodness of a "white, western God" who does not provide anything good in her present desperate condition. According to trauma theory, a person can only get sure relief from traumatic incidents through narration, speaking about them, and doing some memory work (Grehan 56). However, victims of trauma "find it difficult to give a narrative account of the original event" (Grehan 56). In fact, though the young woman is capable of delivering her truth-claim in front of the doctor, she starts to waver when she is subjected to the cold, cynical questioning of the interrogator. She is actually accused of lying and has to endure the interrogator's negative response to her need to *re-externalise* the traumatic events of the massacre of her family, her rape by three soldiers, and the fact that this resulted in her conceiving again the day after giving birth (Adshead 83). "*Faltering, in difficulty*" (Ashead 81), the woman's memory seems to fail her and she can only answer in monosyllables, though she seems to recover her memory at times as she tells the terrifying account of the bayoneting of her whole family, while the baby was killed "with his (the taller soldier's) machete" (Adshead 82). Strikingly, the young woman becomes [*v*]ery tense, tearful, distraught" when she affirms: "I was raped/ by the soldiers/ I.../miscarried a foetus/ in a bucket/ while hiding" (82). Sierz has explained the importance of the way "Adshead reproduces the uncertainties of a traumatic experience—while it is clear that the woman was raped, it is uncertain whether her memory of a miscarried foetus is a real event or a horrific nightmare" (116). Indeed, it may be true that she miscarried a grinning foetus, wishing to eject from her body the outgrowth conceived through violence instead of love, but this might also be a hallucination resulting from the brutal rape, the effect of a need to liberate herself from the traumatic experience by metaphorically expelling the semen introduced by force. A healing process can only be achieved when "a therapeutic process—a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of *re-externalising the event* (Felman and Laub 69; italics in original) can be set in motion.

Tragically, there is no qualified specialist at hand to help the young woman to initiate a healing process, though she does receive some occasional unofficial kindness, as, for instance, from the resolute solicitor, Pennington, who fights her case out of altruism, or the prison social visitor, Agnes, who finds her a home during her “Temporary Admission”. However, “these sympathetic people are without power and the powerful people have no sympathy” (Kritzer 200). Her story is disbelieved because there are no longer any external signs of the rape on her body, or any records of her family’s massacre, or of her work as a journalist, because “the English authorities/ have been writing/ to the wrong fucking paper” (Adshead 37). The appalling treatment she is given “evoke[s] a system where people with neither the skill nor the will to understand a traumatised individual are making decisions about whether to apply the ’bogus’ label” (Halliburton 137). Thus she becomes a victim of racism and xenophobia and gets called “a little nigger woman” (Adshead 23). The guard orders menacingly: “Don’t piss about/ or we’ll make burgers/ out of you/ black meat” (Adshead 57). In addition, she has to put up with a total lack of washing facilities, yet is accused of being dirty. She suffers from an unremitting upset stomach because the food she is given has gone off. Furthermore, she is denied any communication with the outside world and is not even allowed to speak with a solicitor. So she exclaims: “That is a fundamental breach/ of human rights” (Adshead 63).

One of Adshead’s outstanding achievements in the play is to provide the young woman with the poetic skill “to distil her experiences into rapid, rough and ready stanzas” (Sierz 116). From her cell, suffering from insomnia, she watches “the small/ grey rectangle of England/ the veins of English cloud, and weep” (Adshead 19). In these frightening moments, lying ill in her chilly cell, she dreams of her baby girl, Anele: “One night/, mad with waking dreams/ I suck from my own breasts/ hoping to taste Anele/ and my old sweet life” (Adshead 31). These moments, when she dreams of her murdered baby, are exceptionally moving and almost unbearable to watch, as most critics have commented.

The young woman’s resolution to survive as an unwanted refugee, in spite of all the adversities she endures, exact “a physical toll even greater than that she suffered in her own country, as it starves, exhausts, ages, and cripples her” (Kritzer 201). From Campsfield she is sent to another detention centre, Tinsley House, near Gatwick, “run by the American Company/ Wackenhut/ their ethos/ famously/ non-confrontational” (Adshead 67). Her appeals for asylum are dismissed first by the Special Adjudicator, and then by the Special Appeal Tribunal. In her miserable rented room, she has to report weekly to the police station, and she has to survive on a “thirty pound food voucher” (Adshead 98). At length, turned out, she ends

up in the street, totally penniless and terror-stricken, humiliated by a young man who takes her for a prostitute when she uncovers her breast in her agitation, wanting to feed her baby. She has lost her bag with her only possessions—photos of her family, her address-book, and “Anele’s shawl” in which she once wrapped her newborn baby. After this, “[s]he breaks down, she sounds like an animal” (Adshead 119). In a last moment of futile despair, the young woman tries to contact her solicitor or Agnes. Her fate is a downward plunge towards Dante’s Inferno. She is finally arrested and taken to Holloway Prison, where she has to stay in a strip cell for six and a half weeks (Adshead 126). Refused asylum, she is deported and finally killed, along with the friends who are sheltering her. Thus, violence has come full circle, but, sadly, she could have been saved had the British Authorities acted according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, of which she was a defender, a fact which ironically provoked her tragic fate.

***Credible Witness* (Royal Court Jerwood Theatre Upstairs, London (2001))**

Timberlake Wertenbaker’s play, like Kay Adshead’s, is based on real information. Aston explains that “[s]he was originally approached by the International Department of the Royal Court to get involved in a research project on refugees” (9) over a period of two and a half years. Actors and directors called on refugee and detention centres in pairs to interview people and afterwards shared their experiences. Wertenbaker used this research for her play *Credible Witness*, which, like Adshead’s, is set in a detention centre. In the stage directions for Scene Three, Wertenbaker asserts: “*It could be a refugee camp anywhere in the world, but in fact it is a detention centre in England*” (192). The references to “[a] grey space and “[b]arbed wire” evoke a confined, prison-like space, even a concentration camp. While *The Bogus Woman* takes the form of a moving monologue uttered by a single woman, in Wertenbaker’s play the asylum issue is reported through a mother-son relationship and includes other refugees as well. In spite of this human connection, the play “is less a personal drama than a wide-ranging vision of Britain as a global crossroad” (Sierz 116). Sierz conveniently summarises the storyline:

[T]he play follows Petra, a Macedonian woman, who comes to London on a false passport, trying to find her son, Alexander, who has fled his homeland. When she eventually finds him, he is no longer the fierce nationalist he was brought up to be, and she disowns him. At the same time, other refugees appear—a Sri Lankan, a Somali and an Algerian. In the play’s climax, Petra confronts the immigration official, symbolically named Simon Le Britten, with Ameena, a credible witness whose body bears the scars of multiple rape. Petra finally blesses her son and speaks on behalf of all the detainees (116).

The plot, as the summary illustrates, “is concerned with ideas of history, nation, and identity as they arise in the context of asylum seeking” (Aston 8). Es Devlin’s design, a rising, circular walled environment, is evocative of a layered or fossilized history (Aston 11). In the Prologue to the play, the stage directions read: *A small archaeological dig in Northern Greece. Alexander Karagy guides a group of children* (Wertenbaker 185). Alexander explains to the children the different layers of history, from the Iron Age onwards. Now they can look back on “five thousand years of Macedonian history” (185) that can be traced back to Alexander the Great, though contemporary Northern Greece refuses to acknowledge its Macedonian past. He stresses the importance of adhering to one’s history, because it is a question of identity that enriches you. Alexander then suffers an explosives attack by “shadowy figures” (185) who turn out to be the local police. He succeeds in fleeing to England on a false passport, where, again, now in a “dilapidated community centre”, (Wertenbaker 188) he is teaching a group of refugee children and explaining the meaning of exile and the importance of retrieving their personal histories. His statement that they are “guests in England” (188) is sniggered at and spat at by the children, who recall the hostile reception they received. Alexander has been denied asylum, and subsequent scenes show him doing menial jobs as an illegal immigrant. Petra, likewise, is denied asylum on her arrival in Britain and ends up in a detention centre. She assumes, incorrectly and ironically, that the British authorities will be glad to help her find her son, whom she also believes to be being treated as a welcome guest and not as an unwelcome stranger. It gradually dawns on her, once she is deprived of freedom and placed in a prison-like institution, that she is no welcome guest. She encounters other refugees, from Algeria, Sri Lanka, and Somalia, who have fled appalling tortures and are waiting for permission to remain in England. Petra eventually establishes a close and familiar relationship with them, above all with Ameena, a young black girl from Somalia.

When Alexander is finally found, there is a decisive confrontation between mother and son in the detention centre. He disowns his history and asks his mother: “Why should I die for your obsessions?” (Wertenbaker 223) Though Petra curses her son, she eventually understands that one has to leave behind one’s Macedonian history of violence “to embrace a new trans-national community” and also grasps “that overcoming the paralysis of history is not a lack or a “deficiency”, but a gain” (Aston 15). History eventually “shifts in the detention centre, because those detained and those officially in charge of the detention begin to

exchange different histories, and crucially because spectators too are being invited to “see” differently” (Aston 11), to see “identity” in a different light.

Petra’s liberation from her obsessive sense of history and identity enables her to help Ameena, who is suffering from a traumatic shock. Though she has been having horrific nightmares, shaking and crying, nobody has approached her to hear her story, not even the doctor. She was raped when she was seventeen and still a virgin. She suffers from PTSD as a result of sexual trauma. In *The Bogus Woman* the feminine body was the *site* of violence but the woman is disbelieved because there are no longer any wounds on her body. Ameena’s body, however, bears the external *signs* of her traumatic past: thirty-four cigarette burns on her front. Twenty-five on her back (Wertenbaker 232). These multiple cigarette burns provide testimony to the truth of her story of rape, humiliation and torture. Petra forces Mr Le Britten, the detention official, to look at Ameena’s tortured body, to provide him with “credible testimony” (Wertenbaker 233). When Ameena unbuttons her blouse, - “[a]ll turn away except for Shivan and Petra” (232). Shivan, himself a doctor, accuses the centre practitioner of never having taken the trouble to examine Ameena; to make things convenient for him, he has “given her the strongest tranquilliser he could find” (232). Ameena is finally able to recount her traumatic, tormenting experience:

Ameena (*struggling*) I – was – (*inaudible*) They sur-round me in the street. Take me inside – dark – at first I don’t see... Eight. Eight men. I thought: for a beating – for names, I was prepared – for beating.
...
They don’t want – names. For an hour, they shout – not at me – at each the other – who gets me first.
...
She stops.
Then. Many hours. Turned – turned over. Turned. *Pause.*
They stop to smoke and crush cigarettes – on –
Crush cigarettes. On.
Some. Others – start again. They – on my knees. Together now – they – everywhere. (*She gags slightly*). Then. They throw me – on the street. It is light – sun.
My mother – No! I can’t go home (234).

Ameena suffers the frightening anguish of the rape victim, feeling the shame instilled by a patriarchal system that blames women for men’s sexual violence.¹ Critics have agreed

¹ The theme of rape and the feeling of shame instilled by patriarchy is dealt with as well in Wertenbaker’s feminist play *The Love of the Nightingale* (1988). Cf. Klein, Hildegard, “Violence, Silence and the Power of

that the pain of this scene is unbearable, not only for the asylum official, forced by Petra to watch, but also for the spectators, who are likewise forced to become witnesses of the young girl's testimony. "The body is the site /sight of a double violation: the juncture of a violent heterosexist culture of the masculine from which the woman is in exile, and the colonialist, imperialist gaze of the asylum authority" (Aston 17). Up to that moment, nobody has listened to Ameena's excruciating story. But now, with Petra's supportive, protective mother-like role, she is perhaps able to find "liberation or healing" (Grehan 45) from the pain of the past. The overworked immigration official, too symbolically called Simon Le Britten (Billington 184), represents the policy of the British immigration system. However, he has finally "looked" at the wounds inflicted on Ameena and this may induce him to change his attitude in the future. Petra tells him, after her own learning process, not to wall herself up in his own history but to look around at the globalized world, represented by all the refugees: "History shifts, Simon, we can't hold it. And now, when we turn to you, don't cover your eyes and think of the kings and queens of England. Look at us: we are your history now" (Wertenbaker 236).

In the same way, the audience too is forced to come in as witnesses and entreated to take on responsibility, to move towards a new ethics, and to look differently. Adshead wrote her play in the hope "that it may change minds" (Author's Note 2001). In fact, "Kay Adshead hasn't set out to offer solutions but rather to wake us up to the infamies perpetrated in our name" (Woddis 138).

Conclusion

The plays depict an arbitrary and opaque system that turns a blind eye to the terrifying dangers in the asylum seekers' homelands (Kritzer 203). They manifest their political position through appeals to individual conscience. They generate empathy through the humanist construction of admirable characters who have survived extraordinary violence in the past and now encounter institutional callousness and incompetence in Britain. The plays suggest that the failures of the current immigration system can be attacked by those who sympathize with the refugees' fate, but that the impact of their opposition is limited because of their lack of power. However, this individual opposition will eventually "galvanize change". In fact, "[t]he Committee to Defend Asylum Seekers, which began life in 2001, provides organizational support for refugees in Britain" (Kritzer 204).

However, although the treatment of asylum seekers has become an international human rights issue, Kay Adshead, in her Author's Note (2009) to the reprinting of the play, declares as follows:

It (the play) is still being performed, because tragically the asylum debate remains at the centre of not just British politics, but international policy making. Campsfield is still there, no women now, but still 200 detainees. So are Oakington, Harmondsworth, Lindholme and the others, most notoriously Yarl's Wood (infamous for detaining not just women but children with learning disabilities) ... Innocent people who have committed absolutely no crime, often fleeing the most terrible circumstances, bloody slaughter, destruction of their homes, traumatised after seeing loved ones killed are still being locked up in the equivalent of high security prisons, without charge, without a release date, without access to adequate legal representation, in the vain hope that this will deter others from exercising their rights under the Geneva Convention to claim asylum in Britain. ... Amnesty International recognises it as a breach of human rights. Yet it happens every single day.

I would like to conclude this work by quoting Adshead's ardent statement in reference to *The Bogus Woman* being an ideological sister to Medea or Antigone: "I look forward to the day when my play and the character's terrible journey can be seen and enjoyed as universal mythology and not as current social documentary" (Author's Note, 2009).

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