



Reconfigurations of Trauma and Self-representation in Remi Raji's *Wanderer Cantos*

CATHERINE ONORIODE OGUGU, STEPHEN KEKEGHE
Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria

Abstract. The relationship between poetry and trauma is multifaceted and significant in contemporary Nigerian literary scholarship. This implies that literature reflects different experiences that have to do with psychological trauma such as physical health conditions, political aggression, violence, economic disparities and cultural disruption. While most studies on the exploration of trauma in Nigerian poetry are focused on war, social and domestic violence, there are scant critical works on covid-induced trauma in poetry. The COVID-19 pandemic which has generated profound disruptions in human existence, producing both individual and collective trauma, demands literary documentation and interpretation. Remi Raji's *Wanderer Cantos* emerges as a poetic response to the pandemic, exploring the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of suffering and resilience. This study, therefore, investigates how traumatic experiences like loss, isolation, and fear are mediated through poetic language, and are shaped by self-representation in Raji's poetry collection, *Wanderer Cantos*. Poems were carefully selected from the second section of the poetry collection that dwells on the COVID-19 infection, and are subjected to qualitative literary analysis, showing how they explore the idea of self-portrait and trauma. This is complemented by secondary data derived from journals, articles, essays and books. The study adopts Trauma Theory as its theoretical approach, to investigate manifestations of coronavirus-induced trauma in the poems. Trauma theory becomes more relevant to this study because trauma theory in literature try to show how traumatic experiences are represented, processed and transmitted through narrative. The analysis of the poems reveals that, through a personal account, the poet recreates the traumatic experience triggered by the coronavirus pandemic. It demonstrates that poetry functions as a therapeutic tool for reimagining survival. Indices of covid trauma are identified in the poems through dissociative language, alienation, isolation, pain, suffering, hysteria, hallucination, traumatic disruption of time, psyche disruption, fragmented narrative and

disorientation. The poet's use of imagery, metaphor, paradox, personification to illustrate the painful experience of the COVID-19 infection, expose the traumatic experience of the poet and as well reflect an autobiographical account. The study concludes that *Wanderer Cantos* reconfigures trauma by transforming unspeakable suffering into aesthetic testimony.

Keywords: Trauma studies, Self-Representation, COVID-19 infection, Nigeria poetry, Remi Raji *Wanderer Cantos*

1. Introduction

As a genre of literature, poetry represents man's socioeconomic, political psychosocial and existential struggles (Uwatt, 2023:51). The statement above implies that poetry has often shown itself and responded to the struggles of man. Friday and Oghenerioborue (2022:54) declare that literary writers are conscious of the utilitarian functions of poetry in society, noting that poets imaginatively and psychologically reflect various aspects of human life. This also stresses the role of poetry as a cathartic tool employed to alleviate man from his problems in all ramifications. Thus, given the fact that the art (poetry) is saddled with these multifarious functions, it, therefore, enables it to intersect with other disciplines. Apart from its crosswalk with other academic fields, literature or poetry shares a mutually beneficial relationship with the field of psychology (trauma). Hence, Wordsworth (1805) defines poetry as a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings recollected in moments of tranquility (Preface to *Lyrical Ballad*). The definition above implies that poetry serves as a vehicle to communicate man's repressed feelings and thoughts. To this end, many poets have employed poetry as a tool to confront, handle and heal traumatic feelings. In the bible, David is a poet who uses the lyre to heal Saul once he is tormented by evil spirit to the state of insanity: 'And so, whenever the evil spirit from the Lord assailed Saul, David took up his stringed

instrument and Saul was refreshed' (1 Samuel 16:14-23). This means that Saul becomes mentally well anytime David plays the string to him.

Literature and trauma share a significant relationship in contemporary African literature. Trauma discourse into literary studies took effect from the intercession of literary scholars like Cathy Carruth, Shoshana Felman, Dominick La Capra, Kali Tai and Dori Laub. Trauma studies first developed in the 1990s and relied on Freud's theory of hysteria to develop a model that believes that suffering is unrepresentable. It made significant progress in 1996 with the publication of Carruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* and Kaji Tai's *World of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*. In the African context, literary trauma refers to the emotional, psychological, and cultural impact of historical and ongoing events such as colonialism, slavery, war, and displacement on individuals and community (Lee, 2025).

Studies on the depiction of trauma in Nigerian literature have mainly focused on traumatic experiences caused by social violence. Ifowodo (2013) examines the portrayal of trauma and healing in postcolonial novels, drawn from Africa, African-American and Caribbean. Ifowodo's study shows how political aggression can lead to trauma. Ogbiede (2018) investigates the negative effects of trauma on children as represented in two plays namely Darko's *Faceless* and Unigue's *Night Dancer*. Ogbiede argues that as represented in literature, traumatised children are mentally deformed, and cannot play active roles in the society. Kekeghe and Omobowale (2025) discuss poetic response to the traumatic experiences caused by the ecological violence in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. Kekeghe and Omobowale contend that the process of narrating trauma can lead to healing, which is in agreement with Freud's idea of talking cure or what some scholars refer to as scriptotherapy (Owonibi, 2008). The representation of trauma induced by clinical experiences in poetry has not received adequate critical attention. This study, therefore, examines depictions of COVID trauma and self-representation in Remi Raji's poetry collection, *Wanderer Cantos*.

This study adopts Trauma Theory. Literary trauma theory was founded on two models: the classical and pluralistic model. The two models dwell on the representability of trauma in literature. The classical model pioneered by Carruth believes that the traumatic event cannot be remembered or related. That is, trauma is unspeakable. In this model, trauma is viewed as an event that fragments consciousness and prevents linguistic representation. Fragmentation and

dissociation are the direct causes of trauma. The traumatic experience damages the psyche. According to Carruth (1996), trauma is not located in the simple violence or original event in the individual past but in the way it was not known in the first instance that returns to haunt the survivor. She believes that trauma victims cannot remember a traumatic experience at the time of occurrence and the way it happened but can only return through flashbacks, nightmares and intrusive thought. The model emphasises that the suffering which is external, affect internal changes to the mind of the individual and this experience fractures both language and consciousness. In this model, Carruth argues that trauma's latency and dissociation disrupt the ability to fully understand or represent a traumatic experience. Both the individual traumatic experiences and collective historical extreme events are ultimately never known directly but only through an interrupted referentiality that points to meaning of the past only as a type of reproduction or performance (Carruth, 1996:11). Kolk (1996) maintains the same view that what may complicate the capacity to communicate about trauma is that memories of trauma may have no verbal component.

The pluralistic model holds a contrary view to the traditional model. It maintains that meaning and representation of trauma is varied and can be remembered and spoken in a number of ways. It suggests that traumatic experiences expose new relationships between experience, language, and knowledge that details the social significance of trauma (Mambrol, 2018). Baleav (2012:14) explains that 'in pluralistic model, the meaning of a traumatic experience can be determined by the remembering process that is open to alteration over time by the individual's memory who continuously revises memories, including those of traumatic experiences, in each moment of remembrance'. In spite of the different view point of the two models, literary trauma is founded on both. As Carruth (1996:9) asserts, literature serves as a privilege site for bearing witness to trauma; thus, providing an avenue for literary discourse.

Poetry intersects with trauma in quite a number of ways. First, poetry serves as a form of witnessing and testimony. This implies that it provides individuals with the platform to share their traumatic experiences with others. Wenzel (2016) relays how Terri Muuss, who was a survival of incest from her childhood by her biological father, took to writing poems on her experiences which brought about her happiness. Therefore, poetry becomes an avenue to create awareness and empathy. Again, poetry provides an

outlet for individuals to express and process their traumatic emotions. Hannah (2024) advocates for the expressive process of poetry in the collection, *The Ballad of the Bunny and other poems: The Diary of a Car Crash and Beyond*, which recounts her survival in an automobile accident. She expresses the incredible power of poetry for healing trauma. Hannah (2024) states further that poetry offers a unique method of expressing one's deepest feelings surrounding trauma and the recovery thought-process we may keep hidden even from ourselves. This shows that through poetry, people can relate their feelings, deep-thoughts and personal experiences that could also serve universal purposes. The process of telling these experiences through poetic exploration often leads to healing of the body and the mind. Akinpelu (2024) explains how Niyi Osundare in his collection of poems *City without people: The Katrina poems* expressed and processes the traumatic experiences unleashed by Hurricane Katrina through his employment of vivid use of imagery, tone, atmosphere and other poetic devices to enable the reader have a vicarious experience of the Katrina's devastating onslaught as well as heal his mind of the devastation of the hurricane. The instances above, strengthens poetry role as illuminator of the dept of suppressed emotions as well as a channel to express pain and resilience.

In situations where a person is traumatised, poetry can be a therapeutic tool for regaining healing and recovery. Mazza, (2021: para1) maintains that poetry has been proven to have positive impact on adolescents' mental health. His stand is based on research carried out by a good number of psychotherapists that discovered that the use of poetry can improve mental health in adolescents. Perez, (2024) supports this stand point when he says that reading, writing and sharing poetry can have beneficial impacts on mental health and well-being by helping to reduce anxiety, decrease stress, boost self-awareness and promote emotional expression. Again, Sivakumar (2024: para1) states that poetic therapy is an expressive art therapy that utilizes the reading and writing of poetry as a means to facilitate healing and self-exploration. He explains that this engagement can evoke emotional response. From the disposition of the scholars above, it is clear that poetry is employed in the treatment of young people with mental health issues and based on investigations, it has proven to better and restate them to normalcy. It is to this end, that Moawad (2022) states that poetry maintains an interdisciplinary relationship with neuroscience and psychoanalysis. The process of writing poetry can be a form of self-care that allows individuals to process their emotions, work through their experiences and

find a sense of closure and resolution (McGowan,2020 para 3&4).

Moawad (2022) further states that mentally fragmented or traumatised people can have psychiatric treatment through therapeutic processes of reading and writing poetry and behavioural activities. He further notes that there is an interdisciplinary relationship between neuroscience, psychoanalysis and poetry, which leads to new ways of understanding a person's self-knowledge and evaluating his relationship with the others. Similarly, (Okeke, 2023:41) remarks that emotional expression act as a cathartic response to trauma. He explains that through poetry, Igbo writers and poets have been able to illuminate the depths of suppressed emotions of the Igbo people during the Nigerian civil war and provide a cathartic outlet for the expression of pain, resilience, and collective memory. This goes to explain that expressive writing, especially poetry writing, has a way of helping people deal with loss, grief, trauma and emotional pain. The act of turning pain to words reduces the weight and burden that a person carries. Poetry as a healing tool applicable and accessible to anyone, can have a concrete impact in all areas of medicine specifically in providing innovative methods for healing both individually and holistically (Awodiya, 2024). From the above, poetry plays a curative role to the body and suits the mind when it is read or written.

The utilitarian function of poetry in the medical field has also been observed in terms of its curative role. Poetry has been used as a form of medical intervention in the case of some hospitalised children (Delamred et al, 2021). According to them, hospitalization is a form of isolation that can cause anxiety (Delamred et al, 2021). Based on the fact that children often display elated feelings whenever they listen to poem recitations, the use of poems becomes important in the treatment of children as this invariably reduces worrisome feelings in hospitalised pediatric children. Again, Heimes (2011) states that for patients, poetry provides a space to vent, to reflect and to come to terms with their respective situations. He notes that whether a patient is coping with pain, dealing with stressful situation or coming to terms with uncertainties, poetry can benefit a patient's well-being, confidence, emotional stability and quality of life (Heimes 2011). Thus, as noted above, the process of reading and writing poetry can reduce the stress which arose in patients in hospitalised condition which is a form of isolation.

Poetry has also shown its imprints in the area of memory and recovery. Odueme (2019: 149) examines how memory impacts Ojaide's poetry as he employs

the rich traditional Urhobo oral heritage to inscribe his experiences, feelings and thoughts on the contemporary realities, while living in the diaspora. This goes to say that the act of writing poetry brings to mind suppressed memories, emotions and experiences. Chris (2023) exposes the research and findings carried out by the University of Plymouth and Nottingham Trent University founded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, thus: ‘Many people who took to sharing, discussing and writing poetry as a means to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic experienced demonstrable positive impact on their well-being’ (para2). He expresses further that the findings are based on a survey of 400 people which showed that poetry helped those experiencing common mental health symptom as well as those suffering from grief.

Poetry has as well traversed with the issues of the coronavirus pandemic popularly known as COVID-19 pandemic. Coronavirus is a global disease that broke out in a town called Wuhan, China. Ojaide (2021) states that the coronavirus pandemic is one of man’s more recent global social existential struggles that elicited physical and psychological trauma on almost all continents of the world. The novel coronavirus pandemic devastated far away Wuhan China to Europe, especially Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom through New York state to the gradual infection of other states in the United States and other countries such as Brazil, Ecuador, India, South Africa and Russia (Ojaide, 2021). Uwat (2023) notes that as a global health crisis of the 21st century and the greatest challenge the world has experienced since the World War II, since its emergence in the far away Wuhan in Asia late in 2019. The coronavirus pandemic has spread to every continent except Antarctica assuming dimensions beyond a health crisis to an unprecedented social, economic, political and psychological vagary that have left deep and longstanding scars.

The event of the COVID-19 pandemic came with a lot of grief, pain, loss of lives and loved ones, illness, isolation and poverty (Ogliastri, 2020; Statz et al, 2022). It is upon this realisation, that Nigerian poets use their creativity to recap the ugly experience and ravages caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, poets wrote pandemic poems. Okuyade and Mukoro (2024:37) define pandemic poems as poetry (oral or written) that assert the musings of poets about a pandemic disease. They register the contemplations of poets about the coronavirus, a contagious disease that spreads over a whole country or the whole world, as well as its accompanying devastations and wreckage of human psychology,

cultural norms and socio – economic and political activities. Presently, apart from Remi Raji’s *Wanderer Cantos* there exist other COVID-19 poems such as Tanure Ojaide’s *Narrow Escape*, Ismail Bala and Khalid Imam *Corona Blues*, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo and a host of others that have been written to replicate the experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic. As a matter of fact, these writers (poets) have written to show the generality of the characteristics and effect of the COVID-19 infectious disease. Remi Raji’s *Wanderer Cantos* dwells on his personal experience as a victim and survivor of the covid-19 Pandemic infection. Thus, it gives the yardstick to discuss the reconfiguration of trauma and self-representation in Raji’s poetry.

Though there are studies on the representation of covid-19 in literature, they do not seem to pay attention to the reconfiguration and self-representation of trauma. Existing Nigerian literary studies that treat reconfiguration of trauma are on human-induced trauma. Okuyade and Umukoro (2020) undertake a study on a new direction in contemporary Nigeria poetry using the pandemic poems of Tanure Ojaide and Kola Eke. Also, Yong and Ogbodo (2003) employ Roberts, Smitha and Adimora – Ezeigbo poetry to explore the psychoanalytic exegesis of trauma in covid-19 poetry.

By implication there have been several scholarly works on the COVID-19 pandemic poems as it results to individual and community traumas alike. They demonstrate that poetry serve as an essential medium for expressing, sharing and remembering the psychological effects of crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. Okonkwo (2023) discusses the culpability and nation-nation infractions in *Narrow Escapes: A poetic Dairy of the Coronavirus Pandemic* by Tanure Ojaide. Awodiya et al (2024) explore the therapeutic effect of poetry on youths’ mental well-being in post-covid-19 era in Nigeria. Ilechukwu and Ojaruega (2024) explore the collective trauma in selected Anglophone Covid-19 poetry, dwelling on the manifestations of collective trauma and poetry as a medium of resilience. Of all the studies on COVID-19 poetry, there is little or no existing work that combine reconfiguration of trauma and self-representation of the poet in Covid poetry. Therefore, this study aims to fill this vacuum, and contribute to existing studies on covid trauma in contemporary Nigerian literature

Reconfiguration implies redefining life after adversity. It also means finding a new path with different standards, goals and expectations (Blalock, 2023). Blalock also discuss reconfiguration from the context of child abuse and neglect as the ability to move past

surviving to thriving. The implication of reshaping is that it allows survivors of catastrophe to acquire an unbelievable flexibility to move forward with purpose. The aim of reconfiguration is to restore function and movement, relieve discomfort, and improve appearance. Relating this to literature, Carruth (1996:18) states that 'trauma causes an epistemological crises and bypasses linguistic reference'. Literature becomes a privilege site for bearing witness to trauma through innovative literary forms that mimic and transmit rather than represent the phenomenon to readers in its literality. For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs, but put in somewhat different (Carruth, 1996). Therefore, reconfiguration of trauma involves reinterpreting and reorganising one's experience and perceptions of traumatic events. According to Wrights et al (2007), survivors of trauma often pursue new meaning in their lives to be able to navigate in society. The main purpose of reconfiguration of trauma is to promote healing, reduce distress and to serve as therapy. Poets do this task by reframing their narrative, re-evaluating emotions, finding meaning and reconstructing identity and adopting the spirit of resilience.

On the other hand, the concept of self-representation, as it is viewed from psychology, refers to the way individuals perceive and depict themselves both to themselves and others (National Library of Medicine 2015). Its focus is on self-identity, self-concept and self-presentation. The proponent of this concept was Erving Goffman when he published 'The presentation of self in everyday life'. Thus, self-representation entails giving an autobiographical account of one's experience about life. Mohammed (2016: x) explains that self-identity refers to how a person perceives himself and what he chooses to identify with. It is the understanding a person has of himself. The self is the most important aspect in autobiography which is represented in written form. Autobiography depicts the life of a subject which struggles to define itself. The self has a unique quality which brings out its identity. Therefore, since the aspects of self-identity, self-concept and self-presentation must be present to compose a self-portrait of oneself, autobiography becomes self-representation.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the trauma theory to account for the reconfiguration of trauma and self-representation in selected poems in Raji's *Wanderer Cantoes*. Rene Descartes (1959) explains the relationship between disruptive emotions, the resulting fear and its enduring

effects on human interactions and behaviour in his treatise *The Passions of the Soul* Jean Martin Charcot (1980), a French neurologist and professor of Anatomical pathologist in the late 19th century, states that traumatic event is not physiological but psychological and that trauma induced hypnotic state in his patients.

Pierre (1889) identifies dissociative phenomena and traumatic memories. The earliest conceptualisation of trauma implies a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self's emotional organisation and perception of the external world. Thus, trauma can be individual or collective. The American psychological association (2025) defines trauma as an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, crime, natural disaster, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, experiencing or witnessing violence, death of loved one, war and more. This implies that trauma is an unexpected attack on an individual which could have disrupted the person's way of doing things both physically and psychologically.

Trauma studies were first developed in the 1990s and relied on Freudian theory to develop a model of trauma that imagines an extreme experience which challenges the limits of language and ruptures meaning altogether (Mambrol,2018). This traditional model was quickly followed by a pluralistic model of trauma that suggests the assumed unspeakability of trauma. The major focus of trauma theory in the first wave was on limits of language, fragments on the psyche, dissociative behaviour, concept of latency and pathology. Cathy Carruth, Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman arose in the 1990 to examine the concept of trauma and its role in literature. Thus, Carruth postulates that traumatic experience fractures both languages and consciousness. Carruth also stated that fragmentation and dissociation are direct cause of trauma. Trauma theory in literature tries to show how traumatic experiences are represented, processed and transmitted through narrative (Balaev,2014:1, Jena & Semantry,2021:1). It looks at the psychological, emotional and cultural impact of trauma on individuals and community. It also challenges articulation. On the other hand, the pluralistic model maintains that cultural dimension of trauma and the diversity of narrative expression have effect on memory and consciousness. The model also suggest that traumatic experience uncovers new relationship between experience, language, and knowledge that detail the social significance of trauma. Therefore, trauma theory explores the narrative dissociation, fragmentation, hysteria, pains, suffering, traumatic memories, symbolic representation of pains, sufferings through the use of metaphors and imagery.

Thus, trauma theory is deployed to examine the reconfiguration of trauma and self-representation in the poetry collection, *Wanderer Cantos*, which relays the personal suffering, pains and recovery of the poet during the Covid-19 Pandemic.

3. Trauma and Self-Representation in Remi Raji's *Wanderer Cantos*.

The poetry collection, *Wanderer Cantos* by Remi Raji, is a testimony of the personal experience of the poet, transformed into poetic form. The poetry collection is divided into two sections. The first section relates the adventurous activities of the poet, while the second section which is titled *Corona Cantos and Monologues: My Life in the Bush of the Impossible Virus* gives details of the poet's personal experience as a victim and survivor of the corona virus at the intensive care unit of the Oyo State Infections Disease Centre, Olodo, Ibadan. The title of the collection *Wanderer Cantos*, suggests that the poet is a traveller and he contacted the virus during one of his journeys. The title also draws the attention of the reader that the information expressed in the collection depicts a single information but broken down into fragments, hence the title *Corona Cantos and Monologue*. Raji's *Wanderer Cantos* expresses the reconfiguration of trauma and self-representation of the poet.

In the poem, 'A Quiet and Lonely Place' Raji reconfigures trauma not just as a site of pain but as a space of spiritual reckoning and suspended identity. He transforms the raw experience of near-death and medical emergency into a lyrical narrative surrounded by the traumatic encounter. The poem explores the collapse of time, the fragmentation of perception and the blurred boundary between life and death. The poet's self-representation shifts between a victim and an observer. The excerpt below illustrates this:

Everything stood still: motion, breath and the clock,
 Except voices which became bodies asking,
 Praying,
 Whispering.
 They fetched me away and everything became still
 except the sirens and the horns
 which sliced through the rough painful journey.
 Everything stood still
 Everybody arrived in their expertise.
 Astronauts in white and green and blue.
 I do not see their faces
 They drew my blood
 My mother watched from a distance
 She sat, fairer than the oil of gods,
 Her face had not changed in a decade.
 Everything.
 Everybody.

Except death.
 (p. 85)

The poet's emphasis on the idea of 'stillness' can be viewed from the lockdown measures put in place to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus disease. This is because it is very unusual for only the sound of the siren to be heard in a usual busy Nigeria road. This accounts for the amount of fear and distress the poet suffers from. The excerpt below illustrates this thus: 'except the sirens and the horns which sliced through the painful journey' (p.85). The use of stillness also represents the poet's state of illness, his helplessness and the doctors and medical expert's unfriendliness. All of these leads to the trauma which the poet suffers from. The extract above also emphasises the dissociative effects of trauma. The poet does not understand if he is in a helpless state or actually watching what the people around him were doing. His perception is shared between two positions. At some point, he is a vulnerable and an observer, which signifies the traumatic state of the poet. The idea of the dissociative effect of trauma is reflected in the lines thus; 'They fetched me away and everything became still/Astronauts in white and green and blue/ I do not see their faces'. The poem also reflects the stillness of time, which indicates the temporary disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Again, the few voices that showed concern to the poet's evacuation from his home by strange persons were also speaking from a respectful distance, making the poet to feel all the more traumatised. This accounts for the poet's repetition of the lines below:

Everything stood still: motion, breath and the clock,
 except voices which became bodies
 asking, praying,
 and whispering (p. 85).
 Everything stood still (p.85).

The above lines align with the ideas of trauma theorists like Cathy Carruth, who says that trauma is an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the delayed, the uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena (Carruth, 2016, p.3, 11) and Kolk, (1996) who maintains that what may complicate the capacity to communicate about traumatic experiences is that memories of trauma may have no verbal component (Kolk, 284). The idea of motion, breath and clock that ceases to function depicts the frozen moment of time. This emphasises how trauma disrupts the experience of time and narrative continuity. This also exposes how deeply traumatised the poet persona is as a result of this unusual stillness. It goes further to describe the

poet's state of being numb. This indicates a state of being between life and death. Again, the lines of the poem read thus:

Everybody arrayed in their expertise.
Astronauts in white and green and blue.
I do not see their faces (p. 85).

The lines of the poem above present medical images and trauma in the clinical realms. These are doctors, nurses and radiotherapist whom the poet refers to as 'Astronauts in white and green and blue'. This reference also reflects the poet's blunt view of medical experts which without doubt shows that the trauma which the poet suffers has an effect on his sense of association. Again, another distress which the poet persona suffers from is the fact that the medical personnel are faceless, making them to be alienated. This act makes the poet to feel a deep sense of isolation even though he is being cared for. The poet endeavours to elucidate the idea of spirit realm in the lines below:
My mother watched from a distance,
she sat fairer than the oil of gods
her face had not changed in a decade (p.85)

The poet's vision of his mother invokes both memory and myth. The line is particularly confusing whether the mother is living or she is on hallucinatory visitation in a moment near death. This implies that the speaker is in between the physical and the spiritual world. The traumatic condition of the poet placed him in a state of trance whereby he sees the vision of his mother describing her as 'fairer than the oil of the gods'. In spite of his near-death state, he has sense of aesthetics making him appreciate his mother's beauty. Therefore, his mother's supposed appearance to him, revitalises his sense of being and this has therapeutic effect in him.

The second poem in the second section titled, 'A Different December' reflects the poet's uncontrolled anger about the December of that year. As a common tradition, December is a period of festivity and celebration. It is a time of merry-making with family and friends. Contrarily, he finds himself in an isolated place where he cannot free himself. The lines of the poem read thus:

I arrived with a petulant bag
a screaming coldness in the heat of day,
a simmering anger against the virus.
I put the last line of my thought
Into the commotion in my head
I stood up but I sat down watching
as I walked out of my body,
bundle of phlegm, turbo of
menthol and mint

the breathless hysteria of silent tempest,
I arrived with a different rhythm
in my blood lines (p. 86)

The lines of the poem presented above use fragmented imagery, disorientation, physical and emotional metaphors to reconfigure trauma and reconstruct the self. The use of trauma and fragmentation of self is evident in the lines thus: 'I stood up but I sat down watching / as I walked out of my body ...' (p. 86). Again, the above excerpt exemplifies dissociation which is the state of being detached from the body. The self is fragmented, making the poet persona an actor and an observer. This portrays a psychic rupture of the poet's state of mind. To buttress this, the poet says: 'I put the last line of my thought into the commotion in my head'. The poet uses these words to paint a picture of his mental state. Another significant focus on trauma is explored in the lines thus:

Bundle of phlegm, turbo of
menthol and mint,
the breathless hysteria of silent tempest
(p. 86).

The lines above show image of manifestation of illness and panic. The use of phlegm and menthol symbolises relief. The use of 'Breathless hysteria' in this poem is paradoxical. Hysteria usually suggests a loud emotional reaction that can spur a person to display some sort of irrational behaviour. But in this case, the hysteria is breathless. This suggests the mute suffering of the poet. The poet is obviously filled with anger against the virus but lacks the energy to eliminate it. There is also evidence of reconfiguration of rhythms and identity in the poem. This is illustrated in the poet's declaration that 'I arrived with a different rhythm in my blood' (p.86). This line shows a post-traumatic change in the poet. The word 'Rhythms' implies a metaphor for life force, internal equilibrium or psychosocial stability. The poet's self that was in disarray has gradually come to normalcy. Hence, the arrival with a different rhythm implies a fundamental change in identity or outlook influenced by the trauma of the coronavirus. At this point, the poet has built up anger against the virus. His state of mind is to forcefully eliminate the virus and ensure it is eradicated. The poet also employs chaotic language and paradox as seen in the following line: 'A screaming coldness in the heat of the day...' (p.86) The use of 'screaming' and 'coldness' used side by side conveys internal dissonance which is suggestive of a world turned inside out. The poem also indicates that Remi Raji reconfigures trauma not only as a personal struggle but as a collective fight. The poet presents himself as a liminal figure which indicates

body and spirit, present and absent. This is illustrated in the lines thus: 'I stood up but I sat down watching/as I walk out of my body'.

The poem, 'The Pickpocket' is a meditation on the physical and psychological toll of COVID-19. The poet presents the virus as a metaphorical thief – a pickpocket, stealing time, stability and even breath. Raji uses this poem to convey the uncomfortable experience of illness and hospitalization.

The poem opens with the lines thus:

There are many captives in the different wars – all victims of the pickpocket.
Young, old, male and female, all victims of the pickpocket.

The thief does not know character, tongue or quota.
A window away from the ICU
These patients are agile, unlike me, they scare me.

They play scrabble, ludo and other games.
They speak above their voice and the noise grates my chest.
Why they are still here I do not know.
The coronavirus has a golden knife.
It peels the orange for you in a moment,
and stabs you in the arm thereafter... (p. 87)

Here, the virus is personified as a thief, violator of bodily and mental integrity. This gives account of the poet's use of the word 'Pickpocket'. The poet gives a vivid description of the virus as no respecter of age or gender. The following excerpt illustrates this thus: 'young, old, male and female, all victims of the pickpocket'. The knowledge of this alone is traumatic in itself. No wonder the poet explains that there are many captives in the ward. The word 'Captives' portray the imprisonment of the patients. First, the virus itself has made them captives. Then the isolation center is a place where there is no exit except when a patient is fully certified as free of the virus. The patients are disoriented and powerless which is a feature of trauma. Hence the poet persona says; 'The coronavirus has a golden knife/ it peels the orange for you in a moment, / and stabs you in the arm thereafter'. The unpredictability of the virus, explains why the patients live in fear. Thus, indicating the height of being traumatised. Again, the poet persona expresses fear in the midst of shared suffering. He sees himself as weaker than the other patients in the ward. This is illustrated in the lines below: 'These patients are agile, unlike me, / they scare me /They speak above their voices and their noise grates my chest' (p.8).

In the lines above, the poet's show of fear reflects isolation within shared suffering. The resilience of others becomes alienating. This also shows that the

trauma is not physiological but existential. Hence, he questions thus: 'Why they are still here I do not know'. While all the patients are caught in the same tragic situation, some appears stronger than the others in terms of physical activity. The poet says that 'They play scrabble, ludo and other games, / They speak above their voices and their noise grate my chest'. The poet questions their agility and wonders why he cannot be as active as the other patients in the ward. The poet persona feels depressed as a result of this. The poet employs the use of metaphor to reconfigure trauma thus:

The coronavirus has a golden knife.
It peels the orange for you a moment
and stabs you in the arms thereafter (p. 87)

The above extract reveals the unpredictability of the reaction of the virus on the patients. The 'golden Knife' suggests something attractive and pleasing but ultimately deadly. While the image of the orange peeling which symbolises hope is followed by disappointment and betrayal. This implies that the patients may appear healthy in a minute and goes into crises the next. Hence, the poet's feeling of uncertainty and fear. The poet also presents the trauma as living through the body. Here, the lines say; Black seed oil, hot tea, inhale stem, / then cold bath before breakfast (p.87). The lines above implies that the rituals induce more trauma in the patience because it does not bring about wellness but rather survival because even with all these exercises, the poet says, 'The palate is jade, and the nausea is rife'.

The idea of self-representation flows in the poem as the poet presents himself in the poem throughout. He plays the role of an observer and sufferer 'a blob of sweat and steam'. He gives detailed information on the characteristics of the virus, the spike in the temperature of the patients and the stressful and frustrating treatment of the patients. The poet describes the evening hours as most dreadful as the patients experience instability in temperature. This poet portrays the traumatic moment of the patients and the nurses thus:

The most dreadful time is when the sun goes down,
It is cold, it is hot, the temperature spikes,
The nurse is confused by the viral sequence
Fluctuating, between 38.5 and 37.8 and back again
(p.87).

In another line of the poem, the poet expresses the trauma of the medical personnel thus: 'The medical personnel work like ants.' The poem further shows the trauma which the poet faces in the last stanza of the poem when he describes the distress the virus causes

in the patient's internal body organ to the point that the patients pray for them to see the following day. This point is illustrated in the lines below:

The spike is the cruel cudgel of the virus,
To make a mess of the vital organs.
The coronavirus is the rough volleyball spiker.
At night I am a blob of sweat and steam,
Praying for the living day light to break. (p.88)

The poet persona also shows resistance and continuity in the lines below: 'Praying for the living day to break' (p.88). Finally, in the poem 'Pickpocket' the poet changes trauma into metaphor to portray disorientation, dehumanization and the quiet perseverance of life in a Covid-ward.

The idea of reconfiguration of trauma and self-representation is well explored in the poem, 'Breaking News #1'. Raji changes trauma to reconfigure a moment of physical suffering into a profound narrative of endurance, recovery and self-awareness. Trauma theory which emphasizes the embodiment of pain is deployed in the poem below:

December 18, 2020, the fourteenth hour of the day

A rumbling war broke out in my stomach
I dragged my energy to the toilet.
Pants rolled, ready for relief.
Then the miraculous happened I defecated
Defecated I. My bowels answered the call.
Ten days of vacuous emptiness...
To defecate is divine, to fart is human (p. 90).

In the lines above, the poet describes himself as weak giving a mental picture of a sick person lacking enough strength to walk, when he says 'I dragged my energy to the toilet'. There is much evidence of trauma embedded in the poem and the poet centers the trauma around intestinal distress. The poet's description of the way his pants rolled down and the emphasis laid on the act of defecating shows the trauma suffered by the poet. The poet's metaphoric use of the word 'war' suggests an internal conflict that is violent and consuming. This shows that the body becomes a place of crises. It implies disruptive trauma. Furthermore, Raji displays the idea of reconfiguring trauma from suffering to miracle. This idea is expressed in (Line 5) thus: 'Then the miraculous happened. /I defecated, Defecated I!' (p.90).

The lines above, exposes how the poet transforms his traumatic experience from purely destructive into a moment of transformation. The poet describes relief in exalting terms thus "Ten days of vacuous emptiness (Line 7). In another line which reads 'Then the

miraculous happened. / I defecated. Defecated I!' (5-6), the activity of defecation which is a mundane activity is elevated to the sacred. This reconfiguration reflects the psychological transition from helplessness to control. Again, line 8 of the poem says 'To defecate is divine, to fart is human.' This line exposes how the poet employs the use of humor and irony to process trauma. The play on words help to lighten the heaviness of his experience. He employed the use of humor to reclaim his dignity after a humiliating chapter of the disease. The poet represents himself not as a victim but as someone capable of narrating, reflecting and finding meaning in trauma. He presents himself as the actor of the actions through his use of the personal pronoun 'I'. hence the use of the lines 'I drag myself...' and 'I defecated'. That draws the attention of the reader to the fact that the poet narrates a life experience.

The poem 'Too many calls spoilt the solitude' reveals how the poet transforms his traumatic experience of illness and isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic into a poetic narrative that exposes his fractured selfhood and the struggle for identity amid physical and psychological disintegration.

The poem begins with a rejection of modern communication:

I avoided the mobile silver best as I could
Too many calls like quaking sound checks
I hated the ringtone and the many emergency videos
From digital doctors and mythologists,
The quick scientist of mutations and organ failures.
There are more conspiracy peddlers
than there are consultants in the ward.
So I was part of the future fission,
a mere decimal in their adverse game (p.96).

The above extract shows the poet's anxiety. The mobile phone which normally is a symbol of connection becomes a source of anxiety and over stimulation. This aversion signifies the speaker's withdrawal from overwhelming reality which is a common response in trauma survivors who fell flooded by sensory or informational input. This aligns with trauma theory as developed by Caruth that emphasizes how traumatic events can overwhelm the psyche, creating fragmented memory and temporal distortion. The poet also reconfigures reality through satirical imagery in the lines thus:

The many emergency videos from digital

Doctors and mythologists,

The quick scientists of mutations and organ failure. (p. 96)

The different informational treatment on the COVID-19 infection given by the countless online doctors gives the poet persona a feeling of discomfort as such he does not want to have a view of them. This is because the messages passed across appears to be conflicting with the poet's belief. Thus, indicating cognitive dissonance. The phrase 'mythologist' shows how trauma distorts perception. The poem also exposes the idea of identity crises and self-representation in the following lines So I was part of the future fission, /A mere decimal in their adverse game? (p.96). In the lines above, the speaker questions their own subjectivity which quickly suggest a loss of agency and selfhood. The ideas of describing oneself as 'a mere decimal' shows a sense of insignificance and dehumanization often becomes difficult because the traumatic experience shatters the continuity of self-leading to feelings of alienation and fragmentation. The poem present to the reader the physical and psychological deterioration in the extract below Days of solitude, of permanent walking /And permanent sleeping, all mixed up (p.96).

The above excerpt captures the disorientation of traumatic time, where the past, present and future collapse. The constant repetition of the image of dextrose bottles and shifting IVS indicate that the image of the body is mechanically sustained and not fully alive. That is a state between life and death. Based on this that the poet persona represent himself as a prisoner that is longing for escape in the lines below: "So irritable I needed the glucose instead of dead food/So jailed I needed freedom to fly, the energy to run..." (p. 96).

The need for glucose energy and yearning for flight suggests a desperate reclaiming of the self. The body is both literal and metamorphically prisoned. Thus, the poet expresses a deep desire to return to liveliness. The concluding line of this poem which reads thus: 'Death could be very cheap and lonely (Line 16)' represents emotional numbness and the trivialization of death. The word 'cheap' suggests the frequency of death during the Covid-19 pandemic, while the loneliness underscores the isolation trauma: that in suffering the self feels unvalued and unconnected.

Raji also explores the idea of reconfiguration of trauma and self-representation in the poem 'Pre-departure'. Viewing the poem through trauma theory reveals how the poet reconfigures his traumatic hospital experience into a narrative that negotiates mortality, isolation and identity. The poem captures a space between life and death, survivor and surrender in the lines below:

Before lunch I graduated to HDU, waiting for exit.

A single Spartan bed waiting for welcome and the company
Of older men
If they served wine or beer, it would smell like a three-star hotel or four.

An emergency had happened in my solitary ward.
The new entrance female, stretched in silent alarm,
Wheeled supine before my presence, needing oxygenation.

I watched as the doctors tested pulse and breath
The bouncy graphs appeared slow, long and rise
Tiny bleeps and frantic sounds on the screen. (p. 97)

The poem above begins in a clinical but emotionally charged tone. The term 'Graduated' suggests progress yet 'Waiting for exit' introduces a double meaning which could be either discharging a patient from the hospital or death. The speaker makes progress not by healing but by getting close to an unknown departure, showing how trauma reconfigures the perception of time and advancement. The poet's description of the new space as: 'A single Spartan bed waiting for welcome and the company of older men' reflects a detachment from the world. While the reference to the luxury 'three-star hotel' shows how trauma distorts perception. The final lines of this poem which reads thus: I moved into the corner of the last night /Waiting for debriefing, release and the exit fumigation (p.97) suggest a kind of reckoning and purification of the self. The lines represent the reconfiguration of trauma as ritual whereby suffering is processed into therapy.

The poem 'Denial' is a brief poem that contains a lot of information. In this poem, the poet draws the attention of the reader to exploration of the ideas of the disorientation, disempowerment and psychic rupture caused by the Covid-19 infection. The poet persona reconfigures trauma through themes of fatigue, confusion and fractured-self. He presents himself as a narrator trying to reconstruct his identity in the process of recovery from illness. Here the lines of the poem read:

Awake from a new unfamiliar bed.
I do not have the energy to write or think,
Or am I eager to rise.
Still, I wonder how I got caught in the
Unpredictable volleys of the truant virus...
(p.98)

The poem above draws the reader's attention to the fact that the poet persona (speaker) is alienated. That is, he is not in control of his environment. According to trauma theorist like Caruth trauma often shatters one's sense of temporal stability. Thus, this unfamiliar

bed is a symbol of displacement. Again, the poem presents its reader with a collapse of agency showing the speaker's total depletion of cognitive function. This is illustrated in the extract thus: I do not have the energy to write or think, / Or am I eager to rise (p.98). The above extract reflects a deep loss of self-expression, which signals a crisis in self-representation. The lines also reveal that the poet is in a fragmented state. This exposes the confused and disrupted internal state of someone coping with trauma. Thus, the lines above mirrors what trauma theorist call narrative breakdown. That is a situation where there is no logical story telling. The poet also reconfigures trauma through reflection where he says: Still I wonder how I got caught in the /Unpredictable volleys of the truant virus... (p.98). Here, the speaker begins to engage in retrospective questioning, indicating the confused state of the poet and a key step in reconfiguring trauma. The poet's use of the phrase how I got caught conveys entrapment, suggesting that the virus struck without warning. While the word 'volleys' evoke violence – like a battlefield. The poet's reference to the virus as 'truant' metaphorically represent the unpredictability of it. This emphasises how trauma invades without clear cause or pattern.

4. Conclusion

This study has shown through the analysis and discussion of the poems that contemporary Nigeria poetry, specifically Remi Raji's Wanderer Cantos, explores the idea of reconfiguration of trauma and self-representation. The examination of selected poems from the collection shows how the poet reflect trauma as a victim and survivor over the COVID-19 pandemic. The investigation exposes the features of trauma embedded in the poems that align with the poet's re-organising his covid experience into poetic composition. These include the collapse of time, dissociation, alienation, fragmentation of ideas and the text, hallucination, hysteria and use of symbolism and metaphor to describe the pains of illness, isolation and healing. The poet presents himself as both a sufferer and an observer, dead and living. The poet through the reconfiguration of trauma and self-representation presented the COVID-19 pandemic infection, not only as a personal affliction but as a collective disorientation. Again, he successfully reorganises his covid experience into a meaningful whole, replicating his first- hand experience into covid autobiographical poems.

References

Akinpelu, A.D. (2024). Trauma and Resilience in Osundare's City without People. *European*

Journal: English Language and literary Studies (12): 4. pp. 43-55.

Awodiya, et al (2024). Poetry: Therapeutic Functions and Effects on Youth Mental Well-being in post

COVID-19 Era in Nigeria. *agidigbo: ABUAD Journal of Humanities* (12):1 <https://journals.abuad.edu.ng>

Balaev, M. (2014). *Literary Trauma Reconsidered: Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*: Doi:10.1057/978113736941-1p.1 <https://scihub.se>

Blalock, K. (2023). Resilience and Reconfiguration. <https://henricocasa.org/resilience-reconfiguration>

Carruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. The John Hopkins University: Press Baltimore and London.

Chris, B. (2023). Poetry is Good for Mental Health. *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, Doi:10.1080/08893675.2023.2250921.

<https://www.ntu.ac.uk/about.us/news/new>. Retrieved August 18, 2025.

Delamred, et al (2021). Effects of Poetry Intervention on Emotional Well-being in Hospitalized Pediatric Patients. *American Academy of Pediatrics*, Vol. 11-12. <https://pinned.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov>. Retrieved August 18, 2025.

Friday, A and Oghenerioborue, U.P. (2022). literary Imaginations and Medical Practices in Selected Modern African Poetry. *Voices: A Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 8 pp. 52-65 <https://unidel.edu.ng/cms/uploads>

Gonzalez, E.S. (2012). *On Poetry, War and Trauma: A Preliminary Discussion on Memory, Transformation and Audiences*.

Hannah, C. (2024). *Trauma Healing and the Extraordinary Hidden Power of Poetry*. Catherine Hannah

Poetry for Healing and Beyond. <https://catherinehannahpoetry.com/trauma-healing-and-the-extraordinary-hidden-power-of-poetry/>. Retrieved August 19, 2025

Heimes, S. (2011). Stat of Poetry Therapy Research (Review): *The Art in Psychotherapy* 38(i): 1-8, Doi: 10.1016/J.aip2010.09.006

Ifowodo, O. (2013). *History, Trauma and Healing in Postcolonial Narratives*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ilechukwu, S. J. and Ojaruega, E. O (2024). Exploring Collective Trauma in Selected Anglophone Covid-19 Poetry. *Abraka Journal of Humanities, Law and Social Sciences* 1(1): pp. 78-91.

- Janet, P. (1989). The Dissociation Theory. *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 2. pp. 397-412
- Jena, D. & Semantray, K. (2012). Traumatic Experiences and their Representation in Narrative: A Study. *International Journal of English Language Studies* 3(11):01-06 Doi 10-32996/Ijels. 021.3.11.1
- Kekeghe, S. & Omobowale, E. B. (2025). Niger Delta Poetry: Trauma, Blues and Bibliotherapy. *Issues in Language and Literary Studies* 11(1): 298-322
- King James Version (kjv) 1 Samuel 16:14-23.
- Kolk, B.V. (1996). 'The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma' In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Carruth, 158-82. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Landow, G.P. (1988). *Autobiography, Autobiographicality and Self – Representations*. The Victorian Web. <https://victorianweb.org/genre/autobiography/2html>. Retrieved August 19, 2025
- Lee, S. (2025). *Trauma in African Lit: A Guide. Exploring the Representation of Trauma in African Literature in English* <https://www.numberanalytics.com>
- Mambrol, N. (2018). *Literary Theory and Criticism: Michael Rothberg Realism- The Demand of Holocaust Representation*. <https://literariness.org/2018/12/19/trauma>
- Mazza, N.F. (2022). *Poetry Therapy*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1016j.aip.2012.10.002>
- McGowan, E. (2020). *Your Guide to Writing Poetry as a Form of Self-Care*. <https://www.thegoodtrade.com/features/how-to-write-poetry/>
- Moawad. (2022). *Traumatic Experience in the Poetry of Corona Virus Pandemic (COVID-19): Journal of the Faculty of Arts Mansoura University. Vol 70. 29-42.*
- Mohammed, S. (2016). *Self – Identity and Representation in Nigerian Women's Autobiography: A Literary Study of Emecheta's Head Above Water and Ogundipe's Up Country Girl*. 430(1) pp. i-cx
- National Library of Medicine (2015). <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/about/>
- National Library of Medicine: National Center for Biotechnology Information. *J med Humanit* 2020 Vol 41(4) 603-608.
- Odueme, E. F. (2019). *Orality, Memory and the New African Diaspora Poetry: Examining Tanure Ojaide's Poetics. Afrika Focus -Vol. 32, (1): pp.149-157*
- Ogbeide, V. O. (2018). *Of Traumatised Children and Bent Arrows in Darko's Faceless and Unigwe's Night Dancers. Journal of the Literary Society of Nigeria. 10. 45-57.*
- Okeke, C.W. (2023). *Emotional Expression in Igbo Poetry as a Response to Trauma and its Effect on Human Psyche. Nigerian Journal of Arts and Humanities (NJAHA), Vol 3 No.3: pp.40-49. ISSN:2814 – 3760, E-ISSN:2955-0343*
- Okuyade, O. (2010). *The Re-articulation of Hope from Grief: Nigerian Civil War Poetry as Ledger. Novitas Royal Research on Youth and Language Vol 4(2), 201-215*
- Okuyade, O.& Mukoro, E. (2024). *A New Direction in Contemporary Nigerian Poetry: The Pandemic Poems of Tanure Ojaide and Edefe Mukoro Doi 10.1515_9781805434757-005 pp.37-49*
- Ojaide, T. (2021). *Narrow Escapes: A Poetic Diary of Coronavirus Pandemic, USA Spear Books.*
- Owonibi, S. (2008). *Tayo Olafioye and Scriptotherapy: A study of a stroke of hope. The Mines of the mind. B. L. Virtanen & S. Owonibi. Eds. AWP: Asmara.*
- Perez, L. (2024). *Poetry as a Therapeutic Tool: Wellspring Center for Prevention.*
- Raji, R. (2021). *Wanderer Cantos. Noirledge Publishing Nigeria.*
- Regenia, G. (2023). *Introduction; subjectivities: A History of Self Representation in Britain, 1832-1920: Online edn, Oxford Academic.*
- Risberg, M.R. (2018). *Problems in Representing Trauma: Trauma and Literature, pp. 110-123. Cambridge University Press. https://assets.cambridge.org*
- Sivakumar, S. (2024). *Exploring Poem Therapy: A Path to Healing Through Words: Global Leader in Counselling Coaching and Training.*
- Uwatt, E.B. (2023). *A Pandemic on a Pandemic: Tanure Ojaide's Poetry, Racism and Corona Virus-19 Pandemic. Utuemikan: Iban Journal Vol.2.*
- Wenzel, J. (2016). *Poetry and Trauma Recovery.*
- Wordsworth, W. (1805). *Preface to Lyrical Ballad: Fourth Edition.*
- World Health Organization (2022). *Grieving Family Members Reflect on 2 million Deaths from COVID-19: Interviews with those who Lost Fathers during the Pandemic.*