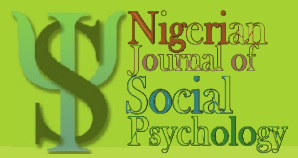


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Economic Trauma as Catalyst for Violence and Social Survival in E.E. Sule's *Sterile Sky*

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Abstract

*Through the prism of Marxist literary theory, this research examines the themes of socioeconomic pain and the battle for existence in E.E. Sule's *Sterile Sky*. The novel depicts the real-life experiences of people locked in a cycle of poverty, alienation, and ethno-religious strife against the backdrop of violence and economic instability in Northern Nigeria. This paper explores how class conflict and economic hardship are portrayed, and influence characters' perceptions and behaviour. Through the affordance of Marxist literary theory, it demonstrates how the novel's capitalist structures feed violent and unstable cycles of society while also systemically marginalising the working class. This study also looks at how the novel's prevailing worldview supports the status quo while also emphasising moments of defiance and prospective revolutionary awareness. In order to critically analyse the socio-political commentary present in *Sterile Sky* and place it within larger discourses on class struggle, inequality, and postcolonial African literature, the study will focus on the intersection of socio-economic trauma and survival.*

Keywords: *class struggle, inequality, and postcolonial African literature, socioeconomic pain*

Introduction

The vicious interplay of religious fanaticism, political corruption, illiteracy, poverty, and socio-economic trauma in the third world is a current conversation in literature. E.E. Sule's novel, *Sterile Sky*, explores these themes, offering a powerful commentary on the challenges faced by individuals trying to survive in such environments.

The connection between socio-economic status and mental health has been vastly researched. Poverty often leads to chronic stress – a condition that has been shown to have both psychological and physiological effects. Hans Selye's General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS) explains how chronic exposure to stress, such as economic hardship, leads to physiological burnout, resulting in poor mental and physical health outcomes (Selye 1950). There are different types of trauma. Economic trauma, just like other forms of trauma, manifests in the body, heralding chronic health problems, substance abuse, and other physical ailments (Bessel 2014). Cultural trauma is a situation, where a group of people undergo trauma together, with the resulting scars affecting the group's collective identity (Alexander 2004). Studies from the American Psychological Association also show that poverty is a major predictor of mental health problems, because it creates a vicious cycle of economic hardship and psychological distress (APA 2019).

Trauma

While there may be various ways to explain trauma, in its most fundamental sense, it refers to a psychological reaction to a catastrophic occurrence. It's an emotion we each experience.

Symptoms may develop towards an irreversible response like (PTSD) post-traumatic stress disorder (Herman 1992). Trauma can also be collective trauma – a blow to the fabric of a community, creating lasting disruption and change in the social structure (Erikson 1976). The previously unpleasant event may repeatedly occur, or one may become disoriented due to recollections of the past and may not know how to proceed (Bessel 2014). Trauma is the result of a stressful incident surpassing a person's capacity for adjustment. It can manifest in the body – trauma survivors experience physical symptoms as part of their psychological distress (Janet 1925). This can show itself as abuse of drugs, stress, grief, or PTSD, among other manifestations (Judith 1992). An individual's mental and physical states can all be affected by trauma, and these can originate from one traumatic experience or from repeated occurrences. These can lead to disruptions in memory and consciousness (Janet 1925). Those who have experienced trauma may find it challenging perform their daily activities due to intrusive thoughts, intense fear, helplessness, or horror. Trauma can lead to dreadful vision or flashbacks, avoidance, and other debilitating symptoms (APA 2013). Trauma also has the potential to alter an individual's views concerning their surroundings and their own. This may result in feelings of worthlessness and an altered perception of security (Sarah 2022).

Socio-Economic Trauma

This is a term that describes the mental and emotional suffering generated through unfavourable social, monetary, or economic situations, as well as abrupt shifts in the state of one's finances. People who have experienced socio-economic trauma are susceptible to obstacles such as unstable living conditions, food shortages in supplies, and constrained access to education and medical care. Several studies, such as *The Impact of Poverty on Mental Health* (source), have explored the connection between socio-economic status and psychological trauma. Research demonstrates that people in low-income situations experience higher levels of stress, trauma, and mental health issues due to economic instability and limited access to resources (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). This specific type of trauma may trigger tension, worry, dismay, structural violence, and other social challenges that put individuals and populations in harm's way (Farmer 2003). In addition, persistent injustices including income disparity, poverty, and limited availability of resources are associated with socioeconomic trauma. Feelings of helplessness and despair may arise from this. (Masoumeh, 2018).

Individuals with a lower socio-economic status (SES) are more likely to suffer from inadequate medical treatment and non-return to work (RTW) after trauma, indicating a link between socio-economic status and trauma consequences. More assistance from society is required for them after dismissal (Masoumeh 2018). Discrimination in deaths and morbidity following adolescent casualties also arise as a consequence of children who come from socioeconomically poor households experiencing a higher proportion of accidents from firearms, transportation, and homicide (Trinidad & Meera 2023). Lower SES individuals suffering from poly trauma are younger, more likely to sustain traumatic injuries, and spend a longer period in the intensive care unit (Popal 2021). Vulnerability to childhood trauma has a strong association with the socio-economic status of the family, with low SES families experiencing higher levels of risk. Therefore, it is imperative to tackle the social variables of well-being and execute measures aimed at diminishing such disparities or societal problems like income inequality, mental health issues, violence, and shortened life spans (Wilkinson 2009). Different scholars have examined trauma and the struggle for survival. Vickroy examines how trauma and survival are depicted in modern literature, focusing on how socio-economic factors contribute to characters' psychological and physical challenges (Vickroy 2002).

In the context of socio-economic trauma, survival signifies the ability of an individual to persevere through hardship and emerge on top. It consists of adaptability, approaches to coping, and being able to adjust to challenging situations. The notion of socio-economic trauma and the struggle for survival draws attention to the link between the mental consequences that result from living in a disadvantageous environment and financial difficulties. It explores the ways in which economic displacement and financial crises lead to socio-economic trauma in literature. It also argues that characters' responses to economic deprivation often manifest as a battle for survival, which can lead to violence, power struggles, and breakdowns in morality (Caruth 1996). Throughout history, trauma caused by socio-economic conditions has been closely linked to broader societal structures, including colonisation, slavery, and systemic racism. According to Fanon, the psychological impact of colonisation on both the colonised and the coloniser has emphasised how economic exploitation and cultural alienation lead to deep-rooted trauma for the oppressed.

The forced economic and social marginalisation that came with colonisation has left a legacy of socio-economic trauma in post-colonial societies (Fanon 1961), leading to the intersection of race, class, and gender, which illustrates how women of colour, in particular, face compounded socio-economic struggles and trauma due to these intersecting systems of oppression (Davis 1981). The neoliberal policies, such as deregulation and privatisation, widen economic disparities which contribute to increased economic instability, particularly for the working class as argued by (Harvey 2005). These economic policies are often accompanied by cuts in social services, which leave individuals more vulnerable to unemployment, homelessness, and poor health. These highlight how economic marginalisation in urban areas creates environments of hyper-ghettoisation, where crime, poverty, and trauma become entrenched (Wacquant 2008).

This struggle manifests in various ways, affecting individuals and communities differently based on their socio-economic status (SES), ultimately perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality in society. The cycle can be difficult to break without systemic changes that address root causes and provide opportunities for upward mobility. Children from low SES families are particularly vulnerable, because they experience higher rates of childhood trauma. This exposure can lead to long-term health consequences and perpetuate cycles of poverty and trauma (Assari 2020). In the setting of socio-economic trauma, the struggle for survival entails sustaining necessities like food, shelter, and safety while overcoming obstacles brought about by social injustices and economic hardship. Maslow's hierarchy of needs posits that the most basic human needs are physiological such as food and shelter and when these are threatened, individuals experience profound stress (Maslow 1943). In impoverished communities, the ongoing effort to secure these basic needs contributes to what is called 'survival trauma.' Socioeconomic status (SES) significantly influences the likelihood of a person experiencing trauma through several mechanisms: Low SES patients experience poor hospital care, worse outcomes, long-term disabilities, and challenges in recovery due to a lack of adequate healthcare, support systems, and resources, which lead to higher readmission rates and chronic health issues. (Yang 2021).

Sterile Sky clearly illustrates both economic and social struggles in addition to the constant struggle to survive in a world filled with violence. The novel, whose story is set in the northern region of Nigeria, underscores the challenges which Murtala as well as those close to him face as they struggle against the depressing reality of crime, destitution, particularly the breakdown of social norms. This study would analyse the societal and economic pain illustrated in *Sterile Sky* by employing Marxist literary theory. The theory accentuates the influence of socio-economic circumstances over human emotions and consciousness. From

this vantage point, the study is also going to investigate the manner in which the novel portrays the effects of societal collapse, economic hardship, and disparities in wealth on people and communities.

Various global efforts seek to address socio-economic trauma. International organisations such as the World Bank, UNICEF, and UNHCR have developed programmes to mitigate the effects of poverty and support vulnerable populations, especially in the wake of conflict and natural disasters. In order to break the cycle of poverty and trauma, these initiatives recognise that socio-economic trauma requires systemic changes, including access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities. However, as (Alexander 2008) points out in *The Globalisation of Addiction*, many of these global efforts are hampered by the very economic systems that perpetuate inequality. Alexander argues that addiction and other social problems often stem from dislocations caused by economic policies which prioritize profit over human well-being. This suggests that addressing socio-economic trauma requires a rethinking of global economic structures.

The main aim of this study, therefore, is to analyse the portrayal of socio-economic trauma and the struggle for survival in E.E. Sule's *Sterile Sky* from a Marxist literary theory lens. The specific objectives would be to examine how the novel represents the socio-economic conditions of its characters, explore the ways in which the characters' experiences of trauma shape their identities and actions, and analyse the novel's critique of the societal structures that contribute to socio-economic inequality.

Theoretical framework

Drawing from the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Marxist literary theory asserts that the written text serves as a window into the socio-economic environment of its subject. It makes the case that a society's superstructure – culture, beliefs, and politics – are determined by its underlying physical foundation, or its economic framework. In literature, this theory is used to examine how texts reveal the dynamics of power, class struggle, and the effects of capitalism on society. The theory also explores how literature can either reinforce or challenge the dominant ideology and socio-economic order. According to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the Igbo group is subjected to cultural brutality and enslavement as a result of colonialism. This kind of exploitation has its origins in the early accumulation of capital process, in which colonialists amass wealth by taking advantage of the time and assets of the colonised people. The novel describes how the collapse of the ideal Igbo society and the trauma that its members endure are caused by colonial abuse (Arthur, 2021). Marxist philosophy highlights the fact that the fight for existence is a struggle between classes.

The upper class known as the bourgeoisie, possesses the resources of production and take advantage of the subjectivity of the proletariat to profiteer. This exploitation is then opposed by the proletariat, who though lack the means of production, have instinctive defences. This is a cognitive and emotional struggle in addition to an economical one. This emphasises the close relationship between the battle for existence and societal and economic factors. The alienation theory developed by Karl Marx outlines how individuals in a capitalist system become estranged from both their labour and humanism. Understanding socio-economic trauma requires an awareness of the sentiments of isolation and helplessness that arise from this feeling of estrangement. When it comes to compensation for labour, employees must sell what they do in order to make ends meet. Their physical beings are appalled and their mental faculties are destroyed in the course of events as the economic system takes control of them.

Due to the fact that their work is a public expression of who they are, an employee feels dissatisfied and exhausted.

It is necessary to examine the psychological and physical factors that influence human interactions in order to apply Marxist literary theory to the explanation of socio-economic trauma and the struggle for existence in the foregrounded novel. This draws attention to the various manners in which exploitation in a situation of estrangement and conflict between classes are essential to comprehending the trauma that individuals experience and their continuous fight for existence in repressive systems. Researchers can gain an improved awareness of the intricacies of socio-economic trauma and the capacity for resilience needed among people to fight each day for survival by looking at these interactions.

Literature review

The novel centres on Murtala, a young boy whose life is irrevocably altered by the violence that pervades his environment. The trauma experienced by Murtala and his family is not only a result of direct violence but also stems from the socio-economic conditions that exacerbate their vulnerability. The novel illustrates the impact of ethno-religious crises in Nigeria, particularly in the northern regions where religious fundamentalism has led to widespread violence. Murtala's experiences, including the loss of loved ones such as his brother and schoolmate, highlight the psychological scars left by such trauma. Scholars note that the haunting presence of these figures in Murtala's dreams symbolises the inescapable nature of trauma in his life (Sanya Osha 2012).

Numerous scholarly articles and journals have explored the themes of socio-economic trauma and survival in literature, particularly through the lens of Marxist theory. Some relevant works like *Marxism and Literature* by Raymond Williams (1977) provides a comprehensive overview of Marxist literary theory and its application to literature. Williams discusses how literature reflects and critiques the socio-economic conditions of its time, making it a valuable resource for analysing *Sterile Sky*. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* by Jameson (1981), explores the relationship between literature and ideology, arguing that all narratives are inherently political. It is useful for understanding how *Sterile Sky* reflects and critiques the socio-economic structures of Nigerian society. Abiola Irele's article "Socio-economic Injustice and the Nigerian Novel" specifically examines how Nigerian literature, including works like *Sterile Sky*, address issues of socio-economic injustice and the impact of colonialism and capitalism on Nigerian society. *Violence and Trauma in Postcolonial African Literature* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o discusses the portrayal of violence and trauma in African literature, with a focus on how the themes are intertwined with the socio-economic conditions of postcolonial societies.

Your literature review relating to *Sterile Sky* is largely inadequate. Tell us what other critics such as Kazeem Adebisi-Adelabu, Lola Akande, Ayobami Onanuga, Lacirda Jones, etc, have written about the novel.

Socio-Economic Trauma in *Sterile Sky*

Sterile Sky portrays a society in turmoil, where socio-economic instability is a constant presence in the lives of the characters. The novel is set in Kano, a city beset by ethno-religious conflicts and economic hardship – a society that mirrors the broader socio-political tensions in Nigeria. The violence and chaos in the city are not just physical but deeply rooted in the socio-economic disparities that plague societies. At the core of the novel is the depiction of economic deprivation and its devastating effects on the lower classes. The

characters in *Sterile Sky* are trapped in a cycle of poverty and violence, which is exacerbated by the socio-political turmoil in their environment. The Marxist application allows us to see how the economic base – characterised by unemployment, lack of resources, and inequality – shapes the consciousness and actions of the characters in the novel.

Murtala's family, like many others in the novel, is struggling to survive in an environment where the means of production are controlled by a few. This situation leaves the majority in a state of deprivation. The novel highlights how the working class is alienated not only from the fruits of their labour but also from the society that has become increasingly hostile and unforgiving. The characters' sense of powerlessness and despair is a direct result of the capitalist structures that marginalise and exploit them. With details, Sule exhibits his generosity in the first person. This shows his impact as an eye witness and projects the reality of his experience in the reader. *Sterile Sky* is an unsullied representation of the deterioration of value in modern Northern Nigerian societies.

The novel begins in a scene of religious riot. "Muslim extremists kill, maim, and set every person, 'kafiri', perceived to be a dissent ablaze" (1). The "graphic description of a pregnant woman being butchered and the mangling of her foetus" (2-3) in the opening chapter introduces the readers to the senseless massacres that dominate and drive the plot. In fact, "the sterility of the sky" (41) which by implication is God's seeming impotence in the face of affliction symbolised by the sky which is assumed to be the residence of God is sincerely portrayed in Chapter Three, where Murtala's mother, Isagua, who is overwhelmed by the proximity of the killers and the seeming certainty of a brutal end, "...looked into the sterile sky" (42). She is possibly looking for an answer without receiving any intelligible response. This is not disregarding the fact that "she and hers survived the particular season of violence" (45). The story attempts to question the omnipotence of God or rather the effectiveness of prayers during trials and tribulations.

The reader learns the ensuing violence that erupts in response to the visit of a man of God from Germany – Reinhard Bonnke. Bonnke allegedly performs a miracle by restoring the sight of a blind beggar at the gate of the Emir by just saying "...a kind word to him..." (12). According to the narrator, "... the white man would have been stoned right there by furious unbelievers who he had brought an evil ring from India to hoodwink all Kano city..."(15). The ignorance which leads to the intolerance, of any kind, is rooted in the economic disadvantage and epistemic ignorance the perpetrators of this violence suffer. The religious violence portrayed in the novel is carried out by the economically exploited hoi polloi, a group of young men known popularly as Almajiri in Northern Nigeria. Their state of lack pushes them into accepting acts of dissonance and chaos. They are ever willing to disrupt the system they believe deprive them of love.

The abundance of images of "roads littered with corpses", "damaged cars and motorcycles...", and "smouldering houses with acrid smoke..." (20-22) in the beginning of the engrossing narrative is a bare reflection of the enormity of destruction accruable from religious bigotry and ignorance. To Murtala, the participant narrator, "the air outside was heavy with the odour of burning flesh" (25) and as they walked in silence they inhaled "the stale odour of death" (26). The commonplaceness of the lexical item "death" in the *Sterile Sky* emphasises the fatality resulting from every form of religious extremism. The exclamation "violence even to the unborn" (5) by Murtala's mother after listening to the story of Helen's father who had gone banana witnessing the heartless and gruesome murder of his six children and the slitting of his pregnant wife testifies to the bottomlessness of disturbing carnages recorded in the novel. The people who are targeted for this absurd killing are usually

the less privileged, the economically disadvantaged who stay in vulnerable spaces with little or no presence of security. They are ostracised from the elites who stratify the society based on economic and political interests. They of the political class are usually not affected by such terrorist attacks and disturbances.

It is noteworthy to remember that before “the horn of violence” (10) is blown in the second chapter, the “tarred street” (11) is described as so “hot” (11) that the narrator could feel it through his rubber sandals. The event implies that none is really insulated from the adverse reality emerging from the all-encompassing violence. Nonetheless, the impact varies. The elites have a way of insulating themselves and leaving the vulnerable masses to their fate – the fate of the socio-economic mess and inequality they have created.

The prominence of shock and dependence that marks the prevalence of senseless occurrence enjoys reinforcement in every chapter of the novel. That Murtala’s younger brother, Ukpo – very energetic and promising – “loses his life in a ghastly motor accident” (34-35) in a commotion resulting from a religiously orchestrated conflict lends credence to the atmosphere of despair that pervades the story. “The death of Ukpo is definitely a tragedy” (36), that Murtala and his family, the young narrator, must live with throughout their existence in Kano State. This is an awful depiction of the state of life in many parts of Northern Nigeria.

In fact, the inventory of death and crises that abound in the narrative is not only seen as distasteful but extremely shocking. For instance, “the killing of Helen and all her siblings” (56-57), “the setting ablaze of Madam Well-well” (78) by the Igbo Christians in retaliatory attacks, and “the loss of twenty-four students” (90) in Murtala’s school is quite outrageous and provocative. The unbecoming activities of religious fanatics and the universality of the effects are mirrored when the “pot-bellied proprietor” of Murtala’s school quotes J.P. Clark saying, “We’re all casualties” (102). Uncle Tony, a university undergraduate and a happy survivor of one of the crises emphasises the air of uncertainty that rents the mood of the narrative. He visits his sister and his friend, Omodiale, limping. He tells the story of how he sustains an injury, declaring that the story has always remained the same, “Rioting, fleeing, jumping and sustaining injuries (115)”. No wonder, Tony argues with his sister, Ijaguwa persuading her to believe that “Christianity and Islam are foreign religions” (120). In addition, Uncle Tony opines that “The ancestral way our fathers worshipped God is the best way” (121).

Omodiale, a young graduate teacher, who seems to see no strange thing in religiously induced violence, seems to be living his life without much sentience of the violence and instability that direct the bearing of the story. Omodiale has become so certain about violence in a society that esteems religious participation. He asserts that “We’re all children of violence; at least by the religions we practice” (127). He does not spare anyone through his string of anecdotes that border on the inevitability of violence as emission of religious practices, declaring that, “Christianity and Islam are rooted in violence...” (128). And arguing that, “... the tradition of killing people and taking their lands, rooted in Christianity and Islam, has continued throughout all ages” (129). Omodiale suggests that most religious warriors unavoidably “kill other people with holy instructions” (130) and reminds us that “the world was not unconnected to religious conquest” (131). Most significantly, the premises of Omodiale’s persuasion pictures the people’s hopeless search for solution; a sort of fatality that seems to be a destiny of the society. When people indulge in religious violence, they do so in response to some personal discomfort and inadequacies.

It is possible that the despair and shock that emerge from the grim reality of terrible violence push Omodiale to justify his care-free lifestyle. He demonstrates this when he declares, "... I'm not afraid of violent death, Fatima. That's why every day, every hour, I live my life to the fullest" (135). He continues, "I indulge in all pleasures I approve for myself, knowing that in a twinkle of an eye, the club, the rope, the sword, the dagger, or the gun will come for my life. Or the ultramodern parcel bomb with which they quenched Dele Giwa..." (136). He argues further "I accept that violence is bound to happen. The foundation of the world and its religion is laid on violence (137)". Also, closely interlaced with religious violence in *Sterile Sky* is the socio-political violence engendered through the sustenance of corruption by the government.

The Battle for Survival

Sterile Sky mainly explores the issue of the struggle for survival, which represents the difficult circumstances that the lower classes in a capitalist society must deal with. The protagonists are always fighting against the socio-economic pressures that prolong their misery in addition to the imminent dangers presented by violent incidents in their city. The novel illustrates the manner in which these battles are often in vain since the protagonists are trapped in a never-ending cycle of crime and destitution. Marxism holds that the capitalist system, which puts profit ahead of human existence and wellness, is to blame for this feeling of helplessness and alienation. It's clear from what happens when the people endure having to make difficult decisions in order to survive, frequently at the cost of their dignity and integrity. The novel advances the argument that each of the protagonists' socioeconomic anguish stems from both the brutality and the deeper economic circumstances that render it unavoidable.

Survival in *Sterile Sky* is depicted as a complex battle against both external violence and internal familial disintegration. Murtala's voyage illustrates the determination needed to survive in a harsh setting. The protagonists are excellent examples of endurance in times of difficulty, especially Murtala's mother. Murtala's mother shows courage and highlights the often-underappreciated roles women play in helping families survive in the face of socio-economic hardships, whereas his father gives in to the demands of his environment (Sanya 2012). The novel also looks at how people of different religions might come together in solidarity. Instances where neighbours assist Murtala's family during crises illustrate the possibility of communal support in times of strife. This challenges the binary often presented between Christians and Muslims, suggesting that shared humanity can prevail despite societal divisions (Suhr-Sytsma 2022).

The Role of Ideology

The Marxist literary theory propounds that ideology shapes people's perceptions of reality, which are important for preserving the status quo. The prevailing worldview in *Sterile Sky* is one that defends socio-economic injustices and the violence that results from them. Frequently, the protagonists are portrayed as internalising this philosophy and thinking that their pain is justified or even necessary. The protagonists find it challenging to imagine a new reality as a result of their assimilation of the prevailing ideology, which serves to maintain the current power structures. The novel also raises the prospect of opposition and transformation. An important idea in Marxist theory is revolution consciousness, which Murtala appears to be developing as he becomes more conscious of the socioeconomic factors influencing his

reality. Thus, the question of whether the protagonists will resist their oppression or continue to accept it is left unanswered in the novel.

Conclusion

It is an incontestable reality from the society represented in the *Sterile Sky* that the illiteracy, disease, violence, and abject poverty characterising most African nations do not result from any ecological factor. These negative elements are by-products of military terrorism, class stratification, economic sabotage, and religious fanaticism. E.E. Sule's *Sterile Sky* offers a poignant exploration of socio-economic trauma and the struggle for survival in a society ravaged by violence and poverty. This demonstrates his fearless stance in exposing the truth bordering on appalling societal ills. Through a Marxist literary theory lens, *Sterile Sky* is imagined as a critique of the capitalist structures that perpetuate inequality and suffering. By highlighting the experiences of the marginalized and oppressed, it reflects the socio-economic realities of its time and challenges readers to confront the systemic forces that shape human lives. Its portrayal of the battle for survival serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring relevance of Marxist analysis in understanding literature and society.

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