

## **Mainstreaming Verbal Abuse as Therapeutic Orality: A Tripartite Psychological Approach**

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APA Citation: Muleka, J. (2021). Mainstreaming Verbal Abuse as Therapeutic Orality: A Tripartite Psychological Approach. *Ngano: The Journal of Eastern African Oral Literature*, 2, 90-97.

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### **Abstract**

*This paper attempts to evaluate verbal abuse/insults as artistic communication that may yield therapeutic results for both the abuser and the abused. The paper which restricts itself to verbal abuse – also synonymously referred to as verbal insults – views it as an art that involves creativity. The paper argues that the very composition of the content and lexis of verbal abuse, accompanied by the mechanics of articulating the abuse, all call for an appreciable degree of creativity if the abuse will achieve the intended effect. As a form of communication, verbal abuse has a structure which involves a speaker as the encoder of the insult and a hearer as the recipient and decoder, capable of converting the messages into painful intents. Pursuing Aristotle’s cathartic principle of emotional arousal and release, this paper attempts to put forward verbal abuse as a catharsis that yields therapeutic end results. Since verbal abuse involves formulation and articulation of intentional messages, it is treated in this paper as a performance that here draws on the theory of performance. The paper results from one-on-one interviews with respondents who had engaged in verbal abuse, whether light or intense; either as recipients of the abuse or as perpetrators. Soliciting for the reactions to the act of verbal abuse from both sides of the action and analyzing the reactions using Sigmund Freud’s tripartite psychological approach of the “Id, Ego and Superego”, this paper concludes that verbal abuse is a performance that not only always leads to toxic results, but may also elicit therapeutic feelings, resulting from cathartic arousal and release of emotions, not only for the abuser, but the abused as well.*

**Key Words:** Verbal Abuse, Therapy, Catharsis, Creativity, Art, Performance, Abuser, Abused

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### **Introduction**

There are many different types of abuse. Abuse ranges from physical to non-physical types, all aimed at hurting the recipient of the abuse. Physical abuse includes and is not limited to acts such as sexual violence, recurrent corporal punishment and battery, among others, while non-physical abuse most times happens in form of verbal insults and intentional discriminatory gestures. While abuse mostly occurs by commission, Muleka (2017) argues that abuse could also occur by omission. Here is where silence is used to suffer the recipient psychological torture through continued denial of crucial information, or through suspense that renders the victim agonizing over inability to grasp the exact meaning of the silence. Apparently the most common non-physical

abuse is verbal abuse which in majority cases may incorporate verbal insults that aim to cause the recipient distress, or bring them to disrepute. Much as verbal abuse may naturally always be viewed from its negative connotations and perhaps shunned as unworthy serious and positive, or even gainful debate, this paper attempts to mainstream it as an art that involves performance, while positing it as a possible source of emotional and psychological therapy to both the abuser and the abused.

### **Methodology**

This study undertook to collect views on the nature of and possible reaction(s) to verbal abuse. I held extensive discussions with my colleagues who freely talked about their experiences when they had altercations with friends, colleagues, relatives, and even their spouses. I also interviewed other people outside my circle of friends. The most memorable case was that of two men at a bus terminus who had bitterly engaged in a protracted quarrel in which the other man was the obvious aggressor hurling all sorts of insults at the victim. Later when I talked to the men separately, I was rather shocked at their responses, and particularly from the man who had been the target of the other's insults. When I expected to find him bitter at being embarrassed to that extent, he instead pointed out to me that he felt no bitterness, but rather it was his opponent that should feel ashamed for making a fool of himself before the whole world. And when I sought out the other man who had been so aggressive in public, I found him mellowed and he was obviously not prepared to be reminded of the quarrel. Whether he was sorry about his earlier actions or ashamed of how he had treated his colleague was for anyone to conjure, but I had actually expected to meet an arrogant man who would repeat or confirm all those insults he had hurled at the other. "Just forget it", he told me with a wave of the hand. Why such sudden withdrawal? Was it possible that he no longer felt proud of the way he had demeaned his friend in front of everyone?

Anyway, during the interviews, I served my respondents with questions that sought to find how they felt after an altercation where they either had been the victims of the insults or the ones insulting.

### **Verbal Abuse as an Oral Art**

Verbal abuse is an art because it involves creativity. For it to carry and yield the intended semantic effect, both the syntactic manipulation and phonological rendition of verbal abuse must go well above average communication abilities. Starting at the syntactic level, the lexical selection, i.e. the choice of words must be carefully and accurately done while constructing the very words into phrases, sentences, or statements must be well thought out, artistic and creative. Only then would the verbal statements elicit the intended effect. At the phonological level, the degree of hurt sometimes depends on the very sounding, or tone of the insult. This is because the level of venom, sarcasm, scorn, ridicule, hate, derogation and derision often depends on the tone of the abuser's voice. An effective verbal abuser must be a creative performer able to creatively intone the insult while accompanying the same with possible most offending gesticulations. For instance, an utterance like "you are an idiot"; accompanied by finger pointing at the speaker's own head is expected to hurt the target more than if it was just a plain utterance.

Meanwhile, as an art, verbal abuse has a structure that involves the abuser as the speaker who encodes the meaning of the intended abuse, constructs it into utterable messages and then utters them in the most insulting manner. On the other hand, the abused is the recipient/hearer who decodes the message starting from when uttered, analyses the constructions and deciphers the hurtful messages, by his/her ability to interpret the intents and purposes of the utterance. The messages may be a direct application such as, “you are stupid,” or that of relational transference of the stupidity to, say, a hyena, i.e. metaphorical: “you are a hyena”, or simile: “you are like a hyena”, and so on.

### **Verbal Abuse as a Performance**

Performance involves carrying out an act. Deborah Kapchan (1996) in her conversation on performance avers that “to perform is to carry something into effect”. Meanwhile, Austin’s (1962) “speech act theory” stipulates that when people speak they perform verbal acts such as making vows, promising, cursing, making statements, giving commands, and so on. Verbal abuse is a performance that involves carrying an insult, a threat, or an accusation into effect. As a speech act, performance involves A doing B to C. As already pointed out, the performer (the abuser represented by A), performs B (the verbal insult), to C (the audience, or the abused) who becomes the recipient of the abuser’s insults.

As a performance, verbal abuse often brings in other characters who may be active or passive onlookers and witnesses of the act of abusing; sympathizers of the abused; supporters and cheerers of the abuser; or as objects of the abuse, thereby bringing in objectified verbal abuse. Objectified verbal abuse sometimes works like a double-edged sword piercing two victims with a single charge, for example, “You are stupid like your mother”. This insult not only attacks the stupidity of the victim of the insult but also loops in the victim’s mother. From the experiences of those who have suffered such insults, objectified verbal abuse hurts more than when the abuse is simply directed to the single target. This has been confirmed by reactions such as: “I wouldn’t have minded if he/she had insulted me without bringing in my mother”.

### **Categories of Verbal Abuse**

As one takes a critical view of verbal abuse, one sees the possibility and need to treat this subject as falling in different categories. For instance, occurrences of verbal abuse may be considered public or private, with the former taking place in the presence of other people while the latter may only involve the abuser and the abused, or if there are other people, they may be few and, so to say, close associates to the parties, thus, more or less, private. From the experience of one victim, a verbal insult that occurs outside the hearing of other people, or many people is less devastating, less embarrassing, and less dehumanizing than that, one suffers in public. As revealed, it is easier to recover from the stigma of a verbal insult that was private than that which happened in front of the ‘whole world’. Perhaps one possible explanation to this is that when one is insulted in public, this brings onto the scene other participants some of who join in judging the victim, widening the space and degree of condemnation. This is made worse by the fact that if reconciliation occurs later between the abuser and abused; or where the former may see the need to apologize to the latter, the public that witnessed the abuse, may not

be present to witness the mended scenario. Instead, the public, after scattering may continue to maintain their judgment and condemnation, not aware of the reconstructed relationship. But if the insult happened in private, the insulted may try to handle the insult within their step without so much having to worry about what people may be thinking of them.

Insults may also be rendered verbally or through the written form as another category. Majority of my respondents confided that verbal insults are more hurting than the written. They attributed this to the fact that verbal insults are instant, and, also to the fact that the abuser is there to emphasize and exacerbate the insults with gestures and other bodily expressions. This could be explained that where one insults the other, for instance, “you are very stupid”, but where the insulted can’t see the facial expression of the abuser as they utter the insult, it becomes more tolerable. It means that verbal insults supported by the body language are more hurting than non-accompanied or plain insults, which then raises debate on the devastation of verbal versus the written abuse. It may be concluded that verbal abuse carries the double effect of words and bodily expressions. It will be acknowledged that an insult can still be effectively done via bodily movements such as gestures, facial expressions and other manipulations of the other parts of the body. This means that face to face verbal abuse may be considered as double action because, while the words communicate the insult, the shape of the abuser’s mouth, for example, or the hand gestures, may also communicate over and above what the words are saying.

On the other hand, a written insult such a phone message, only appears as words, and it may be up to the insulted to give impact or weight to the words he/she is reading. It means that the insulted who reads the insult may have some power, however limited, to down-play the effect of the insult. Some respondents seemed to see written abusive texts as worse because the written text always remains there as a reminder which doesn’t go away, but majority appeared to disagree. The argument against the written insult being worse was that, first the message may take some time before it reaches the target, something that reduces the immediacy of the pain. Secondly, the space that seems to exist between the abuser and abused – the necessity of writing the abuse may be because the parties are in different locations – could also reduce the heat of the abuse. Verbal abuse could be lessened by distance since the abuser may require the one to be abused. However, with technology today, distance may not so much matter for a verbal abuser, as they will call and abuse instantly and in a voice tone of the face-to-face abuser. So distance may only affect written abuse.

### **The Therapeutic Nature of Verbal Abuse**

People react to abuse in different ways. As exemplified in Freud’s psychoanalysis, deep in human nature there is the instinctive tendency to take better of others, or to hurt them. This is further aggravated by the human reluctance to want to accept blame, which then invites in projection. The abuser wants a ‘port’ if not a vessel where to offload his/her personal anger, venom, malice, fear, frustration and sheer avoidance of personal blame. The abused becomes that port or vessel. Abuse is, therefore, a kind of removing from within, toxins that may cause toxic feelings, thoughts and emotions. The abuser as the carrier of anger, venom and ill-will releases the poisonous content within themselves on the abused, thereby emptying the self of the harmful toxins. The cathartic effect that

comes with this release of the abuser's emotional burden in a way serves as a kind of therapy. The abuser feels relief after this emptying of anger and venom. The latter becomes, so to say, released.

The abused on the other hand, as the recipient of the abuser's anger and venom, gets their body, mind and heart filled with the toxins that come in form of abuse, thus, suffering disadvantage at the benefit of the abuser. However, this paper argues that the abused may also experience therapy, particularly where there is a reversal. One possible reversal occurs when, for example, the abused abuses back. In this circumstance the initially abused changes roles with the initial abuser by reversing the venom back to the source. If the former (initially abused) can package a counter abuse to turn the initial abuser into a victim, then the latter becomes a tragic hero/attacker. The latter fails and instead the initial victim enjoys the therapeutic relief that was at first meant for the initial abuser.

There are also other ways the abused may still experience catharsis, thus, enjoy therapeutic effects. For instance, after suffering the pain of being verbally insulted, the latter may take time to digest the messages of the insult and admits that they were on the wrong. So the insult was well deserved. The insult or abuse, thus, becomes as a atonement for their own wrongdoing. It serves as a reparation for a wrong done. The abused subsequently enjoys the relief of one who has paid for their wrongs. The attack on them, in this way neutralizes the guilt earlier felt, serving a therapeutic effect.

The abused could also award themselves relief by locating the abuse or the intention of the abuse outside the power of the abuser. For example, the abused may conclude that the abuser was engineered by some enemy somewhere; or say, that he/she was drunk when they uttered the insults; or that they were mistaken or were simply being malicious. The abused could also conclude that the abuser is by nature quarrelsome, or is always trying to cause other people pain and that 'I am not the first'. The abuser might not 'be taken seriously'. This way the abused sees the abuse as either misplaced or not directly intended. The abuse, thus, becomes less weighty or less painful because "the abuse was not necessarily meant for me" or that "the real source of the abuse is anonymous and not directly present". Subsequently, the physical abuser is considered as a mere surrogate and can, therefore, be ignored.

Having removed direct responsibility of the abuse from the physical abuser, the abused too removes the self from the direct path of the abuse, feeling less hurt, or lighter in feelings, or simply experiencing the relief that comes to one who has either sidestepped a load, or one whose load has by some circumstance been put aside. Release and therapy can also occur when the abused shares the emotions evoked by the abuse, with other people. This may be interpreted as a way of scattering the burden rather than concentrate its contents in one spot. By talking to people who may each give a word of encouragement, the abused develops a coat of self-protection. The abused could also reflect on the truth, size and acuteness of the abuses and make amends, becoming better and happier people.

### **Verbal Abuse and Tripartite Psychology**

As argued in the previous section, both the abuser and abused have a chance of experiencing therapeutic effects through either reversed roles, or counter projection, or

both. Meanwhile, as one Kiswahili saying goes, *Mhini na mhiniwa njia yao ni moja* (the way of the oppressor and the oppressed is one). Both the abuser and the abused each harvests the consequences of abuse, whether as elation or regret. It may be argued that both the abuser and abused end up being candidates of Sigmund Freud's "tripartite psyche" of the Id, Ego and Super-ego. Freud presents the Id as representing our instinctual dark desires basically targeting the individual's pleasures without regard to consequences. The Id represents the 'pleasure principle'; the selfish level that is only attracted to self-gratification. The Super-ego on the other hand, represents the 'morality principle' and assumes the criticizing and ethicizing role. The Super-ego accuses the individual's conscience thereby eliciting consequential guilt and shame. Meanwhile the Ego is the coordinated, pragmatic bit that intercedes between the demands of the Id and the Super-ego, thereby serving as the individual's conscience. The Ego represents the 'reality principle' and appeals to the sobriety of the individual; the individual's capability to allow reason to prevail.

The preceding being the case, the abuser at Id level is driven by the personal pleasure, or self-gratification of wanting to hurt the victim of abuse by hurling inconsiderate insults. The desire for verbal violence has at this point to be fulfilled because it is the way (it is hoped) the abuser will attain personal happiness and satisfaction. However, later the abuser's Super-ego catches up. He/she might then ponder over his/her actions and may realize the excesses in his/her actions. A sense of guilt may set in when the abuser realizes that perhaps he/she went overboard in his/her handling of the victim of abuse: "Maybe I attacked the victim unfairly... Maybe I should have controlled myself... What might those who were around be thinking of me? ... I may have lost a good friend due to my uncontrolled anger... What about my religious faith, or suppose the victim decides to sue me for slander", and so on. At this point his/her conscience (Ego) may intercede and mediate between the initial pleasure-seeking Id and the moralizing Super-ego. The Ego may urge the abuser to apologize, or to withdraw the accusations, or simply to show remorse as the means of personal reparation.

Meanwhile the abused may also undergo tripartite psychology just like his/her abuser. At Id level, the abused who first suffers the hurt of the insults, is bound to develop intense emotions of hatred for his/her abuser and perhaps a great wish to revenge. The abused, therefore, like the abuser will want to achieve individual satisfaction by seeking revenge, or causing the tormenter pain by striking back. And like the abuser earlier, the abused may be confronted by his/her Super-ego which accuses him/her for vengeance or vindictiveness. The guilt of the abused may base on the fact that, for example, "I am going against my faith which preaches forgiveness." The abused may also adjudicate themselves and realize that perhaps they were on the wrong and they deserved the insult. The abused person's Ego will vindicate him/her by advising that "you are better off if you don't argue with a fool", or that "you came out more reasonable because you didn't answer back," etc.

The argument, therefore, is that both the abuser and abused experience an antithesis. The only difference is that the abuser starts with an inflated ego, seeing him/herself as the better, or the superior one in the interaction. But their ego gets deflated as they revise their position and suffer the guilt of arrogance and/or ill-will. On the other hand, the abused starts with a deflated ego but may end with an inflated one through a

reversal of roles, counter projection, or simply realizing that he/she (the abused) came out as the sober one. Whichever the side of the ego (inflated or deflated) the participant experiences a kind of healing that brings a change in the individual. And if it is loss, both sides often suffer the loss. As Patricia Evans argues in *The Verbally Abusive Relationship*, the abuser denying the abused something also denies him/herself something. This makes true an observation I once came across which stated that, the one who ensures that the prisoner stays locked up inside the prison must also be a resident in the prison.

### Conclusion

Verbal abuse is an oral art that is also a performance. As a performance, verbal abuse is like a double-edged sword with a cutting potential equally to the abused as the abuser. As pointed out above, “the abuser denying the abused something also denies him/herself something”. However, more importantly for this paper, verbal abuse may be therapeutic not only to the abuser but also the abused. For the abuser, the act of abusing is “a kind of removing from within, toxins that may cause toxic feelings, thoughts and emotions”. The abuser during and after insulting his/her victim often experiences the cathartic effect that comes with the release of oppressive emotions, thus, therapeutic.

For the abused, catharsis may come because of the reversal of the abuser’s venom by abusing back more strategically. Besides, the abused may admit that the abuse/insult was well deserved. So the abuse becomes a atonement for one’s own wrongdoing; i.e. a reparation for a wrong one did.. This brings relief to the one abused. The insult neutralizes the guilt earlier felt, thus, serving a therapeutic effect. Still, the abused could blame the insult on mistaken identity, or further still reflect on the insult and make amends thereby ending up a happier person.

To conclude, the paper explains verbal abuse in relation to the tripartite psyche of Sigmund Freud’s Id, Ego and Super-ego. The Id in the act of verbal abuse serves the “pleasure principle” in which the abuser seeks self-gratification or/and individual pleasure gained from sadistic victimization of others. The Super-ego operates on the “morality principle” targeting to push the offender to feel the guilt of causing others pain or any other disadvantage. On the other hand, the Ego, also recognized to represent the “reality principle” mediates between the sadistic extremes of the Id and the moralistic extremes of the Super-ego, creating a balance that helps neutralize the extremes of verbal abuse.

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