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**AFRICAN WOMEN WRITING TRAUMA: THE  
REPRESENTATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA IN  
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presented by

**Emilie Ndione Diouf**

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**AFRICAN WOMEN WRITING TRAUMA: THE REPRESENTATION OF  
PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA IN AFRICAN WOMEN'S FICTION**

**By**

**Emilie Ndione Diouf**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **AFRICAN WOMEN WRITING TRAUMA: THE REPRESENTATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA IN AFRICAN WOMEN'S FICTION**

By

Emilie Ndione Diouf

The history of psychological inquiry about trauma shows that there has been an ongoing power struggle over what constitutes trauma, both in experience, manifestation, and representation. Thus, the desire among different cultural groups to make visible their traumatic experiences has given rise to numerous important works in contemporary fiction. As such, this thesis questions the function of fiction in the representation of African women's psychological trauma. It also analyzes the place of African women's trauma fiction in the development of trauma theory. Building its analysis on the relationship between trauma theory, women, and literature, this thesis reads two recent novels and a film by three African women artists who have used their pens and cameras to represent historical and cultural traumatic events that have struck parts of the African continent. This thesis's reading of, Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Veronique Tadjou's travel narrative *Sous L'ombre D'Imana: Voyage jusqu'au bout du Rwanda* (2000), and Fanta Regina Nacro's *La Nuit de Verité* (2004), has attempted to highlight the motivation of African women's fictional trauma stories.

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## Introduction

The reality of psychological trauma and the striving to conceptualize it are becoming increasingly visible in a world where local and global conflicts can be reported. We know that horrible things happen to a great range of people, and we are gradually more aware of the long term effects on the survivors of such catastrophes. As such, one can safely say that psychological trauma is becoming a contemporary condition, as there is unprecedented evidence of its contemporary and historical occurrence in large numbers of places and cultures.

According to Anne Whitehead, “the desire among various cultural groups to represent or make visible specific historical instances of trauma has given rise to numerous important works of contemporary fiction.”<sup>1</sup> However, despite the visibility of some violations that cause trauma and the consequences this may have for the afflicted, there are still largely underdeveloped and silenced aspects of psychological trauma. Besides, the history of psychological inquiry about trauma shows that there has been an ongoing power struggle over what constitutes trauma, both in experience, manifestation, representation and treatment. These aspects have contributed to the ongoing silencing of trauma experiences.

This is especially true in regards to African women who even before encountering specific traumatic incidents have experienced silencing through patriarchal oppression and colonial marginalization. Being already voiceless within a

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<sup>1</sup>Whitehead Anne. *Trauma and Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004, p. 01.

given patriarchal neocolonial culture or society, coupled with the additional burden of experiencing psychological trauma, which by its nature is the “unspeakable story”, creates a strong conflict in which the challenge to express trauma becomes central. Finding a means to communicate the experience of trauma is therefore of vital importance to African women who have experienced traumatic events first-hand, or those who have witnessed trauma.

As a reader I have been affected, disturbed and intrigued by the many instances and the great range of expression of trauma in fictional representations of African women’s experiences by African women writers and film directors. What has especially fascinated me in their trauma fiction is the continuity of women’s trauma, the identifiable similarities and differences in the representations, and the meaning that these trauma stories convey in regards to the female reader.

This thesis questions the function of fiction in the representation of African women’s psychological trauma. Does writing fictional trauma have any kind of impact or interface with real life trauma conceptualization, expression and resolution; in other words, can it contribute to a better understanding of both the things that traumatize, and the way that trauma affects women, or is fiction merely an abstract entity that has no bearing on how trauma issues are perceived? What is the place of African women’s trauma fiction, which Veronique Bonnet calls



“temoigner au feminine, et temoigner du feminin”<sup>2</sup> (testifying as a woman and testifying about womanhood), in the development of trauma theory?

Building my analysis on the relationship between trauma theory, women, and literature, I will draw examples from two recent novels and a film by African women artists from West and Eastern Central Africa. These works depict historical and cultural traumatic events that have struck some parts of the continent. Among them is Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s novel *Half of Yellow Sun* (2006), Veronique Tadjó’s travel narrative *Sous L’ombre D’Imana: Voyage jusqu’au bout du Rwanda*(2000) (*The Shadow of Imana: Travels in the Heart of Rwanda*), and Fanta Regina Nacro’s *La Nuit de Verité* (*The Night of Truth*) (2004).

The aim of this thesis is to examine the relationship between African women’s experiences of traumatic events and practices of representation in a socio-historical and cultural framework dominated by both a patriarchal and a Western discourse. It also hopes to develop a hypothesis about how African women’s fictional trauma representations fit in with and support feminist trauma theory’s aim of using conceptualizations of women’s trauma to express and heal the traumatization of women.

The thesis is comprised of two sections with each having two subsections. The first section gives an overview of the evolution of trauma theory in literary

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<sup>2</sup> Bonnet, Veronique. *La Prise D’écriture de Rwandaise Rescapées du Genocide*. Notre Librairie. Revue des littératures du Sud. N° 157. Littérature et développement. Janvier- Mars 2005, p. 01

studies and its representation of women. It gives an account of the key concepts of psychological trauma developed by Freud, Caruth and by other theorists whose work on trauma is more recent. It attempts to relate psychological trauma's key concepts to the texts under analysis. The second section discusses the transcription of trauma into fiction and the consequences of this act in the understanding and healing of trauma. It examines the literary strategies through which Adichie, Tadjó, and Nacro add to the western discourse of trauma the silenced traumatic experiences of some African women.

## Section 1. Psychological Trauma and Literature

The development of literary studies has recently become marked by trauma theory. In fact, a cursory glance through the trend-setting literary studies journals of recent years reveals that the relationship between literature and trauma is among the most vibrant research topics in the field today. Elissa Marder observes that “it might come as something of a surprise to learn that some of the most influential and far-reaching new insights about trauma have come from a field that might appear to be far removed from it: literature and literary theory.”<sup>3</sup>

According to Marder, over the last twenty four years or so, the emergence of ground breaking new work on trauma in literature and critical theory has made a profound impact both within and beyond the field of literature. Scholars generally agree that the explosion of trauma work in literary studies is due to the path breaking work of both Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman. “Since the early 1990s, both of them have been working creatively on the borders of trauma, literature, and psychoanalysis.”<sup>4</sup>

Cathy Caruth’s 1996 *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* is the most comprehensive, and influential, theoretical articulation of a Freudian account of psychic trauma with literary-critical disciplinary practices. Caruth’s

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<sup>3</sup> Marder Elissa. *Trauma and Literary Studies: Some “Enabling Questions.”*  
Reading On. Vol. I. January 2005, p.01

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.02.

central claim is that “the poetic story can be read...as a larger parable, both of the unarticulated implications of the theory of trauma in Freud’s writing and, beyond that, of the crucial link between literature and theory” (03). In other words, for Caruth, literature should not only be reread as an extension of Freudian accounts of material and psychic trauma, but trauma should be read in and as literature.

According to Caruth, Freud’s interest in the psychic inscription of violence was influenced by a certain failure or incompleteness in his earlier analyses of quotidian life. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud notes the “compulsion to repeat” in many clinical instances. First he finds it in the recurring nightmares of shellshocked World War I veterans (10-12), then in the repetitive “fort/da” game of his baby grandson, who plays the game go away (fort, “gone”) and come back (da, “there”) as a means of representing and understanding his mother’s periodic absences (13-17), and in the transference, as the analysands “repeat the repressed material instead of...remembering it” (19; emphasis Freud’s).

“The repetition compulsion” is of great interest to Caruth’s reading of Freud because in no case is the experience repeated as a pleasurable one, and in no case does the repetition lead to resolution, to remembering an experience such that it can be understood. For her the compulsion to repeat manifests the latency of a violent experience which is “beyond the pleasure principle,” beyond psychoanalysis’s power to explain psychic life according to a rational account of pleasure-seeking behavior.

Regarding his case studies, Freud speculated that experiences of extreme anxiety and violent excitation overwhelmed the capacity of the psyche to assimilate them, a capacity that he understood to be physical in nature. In Chimamanda Adichie's *Yalf of a Yellow Sun* which tells a story of the Nigerian Civil War from the point of view of characters living in Biafra, Olanna is physically and psychologically disabled after witnessing in Kano the slaughtering of her relatives by Muslim Hausa nationalists. The psychological wounds of the event resurface in her nightmares. The narrator tells us that,

Olanna's Dark Swoops began the day she came back from Kano, the day her legs failed... That night, she had the first Dark Swoop: A thick blanket descended from above and pressed itself over her face, firmly, while she struggled to breathe. Then, when it let go, freeing her to take in gulp after gulp of air, she saw burning owls at the window grinning and beckoning to her with charred feathers...Speaking was a labor. When her parents and Kainene visited, she did not say much; it was Odenigbo who told them what she had seen (156- 157).

The psychoanalytic name of Olanna's wound, at once that of the mind and of the body, is trauma<sup>5</sup>. The repetition compulsion which is implied by her nightmare (the dark swoop) forces us to consider the possibility of a limit to psychic life itself, a boundary on what we can represent and understand of ourselves. There is also a

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<sup>5</sup> See Ruth Leys *Trauma: A Genealogy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. for more on the term, origin and usage

second way in which the repetition compulsion sends psychoanalysis beyond its own principles of intelligibility, one rooted in the fort/da game's status as a practice of representation, of storytelling. Such stories compel others besides the compulsive repeater.

This perpetual recurrence of the same thing causes us no astonishment when it relates to active behavior on the part of the person concerned and when we can discern in her an essential character-trait which always remains the same and which is compelled to find expression in a repetition of the same experiences. We are much more impressed by cases where the traumatized subject appears to have a passive experience...in which she meets with a repetition of the same fatality. In Freud's theory, there is the case, for instance, of the woman who married three successive husbands each of whom fell ill soon afterwards and she had to nurse them to their death bed. One way in which this example pertains to our texts is the fact that in addition to witnessing the killing of his relatives in Kano, Olanna has to experience again the disappearance of her twin sister Kainene. The impressive cases, the cases in which the cause and meaning of the repetition are most obscure, generate a moment of incomprehension, fascination, and repetitious contemplation which Freud refers to as the uncanny.

In uniting Freud's clinical cases with the literary instance, Caruth posits the fundamental identity of this fascination with the process of reading literature. To wonder about the woman three times widowed is the same as to read Olanna witnessing the slaughtering of her relatives and the disappearance of her twin sister.

Indeed, this makes Caruth claim that individual texts compulsively repeat life's incomprehensible wounds. Literature, in other words, does not describe but inscribes trauma.

Caruth *Unclaimed Experiences* offers particularly a rich framework for such inscription, for it seeks to establish, not merely the presence of trauma in literature, but an irreducible framework of traumatic representation. The crucial link between literature and trauma theory is not some more or less arbitrary connection modeled by the field-definition and field-coverage model of disciplinary expansion, but a vital imperative generated by the practice of rereading itself.

Insofar as academic literary study is definable as professional rereading, Caruth aims not merely to influence some sector of the profession, but to reframe all professional literary-scholarly activity in terms of psychoanalytic and historical accounts of trauma. From this point of view, reading and criticism, though based in deep knowledge, are also an encounter, at once ethical and epistemological, with that which we cannot describe or know. As a literary critic writing on the representation of African women's psychological trauma, I first need to locate the nature of the encounter between trauma theory, its ethics, politics, and women.

## 1. 1 The Ethics, Politics of Trauma Theory and Its Representation of Women

Michelle Baleev defines the term trauma as that which refers to “a person’s emotional response to an overwhelming event that disrupts previous ideas of an individual’s sense of self and the standards by which one evaluates society. It is the transformation of the self ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and world.”<sup>6</sup> In its early stage of development trauma analysis or reading posits itself by analogy with the witnessing or addressing of testimony to trauma and understands its task as that of facilitating the cultural remembrance and “working through” of those traumas whose absent presence marks the analyzed texts.

Trauma theory emphasizes the dialogic nature of testimony. Yet notwithstanding its analogous relation to testimonial witnessing, trauma analysis and criticism appear to dispense with the insights of contemporary media and literary studies concerning the complex processes of meaning negotiation that take place between texts and their various spectators/readers, and invests the analyst and the critic with immensely and conclusively authoritative interpretative capacities.<sup>7</sup> According to Radstone, “It seems that it is the analyst, and the analyst alone, who is able to discern trauma’s absent traces. In this regard, trauma theory seems to return

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<sup>6</sup> Baleev, Michelle. *Trends in literary trauma theory*. Mosaic (Winnipeg) June 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008, p.23

<sup>7</sup> See Radstone. *Analysts and Readers: the Ethics and Politics of Trauma Analysis*, 22-24



us to an almost Althusserian moment, in which the authoritative analyst alone is invested with the capacity to perceive the truth of representation” (Radstone, 24). The scenario portrayed by Radstone diverges considerably from that of the opening or exposing of texts to multiple, contestable, divergent or contradictory readings that have been bequeathed to the Humanities by readings informed by, for example, deconstruction. It diverges, too, from the stress placed by cultural studies on the situated, local and multiple readings of historically specific readers and audiences. To put it this way, for whom, when, where and in what circumstances are particular texts read or experienced as trauma texts?

A further and related question that remains unanswered, due to the difficulty of debating trauma analysis and reading, is centered on which events, experiences and texts are to be classed as traumatic and which are to be excluded from this category. Though Anne Witherhead claims that “the rise of trauma theory has provided both novelist and filmmakers with new ways of conceptualizing individual or collective trauma” (*Trauma Fiction*, 01); this is problematic since trauma criticism arguably seems to construct and to control the boundary of what can be recognized as trauma. The latter position is made powerful by trauma theory’s insistence on the “tracelessness or invisibility of trauma to all but the most trained of eyes.”<sup>8</sup> Why is it, for instance, the questions of firstly, who it is that gets claimed by trauma theory, and who is ignored, and secondly, which events get labeled trauma and which do not, have not been omitted, entirely, from critical commentary.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 24.

Analysis of historical and contemporary explanations for trauma occurrence, impact and treatment shows they are informed by existing hegemonic structures. As “psychiatric explanations and theories reflect the spirit of the age,”<sup>9</sup> they represent the social framework of the dominant gender, race and class. The discourse established by Western medicalisation of psychology and the subsequent engagement with psychic trauma revolves around issues of power, specifically the power to give voice to the studied objects’ experience. The act of naming another’s experience has the potential to appropriate that experience, thereby molding it into a controlled discourse of knowledge and effectively silencing, or overriding the voice of the object of study. Within the history of trauma analysis, the voice of women naming the “unspeakable” has been obliterated by the voice of patriarchal knowledge. The Western development of views around mental health has utilized women as a testing ground for theories, treatment and conceptualization of the other, meaning the gender that is not male.

However, post-nineteen-seventies evolutions of feminist theory and, more recently, post-colonial theories within psychology posed a challenge to trauma studies, highlighting the bias of the predominantly, male-centered history of scientific conceptualization. New approaches have reconstructed theory, research methodology and treatment in line with the acknowledgement of socio-political

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<sup>9</sup> Bessel van der Kolk, Lars Weisaeth, and Otto van der Hart, "History of Trauma in Psychiatry," in *Traumatic Stress - the Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*, ed. Bessel van der Kolk, Alexander Mc Farlane, and Lars Weisaeth (New York: The Guildford Press, 1996). 66.

frameworks. Central to this is the recognition of trauma as a particularly subjective knowledge, and therefore impossible to divorce from environmental contexts.

Seeking to depathologize women's experience and expression of trauma, "feminist psychology reinforces the "normality" of post-traumatic stress responses, emphasizing that a multitude of symptoms are in fact reasonable survival tactics, allowing the victim to function within society."<sup>10</sup> Widening the notion of what is traumatic, while acknowledging the contributing role of ideology to the sustaining of trauma and the subsequent expression and treatment of it, has effectively opened the doors to previously unheard voices of traumatized women: Feminist theory allows for the validity of "stories" other than the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) story of trauma, created by men and which is about men's experiences.<sup>11</sup>

By working towards ensuring that all women's experiences of trauma are considered as important and as legitimate as the trauma experienced by males (e.g. soldiers), Maria Root observes that feminist psychology allows traumatized women to express their trauma openly.<sup>12</sup> As such, from the theory of trauma discussed above the question one may ask is how do African women who had been twice the "other"- in being neocolonial subjects and women- express their experience of trauma?

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<sup>10</sup> See Maria P.P. Root, "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality," in *Personality and Psychopathology - Feminist Reappraisals*, ed. Laura S. Brown and Mary Ballou (New York: The Guildford Press, 1992). 231. Also Denise Russell, *Women, Madness and Medicine* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995) p. 230

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 232

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

African women's expression of trauma cannot be formulated separately from the experience of colonization. According to Amy Novak in her article *Who Speaks? Who Listens? The Problem of Addressee in Two Nigerian Novels*, "Adichie's novel situates the civil war and the preceding massacre in relationship to an additional site of trauma: the lingering effects of colonialism."<sup>13</sup> The novel strategically represents the trauma of the civil war by critiquing the post-independence colonialism that ignores the way that colonial trauma lingers itself and repeats itself in the present.<sup>14</sup> Novak comments that, "despite independence from Britain in October 1960, individual and national identity in Nigeria remain scarred by the inheritance of colonialism and oppression. In 1966, Igbo military officers led a coup, which was followed by a reprisal against the Igbo. The massacre of the Igbo led to the secession of southeast Nigeria, the establishment of the Biafran republic, and the beginning of the Nigerian Civil War."<sup>15</sup> Novak remarks that *Half of a Yellow Sun* makes explicit the link between colonialism and the ethnic and political strife of the new nation: "If this is hatred, then it is very young. It has been caused, simply, by the informal divide-and-rule policies of the British colonial exercise. These policies manipulated the differences between the tribes and ensured that unity would not exist" (166-67).

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<sup>13</sup> Craps, Stef & Buelens, G. *Postcolonial Trauma Novels*. In *Studies of the Novel*. Vol 40. Numbers 1 & 2, Spring and Summer 2008: p. 05

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 06

<sup>15</sup> Ibid Craps, Stef and Buelens. 07

In the same way as *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Veronique Tadjo's *The Shadow of Imana* bears the marks of colonial and neocolonial trauma. Tadjo traces the origins of the ethnic prejudice that lead to the genocide in colonization. She writes:

One of the reasons for the persecution of the Tutsis comes from the theories suggested by European historians, Belgian in particular, who, towards the end of the nineteenth century, attributed to them foreign origins. According to those historians, the "watussi" shepherds, whom they characterized as tall and slender, in contrast to the smaller Hutu farmers, were not originally natives of central Africa. Some thought they could have come from as far off as Tibet or Egypt. But the link with Ethiopia remains the most common claim. It would even seem that the Tutsis themselves have confirmed this, for their traditional costume is very similar to that worn by the Ethiopians. There is no historical proof to verify this theory. But this claim, initially made as a form of flattery, has had terrible consequences. During the genocide, thousands of Tutsis were thrown into the waters of the Kagera River so that they can return to Ethiopia (*The Shadow of Imana*, 24).

The cultural and political influence of colonialism still lingers in multiple ways in many African countries. The legacy of colonialism is not only evident in history but also in culture. As such, it is relevant to talk about the ways in which African women inscribes post colonial traumatic experiences into their artistic creation.

## Section 2. African Women Writers' Inscription of Trauma Into Fiction

For writers and at this moment for women writers in particular, there is the challenge and promise of a whole new psychic geography to be explored. But there is also a difficult and dangerous walking on the ice, as we try to find language and images for a consciousness we are just coming into, and with little in the past to support us.<sup>16</sup> Adrienne Rich

The process of giving voice to trauma experience is fundamentally an act of re-telling, re-structuring and re-forming, as something internal is forged into something external through the use of language. The psychological benefits of this action have already been expounded as formidable in the sense that confrontation, organization and the opening up of trauma to an audience are instilled with an attainment of power, which is crucial to the healing of trauma. Re-telling is the freeing of formerly unarticulated material, which the teller of the trauma story then owns as a new narrative that has been constructed from out of darkness.

According to Felman and Dory Laub, "the subject of trauma is one that is not caught up in desire, but a subject constituted by forgetting...The traumatized subject can remember its having forgotten in presence of a witness who can acknowledge the gap and absences" (Testimony, 1-5). As such, the nature of the writer's encounter

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<sup>16</sup> Rich, Adrienne. (1971). *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision. On Lies, Secrets and Silence - Selected Prose 1966 -1978*. New York, Norton.35.

with the traumatized subject is characterized by two distinct and leading features, testimony and witnessing. In *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*, Kali Tal writes, “accurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event since, by its very definition, trauma lies beyond the bounds of normal conception” (15). In *Half of a Yellow Sun* as well as in Veronique Tadjo’s *The Shadow of Imana*, the representation of the trauma of the 1960s Nigerian Civil war and that of the Rwandan Genocide only takes place when witnesses to the traumatic event started to confess their stories in front of a writer. While giving an account of a mother who carried the decapitated head of her daughter in her wrapper, the narrator of *Half of a Yellow Sun* depicts to the reader the conditions in which Olanna testifies about that story. The narrator writes, “Olanna tells him the story and he notes the details. She tells him how the blood stains on the woman’s wrapper blended into the fabric to form a rusty mauve” (82).

In fact, theories of trauma involve testimony and witnessing and they share in common a desire to engage with or reveal trauma’s absent textual presence. Radstone observes that “though not always taking as its subject texts explicitly concerned with personal or collective catastrophe, trauma analysis aims to demonstrate the ways in which texts may be engaged with the belated remembrance of trauma.”<sup>17</sup> As a result, the writer and the reader stand as witnesses to the traumatized subject’s account or remembrance of its dissociated memories.

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<sup>17</sup> Radstone, Susannah. *Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics*. Paragraph. Vol.30, January 2007.p 09-29

The ability of literature to lift the trauma story out of shadow means that it plays a vital role in the issues surrounding trauma experience and expression. Van der Kolk and Mc Farlane comment on creative representation of trauma as being more accessible than psychological theory and practice itself: The study of trauma inevitably confronts us with issues of morality and social values...In this regard, artists have traditionally fulfilled the function of holding up a mirror that contrasts sharply with the traditional obfuscation of the subject within a society's dominant ideology.<sup>18</sup> In *Trauma Fiction*, Whitehead comments that:

The term trauma fiction represents a paradox or contradiction: If trauma comprises an event or experience which overwhelms the individual and resists language or representation, how then can it be narrativized in fiction? ...there are various ways of thinking through the relation between trauma and fiction. Attention has been shifted away from what is remembered to how and why it is remembered. This raises, in turn, the related issues of politics, ethics and aesthetics (01).

The theorizing about trauma in fiction has stressed that the reading of a fictional trauma representation can take us to places that are otherwise difficult to

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<sup>18</sup> Mc Farlane, A. and B. Van Der Kolk (1996). *Trauma and its Challenge to Society. Traumatic Stress - The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*. B. van der Kolk, A. Mc Farlane and L. Weisaeth. New York, The Guildford Press. 45.



access. It is therefore the role of the trauma story to reflect both the personal and the political, in the sense that the depiction of trauma in literature and its status as re-formative initiates re-thinking about the history which contextualizes the “inconceivable” of the trauma experience. In terms of re-situating history, the deconstruction of the fictional trauma text points to ways in which ideology has traditionally obscured, or left gaps, in the whole story. According to Jane Kilby, “trauma provides the necessary language and reading skills to produce a different political story, a story not tied to the individual as such nor a story told in the general terms of gender, patriarchy and power.”<sup>19</sup>

The growing acknowledgement of the depiction of trauma in fiction and its double role in representing personal and political issues raises many questions as to the motivation of African women’s fictional trauma story. What is the value of their representations? Is the benefit that trauma theory ascribes to the voicing of a trauma survivor’s story applicable in any similar manner to the fictional trauma narrative, created by authors like Adichie and Tadjó’s who may or may not have experienced what they are depicting?

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<sup>19</sup> Kilby, Jane. *Violence and the Cultural Politics of Trauma*. Edingburgh: Edingburgh University Press, 2007: XIII

## 2. 1 African Women's Literary Strategies of Representing Trauma

In his article, "*Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma*,"<sup>20</sup> Jeffery Alexander presents three critical representations essential in the creation of a compelling trauma narrative:

1. *The nature of the pain.* [Or] what actually happened – to the particular group and to the wider collectivity of which it is a part?
2. *[The] Relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience.* [Or] To what extent do the members of the audience for trauma representations experience an identity with the immediately victimized group?
3. *[The] Attribution of responsibility.* Who actually injured the victim? Who caused the trauma (01-02)?

Inscribing trauma into a fictional narrative requires strategies of representation that show that the author "knows" the nature of trauma and its manifestation. Alexander measures the accuracy of the trauma narrative through the latter's ability to convey the pain of the experience and its appeal to the community that has ties to the context of the trauma. Literature may experience difficulties in recording the language of pain, which Elaine Scarry qualifies as "inexpressible,

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<sup>20</sup>In *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*. Ed. Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernhard Giesen, Neil Smelser, Piotr Sztompko. California: University of California Press. 2004

incommensurable and unshereable.”<sup>21</sup> Yet to put an end to atrocities and depict human sufferings, literature must enable readers to understand as Scarry claims the “aversiveness being experienced inside the body of someone whose country may be far away, whose name can be barely pronounced, and whose ordinary life is unknown except that it is known that the ordinary life has ceased to exist.”<sup>22</sup> Though true knowledge of trauma cannot be pretended, the crafting of literary techniques to capture and convey this knowledge is essential in providing a pathway into the elusive internal wounding that is trauma.

To successfully achieve the reader’s identification with and empathy to the traumatized protagonist, the language narrating violence in *Yalf of a Yellow Sun*, *The Shadow of Imana*, and *La Nuit de Verité*, conveys a sense of immediacy. In *The Shadow of Imana*, Veronique Tadjo, asserts that corpses:

...bear witness, and will have no burial. They are nothing but bones.  
... But these dead are screaming still . . . This is not a memorial but death laid bare, exposed in all its rawness. The horror of the sullied earth and of time laying down layers of dust in its passage. The bones of the skeleton-corpses are disintegrating before our very eyes. The stench infects our nostrils and settles inside our lungs,

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<sup>21</sup> Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 09.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

contaminates our flesh, infiltrates our brains. Even later on, far away, this smell will linger in our bodies and our minds (12).

The decomposing and smelling bodies that Tadjó describes echoes Rancière's "naked images"<sup>23</sup> which through their traces, repel, interpellate and challenge the reader or viewer to act and say never again. Those bones are images that witness humans' will to power. At the same time, they speak to humans' injustice and immunity to pain so that, as Tadjó writes, "the fruit of peace" can "be gathered from the tree of suffering" (27).

Sharing an attention to detailed realism combined with narrative techniques drawn from African storytelling and cultural practices, Tadjó, Adichie, and Nacro's works seek to create a voice that is not reliant on a Western subject for testimony but instead disputes the objectivity and knowledge of such a subject. Through a journey across Nigeria, Rwanda, and a mythical African country, The fictional trauma narratives of Chimamanda Adichie, Veronique Tadjó, and Fanta Nacro demonstrate a range of innovative literary strategies in response to the task of the "directing outward of an inward, silent process."<sup>24</sup> The narratives evoke the experience of trauma for women through the construction of metaphors, symbols and tropes that link the symbolic aspects of writing trauma to the female body.

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<sup>23</sup> See Rancière, Jacques. *The Future of the Image*. London & New York: Verso, 2007, 22-23

<sup>24</sup> Vickroy, L. *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction*. Charlottesville, The University of Virginia Press, 2002: p. 03.

All three African women's representation of trauma focus on physicality of the latter and suggest the need to rethink the very possibility of "working through" by demonstrating that the obstacle in comprehending the event is not simply a cognitive one. Their works represent traumatic experiences with a focus on the centrality of the body to the understanding of trauma. They portray the body experiencing trauma, the body remembering trauma, and the body living trauma. These women's narratives attest to how trauma is inscribed not only on the body, but also within the body. The female body which constitutes the main place where women are oppressed becomes the center of trauma location and representation.

Tadjo, Adichie, and Nacro have depicted the female body as both a site of women's traumatic experience through bodily sexual violence. The latter creates in women's body a spectral memory that continues to haunt the present. While describing Anastasie's memory of her rape by her brother in *The Shadow of Imana*, Tadjo writes, "She was trapped in the prison of her flesh. Her tongue felt furry, and prevented her from uttering the slightest word. Her desires had been worn away like rocks lashed by a stormy sea. She no longer recognized the inside of her body, felt a stranger to this heavy mass which was crushing her spirit" (63).

For Tadjo, Anastasie's body anchors the physical pain of remembering her rape with her act of testifying. It is her body that bears the record of the past, and the story it tells is not seamless but disfigured, and even imperfect. In remembering and testifying about the violence of her rape she loses language and the ability to mentally register pain. The body's materiality, an excess uncontained by

signification, is nonetheless evoked in the act of remembering, until this too is crashed by trauma's pain. Anastasie's body becomes both the site of enunciation of her memory and its absence. It is from this site that language originates, and in the case of Anastasie's trauma, it is where the wound that consumes her language arises.

The fragmentation of narrative associated with both the body's materiality and the physicality of the traumatic experience are something that can be identified as tools used by these three African women writers to create a sense of the chaos of the state of traumatization. As Laurie Vickroy states, "writers have created a number of narrative strategies to represent a conflicted or incomplete relation to memory, including textual gaps...repetition, breaks in linear time, shifting viewpoints, and a focus on visual images and affective states."<sup>25</sup>

In *Half of a Yellow Sun* and in *The Shadow of Imana*, the characters' physical experience of trauma is reflected in the structure of the novels. Like their wounded bodies, the narratives presented to the reader are scarred and haunted. Working in counterpoint to the linear storyline that is the narrators' testimonial of the traumatic events are the brief fragmentary sections. For instance, in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the flow of the fiction's storyline is interrupted by the fragmented historical account which Adichie entitles, "The Book: The World Was Silent When We Died." The latter appears at the end of each part of Adichie's fictional narrative. Unlike the rest of the novel the fragmented paragraphs are not in bold print. In contrast to the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 29.

main narrative, these sections of the text are more difficult to understand because they always start with a third person narrator (He) who is not identified: "For the prologue, he recounts the story of the woman with the calabash" (*Half of a Yellow Sun*, 82).

Though these fragments are mostly told in the present tense, they sometimes display a temporal quality that makes them look like they have been cut loose of the ties that bind them to a linear narrative. With the tension created between these sections and the primary narrative line, the novel does not simply recount the traumatic event that would resist representation; rather, as Laub proposes, "knowledge in the testimony is . . . not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by the testifier, but a genuine event in its own right" (Testimony, 62). These isolated fragments disrupt the narrator's account of the civil war and reinforce the production of a traumatized narrative. They display or rather repeat again a trauma that the characters' testimony and the novel conceal. As such, they shed light on the fictional history by drawing the reader's attention to what remains hidden and unseen.

As for Tadjó's narrative, it is reported into small sections that convey to the reader the pain she encountered in recollecting those fragments of history. Tadjó's eyewitness report in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide focuses both on public and private spaces. Her report is also linear and very causal. Her testimony is all recounted in the present tense as she wants the reader to walk with her and see the horrors of the genocide. Those horrors are comprised of nightmares and memories of

testifiers' missing lovers, dead parents, and dead children. In other words, they provide a performance of a silent discourse within a text.

*Half of a Yellow Sun*'s third-person narration which follows closely three characters - Olanna, a teacher before the war at Nsukka University; Ugwu, her husband's houseboy; and Richard, the British lover of Olanna's twin sister - recounts the difficulty of exploring the atrocities of the Nigerian civil war. As a result, each of these characters shows symptoms of disassociation and withdrawal, including the inability to locate the words to recount their experience. Olanna finds that "[she] wanted to ask Odenigbo to stop being ridiculous, but her lips were heavy. Speaking was a labor. When her parents and Kainene visited, she did not say much; it was Odenigbo who told them what she had seen" (157).

Olanna exhibits classic characteristics of the traumatized in her struggle and inability to discuss the past. Similarly, Richard tries to write about his experience, "but he stopped because the sentences were risible. They were too melodramatic. They sounded just like the articles in the foreign press, as if these killings had not happened and, even if they had, as if they had not quite happened that way. The echo of unreality weighed each word down" (168). Toward the end of the novel, Ugwu, after he is wounded and returns from his service in the army, also seeks solace in language:

Ugwu thanked him and shook his head and realized that he would never be able to capture that child on paper, never be able to describe well enough the fear that dulled the eyes of mothers in the



refugee camp when the bomber planes charged out of the sky. He would never be able to depict the very bleakness of bombing hungry people. But he tried, and the more he wrote the less he dreamed (398).

With each of these cases, the novel initiates discussions about trauma's representation in fiction. It strategically raises questions such as: what is the impact on writing when the trauma experience that is being depicted is essentially fragmentary and silent? And, furthermore, what is the range of forms which trauma literature by African women and about African women can take, and in which way are they producing similar or dissimilar means of addressing trauma? Adichie, Tadjó, and Nacro use their narrative techniques to tell of and "work through trauma." While Nacro's film is purely fictional with a setting in an unnamed African Country, Adichie and Tadjó's novels mix fiction with reality to provide the reader with the historical framework of the traumatic events they portray. Tadjó's account of the genocide's survivor's testimonies is blended with a fictional narrative in which she raises questions about the ways in which justice and reconciliation can be maintained. She contends that peace and reconciliation are possible solely through the acknowledgment of the evil that must be exorcised otherwise ethnic prejudice and fear will remain:

Through justice, through an attempt at a true justice. As long as this attempt is not made, fear will remain. It is there. It has not gone away. All crime that goes unpunished will engender other crimes. The Hutus are afraid of the Tutsis because they are in power. The

Tutsis are afraid of the Hutus because they can seize that power.

Fear has remained in these hills (27).

The necessity to sustain true justice and reconciliation without forgetting the wounds of the past has been raised in the two novels as well as in the Nacro's film. The recurrence of this theme is associated with the African belief in the reincarnation of the spirit of the dead in the worlds of the livings, and with Birago Diop and Aminata Sow Fall's idea that the dead are not dead.

In *The Night of Truth* as well as in *The Shadow of Imana*, the lingering spirit of the dead in the realm of the living is due to the unrealistic modes of reconciliations that undermine the sufferings of the dead by casting them into forgetting. In *The Shadow of Imana*, Tadjo comments that "the dead point an accusing finger at the living who are still making use of them. The dead want to return to the earth. They rise up in protest. They want to melt into the earth" (16). Similarly Edna, the President's wife in Fanta Nacro's *The Night of Truth*, feels uneasy about the whole idea of reconciliation between Nayaks and Bonandes because the latter killed her son Michel. Her argument is that Michel's soul won't be in peace until his death is avenged. Edna's striving for revenge along with the wrath of the dead which provokes the rain in *The Shadow of Imana* may be interpreted as the struggle of memory against forgetting the wound of the past; according to Whitehead, this makes of trauma fiction "a narrative of haunting" (Trauma Fiction, 15). As such, in the following two paragraphs, I would like to offer a reading of *La Nuit de Vérité* as a narrative of trauma haunting.

The central characters in Nacro's film are Edna and the colonel whom compared to the other characters seem to be more haunted by the effects of the civil war between Bonandes and Nayaks. My main focus on Edna and the colonel is on the effect of trauma on memory. The colonel escapes the past during the day but his nights are haunted by the bloody human body parts flowing in the river. Sleepwalking, he re-enacts the civil war and his nights are spent in patrol. Nacro explicitly shows that the colonel re-experience the war as if it were happening in the screen. The flashbacks do not look like he is remembering the war; instead they look like he is actually experiencing it. Like Freud's shell-shocked World War I soldiers, the colonel awakens from his nightmares in a state of total terror. The Colonel as well as Edna cannot escape from the past, and they seem doomed to an interminable haunting of the past. If in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud develops a theory of memory that haunts the present and resists assimilation, Nacro emphasizes the lasting and seemingly unsolvable nature of this possession.

By the end of Nacro's film, the lasting nature of traumatic haunting memories caused Edna to barbeque the colonel. Edna's obsessive focus on her war wound, the murdering of her son by the colonel, powerfully symbolizes and externalizes the resurfacing of her painful memories of the civil war. Colonel Theo's murder shows that Edna's traumatic wound did not heal over time. It is neither susceptible to recovery nor doomed to regeneration. The film ends with the old Bonande soldier visiting Colonel Theo's tomb. The old man tells to the dead colonel that the ghosts of the civil war have been laid to rest after his death. The sand covered grave which has

no name on it suggests the wisdom of forgetting the wounds of the past and offer the promise of a renewed life embodied by the term *Bonandayak*.

Throughout the representation of these traumatic events, Nacro as well as Tadjo and Adichie hint at hard question centered on the complexity of the justice that should be rendered in the aftermath of such horrors. However, the central questions remain those of the work of grief and reconciliation of the traumatized people. How to forgive without forgetting, how to remember while hoping in a future for the afflicted community?

Throughout the recounting of individuals' stories and testimony of the traumatic events of the 1994 Rwandan genocide and 1960s Nigerian civil war, these African women artists raise questions about the importance of trauma representation. If it is so important, both historically and morally, that African women writers like Tadjo, Adichie and Nacro put their pens and cameras to preserving the memory of the past, it is even more critical for the survivors themselves to bear witness, as, for example, the Rwandan women genocide survivor Yolande Mukagasana does in *La mort ne veut pas de moi* (Paris Fixo, 1997).

All the texts evoke the role that memory plays in the simultaneous denial of and exposure of traumatic experience, a role that has only recently been clearly defined by trauma theory itself. The de-construction of conventional modes of literary representations, and the creation of specific linguistic and narrative strategies to capture this emotional and cognitive process, represent how memory both disables

and enables trauma expression. This aspect makes the literary, fictional representations of African women's trauma depend on constructing a compelling narrative framework.

## Conclusion

By recounting the story of civil wars and genocides, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *The Shadow of Imana*, and *The Night of Truth* are situated at the intersection between recent novels of historical trauma and a renewed interest in trauma theory. Examining issues that confront contemporary societies as they grapple with how to narrate the proliferating histories of ethnic prejudice and national slaughter, such novels illuminate the process of trauma as well as examine the ability of literature to represent or know trauma. The contemporary awareness of trauma, evident in these works and in the growing field of trauma studies, comes from what Shoshana Felman identifies as a “crisis in witnessing,” “our era [is] an *age of testimony*, an age in which witnessing itself has undergone a major trauma” (Testimony, 2006). Such a characterization underscores how in the act of writing about catastrophic history a second trauma, a symbolic one, occurs.

The act of writing fictional narratives by African women and about African women may constitute a personally and politically effective task, as the female authorial voice writing about trauma can be the liberation of the voice of the “other.” Kali Tall observes that writing about traumatic experience can serve as a weapon in the struggle for empowerment. Writing fictional narratives of trauma is an act contributing to gaining psychological freedom, while also presenting a challenge, a transgressive, disruptive excess to the ideological structures that create women as an “other.” The fictional trauma author’s writing as an “other,” *about* the “other” from

within a social, cultural and political framework, in which the “other” experiences strategic and institutionalized oppression is a journey of expression.

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