
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Cyclical Nature of Trauma: Memory, Identity, and Psychological Distress in *At Night All Blood is Black*

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| ABSTRACT

This study examines the repetitive nature of trauma in David Diop's *At Night All Blood is Black*. It further explores how it affects memory, identity, and mental well-being. The narrative, set during World War I, follows Alfa Ndiaye, a Senegalese soldier struggling with the horrors of war and the painful loss of his childhood friend. This paper places the narrative within the larger conversation on postcolonial literature and trauma theory, exploring how personal and historical traumas connect to shape both individual lives and collective identities. The main objective of this study is to present how Diop's text presents trauma as something that repeats itself and is difficult to escape, particularly through fragmented memories and psychological decline. Using qualitative textual analysis, the research looks at how the novel uses symbolism, narrative structure, and character development to highlight the recurring nature of trauma. The study closely examines key passages, supported by theories of trauma, including Cathy Caruth's idea of "unclaimed experience" and Frantz Fanon's work on colonial violence. The findings reveal that Alfa's growing madness and repeated actions reflect how trauma keeps coming back, making memory both a heavy burden and a way to survive. The narrative shows how war and colonialism break a person's sense of self, leaving them in a mental state where they feel lost and disconnected. Ultimately, *At Night All Blood is Black* not only shows the lasting effects of trauma but also criticizes the dehumanizing systems of war and colonialism that continue to fuel it. This study helps deepen the understanding of trauma in postcolonial literature and its connection to modern discussions about mental health and historical memory.

| KEYWORDS

Trauma, *At Night All Blood is Black*, Memory, Identity

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The study of trauma in literature has been an essential discourse, shedding light on how psychological distress shapes narratives and character developments. The novel *At Night All Blood is Black* by David Diop is a compelling exploration of trauma's psychological and physiological consequences. This research situates itself within the framework of trauma theory, primarily drawing from Caruth (1996), LaCapra (2001), and van der Kolk (2014), who examine how trauma is not just a momentary disruption but a lasting impact that reverberates through memory, behavior, and identity. By examining Alfa Ndiaye's descent into psychological instability, the study highlights the novel's engagement with trauma as a dominant theme.

This research promises to offer a distinctive analysis of *At Night All Blood is Black* by focusing explicitly on how trauma manifests within the protagonist's psyche and influences his actions. Unlike previous studies that have

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largely examined the novel through the lenses of colonialism, masculinity, and race, this research places trauma at the center of its inquiry. The study explores how Alfa's response to his comrade's death and his increasing detachment from reality reveal trauma's insidious grip on the human mind.

The novel's central narrative follows Alfa Ndiaye, a Senegalese soldier fighting for the French during World War I. His psychological unraveling begins when his closest companion, Mademba, is mortally wounded and begs for a merciful death—a plea that Alfa cannot grant. Wracked with guilt and grief, Alfa begins mutilating enemy soldiers in a ritualistic manner, bringing severed hands back to his trench. Initially hailed as a hero, his actions soon render him an outcast among his fellow soldiers. This transformation marks his slow descent into isolation and madness, underscoring the deep and unprocessed trauma that governs his every action.

The research is grounded in trauma theory, drawing heavily from Caruth's (1996) notion of trauma as an "unclaimed experience" that recurs in compulsive repetitions. Similarly, LaCapra's (2001) distinction between "acting out" and "working through" trauma serves as a vital analytical tool in understanding how Alfa remains trapped in a cycle of violent reenactments rather than achieving psychological closure. Van der Kolk (2014) further supports this framework by emphasizing how trauma is not merely a psychological affliction but one that is physically embodied, influencing behavior and perceptions of reality.

Thus, the thesis statement of this research asserts that *At Night All Blood is Black* serves as a literary manifestation of trauma's cyclical nature, depicting how war-induced psychological distress influences not only an individual's mental state but also their social alienation and moral disintegration. The novel, through its fragmented narrative and visceral imagery, powerfully portrays how trauma distorts memory, identity, and human interaction.

2. Review of Literature

To comprehend the thematic intricacies of the novel, it is necessary to analyze the significant issues it raises. *At Night All Blood is Black* addresses the psychological toll of war, racial oppression, and colonial subjugation. While several critics (Branach-Kallas, 2021; Agustin & Akbar, 2023) have explored the colonial dimension of the novel, this study extends the conversation by revealing how Alfa's actions are not solely motivated by racial or political injustices but by unresolved psychological trauma.

Kefan Lin (2023) states, "The trauma is constructed in the general context of colonial oppression and brutal warfare and directly triggered by the agonizing loss" (p. 79). This highlights how war trauma is compounded by colonial exploitation, positioning African soldiers as expendable instruments of war. Additionally, Arshad et al. (2022) note that "the historical memory of colonial violence is inscribed onto the bodies of black soldiers, making their trauma both personal and collective" (p. 1256). These perspectives are vital in understanding Alfa's alienation, as he embodies both personal grief and the broader trauma of African soldiers.

Further, Branach-Kallas (2021) argues that "Diop subverts the colonial narrative of the noble savage by presenting a protagonist who simultaneously fulfills and disrupts this stereotype" (p. 14). Alfa's transformation from a disciplined soldier to a feared outcast underscores how trauma disrupts identity formation, leaving him psychologically unmoored. Agustin and Akbar (2023) reinforce this view, asserting that "Alfa's descent into savagery is as much a rejection of colonial discipline as it is an expression of his grief and trauma" (p. 78).

Through these interpretations, the novel's central conflict is revealed: Alfa is not merely a victim of colonial war but of an internal psychological war that prevents him from processing his grief. His inability to mourn Mademba's death appropriately leads him to enact brutal acts of violence, a pattern that aligns with LaCapra's (2001) concept of "acting out" trauma.

Samuel Fury (2021) notes that "the text oscillates between poetic introspection and visceral violence, making the reader a witness to the character's fractured state of mind" (web). This observation underscores how Diop employs

fragmented narration to reflect Alfa's deteriorating mental state. Additionally, Lin (2023) states, "The use of fragmented narrative mirrors the disorienting nature of trauma, where past and present blur in an endless loop of relived horror" (p. 82). This aligns with Caruth's (1996) assertion that trauma distorts the linearity of time, forcing individuals to continuously relive their past suffering.

Felman (2002) contends that "testimony is not merely about recounting the past but about grappling with its continued presence in the individual's psyche" (p. 112). Alfa's actions are a form of testimony—a nonverbal articulation of his pain, yet one that isolates him further from his comrades. His inability to communicate his trauma through language results in his complete alienation, reinforcing the argument that trauma not only afflicts the mind but disrupts social connections and identity.

By synthesizing these perspectives, this research demonstrates how *At Night All Blood is Black* is more than a war novel; it is a harrowing study of trauma, guilt, and the cyclical nature of suffering. The novel's themes transcend historical and racial contexts, offering a universal meditation on how trauma dismantles the human psyche. Through the lens of trauma theory, Alfa's experience reveals a broader commentary on war's psychological toll, making this research a critical contribution to literary trauma studies.

The exploration of trauma in literature has been a significant area of scholarly discourse. Trauma studies, as developed by Caruth (1995), LaCapra (2001), and van der Kolk (2014), provide essential frameworks for analyzing narratives that depict psychological distress. Trauma, according to Caruth, is characterized by its repetitive nature: "the experience of trauma ... is not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in nightmares and repetitive actions" (Caruth, 1996, p. 11). Alfa's continued obsession with his fallen comrade and his repeated acts of mutilation exemplify this unresolved trauma.

Researcher Kefan Lin (2023) notes, "The trauma is constructed in the general context of colonial oppression and brutal warfare and directly triggered by the agonizing loss" (p. 79). This insight situates Alfa's experience within the larger history of African soldiers fighting for European powers, raising questions about the colonial legacy of war trauma. Similarly, Arshad et al. (2022) emphasize that "the historical memory of colonial violence is inscribed onto the bodies of black soldiers, making their trauma both personal and collective" (p. 1256). This adds another dimension to Alfa's suffering, as his individual trauma is intertwined with the larger historical trauma of his people.

Branach-Kallas (2021) discusses the savagery attributed to the Senegalese tirailleurs, arguing that "Diop subverts the colonial narrative of the noble savage by presenting a protagonist who simultaneously fulfills and disrupts this stereotype" (p. 14). Alfa's actions are not just responses to personal trauma but are also shaped by the colonial expectation of black soldiers as hypermasculine warriors. Agustin and Akbar (2023) build upon this by stating, "Alfa's descent into savagery is as much a rejection of colonial discipline as it is an expression of his grief and trauma" (p. 78). Their research underscores how Alfa's psychological collapse functions as an act of defiance against the colonial framework that dehumanizes him.

Samuel Fury (2021), in his review of Diop's novel, states, "The text oscillates between poetic introspection and visceral violence, making the reader a witness to the character's fractured state of mind" (web). This assertion highlights the novel's stylistic choices that reinforce its thematic concerns. Furthermore, Lin (2023) argues, "The use of fragmented narrative mirrors the disorienting nature of trauma, where past and present blur in an endless loop of relived horror" (p. 82). This aligns with Caruth's (1996) claim that trauma disrupts linear temporality, forcing individuals to experience the past as though it were still occurring.

While numerous studies have explored masculinity, colonialism, and race in Diop's novel (Agustin & Akbar, 2023; Arshad et al., 2022; Fury, 2021), there has been limited scholarship focusing on trauma as the central theme. This study fills this gap by examining *At Night All Blood is Black* through the lens of trauma theory, emphasizing how trauma manifests in Alfa's psychological state and behavioral patterns. Van der Kolk (2014) affirms that "the body

keeps score of traumatic experiences, even when the mind attempts to suppress them" (p. 102). This is evident in Alfa's compulsion to reenact past violence, showing how his trauma is embedded within his very being.

Additionally, Felman (2002) argues that "testimony is not merely about recounting the past but about grappling with its continued presence in the individual's psyche" (p. 112). Alfa's inability to articulate his trauma, except through violent actions, further underscores his fractured mental state. LaCapra (2001) notes that "the process of working through trauma requires not only narrative but also recognition of its lingering effects" (p. 152). Alfa's final breakdown in the novel suggests an incomplete process of working through his pain, reinforcing the persistence of trauma beyond the battlefield.

Unlike previous studies that have primarily examined *At Night All Blood is Black* through the lenses of postcolonial theory, masculinity, and racial oppression, this research uniquely centers trauma as the novel's defining theme. While Agustin and Akbar (2023) focus on the rejection of colonial discipline and Branach-Kallas (2021) investigates the subversion of the noble savage stereotype, this study moves beyond sociopolitical concerns to explore the psychological dimensions of war trauma.

Additionally, this research draws heavily from trauma theory, particularly the works of Caruth, LaCapra, and van der Kolk, to analyze how trauma manifests through Alfa's behavior, memory, and bodily reactions. Unlike previous studies that largely contextualize trauma within the framework of colonial violence, this study presents a more individualized psychological analysis, illustrating how Alfa's trauma is deeply embedded in his identity and personal history.

Furthermore, this research expands upon existing discussions by incorporating insights from recent scholarship, including Lin (2023) and Fury (2021), to illustrate how the novel employs narrative fragmentation and visceral imagery to portray trauma's cyclical nature. By synthesizing perspectives from psychology and literary studies, this research provides a more interdisciplinary approach to understanding the long-term impact of trauma on both the mind and body. Ultimately, while existing literature has addressed themes of war, masculinity, and colonial oppression, this study distinguishes itself by foregrounding the psychological consequences of trauma and its lasting effects on memory, identity, and human behavior in *At Night All Blood is Black*.

3. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative textual analysis, focusing on the psychological and thematic dimensions of trauma as represented in *At Night All Blood is Black*. The primary theoretical frameworks utilized include trauma theory (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001; van der Kolk, 2014) and postcolonial theory (Fanon, 1967). These approaches enable a nuanced reading of how trauma operates within the text and how it intersects with race, identity, and violence. By examining how trauma is internalized and externalized through acts of violence and psychological deterioration, the study provides insights into Alfa's descent into madness.

Caruth's theory of trauma as an "unclaimed experience" (1996, p. 24) provides insight into Alfa's fragmented memory and compulsive behavior. Caruth further elaborates, stating that "trauma is not simply an effect of destruction but also, fundamentally, an enigma of survival" (1996, p. 58). This suggests that Alfa's actions stem from an unresolved survival mechanism, making his continued participation in war an unconscious means of grappling with his pain. Similarly, LaCapra's concept of "acting out" versus "working through" (2001, p. 143) serves as a lens to examine Alfa's inability to process his trauma healthily. According to LaCapra, "working through requires a critical distance from trauma, while acting out is a repetitive process of reliving the past" (2001, p. 89). Alfa's compulsive return to violence signifies his struggle with the past, as he remains trapped in a cyclical reenactment of his suffering.

The study also engages with Bessel van der Kolk's (2014) assertion that "trauma lives on in the body, even if it is repressed or unspoken" (p. 87). This perspective is particularly relevant in understanding how Alfa's bodily responses—his physical mutilation of others—serve as a conduit for his mental anguish. His acts of severing hands,

initially seen as a means of asserting control, quickly become an uncontrollable compulsion, reinforcing van der Kolk's argument that unresolved trauma manifests in the body's actions.

Data collection involves a close reading of the novel, extracting passages that illustrate Alfa's descent into madness and his interactions with fellow soldiers. These interactions, shaped by his shifting status from celebrated warrior to feared outcast, align with Cathy Caruth's (1995) claim that trauma "disrupts the temporality of experience, creating a fractured sense of self" (p. 47). Alfa's alienation and detachment from his comrades reflect this psychological fragmentation. Furthermore, Fanon (1967), in *Black Skin, White Masks*, argues that "the colonial subject exists in a state of existential crisis, caught between imposed identity and personal dissonance" (p. 110). Alfa's journey through war can thus be read as a struggle with colonial subjugation, further complicating his traumatic experience.

The research also engages with Felman's (2002) theory that "testimony is both an act of witnessing and a plea for recognition" (p. 102). In therapy, Alfa's artistic expressions function as an attempt to reclaim his narrative, though their ultimate impact remains uncertain. This aligns with LaCapra's (2001) notion that recovery from trauma is never absolute but rather an ongoing process of negotiation (p. 156). The novel's ambiguous ending underscores this idea, leaving Alfa's fate unresolved and emphasizing the persistent nature of trauma.

Secondary sources include critical essays and journal articles that analyze war trauma and its psychological effects, contributing to a broader understanding of how *At Night All Blood is Black* situates itself within postcolonial and psychological trauma discourses. By synthesizing these perspectives, the study provides a comprehensive exploration of trauma's pervasive influence on identity, memory, and violence.

4. Result and Discussion

The novel opens with Alfa's internal turmoil over Mademba's death: "I KNOW. I UNDERSTAND, I shouldn't have done it" (Diop, 2021, p. 3). His guilt and self-recrimination set the stage for his subsequent psychological unraveling. He grapples with the overwhelming weight of loss, his mind constantly revisiting the haunting image of Mademba's suffering. As he fails to reconcile his inability to provide a merciful death to his comrade, the grief festers within him, leading to destructive impulses. The novel intricately weaves Alfa's downward psychological spiral, illustrating how his emotions become tangled in an inescapable loop of torment and self-inflicted punishment.

Trauma theorist Bessel van der Kolk (2014) notes, "Traumatized people become stuck in the past, unable to integrate the traumatic memory with their present reality" (p. 68). Alfa's repeated mutilations of enemy soldiers are an externalization of his unresolved trauma, an attempt to relive and rectify Mademba's death. The act of severing hands and presenting them as trophies becomes a grotesque ritual through which Alfa seeks to regain a sense of power and agency. However, rather than achieving closure, his actions reinforce his fractured mental state, plunging him further into his psychological abyss. Each violent encounter fuels his sense of detachment from reality, signaling his disassociation from his humanity.

As Alfa spirals deeper into violence, he is ostracized by his fellow soldiers: "At first, they cheered. Then, they stopped looking me in the eye" (Diop, 2021, p. 37). His actions, initially perceived as bravery, soon become a source of fear. The camaraderie he once shared with his comrades erodes, replaced by silent judgment and avoidance. LaCapra (2001) argues that trauma disrupts social bonds, leading to alienation and self-destruction (p. 52). This is evident in Alfa's eventual removal from the front lines and his subsequent psychological evaluation. His transformation from a celebrated warrior to a feared outcast underscores the isolating nature of trauma. The psychological burden of war reshapes Alfa's identity, making it impossible for him to integrate into either his unit or the larger world beyond the battlefield.

The role of memory in trauma is further highlighted when Alfa recalls his childhood abandonment: "My mother left and didn't come back" (Diop, 2021, p. 96). His early experiences of loss resurface in the war, compounding his trauma. Caruth (1996) states, "The traumatized psyche is compelled to repeat the past in an attempt to make sense

of it" (p. 62). Alfa's fixation on avenging Mademba can thus be read as an attempt to reclaim control over loss and mortality. The unresolved grief from his past manifests in his inability to cope with Mademba's death, driving him to commit increasingly irrational acts of violence. The absence of maternal nurture, coupled with the brutality of war, leaves him emotionally desolate. His trauma becomes cyclical, with past wounds feeding into his present suffering, trapping him in an inescapable psychological loop.

Alfa's final moments in the novel suggest an incomplete resolution of his trauma. In therapy, he paints images of his past, attempting to reconstruct his fragmented identity. This aligns with Felman's (2002) assertion that trauma survivors use narrative and art as means of processing their experiences (p. 102). However, the novel's ambiguous ending leaves Alfa's fate unresolved, reinforcing the idea that trauma defies complete closure. His attempt at artistic expression may symbolize a desire for healing, but the deep-seated scars of war and abandonment remain, rendering any full recovery elusive. Diop masterfully leaves readers contemplating the long-term ramifications of trauma, posing a haunting question about whether true healing is ever attainable for those who have suffered immeasurable psychological wounds.

4.1 Findings

The findings of this research highlight the psychological and emotional consequences of trauma as depicted in *At Night All Blood is Black*. The novel presents trauma as a continuous cycle that distorts perception, behavior, and identity. The protagonist, Alfa Ndiaye, experiences psychological distress following the loss of his closest companion, which manifests in compulsive violence and self-destructive tendencies. His inability to process grief leads him to act out in ways that both isolate him from others and reinforce his suffering.

The novel illustrates how trauma disrupts cognitive functions, causing an individual to become trapped in repetitive patterns of thought and action. Alfa's actions reflect the struggle of a mind unable to move beyond a traumatic event, resulting in a psychological state where reality and memory blur. The obsessive nature of his violence suggests that trauma prevents the integration of past experiences, forcing him to relive and re-enact his pain.

Another significant finding is the novel's representation of trauma-induced identity fragmentation. Alfa's gradual detachment from his fellow soldiers and his increasing reliance on ritualistic violence signal a shift in his perception of self. His transformation from a disciplined soldier to an outcast indicates the profound impact of trauma on personal identity, leading to dissociation and a loss of a stable sense of self.

Furthermore, the novel demonstrates how trauma alters emotional responses, making it difficult for individuals to form meaningful connections with others. Alfa's alienation from his comrades and his inability to communicate his suffering reflects the isolating nature of psychological trauma. His descent into madness highlights the long-term effects of unprocessed trauma, reinforcing the idea that unresolved psychological wounds can result in social and emotional withdrawal.

Overall, these findings suggest that *At Night All Blood is Black* provides a complex portrayal of trauma's lasting psychological effects. Through the protagonist's journey, the novel explores how trauma reshapes memory, disrupts identity, and leads to behaviors that perpetuate suffering rather than provide healing. The research underscores the need to understand trauma not just as a singular event but as a psychological state that continues to shape an individual's existence long after the initial experience.

5. Conclusion

David Diop's *At Night All Blood is Black* offers a profound exploration of war trauma, demonstrating how loss and violence shape identity and mental health. Through the lens of trauma theory, Alfa Ndiaye's actions emerge as symptomatic of unresolved grief, guilt, and psychological distress. His descent into madness, alienation from his peers, and ultimate breakdown underscore the long-term effects of trauma. This research contributes to existing scholarship by centering trauma as the primary thematic concern in Diop's novel. Future studies may explore comparative analyses with other postcolonial war narratives or examine the intersection of race and trauma in

greater depth. As trauma continues to be a pressing issue in contemporary discourse, literature like *At Night All Blood is Black* remains crucial in understanding its multifaceted impact on the human condition.

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