

## DISCARDING EMPATHY FOR THE OTHER IN DANGAREMBGA'S *NERVOUS CONDITIONS* AND HABILA'S *OIL ON WATER*

Ocholi V. Idakwo<sup>1</sup>, Steve A. Ogunpitan<sup>2\*</sup> and Innocent E. Chiluya<sup>3\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Doctoral Student, Covenant University Ota, Nigeria / Principal Lecturer, Federal Polytechnic, Ilaro, Nigeria, ocholi.idakwo@stu.cu.edu.ng, ocholi.idakwo@federalpolyilaro.edu.ng  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0504-1162>

<sup>2</sup>Assoc. Prof. Lagos State University, stephen.ogunpitan@lasu.edu.ng  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6429-594X>

<sup>3</sup>Prof. Covenant University, Ota, Nigeria, innocent.chiluya@covenantuniversity.edu.ng  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4420-9709>

\*Corresponding Author

### Abstract

Trauma novelists usually deploy narrative tools which aspire to reflect perspectives that illuminate the mind of the reader on the kind of suffering that stems from revolting experiences. Expectedly, they involve the reader as an intimate witness or a distant observer of the fictional world that portrays trauma. As this reality unfolds, it is expected that they will evoke catharsis or create a gap between the reader and the personalities that are affected by the unfolding events.

The study makes certain assumptions by which it scrutinizes the degree of empathy that is usually provoked or impeded in prose narratives that reflect colonial reality, where the pain suffered by the characters is registered along racial and cultural divides. Two novels, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (2004) and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2010) are discussed as representations of such traumatic reality by engaging Pieter Vermeulen's proposition that the West habitually classifies the tragedies of non-Europeans as unworthy of recognition. To this end, tragic experiences that do not directly implicate the westerner are classified in colonial notions as irrelevant and lacking of melancholic affectation. This segregation has provoked postcolonial pundits to hypothesize that there actually exists a wide gulf between the interest of the colonizing West and that of the subjugated natives of sub-Saharan Africa. Attention is therefore drawn to the need for scholars to seek pragmatic means of understanding the differentiated traumatic hangovers that came with the colonial encounter. To this end, the study implores literary critics to evolve tools that will intellectually assess the tragic realities of citizens of the postcolony who have featured interminably as the most precariously situated.

**Keywords:** Affectation, Empathy, Tragedies, Trauma, Witness.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The value of chronicling the numerous studies that have researched in to trauma from its early beginnings to the present period cannot be overstated. Such a listing would reveal that it was only after the American/Vietnam War of the 1970s that noteworthy studies began to make inroads on what is now regarded as literary trauma theory (Stocks 71-72). Research on the phenomenon of trauma has become so popular to the extent that it has attracted scholars from some previously unrelated fields to carry out collaborative works that feature and possibly proffer solutions for modern man's navigation through the maze

of ever-increasing tragic experiences.

As numerous as these endeavours are, Judith Lewis Herman has called for their unification which she has described as 'an apparently divergent body of knowledge' to work for the same goal of bringing about a cure for traumatized people (4). She has argued that in spite of the preponderance of scholastic endeavours where dissimilar tools and methods have been used for the analysis of traumatic reality, there are common noticeable strands that cut across the various fields which most pundits have continued to share.

Amir Khadem who comments on the collection of essays on trauma studies edited by Gert Buelens, Sam Durrant and Robert Eagleton, states that the views presented by the critics whose articles appeared in the volume, have called for the review of the traditional classical postulations on trauma. They had highlighted specific shortcomings in contemporary thoughts and offered suggestions for reviewing the framework. For instance, where Robert Eaglestone appraised the call that the study should deploy a language that reflects greater sensitivity to the socio-cultural realities of citizens of non-western countries, Khadem surmises the argument by stating that on-going work on trauma is actually not just a 'response to but also a symptom of a systematic change in our conceptual framework that results from trauma itself' (144).

Maintaining a radically different approach, Stef Craps points at the limitation of trauma theory's persistence on engaging European psychoanalytic problematic by prescribing western therapeutic methods that would be relevant only for application in western locations and experiences. In his treatise on the need for trauma theory to look beyond Eurocentrism in the age of globalization, Craps makes a case for the review of those classical models that have failed to reckon with the peculiarities of marginalized groups. He criticizes canon's continued disregard for the 'traumatic experiences of non-Western minority cultures' (46). Apart from that, he states that any theoretical conjecture that constantly denies the necessity to adopt an anthropological approach for the appraisal of the traumatic experiences of citizens of other zones will lose universal relevance.

Considering the fact that a number of narrative configurations are often deployed 'to provide insight into the trauma' that implicates the reader as a witness (Samuel 365), this study which has adopted an expository approach aims to examine the reflection of trauma in the social-cultural experiences of non-European societies. It examines the depiction of trauma in postcolonial African novels and focuses on the novels' pattern of deviation from canonical propositions. The work also reviews the classical characterisation of trauma, which limits traumatic reality to the experience of personal pain in a mono-cultural context and argues for a deconstructive reading and interpretation of the African novel. The study which engages Pieter Vermeulen's proposition that westerners habitually classify the tragedies of non-Europeans as unworthy of recognition, to which end, tragic experiences that do not directly implicate the westerner are classified as irrelevant and lacking of melancholic affectation, selects Tsitsi Dangaremba's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and Helon Habila's *Oil on Water* (2012) as primary texts.

## 2. TEXTUAL DISCUSSION

### 2.1 Unworthy of Affective Investment

The novels selected for this study present perspectives that attest to the fact that no two traumatic experiences can be equated to each other. In the light of the novelists' utilization of their respective themes, settings and characters, the cathartic effect that they register is as varied as the distinctive styles in which their narratives are translated. It is essential to consider the evocation of empathy and its defining characteristics and also state that the physical and emotional impact of trauma on people who go through it. In this wise, we are compelled to view its effects and consider the varied debate that it often provokes. As Leah Anderst states, 'empathy is a spontaneous or a reflexive feeling with another being, an instinctive flinching when witnessing another's sudden pain, or a baby crying when it hears the cries of another' (272).

The narrative of each of the selected novels is therefore etched around the postcolonial notion that the colonial encounter is an undeniably disruptive episode in the evolution of African primeval societies. The novelists portray the reality of devalued personages and dysfunctional social structures by drawing from their countries' historical experiences to emphasize the brand of trauma that is triggered by colonial exploitation.

As we look at Dangaremba's narrative of *Nervous Condition*, it is worth noting that the novelist's rendering of the agony of the native as a hangover of the colonial experience. As evident in the colonial reality that the novel reveals, the colonial institution had laid a foundation for an unequal relationship between the colonizer and the colonial subject where the latter is restricted to sites from where the colonized wittingly or unwittingly performs inferior roles. It is therefore not surprising that volunteers for such demeaning roles frequently

emerge as beneficiaries of economic gratification and social elevation (Ashcroft, Griffiths, et.al). One of such prominent colonial citizens in *Nervous Conditions* is Babamukuru whom Dangarembga depicts as an emergent African bourgeois. He suffers painful consequences arising from his emasculation in matters of cultural relevance resulting from his transmuting status. The story reveals that it is his bizarre obsession for things European that constantly sinks his desire for cultural inclusion.

Babamukuru's humiliation manifests in his personal failure to confirm his true membership of the Shonan clan. In the first instance, his relatives see him as a traitor and also as a man whose thinking about things pertaining to the African culture is shallow. In the second instance, he suffers the pain of the African elite whose frantic mimicry of western norms is attended to with the frustrations of a defeated man. We see him striving to bestride the two worlds, and he ends up showcasing himself in the ludicrous image of a hybridized subject. His eagerness notwithstanding, he is neither acknowledged as a full-fledged member of the Shonan clan nor admitted into European circles as an assimilated native. Cast in the grotesque image of the hybridized colonial subject whom Frantz Fanon had aptly described as the black man who wears a white mask, Babamukuru suffers the agony of rejection on both sides. His ordeal can better be described by European rating as a caricature of a civilized native. As he is ostracized by his clansmen, he is also denied full membership of the European world which alien norms he continues to observe ardently.

The cathartic effect of Dangarembga's depiction of the frailties of her African characters who are victims of colonial oppression is intense. In the same manner in which Babamukuru is frequently thrown into confusion, Nyasha his daughter is also trapped between two contrasting cultures of Europe and Africa. While she abhors her father's situation, who at the face of colonial conquest, is divested of his prided African masculinity, she is also revealed as a woman who suffers pitifully in her dual victimhood of colonial subjugation and patriarchal oppression.

While Dangarembga calls our attention to the incongruity of imposing the European ideal of beauty on the physiognomy of the black woman, she succeeds in portraying Nyasha as a courageous character who always deploys part of her personality to criticize her father for habitually cringing before the colonialists. In spite of this, she also fails to conceal her own inherent contradictions when she yearns for her own chance to fit into the European mould of female refinement. In the course of processing the thought of accommodating the two contrasting conditions in her fragile body, she suffers a nervous breakdown for which she is institutionalised in a psychiatric asylum. Through the unsentimental insight that Tambu presents, both as a narrator and as a character, she succeeds in enthraling the reader and drawing him into an affective mood, to the extent of empathizing with the other characters who have been traumatized by the violence of colonial contact.

## 2.2 Viewing the 'Other' as a Distant Observer

In *Oil on Water*, Habila represents the despoiled landscape as a major trope for the revelation of traumatic realities of everyday living in the delta region of Nigeria. All through the sporadic narrative, the novelist uses the travails of the characters to reveal their individual and social roles either as destroyers of the landscape or as victims of the ravaged ecology. He uses this to bring to the fore and also to evoke nostalgic thoughts about their glorious and prosperous past which has plummeted since the era of colonial exploitation.

At the outset of the story, Rufus is presented as a character who is under the impression that the kidnap of Isabel is a remarkable incident for which the mobilization of all resources to secure her release from her captors is essential. But while the task dips into a futile search, he too suffers his own bout of self-doubt. Expressing concern for his own personal wellness in the course of the search, he describes how wet, cold and hungry he feels and wonders repeatedly if there is any wisdom in his decision to join Zaq in the quest for the kidnapped wife of the expatriate oil worker. In his disillusionment, he laments that he 'was sure the whole adventure – or rather misadventure – was now to them nothing but a memory, anecdotal currency to trade for a drink on a lazy day in the press clubroom' (3-4).

Rendering his impression of the expedition through the creeks, Rufus reveals that the kidnap of the British woman is in actual fact, not as crucial as the other calamities that have befallen the residents of the oil-producing marshlands. He is surprised that the numerous oddities surrounding the people's lives had never attracted as much media attention as the recent kidnap of Isabel, a foreigner. He therefore seizes the opportunity to bring the sufferings of the communities to the attention of the previously unperturbed West, represented by James Foolde, the kidnapped woman's husband.

Earlier on, when Zaq was contracted to embark on the search, James' security detail who is simply called Black Suit demonstrated that he had no clue of the strange twists that the search would assume. It is the

very reason why he stated rather glibly that there was no big deal in the task of making contact with the kidnappers and securing the release of the woman. In a deliberate attempt to trivialize the expedition that Zaq was about to embark on, he had told him dismissively that his job was simple. He then instructed him to just confirm that 'she's alive, take pictures and we'll take it from there. It should be easy' (32). However, the surprising twist of events indicates that Zaq's search party is exposed to a reality that is more tempestuous than was originally anticipated. It turns out that the mission is more engaging than the rudimentary job of a journalist who simply interviews people and clicks the camera to capture momentous incidents. Without realizing the objective of the expedition, Zaq dies tragically as a result of a water-borne disease that he contracted in the process of discharging the duties that the security detail had previously dismissed as a 'simple job'.

The contrast between the security operative's frivolous remark and the reality on ground is a reflection of the dismissive attitude of colonial agents towards things that concern other people that are non-western. They regard the agitations of the native as exaggerated hues that are not worthy of affectation. As indicated in the security operative's impertinence, he had even warned that the kidnappers should provide special care for Isabel, instructing Zaq to 'make them understand that nothing must happen to her. She's a British citizen' (32). His threat underscores the notion that irrespective of any harm that may befall 'other' nationalities in the region, the safety of the European woman remains supreme. Zaq is irked by this racial codification as he wonders aloud whether it 'does make her [referring to Isabel] more important than if she were, say, Nepalese, or Guyanese, or Greek' (32).

Rufus exploits his role as a journalist to reveal the oddities of the oil-producing communities, which he reasons to be sufficiently grave for the evocation of world empathy. As disquieting as the kidnap of Isabel might seem, Rufus tells James that her abduction need not be the only headline event that should be reported in the media. He views James as a representative of colonial powers as he draws him into a rational renegotiation of the terms of engagement between the colonizer and the colonized. He narrates the horrors of the oil-producing communities in a manner that no other person had ever told James.

Before the moment of Rufus' encounter with James who lives in the deluxe ambience of expatriate quarters, the only seemingly credible window through which the latter could glean the goings-on in the degraded communities is the newspaper or the television screen which is now 'filled by a blown-up photo of a smiling Isabel (96). Habila reveals the blissful atmosphere of the expatriate accommodation which insulates and isolates the Europeans from the contrastingly harsh world of 'a crowded street' (96) of the oil-producing communities. They are accommodated as mere squatters in decrepit shelters. By this insight also, the reader becomes even more intimate with the degree of injustice and inhumanity that the natives are subjected to. Rufus notes that as original residents of the oil-laden land from where the comfort and safety of every European expatriate is guaranteed, no real benefits ever accrues to the Niger Delta people. Yet, in what may seem like a parochial and insensitive assessment of the situation and a paradoxical consolation offered the people, James re-echoes the imperial sentiment that they were told by the oil companies and the government 'that the pipelines are there for their own good, that they hold great potential for their country, their future' (97). Rufus, nonetheless reveals that the pipelines are only there for the good of profiteering oil companies and their cronies. Their European representatives live in barefaced ostentation that perpetually injures the sensibilities of the displaced and disempowered natives. The atmosphere of James' residence confirms this as it 'was hidden behind a tall, barbed wire-topped wall, and passed through two gates and about half a dozen security men talking to each other on radios' (94).

Considering the fact that the comfort of all European expatriates is guaranteed, they can afford to be indifferent to the hues of the natives who live in 'countless villages going up in smoke daily' (97). It is against this milieu that Rufus criticizes the situation where the abduction of just one British woman would attract greater attention in the same media space that had always turned a blind eye to the monstrosities committed against the delta people. His observation is in tandem with the worries of postcolonial pundits concerning the self-effacing bias of the West against the affairs of colonial subjects. As Vermeulen has observed, the West often classifies the tragedies 'that affect non-Europeans as unworthy of recognition and affective investment' (141). To this end, any calamity that does not directly affect the West or Westerner is usually treated as one that is not worthy of deep reflection or mourning (Butler xiv).

Habila intentionally describes how the delta people's proximity to oil-producing facilities makes them worst victims of industrial pollution than the oil executives who work and reside at locations that are relatively distant from the production sites. The expatriate oil workers are usually shielded from the ravaging effects of production activities. As a result of the perceived opportunities that come with the industrial architecture that litter the coastline, greed and betrayal become the order of the day. Kinsmen who used to be closely knitted

now view one another as potential threats because their inane naivety made them welcome strangers – oil companies and government agents – to sow seeds of disaffection among them. The result is that they end up creating the tempting platform for traitors to fight against the collective interests of their clans. Before this wave of compromise became widespread, the clans had maintained a stance that resisted subtle or forceful theft of their ancestral lands. It is for this reason that Rufus refuses to

blame them for wanting to get some benefit out the pipelines that have brought nothing but suffering to their lives, leaking into the rivers and wells, killing the fish and poisoning the farmlands. And all they are told by the oil companies and the government is that the pipelines are there for their own good, that they hold great potential for their country, their future. (97)

In another instance, where Chief Ibiram tells the story of the itinerary of his clan, he reveals how Chief Molabo, their patriarch had once turned down the tempting offer made by oil companies to buy their entire village for a good price. The intension of the oil companies is to convert the once-fertile land to an industrial layout where they would drain the oil reserve that lies underneath their soil. The oil companies, according to Chief Molabo had offered to part with 'a lot of money than any of them [the natives] had ever imagined' (39). It is a disappointment that his vouched dedication to the clan's cause would turn out to be inconsequential since some of his kinsmen end up embracing the offer and conspire with government operatives to obliterate his ideals. Chief Molabo was therefore arrested and accused with thrummed-up charges of aiding rebels to plot against the government. He is also accused of being the brain behind the frequent kidnapping of oil workers. Following his death in detention, the explorers with their collaborators in government ultimately achieved their aim of creating a crack in the resolve of the community to resist the sale of their ancestral land. We therefore see individual families sell patches of their land for the providences of immediate comfort. Little did they know that they had indeed sold out their future for a trifle. The result is that

The rigs went up, and gas flares, and workers came and set up camp in our midst, we saw our village change, right before our eyes. And that was why we decided to leave, ten families. We didn't take their money. The money would be a curse on them for taking our land, and for killing our chief. (41)

Ibiram's narration captures the emotion of a people whose heritage has been outmatched by powerful forces that came from the West. He expresses the pain of his clansmen when he asks rhetorically, 'how can we be happy when we are mere wonderers without a home?' (41).

Chief Molabo's martyrdom resonates with Ken Saro-Wiwa's ordeal in real life for the protection of Ogoni land from capitalist exploitation. It is worthy to note that several years after he was executed by the dictatorial regime of General Sani Abacha, Saro-Wiwa's ghost still seems to haunt successive regimes in Nigeria. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) came out with a report on the Environmental Assessment of Ogoniland in August 2011. The report was recommended to the government, the oil and gas industry and communities to begin a comprehensive cleanup of Ogoniland, restore polluted environments and put an end to all forms of ongoing oil contamination in the region. Even though government often promises to carry out the affirmative action of cleaning Ogoni land and other adjoining communities of oil pollution, only superficial cleansing of the pollution is seen to be carried out.

The portrayal of the melancholic state to which Chief Ibiram has drifted, evokes empathy in the reader who is drawn into a telepathic communion with the displaced clan. Through this also, Habila draws our attention to the agony of the Ogoni people with whom we identify and empathize. He makes it evident that the traumatic hangover of Chief Ibiram's clan is the tragedy of the entire region. His narration re-echoes the pain of disoriented individuals and dislodged communities that persist as the collective tragedy of the delta people. Rufus, for example describes how a location, which probably used to be one of the villages from where the natives were dislodged, has lost its communal texture. As a result of the unfettered despoliation of the landscape, horrific consequences have resulted. The land has become uninhabitable. It now looks like a scene in a sci-fi movie: 'the meagre landscape was covered in pipelines flying in all directions, sprouting from the evil-smelling, oil-fecund earth. The pipes crisscrossed and inter-connected endlessly all over the eerie field' (35). Besides, distant gas flares dot the landscape as they puff out thick smoke. During the night, the flares cast an iridescent light over the surrounding villages. But the tragedy of the residents is in the fact that they never realize that the glow which they initially mistook for government presence and actual development would eventually decimate their pastoral population. It would gradually plunge them into a pitiable vegetative condition. The aftermath of this is reflected in the description of the people's current condition which indeed, is the actual manifestation of the apocalyptic vision that Malabo had seen when he refused to embrace the

new wave of modernity that the oil companies promised.

Through a picturesque depiction of the ravaging effects of industrial pollution, Habila conveys the agony of a people who had, as a result of their naivety embraced a semblance of development that the people who degraded their land offered. For some strange reasons, most of the decimated communities are portrayed as anonymous entities as they remain nameless or designated with undecipherable numbers that are in reality mere coordinates for oil-tapping installations like “oil well no 2.1999. 15,000 meters” (7) or just meaningless names like Junction town where Rufus’ family used to live until the fire disaster that destroyed everything (97).

With the zealous determination of a news hound who is committed to a cause, Rufus uses his interview with James to challenge the colonial mindset which has always labelled the African native in the dark images of the villain, criminal or the uncivilized who is perennially endowed with the tendency for corrupt practices. Accordingly,

These people endure the worst conditions of any oil-producing community on earth, the government knows it, but because the government doesn’t care, they also don’t care. And you think the people are corrupt? No. They are just hungry and tired. (97)

It is significant to point at the fact that Rufus in Habila’s *Oil on Water* and Tambu in Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* play synchronous roles not only as voices of conscience, but as protagonists through whom the two novelists renegotiate with western hegemonic forces for the negative roles they played in the tragedies that the continent is yet to recover from. They stand on ethical grounds to demand empathy and reparation possibly, for the ravaging effects of colonial violence which hangovers still torment the African continent in its neo-colonial state.

It is evident from the forgoing, that it is a matter of moral and ethical propriety. It is therefore understandable why Rufus in *Oil on Water*, expects James to see the picture of human suffering beyond the hypocritical mourning of the kidnap of his wife who he does not really love. His illicit affair with Koko his domestic maid which had been in place before the arrival of Isabel is a proof that he had long lost his commitment to his marital vows before she got kidnapped. In addition to this, James’ sexual exploitation of the naive African maid is in character with colonial exploitation where the colonizer takes undue advantage of the gullible and vulnerable colonial subject.

James’ illicit affair with Koko is an extended metaphor of the exploitation of the colonial subject which has persisted even after the period of colonization. Therefore, as journalists hound him, pressurizing him to render some explanation about his wife’s kidnap, he is betrayed with the realization that he lacks the courage to face them. That is why he thinks that the string of events is ‘like a circus....and the funny thing is I don’t even know what to tell them. I don’t know what’s happened to her’ (95). How can he understand the condition of the delta people consider them worthy of affectation where he is bereft of the knowledge of what actually happened to his wife who was purportedly kidnapped?

### 3. CONCLUSION

This study has viewed the novelists’ deployment of various narrative tools to evoke the empathy of the reader as a witness to and as an observer of the colonial violence that is responsible for the traumatic hangovers of contemporary African societies. In its engagement of Vermeulen’s notion, colonial hegemonies with their stooges have perennially isolated themselves from victims of colonial violence and as such have reserved no emotional commitment to their cause, which they relate with as the hues of the ‘other’.

The lives of the protagonists as well as those of other prominent characters in the two novels discussed in this study, reveal the failure of colonial institutions and their agents to acknowledge the agony of the ‘other’ as the tragedies of heterogeneous entities that are peculiar in a multiplicity of ways. The study has therefore argued and has maintained that as far as the West is concerned, traumatic reality would always be evaluated through the lens of psychoanalysis. While not disregarding the essentiality of viewing trauma through this prism, the study maintains that the reality of trauma for the individual as well as the community, especially in the context of postcolonial reality should be extended to such dimensions that accommodate social, historical and cultural factors as sensors of traumatic experiences.

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