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Rewriting the Past: Trauma and Repair in ***Destination Biafra*** and ***The Farming of Bones***

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إعادة كتابة الماضي: الصدمة والتعافي في *Destination Biafra* و*The Farming of Bones*

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Introduction

> "The story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available… The story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality—the escape from a death, or from its referential force—rather attests to its endless impact on a life." (Caruth, 1996, p. 4)

Can the wounds of the past ever truly disappear into oblivion, or do they endure, quietly shaping the course of our lives? This question resonates through Buchi Emecheta's Destination Biafra (1982) and Edwidge Danticat's The Farming of Bones (1998). Trauma, political violence, and social conflict are the cornerstones on which both texts are built, as their authors probe the human costs of historical upheaval and the intimate struggles of individuals amid collective turmoil. Yet the novels do more than underscore the lasting impact of atrocity; they also foreground the resilience and agency of women as witnesses, actors, and narrators.

Emecheta's narrative centers on the Nigerian Civil War, while Danticat's recounts the 1937 Parsley Massacre on the Hispaniola border. Both invite reflection on how fiction can represent trauma and violence by staging the relation between bodily and emotional scars and women characters' dilemmas when caught in bloody historical events. The analysis draws sustained parallels between the Biafran conflict and the massacre of Haitians in the Dominican Republic, while remaining attentive to each novel's historical and cultural specificity.

Previous scholarship has extensively examined trauma and violence in each text, highlighting their psychological and social ramifications. Olivia Adaobi Ihueze (2016) reads Destination Biafra through the lenses of loss, displacement, and the war's effects on women and children. Mariah Pongor (2015) shows how The Farming of Bones offers a counter-hegemonic account

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of the Parsley Massacre that exposes gaps in Hispaniola's historiography. However, there remains a relative gap in comparative approaches that place the two novels in sustained dialogue—precisely what this article undertakes.

The novels follow Debbie's and Amabelle's political involvement alongside other commitments. The texts' tensions lie in' implication in national tragedies—the Nigerian Civil War and the Parsley Massacre. Within this framework, I argue that trauma, both personal and collective, remains an enduring force that shapes identities and national histories. In both novels, trauma becomes a critical lens through which the authors explore legacies of violence, displacement, and systemic oppression. The narratives revolve around these themes, foregrounding women's experiences amid socio-political upheaval, where their "goal is radical change" (Myles, 2009, p. 6). Through their protagonists, the novels show how personal suffering mirrors collective trauma, weaving individual stories into the larger fabric of historical memory.

Moreover, in both works trauma takes on a collective dimension, indexing the scars of colonialism, war, and structural domination. These traumas are narrated, contested, and refigured, offering both a mode of resistance and a space for repair. Emecheta and Danticat bridge the personal and the collective, illuminating how individual remembrance intersects with broader socio-political realities. Their novels critique the erasure of women's experiences from official histories and affirm women as witnesses and chroniclers of national and communal suffering.

This study asks: how do Destination Biafra and The Farming of Bones interweave personal trauma with political oppression, and by what narrative devices—voice and focalization; temporal structures of recall; the body as a site of injury and signification; and practices of testimony/counter-memory—do they enact recovery through rewriting the past? Methodologically, the article adopts a qualitative, contrastive design structured around these four analytic axes and grounded in close readings with precise pagination. The theoretical framework is diversified (Caruth; LaCapra; Felman; Hartman; Hirsch), and sources are restricted to academic editions and citable materials; the primary editions consulted are specified in the bibliography.

1. Theoretical Framework

Drawing on Caruth's theory, literature is one of many disciplines that can bear witness to trauma, serving as a medium to reveal the wounds of the past and provoke reflection and transformation in both individuals and

societies. The significant rise of interest in trauma narratives has fuelled the emergence of Literary Trauma Studies, offering detailed accounts of how trauma has been represented in literature. These studies initially focused on the role of trauma and its bending effect on narrative structures. However, trauma narratives have also flourished in more accessible genres, particularly within women's writing, where themes of grief and loss are pervasive.

More precisely, the concept of trauma, often subject to critique, is typically seen as a deeply disruptive experience that significantly alters the emotional structure of the self and reshapes its perception of the external world. Trauma studies investigate the effects of trauma in literature and society by examining its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural dimensions. Cathy Caruth, a key figure in trauma studies alongside Shoshana Felman, Geoffrey Hartman, and Dominick LaCapra, challenge, each in his own way, the theory that trauma is detached from history and ethically stagnant. Caruth's perspective offers valuable insights into how trauma can deepen our engagement with historical narratives rather than distancing us from them. She posits that a *textualist* approach, rather than negating history, enables a "rethinking of reference" that does not erase history but instead allows it to emerge in spaces where immediate understanding might falter (1996: 11). Caruth emphasizes the ethical imperative of this practice, asserting that "the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly, and imperatively demand a new mode of reading and of listening" (1996: 9). This new mode is essential for addressing the isolation experienced by the two novels 'characters and communities shaped by trauma. Henceforward, trauma theory provides a vital foundation for understanding the fragmented and elusive nature of memory and its representation in the selected texts. Caruth's insights into trauma emphasize its dual nature as an event that is experienced and incomprehensible, simultaneously present and absent in the survivor's consciousness. The theorist describes trauma as "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available (1996: 4), compelling individuals to confront the unspeakable through the act of testimony. This tension between silence and speech extends beyond the personal, manifesting in collective memory as communities grapple with histories of violence and loss. Their fragmented memories create reflective questions about trauma, memory, and nationality.

This exploration of trauma and its lingering effects is displayed in *Destination Biafra* and *The Farming of Bones* through the two women characters,

who bear the scars of personal and collective violence. They respond to trauma in ways that reshape their identities and histories. As an illustration, Emecheta's heroine, Debbie, witnesses and survives the atrocities of war, while Amabelle, in Danticat's novel, bears the weight of torture and loss. In both texts, trauma is not only personal but also political as it is intricately tied to the broader histories of colonialism, violence, and gendered oppression. The two characters' struggles reveal the ways in which trauma can obscure, fracture, and silence memory. It becomes also a means of resistance and a powerful force for reclamation and empowerment. By confronting their histories and finding ways to voice their pain, these women transform their suffering into acts of resistance, building narratives that contribute to the collective memory of their nations and reshape their futures. Consequently, the first part of our analysis aims to set a bridge between the notion of writing trauma and identity construction. Its ambition is to demonstrate how writing can offer a platform to cure intimate contingences. For Michael Richardson and Meera Atkinson, in *Traumatic Affect* (2013), trauma and post-traumatic syndromes stand as spaces designed to encompass *unbearable* and *unspeakable* realities. It is then essential to view traumatic recollections as a powerful instrument to witness trauma, declaring that,

> "Trauma is inescapable. Inevitable. It is not rare, but common. The word "trauma" comes with innumerable connotations: hysteria, suffering, damage, and catastrophe, to name a few. What is catastrophic or exceptional for some-rape, war, torture-might constitute the everyday for others." (2)

Thus, trauma exists on a relational continuum, inseparable from its context, whether individual or collective. While it is essential to address the most extreme and violent forms of trauma both theoretically and therapeutically, it is equally important to acknowledge the seemingly *minor* ruptures that, while not shaking the world, disrupt the inner fabric of a person's body and mind, or alter the dynamics and course of a family, social circle, workplace, community, or even encounters among strangers.

2. The Two Novels' Contexts: Bridging Trauma Histories

By returning to the past, with all its pain and trauma, the two authors recreate the story of the Nigerian Civil war and Haitian Parsley Massacre by focusing on the victimization, maltreatment and brutalization of its most vulnerable victims, women. In Destination Biafra, Emecheta illustrates how trauma manifests not only in physical suffering but also in the enduring

psychological toll of witnessing atrocities and surviving in a society fractured by violence. The author examines the traumatic dimensions of war through the experiences of Debbie Ogedemgbe, a woman who undergoes the gendered violence and acute suffering caused by the Nigerian Civil War. Cathy's theory of trauma provides a valuable lens to analyse how Emecheta portrays the psychological and emotional scars left by conflict. She emphasizes the paradoxical nature of trauma, describing it as both "trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (Caruth 1996: 3) and an experience that defies complete understanding or expression. This framework underscores the silences and fragmented recollections that shape Debbie's journey. Hence, Debbie's encounters with war, including the loss of her father and her harrowing travels across dangerous territories, reflect Caruth's notion that trauma disrupts time and memory, as the war remains "one of your greatest shames" (Emecheta 1982: 255), creating a cyclical pattern where the past continues to intrude upon the present. Amabelle, in this connection, according to Dominick LaCapra is among victims of trauma who "tend to relieve occurrences or at least intrude on their present existence" (2001: 143), believing that literature can be a powerful testament to trauma in the world where literature allows us to 'read the wound" (Hartman 1995) in order to represent the reality of loss, and a multifaceted approach from a variety of disciplines, one of which is literature, becomes necessary because

> "[it] may be only through this variety that we can learn, in effect, not only to ease suffering but to open, in the individual and the community, new possibilities for change, a change that would acknowledge the unthinkable realities to which traumatic experience bears witness". (Qtd in Alexander 2023: 127)

Next to the context, which bridges the two novels' histories of violence, a brief summary of the key events in each novel that depict trauma, resistance, and resilience would provide insight into their shared exploration of human endurance and the capacity to confront systemic oppression. Both Destination Biafra and The Farming of Bones revolve, as already mentioned, on historical events marked by extreme violence. Emecheta's novel recounts the horrors of the Nigerian Civil War while Danticat's work focuses on the Parsley Massacre. These historical contexts provide a backdrop for exploring the profound trauma experienced by the characters as the subsequent novel summaries illustrate.

3. Synopsis of the Two Novels

Destination Biafra tells the story of Debbie Ogedemgbe, an educated Nigerian woman and a British-trained officer, as she goes through the chaos and devastation of the war. Though she experiences trauma, Debbie is determined to play an active role in the conflict, challenging both societal and gender norms in a male-dominated military and political landscape. It is through Emecheta's portrayal of Debbie that the novel captures the horrors of war, including ethnic violence, betrayal, and the lasting impact of colonialism on Nigeria's fragile unity. Through Debbie's journey, Emecheta critiques the manipulation of Nigeria by both foreign and local forces, exposing the personal and national struggles of a country grappling with identity and survival. Amidst the brutality, Debbie emerges as a symbol of resilience and hope, striving for peace and a united Nigeria. The novel is both a critique of war and an exploration of its toll on individuals and society.

Correspondingly, *The Farming of Bones* revolves around the violence of the Haitian Parsley Massacre, which began in 1937 in a village on the Dominican side of the river that separates the country from Haiti. The narrative is based on the moving Amabelle Desir's journey, Haitian-born and a faithful maidservant to the Dominican family that took her in when she was orphaned, and her lover Sebastien, an itinerant sugarcane cutter, decide they will marry and return to Haiti at the end of the cane season. However, hostilities toward Haitian laborers find a vitriolic spokesman in the ultra-nationalist Generalissimo Trujillo who calls for an ethnic cleansing of his Spanish-speaking country. As rumors of Haitian persecution become fact, as anxiety turns to terror, Amabelle and Sebastien's dreams are leveled to the most basic human desire: to resist and endure. Based on a little-known historical event, the novel memorializes the forgotten victims of nationalist madness and the deeply felt passion and grief of its survival. Danticat reformulates the old affirmations of identity (gender, race, nationality, class). Danticat, as Myriam, J. A. Chancy writes, consistently exposes the ways in which class and gender dynamics are inextricably articulated with racial meanings and vice versa. As such, the recreated identities stand as social categories of belonging are always necessarily unstable since it is through their articulation with other categories of social identity that they acquire their meaning (Chancy 2010: 64).

As Emecheta's novel, *The Farming of Bones* features a female protagonist in the figure of Amabelle Désir, who recounts the history of the Haitian Parsley Massacre of Haitians from the perspective of a victim, a survivor,

and a historical witness. This novel subversively intervenes with historical narrative by privileging the voice of a Haitian woman to tell the story of the Massacre. As a Haitian, as a woman, and as a domestic servant in the Dominican Republic, Amabelle occupies a position of multiple oppressions. The trajectories of both Debbie and Amabelle are consistent with this "evolutionary spiral." While Debbie's journey is psychological, its psychic power is inextricably bound to its physicality, that is, the experience of violence and rape. Amabelle, on the other hand embarks on a treacherous physical journey as she attempts to flee the Massacre, a plight that is also psychological because the Dominican Republic is the only home she has ever known and she shares a close bond with her Dominican, Trujillo-partisan employers.

It appears from the two summaries that Emecheta and Danticat utilize their women characters as literary devices to depict trauma and violence. Moreover, Emecheta employs vivid imagery and symbolism, while Danticat uses fragmented narratives and multiple perspectives to convey the disorienting and pervasive nature of trauma. Both authors also use character development to highlight the resilience and strength of individuals in the face of violence. The themes of identity, memory, and resilience are central to both novels. Emecheta and Danticat explore how trauma and violence shape personal and collective identities, with characters struggling to recover their sense of self in the aftermath of conflict. Memory is depicted as both a burden and a source of strength, as characters navigate their past experiences. The theme of resilience is evident in the characters' ability to endure and find meaning amidst suffering. Common to Emecheta and Danticat are the ways in which they effectively portray the complexities of trauma and violence contributing, thus, to a deeper understanding of the psychological and social effects of conflict, through their valuable insights into the human condition.

4. Remembering, Recreating and Interrogating History

To preserve the memory of the war against the threat of forgetfulness, Emecheta and Danticat make their two novels centre on traumatic memories, which are shaped by shared experiences, narratives, and symbols, encompass the African and Caribbean people's long history of political and societal marginalization, cultural subjugation, and violent repression. Both critically confront historical injustices, facilitating communal healing, and fostering empowerment within oppressed communities. Depending on this explanation, trauma emphasizes how traumatic events are experienced

and remembered as it is an overwhelming experience that disrupts the normal processes of memory and understanding, often manifesting in a delayed, repetitive form. It has a profound impact on collective memory and identity. The two narratives are crucial for reinforcing the collective identity of the African and Caribbean community, which had been systematically undermined by the tyrannical regimes. In this frame, Caruth's claim that trauma may act as "the very link between cultures" (1996: 11) resonates deeply in these novels, as the traumatic experiences of their protagonists create opportunities for solidarity and transformative understanding across boundaries of race, gender, and history. I contend that listening to the trauma embedded in these narratives not only highlights the shared pain of colonial and patriarchal violence but also offers the potential to build cross-cultural connections and reimagine community through shared resilience. In this way, trauma becomes not merely an account of suffering but a powerful medium for confronting historical injustices and envisioning a more inclusive future.

Emecheta situates *Destination Biafra* in the context of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970), a period marked by ethnic tensions and colonial legacies. Debbie Ogedemgbe, the protagonist, is portrayed as a modern, Oxford-educated woman who defies patriarchal norms and ethnic divisions. Her journey through the war-torn landscapes of Nigeria critiques both tribalism and the complicity of colonial powers, positioning Debbie as a symbol of resistance and idealism. Emecheta's reliance on memory and second-hand accounts underscores the challenges of narrating historical events from a diasporic perspective. Conversely, Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* revisits the 1937 Haitian Massacre, a lesser-known but equally harrowing episode in Caribbean history. She analyzes the physical stress and psychological trauma her fellow woman is subjected to through the voice of Amabelle Désir, a Haitian domestic worker in the Dominican Republic, Danticat reconstructs the atrocities of 'the cutting,' where thousands of Haitians were killed under the regime of Rafael Trujillo. Amabelle's deeply personal narrative offers a counter-hegemonic perspective, revealing the racial and linguistic prejudices that fuelled the violence.

Both novels portray women's bodies as sites of trauma and resistance. Debbie's journey through Nigeria's war zones and Amabelle's physical and emotional scars reflect how systemic violence targets women in ways that are both symbolic and tangible. While Debbie's impartiality and idealism drive her quest for a unified Nigeria, Amabelle's "map of scars" becomes a living testament to the personal and collective suffering of Haitians. Emecheta and

Danticat also differ in their approaches to historical memory. Emecheta's narrative is shaped by her diasporic position, relying on oral histories and imaginative reconstruction to critique colonial and patriarchal structures. Danticat, on the other hand, uses Amabelle's voice to craft a visceral, first-hand account that challenges official historiographies and foregrounds the collective memory of the Haitian community. Despite these differences, both authors use their protagonists to highlight the gendered dimensions of historical trauma. Debbie's idealism and Amabelle's resilience offer nuanced portrayals of women navigating the complexities of war, violence, and displacement. By placing these narratives in dialogue, we can better understand how postcolonial literature amplifies silenced voices, critiques systemic inequities, and reimagines the possibilities for female agency in the face of historical oppression.

Remembering becomes a therapeutic device through which both women characters succeed to cope with their trauma. The two characters bypass their violent experiences by addressing traumatic memory in order to seek healing. Memory is itself problematic, as Zygmunt Bauman writes in the context of war victims, "memory is a mixed blessing…Memory selects, and interprets" (2003: 86). Depending on this, I argue that this tendency, in women's trauma fiction, foregrounds a paradox; while trauma has often been described as unspeakable, these narratives incite speech, bringing silenced experiences to light.

This tension between silence and expression reflects Caruth's argument that repressive forces often paradoxically generate discourse (1996: 116). In a similar vein, trauma narratives create a space for articulating the unspeakable and addressing both individual and collective suffering. Caruth highlights how the retelling of memories is crucial in transforming traumatic experiences into narrative ones, thus facilitating the process of healing. Meanwhile, Contemporary literature, particularly women's writing, has demonstrated a profound commitment to voicing silenced traumas, experimenting with how such experiences are represented and addressed.

This is particularly relevant when analysing Buchi Emecheta's and Edwidge Danticat's texts. Both novels foreground the intersections of trauma, gender, and history, exploring the enduring effects of violence on women's bodies and psyches. In *Destination Biafra*, Emecheta critiques the Nigerian Civil War's dehumanizing effects, with women's suffering serving as a lens to interrogate national and patriarchal power structures. This response underscores her refusal to be reduced to silence or passivity. Her resistance

extends to other moments, such as when Alan Grey, a British officer, suggests she use her sexuality to her advantage, telling her to "Do your woman bit tonight." Debbie retaliates by slapping him and declaring "For the way you and your country have fallen in the eyes of the black nations" (Emecheta 1982: 255). Her experience with Alan, and possibly others like him, could foster a lasting sense of betrayal, anger, and mistrust toward authority figures, men, or even the colonial system itself, marking the emergence of trauma. The slap, more than just a physical act, becomes a symbol of this trauma, encapsulating the emotional and psychological upheaval that lingers long after the incident, shaping her perception of the world and her relationships.

After her traumatic rape, Debbie does not exhibit the typical symptoms identified by Jean-Charles (2014) as part of "rape trauma syndrome," such as disruptions in time perception or a loss of personal agency. Rather, the novel presents her as a character whose resilience and sense of purpose remain unshaken by her victimization. The Debbie who confronts and strikes Lawal and Grey is not fundamentally different from the Debbie we encounter at the glamorous Lagos party at the beginning of the story. This portrayal shifts the focus of the narrative away from Debbie as a mere victim, instead positioning her as a symbol of resistance, actively challenging both patriarchal and colonial forces.

Similarly, Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* revisits the Parsley Massacre, intertwining personal loss with collective trauma to highlight the silencing of women's experiences within official historical narratives. Amabelle's trauma is rooted in the brutal loss of her lover, Sebastien, and the massacre of her parents and the community as a whole. It challenges the hegemonic versions of history, re-centering marginalized voices and exposing the gendered dimensions of trauma. As Geoffrey Hartman observes, there is an intrinsic link between psychic wounds and signification (2003). By transforming hidden wounds into narrative, these texts underscore how this process can bear witness to suffering, offer resilience, and contribute to healing. Both novels exemplify how postcolonial women's writing disrupts dominant historical discourses, reclaiming agency for female characters and highlighting the transformative potential of art.

Amabelle's narrative in *The Farming of Bones*, also, aligns deeply with Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma as a "wound that cries out," a rupture that exceeds the capacity of language and remains as an unhealed mark on both the individual and collective psyche. For Caruth, trauma is not only the event itself but also the persistent haunting of its incomprehensibility.

This is evident in the novel through Amabelle's role as both a survivor and witness, tasked with giving voice to a silenced history. The Parsley Massacre, an unspeakable atrocity inflicted on Haitians by Trujillo's regime, is an enduring wound that Amabelle carries, even as she exists within two realms, the physical and the spiritual. In this case, Caruth argues that trauma exists as an absence within consciousness, a rupture that resists direct representation. This is mirrored in Amabelle's fragmented narration, where memory and reality blur. Her storytelling serves as a means of filling the silences left by historical erasure, but her testimony is also haunted by what cannot be fully articulated. The persistent ghosts of those lost in the massacre, Sebastien, her parents, and countless others, represent the enduring presence of trauma as a wound that cannot be closed. Even as she recounts her story, Amabelle's narrative oscillates between moments of clarity and overwhelming silence, reflecting Caruth's words that "traumatic experience… is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known, and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (1996: 4).

The novel's exploration of testimony as a form of healing echoes Caruth's belief that trauma demands a response, that its telling is a way of bearing witness to what was otherwise unspeakable. Amabelle's role as a narrator is not only to recount her personal pain but to voice the collective trauma of her people. She becomes, as Caruth suggests, "the site of a wound" that speaks not only for herself but for those whose lives were erased. Her act of narrating bridges the gap between historical reality and personal memory, constructing a space where trauma can be acknowledged and mourned. Yet, even in this act of testimony, the rupture remains. Amabelle's wound, the loss of her loved ones and her displacement, remains an integral part of her identity. Caruth's emphasis on the belated nature of trauma, its recurrence in memory and the impossibility of full closure is evident in Amabelle's inability to move past the massacre. Her memories return in waves, unbidden, showing how trauma lingers as both a mark of survival and a constant reminder of loss.

Amabelle's journey also reflects Caruth's idea of trauma as an intersection of personal and collective histories. While her pain is uniquely her own, it is inseparable from the broader suffering of the Haitian people during the Parsley Massacre. The novel juxtaposes Amabelle's personal grief with the historical wound of Trujillo's violence, emphasizing how trauma operates on both individual and collective levels. The silenced history of the massacre,

the absence of memorials, the gaps in official narratives, parallels Amabelle's internal struggle to reconcile her memories with the reality of survival. In light of the above, The Farming of Bones demonstrates that trauma, as Caruth describes, is both a wound and a call to action. It resists forgetting and compels remembrance, even as it eludes full understanding. Amabelle's act of bearing witness becomes a form of survival, but it also ensures that the wound of the Parsley Massacre is not erased. Through her narrative, Danticat bridges the gap between the living and the dead, the remembered and the forgotten, creating a space where trauma is both spoken and heard, even if it remains unresolved.

In this context, the use of testimonies in *Destination* mirrors the traumatic impact of the violence depicted, specifically the pogroms in Northern Nigeria and the aftermath of the 1966 killings of Igbos. By foregrounding the subjective perspectives of a young mother and a teenage boy, Emecheta allows the traumatic experience of the violence to unfold through fragmented, personal accounts. This aligns with Caruth's assertion that trauma is often represented as a 'wound' that remains unprocessed or unhealed, resurfacing repeatedly through the act of testimony. Trauma, here, presented as an event that cannot be fully integrated into the individual's consciousness until it is expressed, also resonates with the shift Emecheta makes by moving away from the omniscient voice to give space to personal narratives. The character's testimonies, uninterrupted and raw, act as a means of articulating their trauma, despite the impossibility of fully encapsulating the magnitude of the violence they have endured. The lack of a clear, objective narration of the historical events, replaced by the fragmented personal accounts, highlights how trauma, in Caruth's view, disrupts both the individual's ability to communicate it and the larger historical understanding of the event. These testimonies become the site where trauma is both articulated and perpetuated, making visible the lingering effects of historical violence on the personal and communal psyche.

> "One boy of about fifteen, who had long taken leave of his senses, rushed up to Ugoji and started to blubber, with saliva dripping from both corners of his mouth, "My mother, my father […] we were made to watch while they pounded them like yam with their clubs" […] One of his brothers came and pulled him away, apologising and saying to Ugoji, "He has been like this since the night of the incident." Ugoji simply gaped". (Emecheta 1982: 84)

Emecheta's decision to convey the historical events through re-experienced moments, via testimony and dialogue, disrupts the narrative's flow, infusing it with jarring, violent imagery and fragmented language. This approach not only slows the narrative's progression but also grants the traumatized boy, a unique form of historical authority, positioning him as the primary source through which the reader learns about the events of June to October 1966. Another distressing testimony, given by a young woman, vividly depicts her lived experience:

> "My husband was a chemist and we owned our own shop. As he was locking up, I heard the heavy footsteps of soldiers […] Our neighbours heard him calling for God's help, calling for his mother and me, but none of us could help. We all heard the firing, and I disobeyed him and ran out […] I was alone in the dirty muddy street where his bullet-ridden body, still warm, was left" (Emecheta, 1982, p. 91).

The young woman's testimony, marked by vivid details like the "still warm body" and the "heavy footsteps," transforms her account into both a personal recollection and a form of creative storytelling. Her descriptive language conveys the intense sensory experience of the event, capturing the wound of her trauma in a visceral manner. This emotional expression not only causes "all the women present to begin crying," fostering a sense of collective empathy that offers reassurance to the survivor, but it also "ignites the anger of those listening to fever pitch," sparking a heightened sense of political commitment within the group (Emecheta. 1982: 91). The shared reactions of grief and anger suggest that the listeners are familiar with similar experiences, perhaps even having endured the same suffering. Consequently, the woman's unverifiable account is accepted as truth, not because it can be independently corroborated, but because the group reaches a collective agreement on the validity of the survivor's subjective retelling. In this way, the wound of her trauma becomes a shared communal scar, binding the group together in both empathy and action.

The protagonists in both novels challenge the systems that oppress them, though their paths to resistance differ. Debbie's journey in *Destination Biafra* reflects bell hooks' assertion in *Talking Back* that speech and narrative are acts of resistance for marginalized women. Similarly, Amabelle's storytelling in *The Farming of Bones* aligns with Chandra Talpade Mohanty's concept of reclaiming narratives to critique dominant ideologies. Both novels underscore

the importance of women's voices in reshaping historical narratives, demonstrating how literature becomes a site of symbolic resistance.

Amabelle's narrative is the retention of memory as an act of resistance, as she states that, "The slaughter is the only thing that is mine enough to pass on." (Danticat 1998: 266). The annual gathering at the physical border between two nations symbolizes where the true commemoration of memory should occur, underscoring the importance of both place and collective identity in preserving historical trauma. Central to this act is the river, which functions not only as a geographical border but also as a poignant site where institutional and personal memory collide. The significance of the river as a site of memory is vividly portrayed in Danticat's text the war remains to be: "We went to the river every year on the first of November. The women would dress in all white" (Danticat 1998: 41). By consistently returning on the same day each year and adhering to a specific dress code, the women establish a formalized commemoration rooted in discipline and shared principles. As Josephine notes, they began "making up codes and disciplines by which we could always know who the daughters of the river were" (Danticat 1998: 44). Through these practices, the daughters of the river have succeeded in creating a personal and independent commemoration that resists institutional erasure, embodying both resilience and solidarity. Amabelle's memory of what she had seen is constantly with her; the experience will always be with her to pain and overwhelm her as she reacts,

> "[…] the water rises above my father's head. My mother releases his neck, the current carrying her beyond his reach. Separated, they are less of an obstacle for the cresting river I scream until I can taste blood in my throat, until I can no longer hear my own voice" (Danticat 1998: 20).

As the above quote makes clear that trauma is something that haunts a person with a memory from the past and the present becomes highly unbearable and heavy. The victim loses all sense of the reality around her because she is engulfed by that powerful memory from the past. It is only by sharing it with other people that the victim can experience a sense of relief from the traumatic pain. In this connection Dominic La Capra maintains:

> "Victims of trauma tend to relieve occurrences or at least intrude on their present existence, for example in nightmares or in flashbacks or in words that are compulsively repeated and that doesn't seem to have their ordinary meaning because they are talking on different connotations from another belief . . .

> I also believe that people who have been severely traumatized, it may be impossible to fully transcend acting out the past". (Danticat 1998: 143)

LaCapra's (2001) concept discloses the reality of traumatic experience in which the victim tries to relieve the event or memory of the past in many ways. Nightmares, flashbacks and use of certain kind of language by the victim show that it is almost impossible to avoid acting out the trauma inflicted by past memories. It is by telling the story of those memories that victims try to find a way out of that obsessive psychology. Amabelle's position as a traumatized and wounded survivor provides much of the novel's emotional and dramatic power. Being a narrator, she plays the role of mouthpiece for the suffering Haitians. Her experience symbolizes the rootless and stateless condition of Haitians. The following observation by Sebastian makes their situation clear:

> "Sometimes the people in the fields, when they are tired and angry, they say we are an orphaned people . . . we are the burnt curd at the bottom of the pot. They say some people don't belong anywhere and that's us. I say we are a group of people Vwayaje, wayfarers. This is why you had to travel this far to meet me, because that is what we are" (Danticat.1998: 22).

Drawing on Caruth's theory, trauma is not in the violence or the violent event but in the survivor's response to that event. A survivor may not be able to make any sense of the event as it happens but relieves the memory of that event later on. This establishes trauma as a belated response to something that had taken place in the past. Not the simple violence but the disruptive effects of that event on the survivors, it is what reveals the true force of traumatic memory. Amabelle is frequently haunted by the memory of her parents and it causes a kind of great restlessness and a deep emotional turmoil. Her memory brings this fact to light,

> "In my sleep, I see my mother rising like the mother spirit of the rivers, above the current that drowned her . . . I was saving my smile for when you needed it [. . .] you were never truly dying, my precious imbecile . . . I will never be a whole woman [. . .] for the absence of your face. Your mother was never as far from you as you supposed" (Danticat 1998: 79)

In Buchi Emecheta's novel, the fictionalized depiction of war-time President Yakubu Gowon, here named Momoh, places Debbie in an impossible and symbolic position of mediation. Momoh's insistence that Debbie "use her

education" to negotiate with Abosi reflects his own unwillingness to make decisive political choices, instead transferring that burden to her. He claims, "If she [Debbie] gave any indication that Abosi was unwilling to budge, then he would send a conquering army into the Igbo heartland" (Emecheta 1982: 142). Debbie's departure on this perilous mission, filled with uncertainty and danger, thus becomes a stand in for Momoh's own inability to take accountability for the nation's fragile future. Her journey is neither strategic nor timely it is a fragmented attempt that embodies both personal and national trauma.

This trauma is made explicit through Debbie's harrowing experiences on the road, where she is gang-raped by "so many soldiers… by black, Nigerian soldiers" (Emecheta.1982: 167). This violation not only leaves her psychologically scarred but reduces her, in society's eyes, to "an object of ridicule" burdened with a "tarnished image which she would carry forever" (Emecheta 1982: 157). Debbie's personal suffering becomes inseparable from the collective pain of war, as her body, violated and disregarded, stands in for the land itself, treated as disposable by those in power. The soldiers and politicians who exploit both women and the territory for personal gain further highlight the larger structural violence of the war.

5. The Process of Recovery Through the Act of Rewriting the Past

Debbie's trauma, however, is not merely an isolated incident of personal suffering; it is a marker of the broader historical trauma of the war itself. Caruth's theory of trauma as a "wound" helps elucidate this duality. Caruth suggests that trauma is not fully comprehended at the moment of its occurrence but instead persists as an unhealed rupture in memory, one that continues to haunt and define the individual and collective psyche. For Debbie, the journey into the war-torn Igbo heartland is emblematic of this dynamic. Her departure into danger is a literal and metaphorical crossing into trauma, an act that Caruth would argue "preserves the event in its literality, even as it remains ungraspable in the moment (1996: 17-18). The novel does not linger on the specific context of Debbie's departure from the security of Lagos into the horrors of violence and violation. Instead, her journey is left as an open wound, a space where trauma is both experienced and deferred, ensuring that the event lingers in memory without ever being fully resolved.

Moreover, the exploitation of land in the novel mirrors the treatment of women's bodies, reinforcing the connection between personal and collective trauma. Politicians like Momoh and Abosi spend much of their time dividing

territory like pawns on a chessboard, treating the land as a commodity rather than a homeland imbued with meaning. This division of land becomes a dominant metaphor, emphasizing the dismemberment of both the nation and its people. For instance, Momoh casually cedes control of critical oil fields to Abosi, seemingly oblivious to the long-term consequences of lost revenue (95). This careless division reflects a broader theme of dehumanization and dispossession, where neither the land nor the people, particularly women, are given agency or respect. Debbie's rape and the broader exploitation of land are intertwined as symbols of a nation fractured by war and greed. Her body, like the land, becomes a site of conflict, marked by violation and disregard. Caruth's conception of trauma as a rupture that remains unresolved resonates here. Debbie's experiences are not just personal wounds but collective ones, embodying the fragmented and wounded state of the nation itself. Her trauma becomes a space where personal and historical narratives intersect, highlighting the inability of those in power to protect or heal either.

Ultimately, Debbie's journey, her suffering, and her marginalization reflect the lingering effects of trauma as a wound that cannot fully heal. As Caruth asserts, trauma demands acknowledgment and remembrance, even as it resists resolution. In Debbie's case, her personal trauma serves as a reminder of the violence and betrayal of the war, a haunting that continues to resonate within the fragmented memory of the nation. Both her body and the land she traverses bear the scars of a conflict that redefines them as spaces of unresolved pain, ensuring that the trauma of the war remains an enduring, unhealed wound in history. In all cases traumatic experiences are engraved in the mind of these women as Danticat admits,

> "It is perhaps the great discomfort of those trying to silence the world to discover that we have voices sealed inside our heads, voices that with each passing day grow even louder than the clamor of the world outside" (Danticat 1998: 266)

Thus, the trauma of sexism and racial oppression is deeply embedded in the lives of Black women, shaping their identities and experiences from an early age. This trauma is not only the result of individual acts of violence or discrimination but is also perpetuated through societal structures that normalize such abuses. Understanding how these systemic forces operate allows women to see how they are conditioned to accept their subjugation, and it provides the tools for breaking free from the psychological, emotional, and physical scars left by patriarchy and racism, in the words of Bell Hooks, understanding the way male domination and sexism was expressed in

everyday life create awareness in women of the ways women are victimized, exploited, and, in worse case scenarios, oppressed (Hooks, 2000: 7).

What becomes clear in the narrative of *Destination Biafra* and *The Farming of Bones* is the bloody scenes and horrors that ensued in order to try and make the Biafran and Haitian states a reality. At the end of the novel when Debbie witnesses General Abosi fleeing Biafra on a plane she begins to rethink all that she had previously believed in:

> "A hot uncontrollable anger enveloped her, making her sweat and shiver at the same time. To do so betrayed, by the very symbol of Biafra ! She remembered the image of the young mother raped and then pounded to a pulp by those inhumane soldiers; she recalled the death of Ngbechi and his little brother Ogo, who wanted plantain and chicken stew and could take no more... Abosi must not escape ! He must not be allowed to escape and leave all the believers of his dream... Like a good captain, Abosi should die honorably defending his ship. Her mind was made up. No man, not even Abosi, was going to make a fool of her, a fool of all those unfortunate mothers who had lost their sons, the hopes of their families." (Emecheta 1982: 257)

In a battle for acknowledgment and approval of the now, the survived subjects had to reconcile their recollections of the then with the current in order to connect all of the segments into a relatively intelligible whole. Consequently, the final reconciliation of Amabelle with the river, the location of the slaughter, and Debbie's act of writing the war's brutal details represents new images and uncover many hidden facts after an irreconcilable past.

Emecheta and Danticat utilize various literary devices to depict trauma and violence. Emecheta employs vivid imagery and symbolism to portray the physical and emotional scars of war, while Danticat uses fragmented narratives and multiple perspectives to convey the disorienting and pervasive nature of trauma. Both authors also use character development to highlight the resilience and strength of individuals in the face of violence. Moreover, the themes of identity, memory, and resilience are central to both novels. Emecheta and Danticat explore how trauma and violence shape personal and collective identities, with characters grappling with their sense of self in the aftermath of conflict. Memory is depicted as both a burden and a source of strength, as characters navigate their past experiences. The theme of resilience is evident in the characters' ability to endure and find meaning amidst suffering. Danticat's world is one of loss, trauma, and displacement:

is careful not to freeze this cultural specificity in time or to construct it as an immutable idea of home. While reifying a cultural past, Danticat's work "paradoxically revises the concept of Haitian tradition to signify a hybrid and changing space that is open to incorporating other aspects of the other culture

Conclusion

The analysis of the two novels highlights the unique and shared themes of trauma, resistance and resilience, enriching the literary discourse on trauma and violence. *Destination Biafra* and *The Farming of Bones* provide powerful depictions of trauma and violence through the skilled use of characters and themes. Emecheta and Danticat's works underscore the enduring impact of historical atrocities on individuals and communities while also celebrating the resilience of the human spirit. Comparing the two texts contributes to the scholarship on these two authors and invites further exploration of trauma and violence in literature. Throughout their recreation of history through writing, Emecheta and Danticat retrieve women's voices and recall their pain, resistance, and resilience as acts for challenging the ideological silencing imposed upon them and allowing them to assert their presence in the world. Through *Destination Biafra* and *The Farming of Bones*, Buchi Emecheta and Edwidge Danticat illuminate the transformative potential of literature in addressing trauma and reclaiming agency. These novels serve as powerful platforms for amplifying silenced voices, enabling their protagonists to resist forces of erasure and oppression. By comparing these works, we uncover how women's experiences, despite unfolding within distinct cultural and historical contexts, converge in their shared struggles for survival, agency, and liberation. Emecheta's and Danticat's narratives thus stand as enduring testaments to women's resilience and the transformative power of re-telling in confronting historical trauma. Drawing on Caruth's insights, we gain a deeper appreciation of how women's traumatic memories in postcolonial novels become sources of power and resistance. Through acts of remembering, storytelling, and the creation of communal bonds, these narratives transform trauma into radical acts of defiance and healing. By *talking back*, these women shift from silence to speech, a movement that is not just a gesture of rebellion but an assertion of agency and subjectivity. This act of reclaiming voice becomes a site of collective transformation, challenging the systems that sought to silence them and fostering possibilities for growth, empowerment, and liberation. These works not only confront the lingering scars of historical trauma but also reimagine the role of trauma as a means of

both individual and collective healing. Their novels reaffirm the potential of postcolonial literature to serve as a space where personal pain is woven into a broader narrative of resistance, creating a new life shaped by resilience, memory, and the liberating act of reclaiming one's voice. Therefore, it can be deduced that Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* and Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* stand as two seminal literary works that explore the themes of trauma and violence through the lens of historical and personal narratives. Emecheta, a renowned Nigerian author, and Danticat, an influential Haitian-American writer, both recreate the atrocities of war and the lasting impact on women and their communities. The two authors employ women's voices as literary devices to depict trauma, resistance and resilience, thus contributing to a broader understanding of these themes in literature.

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Abstract

This article compares *Buchi Emecheta's Destination Biafra* (1982) and Edwidge Danticat's *The Farming of Bones* (1998) to examine how women's narratives mediate personal and collective trauma in postcolonial contexts. Drawing on Caruth's trauma theory while widening the lens to include LaCapra, Felman, and Hartman, the study advances a contrastive reading that focuses on voice, temporality, embodiment, and testimony. Through close readings with precise pagination, we show how Debbie and Amabelle's recollections convert injury into acts of witnessing that interrogate political violence and historical erasure. Findings indicate convergences (gendered victimisation; testimonial voice; memory as burden and resource) and salient differences (diasporic vs. situated witnessing; narrative structure and temporal pacing). The article argues that rewriting the past functions as a mode of ethical repair that links individual survival to civic memory. Implications concern the place of women's testimony in the historiography of the Biafran War and the Parsley Massacre.

Keywords

Trauma, memory, women's narratives, postcolonial literature, testimony, Afri-

ca, Caribbean

ملخص

تؤمن الأبحاث المعاصرة بأن الاستعمار، والاعتداءات الجنسية، والاضطهاد، وغيرها من التجارب المروعة تظل محفورة

في الذاكرة ولا تُنسى أبدًا. وبالاعتماد على نظرية كاثي كاروث حول الصدمة بوصفها جرحًا ووسيلةً للتعبير عن القصص غير المروية للمعاناة، تستكشف هذه الدراسة كيف تُستخدم نصّان كوسيلة للكشف عن التجارب الصادمة التي تقاوم الاعتراف أو التعبير الفوري. يتمثل الطرح الأساسي في أن الذكريات الصادمة تعمل كقوة تحولية تمنح النساء القوة في Destination Biafra وThe Farming of Bones. وعلى الرغم من أن الروايتين كُتبتا في سياقات تاريخية وجغرافية مختلفة، إلا أنهما تصوران بطلات نسائيات لا يواجهن فقط الصدمة الناتجة عن البنى الأبوية القمعية والخسائر الشخصية، بل تؤكدان أيضًا على صمودهن وقدرتهن على اكتساب القوة من خلال معاناتهن. تتجلى الصدمة، سواء كانت حدثًا أم غيابًا، في الأعمال الأدبية المختارة، حيث تأتي ذكريات الشخصيات حول العنف والخسارة غالبًا في صورة متجزئة وغير مفهومة للوهلة الأولى. يعكس كلا السردين التأثير العميق للصدمة على الذاكرة والهوية. تُعد هذه الدراسة ذات أهمية خاصة لأنها تسلط الضوء على تقاطع النوع الاجتماعي والصدمة التاريخية، مما يتيح فهمًا أعمق لتجارب النساء في ظل القمع السياسي. ومن المتوقع أن تُسهم النتائج في تعزيز استيعاب الأبعاد النسوية في الروايتين، وتشكّل أساسًا لمزيد من الأبحاث حول التقاطع بين الأدب النسوي والصدمة، مما يفتح المجال لمزيد من الاستقصاء حول كيفية تشكيل القصص النسائية للتجربة الفردية في سياق التصورات الوطنية. وهكذا، تضع هذه الدراسة الأساس لبحوث مستقبلية حول موضوعات مماثلة في أدب الصدمة.

كلمات مفتاحية

التاريخ، الصدمة، الأمة، ما بعد الاستعمار، المرأة، القوة، إفريقيا، منطقة البحر الكاريبي

Résumé

Les recherches contemporaines soutiennent que la colonisation, les abus sexuels, l'oppression et d'autres expériences horrifiques sont gravés dans l'esprit, ne pouvant jamais être oubliés. En s'appuyant sur la théorie du traumatisme de Cathy Caruth, qui le définit comme une blessure et un moyen d'articuler les histoires indicibles de souffrance, cette étude explore comment deux textes servent de véhicules pour dévoiler des expériences traumatiques qui résistent à une reconnaissance ou une expression immédiate. L'argument avancé est que les souvenirs traumatiques agissent comme une force transformatrice, donnant du pouvoir aux femmes dans *Destination Biafra* et *The Farming of Bones*. Bien que rédigés dans des contextes historiques et géographiques différents, les deux romans mettent en scène des protagonistes féminines confrontées non seulement au traumatisme résultant des structures

patriarcales oppressives et des pertes personnelles, mais soulignent aussi leur résilience et leur capacité à trouver un pouvoir à travers leurs luttes. Le traumatisme, à la fois comme événement et comme absence, s'aligne avec les œuvres littéraires sélectionnées, où les souvenirs des personnages sur la violence et la perte apparaissent souvent fragmentés et incompréhensibles au premier regard. Les deux récits reflètent l'impact profond du traumatisme sur la mémoire et l'identité. Cette étude est particulièrement pertinente car elle met en lumière l'intersection entre le genre et le traumatisme historique, offrant une compréhension des femmes naviguant leurs expériences dans un contexte de répression politique. Les conclusions espèrent approfondir notre compréhension des dimensions féministes des romans et servir de base à de futures recherches sur l'intersection entre la littérature féministe et le traumatisme, ouvrant ainsi la voie à une exploration plus large de la manière dont les récits féminins articulent l'expérience individuelle en lien avec les perceptions nationales. Ainsi, cette étude pose les bases de futures recherches sur des thèmes analogues dans la littérature du traumatisme.

Mots-clés

Histoire, traumatisme, nation, postcolonial, femme, pouvoir, Afrique, Caraïbes