

Cartographies of the Self: Navigating Psychic Rupture and Diasporic Estrangement in *Nervous Conditions* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the threads of identity, trauma, and dislocation in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* in relation to their geographical and psychological contexts. It looks through the eyes of female protagonists as they traverse through the physical and psychological fractured landscapes of colonial Rhodesia and war torn Biafra using the frameworks of cartography and psychic rupture. It employs recent research in postcolonial theory and object relations theory to situate individual trauma amid collective turmoil, exploring how emotion-laden landscapes influence diasporic identity. It demonstrates how literary depictions of gendered displacement articulate self-portraits of estrangement, illustrating the contours of fractured identity through the lens of cartographic self-portraiture. This paper advances postcolonial African literature's narrative identity exploration by tracing borders and mapping drawing metaphors of cartography and borders.

Keywords

Psychic Cartography, Diasporic Estrangement, Postcolonial Femininity, Affective Geography, Narrative Displacement.

Introduction

African literature served as a mirror reflecting the ever-changing colonized history, identity, resistance, and the anxiety that follows after independence. African literature as a whole is rich with nuanced narratives that depict personal and collective fractures, from the early efforts to respond to decolonization to modern considerations of gender, displacement, and trauma. In this developing literary context, the female other has, often, not only felt voiceless, has also increasingly drawn attention in the lens of identity, geopolitics, and power and, geography. Tsitsi Dangarembga and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie are two important writers from this literature. Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and its sequel, *The Book of Not* (2006) offer profound sociopsychological insights and a powerful glimpse of a girl's life in colonial Rhodesia. The main character, Tambudzai, exposes the flaws of the colonial and familial systems that hold her life captive as she attempts to reconcile enduring patriarchal customs with modern Western schooling. Dangarembga's prose is minimalist yet profound, as is the reflection of the work as a whole she is committed to, the internalization of oppression alongside cultural dissonance.

Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) places its characters within the scope of the violent Biafran War, which took place after the Nigeria Civil War. Adichie creates a wide ranging narrative using the intimate stories of her characters Olanna, Ugwu, and Richard. She captures the tenderness of human bonds amidst conflict as she masterfully weaves together elements of gender, class, and national identity. Adichie's prose weaves together deeply rooted personal anguish with shared historical experience and her voice emerges as both lyrical and political. Regardless of the historical contexts, both authors describe protagonists deeply affected by mental and physical displacement. Following Kirkpatrick (2010), we can say that the authors exemplify "an aesthetics of displacement" where layered, fragmented, and complex identities are set upon ever-shifting landscapes of home, family, and nation. This paper works with postcolonial, affective, and object relations by the psychoanalyst, Winnicott, to discuss the idea of cartographies of the self, considering how gaps created spatial and psychological divisions are narrative techniques of self-creation.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In this paper, I incorporate both Object Relations Theory, specifically the notions of the True Self, False Self, and maternal holding environment by D.W. Winnicott, and Postcolonial Theory, taking insights from Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, and Edward Said. The intersection of these two theories applies particularly well to the psychological and sociopolitical disruptions with which the female characters of Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and Chimamanda ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* grapple.

D.W. Winnicott's Object Relations Theory, particularly his concepts of developmental environment and psychic integrity, undergirds the psychological framework of the paper. His theories of the False Self a defensive structure formed under the conditions of oppressive or unresponsive care allow for an understanding of Tambu's and Olanna's internalized oppression and splintered identities. The False Self, states Winnicott (2013), arises when persons are compelled to be true to the outside world at the cost of their true subjectivity. This elaboration is further explored in his *Collected Works* (2016), which stress how maternal insufficiencies may result in ruptures in development. Ehrlich (2021) states that the autobiographical tensions in Winnicott's own life are reflected, in some way, in his theories about self. It is for this reason that Winnicott's work feels especially pertinent to literature that confronts self-fragmentation and resistance.

In extending Winnicott's ideas, Bodin (1994) compares Winnicott's theory with self-psychology in order to highlight the importance of relational dynamics in the formation of identity. This emphasis is paramount in both novels as the protagonists struggle within and against colonial, patriarchal, and familial systems. To contextualize the analysis in a postcolonial lens, the paper used an epistemology that integrates Spivak's (2014) ideas about the subaltern and the limits of representation alongside her critique of capitalism's colonisation of native consciousness. Bhabha's concepts of mimicry and hybridity (Moore-Gilbert, 2000) consolidate our understanding of in-betweenness and the disjunctive aspect of diasporic and postcolonial identities. Sawant (2011) discusses what he terms the critical grounding of postcolonial theory; Said, Spivak, and Bhabha fasten this study within a sweeping intellectual tradition.

These strands all converge on "psychic rupture," which refers to a rupture of personal coherence endured as a result of intimate trauma, compounded by histories of trauma. In *Nervous Conditions*, the psychological burden of patriarchy and poverty and the impact of colonialism are dominant forces on

Tambu's arch. Conversely, *In Half of a Yellow Sun*, the core forces shaping Olanna's broken sense of self are war and loss, and a sense of disjunctive displacement and diaspora.

The approach taken is a qualitative close reading of the primary texts while utilizing psychoanalytic and postcolonial approaches of reading. Narrative moments are observed in the close reading for depictions of psychic rupture, alienation, and identity reconstruction. An intertextual reading is applied to blend in the scholarly literature and theoretical points of view. Thematic coding is also used to ensure that there was a systematic reading of trauma, displacement, and relational interactions. Having a dual-theory approach creates a palimpsest reading of the protagonists' fractured identities as both lived experiences and interrelated dimensions of complex sociopolitical histories. The goal is to chart the terrain of the self as it moves through its inner psychic ruptures and outer diasporic estrangements.

Analysis and Discussion

In *Nervous Conditions*, Tambudzai's education begins as a form of freedom, but is progressively transformed into psychological dissonance. By leaving the rural homestead to attend the mission school, she enters a space where she begins internalizing colonial values, resulting in colonial patriarchal control. At the opening of the text, Tambudzai says "I was not sorry when my brother died" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 1). This powerful beginning sets the tone for the multiple moral and emotional rifts impacting Tambu's identity experiences from the very start. Moving from a family orientation to an individual aim creates an almost fractured subjectivity, where the "false self," in reference to Winnicott, becomes sustained by educational success and performance (Winnicott, 2016, p. 17).

Nyasha, Tambu's cousin, represents a different form of cultural dislocation. As someone who has returned from England, Nyasha experiences a form of psychological distress that results in bulimia and rebellion. Since Nyasha's breakdown of following the death of her mother and her father's refusal to stand by her, when Tambu watches Nyasha's breakdown, "She's eating herself up" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 196), it demonstrates Kizito's (2019) epidermal border where ideational and bodily violence happens in a collapse. I would use Nyasha's distress as a summation of Courchesne's (2024) view of postcolonial disillusionment along the axes of British liberalism and Shona patriarchy.

Olanna's trauma in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, becomes traceable through her mobility and emotional fragmentation. When she witnesses the massacre at Kano, her psychic rupture initiates immediately, and nothing offers relief or cohesion in time. "Olanna staggered out of the train station in Kano and vomited on the street. There had been many people on the ground, but as she looked down again, she saw the head of a child in a calabash" (Adichie, 2006, p. 186). This moment pinpoints a psychic breaking point which bears some resemblance to Winnicott's (2013) notion of environmental failure wherein the disintegration of the holding environment leads to a disintegration of self.

Olanna's partner Odenigbo's betrayal compounds her instability. Olanna's disassociativeness during sex with Richard in a desperate attempt to reclaim agency "She felt nothing... she wanted only to get through it" (Adichie, 2006, p. 216) gives evidence of the emptiness of the "false self," based on Ehrlich's (2021) theorization. Olanna moves back and forth from alienated disconnection to a gut-wrenching inability to escape her vulnerability, mirroring Şencan's (2025) idea of cartography as a metaphor for emotional dislocation in Olanna's psychic mapping.

Ugwu, though a minor character, undergoes a profound transformation. Ugwu enlisting as a child soldier "He felt the weight of the gun. He did not know what the gun meant or what to do with it; but he knew he was different" (Adichie, 2006, p. 364) re-situates him in Wang's (2022) relational identity conceptualization. Ugwu's eventual authorship of the story suggests tectonic narrative

reparations, notwithstanding Spivak's (2014) request for subaltern express. Ugwu's story demonstrates the shift from an object to a subject, lost and found amongst the trauma of war and agency of narrative.

Following in the sequel *The Book of Not*, it is made evident that Tambu's later life will confirm the long-lasting psychic erosion that colonial education causes to the self. However, even in *Nervous Conditions*, the seeds of disintegration appear to be present. Tambu's silence, her retreat from the pain of Nyasha, and her seeming complacency with the patriarchal order, coupled with her mother's description of her education as deracination "My mother said I had stopped being a woman" (Dangarembga, 1988, p. 102) illustrate the impossibility of maintaining an abiding self and the alienation that participation in colonial education causes by estranging the educated from a relationship with their mother, with the traditional life of the community they come from, highlighting the psychological cost of upward social mobility.

The protagonists in both novels seem to have no choice but to re-draw their psychic maps inside of political chaos and rupture. These mental cartographies constructed over a life-time, built of war, gender, and memory, implicate the tension between the so-called "true self" and the prescribed roles demanded of the protagonists by colonial-patriarchal forces outside of themselves.

Conclusion

Cartographies of the Self highlights how postcolonial African woman and marginalised subjects negotiate forms of psychic rupture and diasporic dislocation within the contexts of colonial history, war, and gendered oppression. Both *Nervous Conditions* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* illustrate the complications of identity formation resultant from the internalisation of trauma and the loss of cultural connection. The psychological struggles of Tambu and Olanna illuminate the gap between the "true self" and the "false self", as theorised by D.W. Winnicott. Simultaneously, Nyasha and Ugwu represent the extreme ends of fragmentation and fortitude, respectively. Utilizing object relations theory especially Winnicott's "holding environment", the paper reflects on those experiences of emotional neglect, colonial infrastructures, and gendered subjectivities, violence that creates fractured selves hunting for meaning through memory, silence, or narrative. Furthermore, these ruptures are not just individual, but mapped across the bodies, geographies, and political histories of postcolonial Africa. From this reading both novels become narrative cartographies of identity- of how selfhood is narratively constructed and deconstructed through sociopolitical realities. By incorporating postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis, and spatial metaphors, this paper adds to an important understanding of diasporic estrangement and psychic fragmentation, while also recognizing the need to take into account the often invisibled, emotional labor of surviving in postcolonial African contexts.

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