

# ***Trauma Narrative in David Diop's "At Night All Blood is Black"***

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**Abstract:** This study aims to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the trauma narrative presented in David Diop's novel 'At Night All Blood is Black' by examining its storyline and linguistic features. This study shows that the trauma is constructed in the general context of colonial oppression and brutal warfare and directly triggered by the protagonist's agonizing loss of a friend. By focusing on the recurring nature and latent effects of trauma, we realize that the representation of the trauma in the novel was mainly characterized by a repetitive style in terms of language and narration. Furthermore, we also explore the dramatic manifestation of the trauma, analyzing the protagonist's chaotic psychological state entangled by madness and sexual aggression, thereby revealing the violence and moral decay he experienced. The findings provide a dynamic perspective on the protagonist's psychological struggle within the traumatic experiences, highlighting the intricacy of savagery, self-alienation, and cruelty that entraps him.

## **1. Introduction**

Written by David Diop and awarded the Prix Goncourt des lycéens in 2018, *Frère d'âme* is a captivating novel that represents the intimate world and traumatic experiences of Alfa Ndiaye, a young "tirailleurs sénégalais", during the World War I. From the perspective of a marginalized African soldier, the novel not just provides a detailed portrayal of the universal destiny faced by this special group in the colonial context but focuses on exploring the individual trauma and internal struggles he experiences amidst the atrocities of war.[1]

This research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the trauma narrative in the novel and outline the protagonist's journey of suffering and alienation. The first part will take a decolonized perspective, integrating the historical context of France's recruitment of tirailleurs s'énégalais within the fictional portrayal, in order to investigate how the protagonist is manipulated and exploited as a tool of violence by the colonizers, considering the contributing factors to the development of trauma. Then, the focus will be on the fictional representation of trauma, exploring narrative and linguistic features that contribute to represent the primary characteristics of trauma. Lastly, we will explore the psychological effects of trauma on the protagonist, examining how it manifests as madness and drives the protagonist towards extreme acts of aggressive revenges and murderous adultery. [2]

## 2. Historical context of trauma: the exploitation of tirailleurs sénégalais during WWI

The protagonist in this work, Diop, is a tirailleur sénégalais (soldier from Senegal), during the First World War (WWI). Confronted with a shortage of manpower due to low birth rates and serious losses in warfare, France made the decision to recruit a considerable number of black soldiers from its West African Colonies to strengthen its military forces. These black soldiers who served in the French army fought alongside their white counterparts in the same battles during WWI. In total, over 600,000 soldiers from France's vast empire in Africa were mobilized, and approximately 150,000 were brought to Europe to fight in the trenches (Zehfuss, 2005).

The destiny of tirailleurs sénégalais is closely related to the colonist background. The implementation of this conscription policy was based on a combination of racism and the belief that individuals of color could be just as capable in combat as white soldiers from mainland France. [3]

### 2.1. The ideological ground : the conception of the Black force

As the primary theoretical support and justification for this policy, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Mangin's book *La Force Noire* (The Black Force, 1910), stresses the strategic advantage of recruiting black soldiers in the French army and the importance of utilizing them in future European wars to address the deficiency in the French army. The Black force theory is based on the entrenched racial stereotypes and preconceptions that depicted black individuals as a force of uncivilized "savagery" and "the big children", possessing a sort of innocent cruelty with the need of guidance and education of civilized white colonizers. In addition, this work attempted to justify the utilization of black soldiers from a scientific racist perspective, asserting their born attributes as a "warrior race" (Mangin, p. 113-114), including endurance, ability to withstand severe hardships, and adaptability to diverse climates.[4]

Building upon these ideas, the image of the tirailleurs as a controllable war machine was therefore enhanced, highlighting their loyalty to France and courageous nature, which means that they can be easily transformed into manipulated brutal force when confronting the enemy (Lunn, 2009, p. 127). These contrasting African preconceptions were actively promoted in the official language and public discourse, aligning with the government's patriotic appeal to save the country during the war years.[5]

### 2.2. The manipulation of black soldiers in the novel

The French government's manipulation of black soldiers in this novel is concretized through the oppressive control of the white superiors, assigning the tirailleur soldiers to carry out the most dangerous tasks. It is a paternalistic form of discipline (Mangin, 1910) that characterizes the power dynamics between the white officers and black soldiers. The latter are obligated to submit to inhuman commands, endure unjust treatment, and sacrifice their lives for their white counterparts, having no control over their own fate. Moreover, after all these sacrifices, they held the lowest ranks, the least significant recognition and the most inferior position within the army. The tirailleurs remained anonymous and uncelebrated, while French colonial administrators and military commanders took credit for the outstanding exploits of the tirailleurs in the military endeavors (Vansina, 1994).

The captain, who stands for the supremacy of the Republic of France on the battlefield, consistently uses the power of words to reinforce the image of the expected role played by the African soldiers from a colonizer's perspective: "You, the Chocolats of black Africa, are naturally the bravest of the brave. France admires you and is grateful. The papers talk only of your exploits!" (Diop, p.14). The otherness of colonial individuals is shaped by the dominant ideological frames

imposed upon them by the colonial supremacy, which in turn influences the construction of their own identity (Said, 1978). Through praise or punishment language, the soldiers internalize the exploitive demands of their officers-and seek to exhibit primitive savagery to prove their value.[6]

Additionally, if the tirailleurs dare to resist, they would face merciless executions carried out by the captain as punishment for rebellion or refusal to fight. The captain symbolizes oppressive authority that systematically employs bloody measures to suppress any form of resistance. One example in the novel is that they punish the captured black rebels by revoking their pensions and by coercing them, bare-handed, into feeding the enemy's artillery. This scene highlights the complete absence of rights of the black individuals compared to their white counterparts and underlines the dehumanization and oppression endured by these individuals. [7]

As Davis (1970, p. 11) pointed out, “the Senegalese tirailleurs have no spokesman.” In the novel, they are portrayed as victims of colonial oppression and marginalization, the same as silent, numb animals resignedly enduring all treatment imposed upon them. Their inner sufferings remain hidden, completely unexpressed. Without ability to speak French, their silence echoes with their obedient situation and is further strengthened by their linguistic aphasia, which isolates them from the rest of the army and deprives them of the ability to convey feelings and thoughts. The narrative portrays the communication of the protagonist with the white captain as dependent on translations, which are merely used to announce the captain's commands that he has no right to refuse. While the language barrier underlines the lack of speech rights for the side of the colonized people in those unequal communications, reflecting the inherent disparity between the colonized and the colonizer, the text written in French offers the necessary translation for understanding the protagonist's inner world, offering readers an insight into his unique perspective and experiences.

Moreover, the colonial discipline leads the African soldier to a profound psychological transformation, influenced by experiences of conscious surrender to savagery. For instance, “When commanded to leave the shelter of their trench to attack the enemy, defenseless, it's “yes.” When told to play the savage, to scare off the enemy, it's “yes.” The captain told them that the enemy was afraid of savage Negroes, cannibals, Zulus, and they laughed.” (Diop, p. 13)

This passage above mirrors the shared destiny of the black soldiers to become cruel and sanguinary under the command of the officer through the repetition of the structure “when...they”. The inclusive pronoun *they* represents Diop's bystander's view to witness the common destiny ~~experiences~~ of individual soldiers. They are assigned perilous missions, deprived of bodily autonomy, and denied the right to independent thought. The repetitive use of “yes” is a poignant manifestation of their diminished mental agency, signifying their unconditional obedience amidst the loss of individuality. [8]

Nevertheless, unlike other tirailleurs, the protagonist demonstrates a heightened awareness of their common situation and consciously chooses to “play the savage” (Diop, p. 14). Surrendering to savagery can not only be seen as a choice that allows him to preserve his rationality but also show his struggling efforts to adapt and survive in the cruel battlefield. The statement “as soon as the trench birthed me and I began to scream, the enemy was in trouble” (Diop, p. 15) reflects his reconstruction of identity amidst the harsh impact of the war and his decadence in lucidity to fully embrace the role akin to death. However, his physical self seems to detach from his free will, as indicated by the phrase “the hand that had cleaned it, discharged it, and reloaded it” (Diop, p. 16). In this phrase, the focus of the agency is dressed on the body part hand, rather than his mind or his entire self, which reflects a sense of loss of bodily sovereignty and self-alienation, being conscripted by war. It demonstrates a disconnection between his deep-seated resistance and the mechanical actions exerted by his body.[9]

### 3. The representation of trauma in the narrative

Another point that we need to take into account is how the author represents the trauma. According to Caruth (1996, p. 11), trauma is commonly defined as a sort of “overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.” It means that trauma refers to a deep psychological injury and stress that individuals experience when exposed to certain overwhelming and miserable circumstances, including life-threatening situations, witnessing horrific events, etc. The initial shock and impact of such events can have long-lasting effects on a person's mental and emotional states by causing various forms of subsequent suffering, intensifying the pain and distress in their intrusive recurrences.[10]

WWI, for instance, is the most notable example, which caused significant losses worldwide, inflicting immense psychological shock and trauma upon participants and witnesses. The soldiers at the front lines were the most direct victims, exposed to agonizing cries, brutal tortures, the sight of countless corpses and flowing rivers of blood. These traumatic scenes often led soldiers to experience post-war psychological breakdowns, commonly known as war neurosis or post-traumatic stress disorder (Caruth, 1996).

#### 3.1. The trauma narrative : repetitions and haunting guilt

In the narrative, Diop, a black soldier, is subjected to the harrowing ordeal of carrying out dangerous missions on the battlefield under the command of his captain. At the same time, he also becomes a witness to the tragic death of his dear friend Mademba, killed by a German soldier. This traumatic experience weighs heavily on Diop, generating survivor guilt and deep remorse. The story unfolds through Diop's internal monologue, and explores the emotional triggers of his extreme actions.

If trauma narratives in literature aim to manifest and interpret the experiences of trauma, representing trauma proves to be a challenging task. As a matter of fact, traumatic event cannot be anticipated or reproduced in transparent referentiality of traditional modes of historical discourse (Douglass and Vogler, 2003). Therefore, the trauma itself resides within the realm of the unspeakable and inaccessible, so that the representation of trauma often requires the implementation of unique narratological structures and aesthetic strategies in literature. Thus, trauma narrative seeks to mimic the intricate ways in which the mind receives, perceives, and processes trauma, capturing the distinctive paradigms of traumatic memory, including its disorienting nature, the intrusion of distressing thoughts, and the heightened emotional intensity that accompanies the former two types of distinctive paradigms.[11]

Moreover, the effects of trauma are not presented as an immediate experience of a certain emotional shock at the very moment it occurs, but rather become apparent through its latency and repetition (Caruth, 1995). This implies that trauma cannot be reduced to a singular experience; rather, the impact of traumatic events grows stronger over time, forcing survivors to repeatedly confront the initial shock. Since repetition represents the core feature of trauma, the trauma narrative in this novel implants entangled and haunting fragments of memories within the linear narration to represent the latency of pain and enduring psychological effects.

Repetitive narratives utilized in this novel intrusively and persistently revisit traumatic moments in the past. The author refers constantly, in direct or implicit ways, to the fragmented and sparse memories of his friend's impending death, in different parts of the history with vivid sensations to demonstrate how the haunting shadow of guilt persists over time. Relentless flashbacks and intermittent descriptions of traumatic scenes throughout the story deviate the narrative timeline back to the past, disrupting the conventional linear narrative and engendering a sense of stagnation in the

present moment. Portraying the vivid sensations and subsequent anguish and grief that are related to the scene, the intermittent recalls of Mademba's death reflect Diop's tumultuous and unsettled mentality, overwhelmed by the unspeakable trauma.[12]

For instance, in the opening chapter, the story takes on a dialogic structure, with the protagonist involved in an imaginary one-sided conversation with his deceased friend and expressing regret for being bound by a futile moral obligation that prevented him from granting his friend a swift and compassionate end: "How I've regretted not killing you on the morning of the battle, while you were still asking me nicely, as a friend, with a smile in your voice!" (Diop, p. 6). However, starting from Chapter II, the story transitions into a first-person narration following a conventional storytelling format. It describes the protagonist's arduous journey as he carries his friend's body to their trenches and highlights his afflictions and despair associated with his friend's death. A burden of guilt permeates his consciousness, equalling himself to the perpetrator responsible for Mademba's demise: "I killed Mademba Diop with my words" (Diop, p. 44). This sentiment remains until the end of the text, where a profound sense of unity and interconnectedness is generated between the protagonist and Mademba, "he is me and I am him." (Diop, p. 145)

Throughout the text, the author underlines Mademba's presence, even though physically absent, as a symbol of the haunting trauma. It finally leads to the spiritual fusion and a profound connection between the dead and the survivor, which finally consoles his guilty soul, resonating with the original French title of the novel, "Frère d'âme" (soul brother), with the meaning that the protagonist finds elusive redemption in his fusion with his brother's soul.

Language accounts for the haunting quality and inherent unintelligibility of trauma. While written in a colloquial tone of monologue with a simple syntax and vocabulary, the text does not offer a precise description of the trauma or subtle feelings linked to it, but presents faithfully the fluidity of inner thoughts of the protagonist with a remarkable orality. We can find interjections like "god's truth" (Diop, p. 38), doubled use of degree adverbs like "very very careful" (Diop, p. 33) and use of appositions that function to provide supplementary details. The most notable example is that when mentioning Mademba, the author states repeatedly "my childhood friend, my more-than-brother," effectively underscoring the significance of this bond and his profound distress of losing him. Another example is this phase:

"The rumour, stark naked now, claimed I had eaten the insides of Mademba Diop, my more-than-brother, before he was even dead. The brazen rumour said that I should be feared. The rumour, spread-legged and ass in air, said that I devoured the insides of the enemies from the other side, but also the insides of friends." (Diop, p. 35)

The three consecutive phrases in the passage above all begin with the same antecedent "The rumor". Each occurrence of the term is accompanied by specific qualifiers or appositions to personify the rumour and attribute dynamic actions to it, underlying his guilt of "killing" his best friend admits the defamation directed towards him.

In addition, the author retains elements of African linguistic traits and cultural nuances in the language. According to Saif Adnan Al-Obaidi (2022), this repetitive style marks the religious influence in this novel. The discourse takes on a supplicatory tone, reminiscent of the incantatory style practiced by Muslims, to express the protagonist's confession and pardon for the excuse of his friend. This repetition demonstrates the unquenchable guilt after the suffering of trauma, for example, the repetitive use of the segments "I know, I understand" throughout the novel highlights the protagonist's deep-seated remorse about his friend's helpless suffering and his inability to alleviate his friend's pain before his final moments: "I know, I understand, I shouldn't have done it. I, Alfa Ndiaye, son of the old, old man, I understand, I shouldn't have. God's truth, now I know." (Diop, p. 3)

It is notable that the protagonist-narrator repeats his self-reproachful confession continually

across his monologue, highlighting his helpless witnessing of his friend's suffering and his repent of mocking his totem: "I knew, I understood that I should not have abandoned you." (Diop, p. 7), "I know, I understand, I shouldn't have been thinking about the vengeance demanded by my brain, furrowed by your tears, seeded by your cries, when you weren't even dead yet." (Diop, p. 26), "I understand, I shouldn't have made fun of his totem." (Diop, p. 41), "I know, I understand that I should not have pushed him with my words to demonstrate a kind of courage I knew he already possessed." (Diop, p. 87).

Besides, apart from the recurring flashbacks of painful memories, an impulsion to revenge can be seen through the metonymic references of the "blue-eyed" (Diop, p. 27), representing the German soldiers who killed his friend. This part adopts the body part (eyes) of the killers to stand for the whole person, who is the object of revenge of the protagonist. The universality of this characteristic body part makes it impossible to pinpoint an exact enemy, forcing Diop to abstract the target of his anger from a specific killer to a vague collective entity, which could represent any German soldier, which ultimately drives him to embark on an endless journey to confront German soldiers, which can be understood as an extreme means to mourn his loss.

#### **4. Madness: a distorted way of mourning and guilt**

The act of taking lives assumes a distorted form of liberating the protagonist from the weight of guilt, which reflects a sort of madness in his mental state. Madness is a common psychological response on the battlefield, where soldiers are exposed to the devastating impact of destructive weaponry, mass slaughter, and the brutal conditions of the trenches (Micale & Lerner, 2001). In literary works, madness is also a complicated and multifaceted concept that contributes to dramatic tensions within the narrative. Whereas, defining madness in a concise and limited language is infeasible considering the various forms of manifestations of trauma, which means that the analysis should be based on the cultural and historical background and specific contexts of the literary works.[13]

##### **4.1. The protagonist's traumatic madness in the battlefiled**

On one hand, the behavior of the protagonist showcases a contrasting calmness, self-control, and lucidity, which appears distinct from manifestations of madness. According to Sass (1992), madness involves the decline or even disappearance of rational factors in human conduct and experience, resulting in the diminishment of one's personhood and volition. Unlike other obedient soldiers who descent into a numbing state to satisfy the captain's expectations, the protagonist possesses a clear awareness of the exploitative intentions behind the colonizers' manipulation and realizes that they are being tamed and utilized to act as the primitive and savagery force: "The captain's France needs our savagery, and because we are obedient, myself and the others, we play the savage. We slash the enemy's flesh, we maim, we decapitate, we disembowel" (Diop, p. 15).

Furthermore, the protagonist exhibits also a strong sense of subjectivity and lucidity in his pursuit of revenge. With meticulousness and skilled actions, the protagonist showcases his excellent art of killing and carries out his revenge after efficient planning in the desolate "no-man's-land". We can see that he is well-adapted to the role of an executiner:

"I wait patiently for the enemy from the other side to wake up if I've knocked him out. If I don't have to knock him out, if the one I dragged from his mortar-shell hole has let me take him, believing he can outsmart me, I wait and catch my breath. I wait until we're both calm. While waiting, I smile at him, in the light of the moon and the stars, so he doesn't become too agitated." (Diop, p. 19)

On the other hand, the protagonist's thoughts and actions also represents a furious rebel that is

closely linked to madness. As suggested by Feder (1980), madness is considered a psychological deviation and causes eccentric behavior that surpasses established social norms under external or internal oppressions. In this novel, although the protagonist initially maintains a semblance of composure and rationality, within him remains an underlying inner turmoil consisting of constant anger, profound depression, and a desire to release his aggression ever since Mademba's death.

The traumatic event shakes his adherence to morality, leading him to start ignoring the inner voice that represents the moral codes that used to restrain his anger: "It happened like that, all of a sudden without warning, it hit me brutally in the head, like a giant seed of war dropped from the metallic sky, the day Mademba Diop died" (Diop, p. 4). This pivotal moment serves as the catalyst for his descent into state of madness. Over the course of the story, the protagonist progressively loses touch with his internal moral compass and becomes increasingly detached from perception of the gravity of his murderous actions in the heat of battle.

Moreover, madness serves as a necessary means of self-preservation for soldiers on the battlefield, enabling them to forget the pain of loss and to maintain encouragement and resilience in brutal combat. As a result, the protagonist chooses to abandon his humanity, not due to the captain's orders, but through his own volition: "I am inhuman by choice" (Diop, p. 17). The character's transformation reflects the profound impact of war on individual's psyche, revealing the moral erosion and devastating consequences that follow.

Furthermore, the perception of his extraordinary madness and seemingly supernatural power makes him a totem in the eyes of other African soldiers: "They were so pleased that I'd come back because they liked me. I had become their totem" (Diop, p. 17). This perception is intricately intertwined with the cultural indoctrination the African tribes have received. The protagonist, having been raised within African tribes, is deeply influenced by the ancestral totemic culture that has been ingrained in his upbringing since childhood. From the cultural perspective, a totem represents a natural or mythical entity that carries profound symbolic meaning for a particular family or clan. Precisely, it is revered as a source of insight into life and a spiritual unifying force, connecting the members of the family or clan to a shared identity and heritage (Mandillah & Ekosse, 2018). In this novel, the protagonist reveals that the totem of Diop family is the peacock, representing egotism, which helps shape his sense of masculinity and savage courage on the battlefield.

However, the madness, when becoming excessive, cannot release Diop of trauma, but only exacerbates his sense of self-alienation and further isolates him from his comrades. In contrast to his fellow soldiers' temporary madness, which is confined to the dangerous situations, the protagonist's repeated acts of severing the hands of his slain enemies are considered as a form of continuous and uncontrollable madness by his trench-mates. This form of cruelty, which seems increasingly brutal and ritualistic, evokes their superstitious fear. Described as a "sorcerer" (Diop, p. 35), a "dëmm" (Diop, p. 46) and a "death-defier" (Diop, p. 34), Diop develops exceptional killing abilities which are perceived as "witchcraft" (Diop, p. 34) by the others, rendering him an enigmatic and foreboding presence among his fellow soldiers.

#### 4.2. The sexual violence in the madness

It is significant to acknowledge that the violence engendered by madness encompasses not only his cruelty in war, but also results from and reinforces back his strong identification with male sexuality, represented by the totem image of a lion. In the novel, war is metaphorically associated with the female body (e.g., "Seen from a distance, our trench looked to me like the slightly parted lips of an immense woman's sex", Diop, p. 9), with trenches representing female reproductive organs, and the act of war being compared to sexual intercourse. The protagonist's nostalgic

reflections on his own masculine body and sexual experiences reveal his admiration for conventional masculine qualities that are necessary for survival in the context of war: “I know, I understand that Fary wanted to make me a man before I went to offer my beautiful body to the bloody battlefields of war.” (Diop, p. 115) Conversely, the character of Mademba, who never had sexual relations with a woman, is depicted as lacking and incomplete in his masculinity: “God’s truth, I know with certainty that Mademba never experienced the pleasure of entering the insides of a woman’s body. I know it, he died even though he wasn’t a man yet.” (Diop, p. 115) At the end of the novel, the author, from the perspective of dead man Mademba, portrays the protagonist’s intimate encounter with Fary Thiam before he departs for war as a sign of strong virility tailored for the battlefield: “I knew, I understood that she wanted the lion-sorcerer.” (Diop, p. 145)

Furthermore, the protagonist’s toxic aggression persists beyond the battlefield and manifests in the form of a heinous act of rape and murder. This disturbing act, stemming from his desire to unleash violent impulse and his narcissistic overconfidence in male sexuality, as the protagonist mistakenly believes that Madame Françoise seduces him. This showcases the destructive consequences of the protagonist’s distorted understanding of masculinity and the harmful effects of toxic aggression in the context of war. The traumatic madness generates the aggressive violence of the protagonist, transforming him into a male predator who seeks to reconstruct his value by dominating and objectifying women.

## 5. Conclusions

Through the analysis, we can see that the manipulation of the French colonists based on the black force theory represents an image of ruthless inborn killers in terms of the African black soldiers, directing them to internalize the command to act as savages for France. This historical background sets the fundamental context in which the protagonist’s trauma takes shape. Then, it is the scene of his best friend’s death that triggers his trauma, an experience that incessantly haunts him and intensifies his sense of guilt as time passes. The rhetoric technique of repetition underlines the trauma’s persistent and unrelenting nature, mirroring the protagonist’s inescapable emotional turmoil. Ultimately, madness, accompanying aftermath of trauma, intertwines with African totem culture that embodies warrior courage tribal masculinity. These factors lead the protagonist towards an extreme of aggression, culminating in his brutal and unjust killing of innocent women.

Through the author’s description, readers can delve into the protagonist’s journey through revenge, madness, and self-alienation. This in-depth exploration of the individual’s inner world, coupled with resurgence of African cultural and linguistic elements within the monologue, contribute to the work’s success and distinctiveness. It offers a marginalized perspective of a “tirailleurs sénégalais” on the European battlefield, an obscured viewpoint that is seldom depicted in artistic representation about WWI.

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