



# Traumatized Mind: Inspecting Abandonment Trauma in David Diop's *At Night All Blood is Black*

Arsha Junaid

Works as a guest lecture in English Literature.

Abstract: There are many war narratives in literature especially after the terrifying Second World War. Along with

discussing the horrors of war, writers popularized the concept of 'trauma' which is an after effect of all the brutalities the soldiers and the citizens witnessed as part of the war. Concepts like PTSD began to be discussed and there came several different types of trauma narratives. 'Abandonment trauma' is one such where we discuss the psychological after effects of abandonment on an individual. Abandonment can be from different sources. But a child who is neglected of parental care and love in their childhood is likely to exhibit certain severe psychological impacts even after he grows into an adult.

This academic paper discusses a novel written by the Senegalese writer David Diop *At Night All Blood is Black* which is primarily a war narrative discussing the story of a soldier Alfa Ndiaye, who is continuously exposed to the brutalities of the war and his transformation from an innocent soldier to a monstrous one seeking revenge by the ritualistic enemy killings. Alfa was like all the rest of the soldiers who obeyed his captain without any second thought, until he witnessed the death of his friend Mademba Diop in the war field. After that night he started transforming into a blood thirsty human monster who starts to kill his blue-eyed German enemy soldiers each a day and returned to his trench with the severed hand of the dead. He does this each single day until he is sent to the military asylum after the eighth enemy hand. This violence in Alfa has something to do with his childhood. The paper delves deeper into his childhood and the parental abandonment which he experienced at the early age of 9 and how it has affected his actions in the adulthood. It thus makes use of abandonment trauma theory and its psychological implications upon an individual.

Keywords: David Diop, *At Night All Blood is Black*, trauma studies, child abandonment, abandonment trauma, war trauma, human psychology, child development, parental care, savagery in war, grief, revenge.

## Introduction

Trauma has been a topic of discussion from long back and has still not lost interest among academicians. Trauma studies tries to interpret the representation of an extreme effect and its psychological after effects on the individual. Holocaust is considered to be the marker of trauma studies as trauma narratives began to flourish as an aftermath of Holocaust. When we think of trauma, we first connect it with war or any such kind of violences and its effect upon individuals. This academic paper studies a fictional war narrative *At Night All Blood is Black* written by David Diop not in the light of war trauma but for the untold trauma caused by abandonment.

The protagonist of the novel is a black Senegalese soldier Alfa Ndiaye who is fighting in the warfront for France against Germany in the Second World War. He is referred to as 'Chocolate' soldier who is playing savage in the war against his enemy soldiers. Since the story is taking place in the war field, there are instances of horrors of war and the trauma it has inflicted upon those who have witnessed it. The story is told in a first- person narrative from the perspective of Alfa, who is traumatised after witnessing the brutality of the war on his childhood friend and his co-soldier Mademba Diop who is disembowelled but not dead, pleading Alfa to shoot him to death. Alfa unable to decide between the voice of duty and the voice of humanity decides not to kill him even after all his pleas. He stood by Mademba witnessing his misery and pain but unable to end the suffering of his 'more than brother' as he mentions Mademba all throughout the story. The trauma caused by this event leads Alfa to commit rather brutal enemy killings and he starts this ritualistic act of killing the enemy soldiers. He finds no satisfaction in killing them in a single gunshot but rather caught them, tied and disembowelled each one of them, and when he saw them pleading with their eyes to end this suffering, he slit their throat and left to his trench

with their rifle holding severed hand. What excites him is the panicked fear of death in the enemy's blue eyes. Each killing in a way satisfied his guilty consciousness of not being able to grant death to his dear friend. Thus, this academic paper is an exploration of the root cause of the protagonist's trauma which is not the mere war but is intertwined with his childhood and parenting.

## **Abandonment trauma and its effects in *At Night All blood is Black***

Abandonment trauma is a not so discussed topic in literary arena but deep down the psychology of every person who has experienced trauma, there is a chance of him/her of being tormented with abandonment in their early childhood and its effects are quite long lasting. Being neglected of parental affection and care in childhood can result in abandonment trauma in individuals and this will haunt them even after they become adults. They long for the lost love and care no matter how old they become. Alfa Ndiaye's condition is usually interpreted as a result of war trauma but this study proves that it has more to do with abandonment rather than war. War was a mere reason for the trauma to revive from his hidden memories. Past trauma and traumatic memories affect the mind of the characters. Mademba Diop's death in the war added up to his already suffering mind which lost all its control and further decides to violate all the boundaries of humanity. Significantly, scientific studies have shown that childhood trauma can lead to violent behaviour.

Alfa Ndiaye's young and beautiful mother Penndo Ba was married to his old and wise father in return for the hospitality he showed towards her father Yoro Ba's herd. Their marriage was thus not the union of two souls who were deeply in love but was in fact a return gift to show the family's gratitude towards the old man. Seven years after their wedding, her

family stopped visiting her. She waited their return for the next two years and began to wither because of this same reason. Thus, Penndo Ba had no reasons to stay in that marriage except for the son Alfa Ndiaye they had after a year of their marriage decided to go in search of her father and brothers. The departing scene of the mother and the 9-year-old Alfa is heart touching. She promised to come back as soon as she found out what happened to them and gave him her word that “She would never abandon the one she had given life” (Diop). As soon as she left, the poor little boy began to wait for her. Penndo Ba never returned and when they went in search of her, they came to know that she was kidnapped by a dozen Moorish horsemen. Even after knowing the news of her capture, Alfa still had the belief that she would be alive somewhere and would return to him one day. His only longing in life was to get her back and this was the reason he joined the army because he knew that power could eventually buy you happiness.

Alfa's love for his mother is portrayed with immense care from the very beginning of the novel and his real problem is identified to be the lack of maternal affection that he has lost in the age of 8 or 9. Even though the major part of the novel recounts the horrors of war and the inhuman acts of the protagonist, there is a later part in the story which revisits his childhood and the memories associated with it. When Alfa is forced into the military asylum after 8 savage killings, he is all alone and at some kind of peace there. He then gets enough time and opportunities to recollect his memories related to his dear mother. In fact, his doctor wanted him to open up about his disturbing memories and thus Alfa is asked to draw down his thoughts which are in other ways unexplainable in words, “Doctor Francois tells us draw whatever we want. I know, I understand that behind the glasses that magnify his matching blue eyes, Doctor Francois is looking inside our heads” (Diop). ‘Looking inside’ one's head is challenging as well as

interesting. Here Alfa through his drawings gives the readers a chance to look inside all the hidden memories which are important for him to rely upon and live. And the first thing he drew on the piece of paper given to him was his mother's head. Out of all the memories in his head, he purposefully selected or (it might be a coincidence) be it in either way, it is evident that what matters the most in his life is the memory of his mother. These memories and the pain associated with it has got many things to do with his present condition.

His longing to meet his mother and his unconditional love for her is reflected in the way he speaks about her. There he says "I drew my mother's head. God's truth, my mother is very beautiful in my memory.....I brought my mother's head to life" (Diop). After all these years he still believes and hopes that she will return one day to him and this hope gave him a sense of reassurance that she still loved him, "Doctor Francois heard my mother say from her sketched mouth that she was gone, but that she had not forgotten me. That she was gone and had left me with my father, the old man, but that she loved me still" (Diop). We can see love, reassurance and hope in this line. He admits that she has left them, but is trying to comfort himself by saying that she loved him. The thought of him being loved by his long-lost mother is in fact what keeps him going. At a point when Mademba died and left him, what he lost was this hope, because after his mother leaving him, Mademba was the one who loved him like his own brother. He even forced his parents to adopt Alfa so that Alfa is never deprived of a mother's love. Mademba was himself a motherly figure to Alfa and this was what he lost in that dark night. After losing his mother Alfa followed Mademba literally everywhere and this companionship at certain point made him forget his loss and helped him stay calm and strong.

It was Mademba who first decided to join the army and he forced Alfa to accompany him. When he rejected, Mademba made him agree, and that too by giving him hope that together

they will find out his mother one day. Suddenly when he died, what Alfa lost was not a brother but in fact his mother like companionship and his shoulder to rely upon. Along with that he lost his last resort to find his mother with the help of Mademba as he promised when they were about to join the army. When Mademba said: "The war is a chance to leave Gandiol. God willing, we will return safe and sound. When we become French citizens, we'll move to Saint- Louis. We'll start a business. We'll become wholesalers and we'll distribute food to the shops in northern Senegal, including the ones in Gandiol! Once we're rich, we'll look for and find your mother, and we'll buy her back from the Moorish horsemen who took her" (Diop), he started dreaming about getting back his long-lost mother and her love. All his dreams were shattered with the death of his more-than-brother Mademba Diop. So, all the gruesome acts he commits can be seen as a way to avenge the loss of his mother who is taken away from him forever and not the death of Mademba Diop. He saw his mother in Mademba and that can also be the reason behind him not slitting the throat of his 'more- than- brother' when he wished to die the most.

It was Mademba who gave him the word of finding her back and with his death he lost even the last ray of hope that he would one day find his mother and thereafter will live happily with her. That hope can be another reason why he hesitated to slit the throat of his dear friend because somewhere deep down his heart he might have had the belief that Mademba would come back to life to assist him in his journey to find his mother. The story says that after the death of Mademba, he started the ritualistic killings of his blue- eyed enemy soldiers. Those blue -eyed soldiers were the representation of the Moorish horsemen who captured his mother and now his beloved friend Mademba Diop. The 9- year- old Alfa couldn't avenge the loss of his mother but the young 20- year- old Alfa Ndiaye is full of revenge and animosity towards those who

have plundered him of his greatest wealth, his more-than-brother. The young self was left out to grieve alone while the adult had the courage to avenge the death all alone. He says "What I didn't do for my friend I can do for my enemy" (Diop 20) repeatedly in several places. One can infer that he also means to say that what he didn't do to the kidnappers of his mother, he is doing it to the killers of his more-than-brother Mademba Diop. He somehow has to get rid of the childhood guilt of not being able to do anything for his mother when she needed them the most. The self-blame and guilt have thus transformed him into another level monster.

In both his losses he blamed himself for being the reason for their captivation and death. According to him, his mother couldn't go in search of her family at the earliest because he was too small to be left alone without a mother. Before her departure she even says this as below: "One evening, not long before her departure, Penndo Ba, my mother, took me in her arms. She said to me, in her musical language, that I was a big boy that I should be able to listen to her reasons" (Diop). She had a son back home waiting for her and this thought might have distracted her on her way leading her to be caught by the Moorish horsemen. On the day Mademba died, Alfa teased him for his totem in way challenging his courage and ancestry which blinded him with anger and pride led him in a way to his own death. He was full of pride and wanted to prove that his tribe's totem was no less than Alfa's and thus left first from the trench as the captain whistled for the attack. Alfa believed that he provoked his friend leading him to the battlefield with temporary madness and thus his mockery and the hurtful words are the true cause of Mademba's death. Both of the above-mentioned actions are what we call self-blame. Scientific study has proven that "Childhood trauma is related to adult psychological symptoms. Self-blame as a coping strategy is a mediator between early trauma and adult psychological symptoms" (Dorresteyjn). The above furnished



statement thus proves that his self-blaming tendency in both the situations of his major loss is a result of the trauma that he had been struggling with since his childhood. The abandonment and the resultant trauma that the narrator experienced during his childhood grew along with him and has thus affected his adult psychology. He used to self-blame for every bad thing happened to him and this tendency continued even when he became an adult. His traumatic psyche acts as a hindrance to reason and logic which blinded him and led to all the events thereafter.

“Every year in the dry season, the desire to see Penndo would take me by the throat again. I didn't know how to chase my mother from my mind except by exhausting my body” (Diop 108) says Alfa. He used to work really hard in the field, dance and wrestle to exhaust his body, to not think about the impossible return of his mother. Each enemy killing was equally exhausting and thus made him insensitive to the thoughts of loss and solitude. Mademba Diop was in fact a shield which covered the real feeling that were hiding inside Alfa and with his death his mind opened enough to let him see what was hiding in there. “In a review study, Passmann Carr, Severi Martins, Stingel, Lemgruber, and Juruena concluded that childhood trauma can trigger and increase the recurrence of psychiatric disorders” (Dorresteijn). Here the death of Mademba was the trigger which eventually led to the recurrence of psychiatric disorders in Alfa. Certain instances from Alfa's childhood memories reinforce the fact that he had the same violent killing instincts even long before. The sight of Mademba laying disembowelled brought back all the hidden instincts and thus he restarted his brutalities. Earlier it was on palm rats and turtledoves that he experimented on but later fresh human bodies took up their position. Killing some or the other form of life had always been his means to forget the loss and this kept him exhausted.

Studies shows that those who have experienced parental trauma in early childhood are likely to show aggressive behaviour once they grow up and it is typical of them to have less academic achievement and problems with friendships. In the book “Encounters with Children” which deals with paediatric behaviour and development, it is studied that “Middle childhood parental loss may deal a blow to self-esteem and set up a child for short- and long-term emotional problems. Academic achievement and friendships are at risk, and they may even have a fear of being stigmatized by peers” (Maria Trozzi). Alfa had both these above-mentioned problems. He had difficulties learning because he believed that “nothing could enter into the insides of my head. I know, I understand that the memory of my mother had calcified the entire surface of my mind so it was hard like a tortoise’s shell. I know, I understand that there was nothing beneath this shell but the void of waiting” (Diop). He preferred to work in the field, to dance and wrestle. His only companion mentioned in the story is Mademba Diop and at certain points in the story the readers would understand the fact that Alfa is only humane with Mademba because he was the only friend he had. All other relationships in Alfa’s life were temporary, be it friends or lovers. There are number of people mentioned who were all part of his life at some point but none stays permanent in his life. They come and go but Mademba managed to stay within Alfa even after his death. Alfa sometimes believed that they were both the same, two bodies but the same soul. This in turn shows that they share something purer beyond friendship and we can infer that Alfa often found his solace in him and he received a maternal affection from Mademba.

Trauma texts in general make use of “intertextuality, repetition, fragmentation and language manipulation to create meaning due to extreme traumatic stress” (Morrissay). This text too aligns with this general rule to confirm that it is a

trauma narrative. The narrative is fragmented and becomes unreliable as it reaches the concluding part which shows the psychological intricacies through which the protagonist goes through. His situation worsens as the narrative progresses and all throughout the narrative we can see the repetition of a specific incident, which is the denial of easy death to Mademba and this shows the impact of the guilt within Alfa. He also repeatedly describes the ways by which he slaughtered the enemy soldiers. The language of the narrative is manipulated in a way that at times the readers sympathize with the crimes committed by Alfa because of the manner in which he persuades the reader to think from his point of view and this in turn makes the reader sympathize towards his brutalities. Reading this work is like going through a roller coaster of emotions and we get to discover the darker shades of human beings. Alfa is one of the most unpredictable characters of recent times and nobody except himself can predict his next move.

## Conclusion

When this novel is read from the perspective of war narrative the reader will be convinced by the actions of the protagonist as a result of the horrors he has witnessed in the war. Continuous exposure to gunshots, shells and bombs can eventually impair the sense of a man and can drive him mad. He may do things which are otherwise forbidden in the war. But observing the protagonist's childhood gives us insights into the trauma that he had been suffering ever since he lost his mother. There can be untold trauma in everyone at one or the other point of life. They may forget it in the long run of life, but that doesn't mean that the pain has completely released from the person. Certain similar events or some much more extreme events can bring back the hidden pain which has been hindered for long somewhere in the mind.

Once this happens chances are there that the person behaves in totally unexpected ways.

The study thus proves that Alfa's problematic personality is the result of the abandonment and rejection of parental affection and love ever since he remembers. The child inside him craved for the lost love which he in turn experienced from his friend Mademba Diop. But once he is killed, Alfa is completely ostracized and feels extreme loneliness even in the midst of all the people around him. This made him find satisfaction and content in the enemy killings and the events thereafter. The work thus discusses concepts of war trauma which is typical of a war narrative but there are many more layers of trauma in it. The effect of abandonment is far fletching and intense which can go up to any extant and it is vividly portrayed in the novel. Diop has thus incorporated the psychological aspects of abandonment in rather subtle ways all throughout the novel and can thus the novel uncover its true themes not necessarily in the primary reading. There are untold trauma and painful memories in every individual but it is not necessary that everyone responds to a traumatic event in similar way. Some may find certain coping techniques on their own and some others may find it extremely difficult to hold themselves together after the recurring incidents which gives them trauma. Alfa Ndiaye of David Diop is thus a typical example of a victim of abandonment and its bitter memories which made him a living monster in his early adulthood.

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**Arsha Junaid**

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Arsha is working as a guest lecture in English Literature. She completed her post-graduation under the University of Calicut and has qualified UGC NET in 2022.

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