

# PERCEIVING PAIN IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

Zoe Norridge



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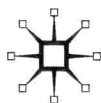
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# Introduction – Pain, Literature and the Personal

*You don't know about the pain. It's a memory to you, a wound to your ego, a theory [...] You can't even begin to imagine the pain. [...] Ja, I suppose imagined pain isn't the real thing. But I've lived with it for so long, it's become real. (Dangor 14)*

*It is a kind of pain that cannot be explained, that is like no other. [...] The experience of suffering remains unmatched in my adult life. I have given birth, suffered from renal colic – each pain is different. (Khady 21–2, my translation)*

*Victims are interested in the representation of their own sufferings. But they want the suffering to be seen as unique. [...] It is intolerable to have one's own sufferings twinned with anybody else's. (Sontag, Regarding 100–1)*

This book is about imagining pain. It is about how the written word explores the most aversive of sensations, across time and between people. I will argue that, at its best, the literary aestheticisation of stories transforms pain into more than a 'memory', a 'wound' or a 'theory', instead lending to hurt the immediacy and poignancy of the present. Achmat Dangor, writing about the enduring wounds of apartheid, suggests that pain creates interpersonal divisions, divisions based on the subjectivity of the survivor's experience of pain and its necessary distance from the imagined suffering of the witness. This emphasis on the particularity of pain is echoed in the other two quotations above. Khady, in her account of female genital excision in Senegal, asserts that each pain is different, that her childhood experiences of suffering remain unmatched by those of her adult life. Sontag, writing about



press photography, argues that the victims of war wish their suffering to be understood in its singularity rather than compared with the victimisation of anyone else. Yet all three writers, with the very gesture of asserting particularity, juxtapose one pain with another, draw attention to the fact that pain does reside within a meaningful conceptual category. Sontag entitled her final critical work, written whilst she herself was dying of terminal cancer, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Khady dedicated her memoir to all those who suffer in body and mind. Dangor's writing explores the connectedness of pain – where living in proximity to suffering results in enduring empathetic identifications.

Why, then, do these writers also assert that pain is always unique? Many emotions, from love to envy, happiness to nostalgia, are recognised as fundamentally subjective. What is at stake in the representation of pain that carries such an urgent call to be seen on its own terms? The immediately apparent answer is that pain is often either a result or a cause of the denial of another person's voice. The child has no say in their own excision ceremony, the civilian casualties of war are literally silenced by violence in death or denied the opportunity to speak their pain. Yolande Mukagasana, a survivor of the Genocide in Rwanda, talks of the elemental need to tell stories in the face of the overwhelming pain. Her first act of writing was to note down the dates when she heard her family and friends had been killed, whilst still in hiding herself. It forms a gesture of resistance to the ideology underpinning genocide, which aims to suppress the human and conscious existence of the individual. The Kigali Memorial Centre in Rwanda takes extreme care to give voice to the experiences of survivors in order to emphasise the particularity that was denied to Tutsis during the decades of dehumanising propaganda running up to 1994. These examples are recent, but the dynamics of silencing have a long history. Achille Mbembe, for example, suggests that the denial of the humanity of Africans was crucial to the violent imposition of European colonial rule (14). Writers who have lived through oppression, loss and childhood trauma stress their right to an individual voice precisely because their public right to self-expression, intrinsically bound up with self-determination, was denied at the time.

Ironically perhaps given the role of the United Kingdom in denying African voices, one of the most radical definitions of pain I have found comes from the British Pain Society. They propose that 'Pain is what the person feeling it says it is'. Such a statement foregrounds both the alterity and subjectivity of the person who suffers and asserts his or her right to self-representation. It also runs fundamentally counter

to more traditional diagnostic criteria, whose common aim is to pin down overarching features of a condition, in returning the taxonomic power to the person in pain. In the British Pain Society's literature, this extraordinary definition is qualified with another more conventional classification from the International Association for the Study of Pain: '[Pain is] an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage or described in terms of such damage'. This declaration both roots pain in the body (sensation, tissue damage) and identifies it with an emotional process. The IASP privileges description within the very terms of its definition and ties the representation of pain to a *perceived* sense of danger. These features will be present throughout *Perceiving Pain*, which repeatedly explores pain as both emotion and sensation.

If description is fundamental even to the definition of pain and representation has a pivotal role to play both in pain's infliction and its cessation, then it is not hard to see why literature, particularly literature from places and periods of time associated with confluences of violence, environmental hardship or political oppression, resounds with depictions of suffering. In the case of African literature, my focus in this monograph, the source of pain's preponderance requires little speculation. The history of pain infliction on the continent is well known, from the ravages of the slave trade and the brutalities of colonialism, to contemporary causes of suffering such as civil war and HIV. Many African novels and memoirs are suffused with descriptions of hurt and, at their most optimistic, healing. We could think back to Ferdinand Oyono's descriptions of violent pain infliction in *Une vie de boy* (1956, translated as *Houseboy*), the extraordinary opening descriptions of the pain of loss in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) or much more recently to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's extraordinary exploration of the suffering inflicted by civil war in *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006). This is not to suggest that all writing from Africa is fundamentally concerned with pain. Although it is the focus of many of the texts I choose to discuss in this study, in others it remains merely peripheral. Nor are all pain descriptions harrowing and sensational journeys to extremes of emotion: whilst they may be horrifying, they are at times also beautiful, clumsy, incidental and even funny.

What remains surprising is that, for a sensation which is so pervasive in African writing, pain is relatively understudied in African literary criticism. One reason for this caution stems from the long-standing ubiquity of images of African distress in the international media. Many critics perceive the topic of literary pain narratives as yet another

homogenising Western stereotype of Africa as an ‘underdeveloped’ nexus of violence and death. I will explore this concept and its implications, both in this introduction and at later moments in the book, in relation to the symbolic currency of highly gendered representations of pain and international perceptions of mass violence. However, it is worth noting straight away that whilst stereotypical representations of African suffering are indeed a serious issue, African writers themselves repeatedly assert that their own artistic practices work against such homogenisation. Jack Mapanje writes in the introduction to his anthology of African prison writing: ‘No. *Gathering Seaweed* is not another anthology calculated to negate Africa. I vehemently reject the subtle neo-colonial view that the publication of African prison writing fabricates yet another negative image of the continent; arguments like this were death to many creative projects in the last century’ (xiii). To ignore representations of pain in African literature, representations that provide a rich and varied source for academic literary reflection, seems to be the greater mistake, a mistake that may indeed be read as ‘neo-colonial’ in the sense that it forms yet another silencing of suffering.

Given the seeming hesitancy of academics to address questions of pain in African literature, much of the theoretical context for exploring suffering through the lens of literary criticism has come from studies of European and American literature. That said, in the twenty-first century the aesthetic appreciation of pain narratives began to undergo a sea change with an increasing number of publications concerned with suffering in the field of world literature.<sup>1</sup> This Introduction offers an overview of such trends in literary and cultural studies followed by more specific exploration of how this relates to my own work in the African literary context.<sup>2</sup>

### **What can be said about pain? Trauma theory and Scarry**

In the twentieth century, the overriding focus of academics working with literatures of suffering was the spectre of the Holocaust – first, in the aftermath of the Second World War with cultural commentators such as Adorno, Steiner and Lyotard considering the ethical consequences of this extreme, brutal and methodically inflicted suffering, and later, with the advent of trauma theory, which emerged in the early 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Although trauma theory is by necessity fundamentally concerned with pain, it is framed around the impossibility of accessing the suffering of the past from the present. As Caruth puts it: ‘traumatic experience suggests a certain paradox: that the most direct seeing of a

violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it' (91–2). This concept of the unrepresentable lacuna of testimony is based in three lines of thought: deconstruction, with its emphasis on the impossibility of ever fully representing what is sought to be represented in language; psychoanalysis, with its focus on the repression of traumatic memory; and survivor writings, which explore the notion that the extremes of experience are inaccessible because those who suffered the most are no longer with us.

Many of the literary critics working with concepts of trauma, including Hartman, Caruth and Felman, were based in New Haven, where the 'Yale School' of deconstruction, active from the mid-1970s onwards, was centred around Paul de Man and his friendship with Derrida (Luckhurst 6). Given deconstruction's preoccupation with the gap between the referent and representation, it is perhaps unsurprising that trauma theory, as it emerged at that place and moment in time, is concerned with the vicissitudes of literary depiction, with the chasm between what happened and the aesthetic processes of remembering. In the work of academics who are also therapists, such as Dori Laub, this distancing is intrinsically linked to psychoanalytic theory, and in particular to Freud's writings about trauma in the aftermath of the First World War (Felman and Laub). Freud drew on the traumatic war dreams of soldiers suffering from shell shock after that earlier war to explore ideas of repressed memory in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. This repression once again foregrounds the inaccessibility of extreme pain to the conscious mind and manifests itself in writing as interruptions, inconsistencies, literary spectres and gaps in narration.

The testimonies of survivors assert yet another form of absence – that of the ultimate witness. Levi and Wiesel, for example, write about those men, women and children who were executed during transportation, were sent to the gas chambers on arrival in the camps, or who worked in appalling conditions until their minds and bodies gave up and they were either sent to be killed or died from sickness and exhaustion (Levi 96, Wiesel 314). Of these experiences Agamben comments: 'At a certain point, it became clear that testimony contained at its core an essential lacuna; in other words, the survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to' (13). This is not to say survivor writings do not negotiate pain – they certainly do. Indeed Levi even goes so far as to comment that the theoretical turn to 'incommunicability' is both 'frivolous and irritating' (*Drowned* 68). But for trauma theorists versed in psychoanalysis and deconstruction including Agamben, who has

written extensively about the aporia of survivor testimonies, the trope of lacuna is pervasive.

Pain, then, in the body of works associated with trauma theory, is enduringly described through its absence. Remarkably, it doesn't even appear in the index of two of the most recent publications in the field: Luckhurst's *The Trauma Question* and Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory*. These impressive comparative works, ranging over languages and geographies, are concerned with analysing the problematic process of accessing suffering rather than the dynamics of pain as a sensation in itself. In contrast, one critic who does engage with the nuances of pain as phenomenological experience is Elaine Scarry, whose seminal text *The Body in Pain* has remained the point of reference for academics working on suffering across the disciplines for the last twenty-five years.

Writing out of a similar intellectual climate to the early proponents of trauma theory, Scarry shares many of these theorists' concerns. Two of her key theoretical assertions are that extreme pain destroys language and that the interpersonal dynamics of pain are ultimately characterised by doubt (4). Her source materials, though, are rather different. In the first chapter of *The Body in Pain*, from which most of the theoretical assertions about pain attributed to Scarry are drawn, she focuses her attentions on torture. Delving through the archives of Amnesty International in London, she looks at descriptions of the torture chamber from Greece, the Philippines, Vietnam, Chile, Brazil, Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentina and Algeria, for the most part testimonies detailing interrogation techniques developed and used from the 1970s onwards. These accounts she reads alongside texts by the great novelists and philosophers of European culture: Shakespeare, Emily Brontë, Balzac, Zola, Beckett, Thomas Mann, Nietzsche, Sartre, Solzhenitsyn. The result is one of the most astonishing works of comparative literature ever written.

Scarry's work emerged at a moment when post-structuralism was beginning to dominate the American Academy but her project is in many ways more old fashioned and ambitious in scope. In *The Body in Pain*, she seeks to describe what happens when a person is pushed to the extremes of pain, and her argument is based upon the premise that at such a point, cultural and linguistic differences fade into the background because the physicality of pain is so world-destroying that the sufferer is reduced to 'a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned' (4). She explains that this feature of pain is not significantly affected by cultural considerations as

the language-destroying characteristics of extreme suffering are intrinsic to the nature of suffering itself: to feel pain is to be trapped within the boundaries of a body and remain incapable of moving out of that body into the external sharable world (5). To talk of pre-linguistic cries is to refer to the unsustainable immediacy of extreme pain encountered in Scarry's case in torture, but also in more commonplace and less ideologically aversive events such as wounding accidents or childbirth. However, for many pain sufferers, and certainly for the protagonists of the texts I will discuss, pain goes beyond the extremes of agony and is experienced on a daily basis with many featured faces. This is what Melzack and Torgerson tried to capture when they devised the McGill pain questionnaire in 1971, using sensory, affective and evaluative pain adjectives to generate nuanced and clinically relevant descriptions of pain. Scarry reads the McGill diagnostic tool as evidence for the difficulties inherent in expressing pain in language, where I would like to interpret it as in many ways indicative of our capacity for the linguistic exploration of suffering. We differ perhaps because Scarry sees the questionnaire as a means of describing pain after the event, once its searingly language-destroying extreme has passed, whereas I would argue that pain can be written through, and am intrigued by how (perhaps less extreme) pains are described in the present tense with a sense of immediacy.

Scarry's belief that pain is unrepresentable is in many ways grounded in the climate of post-1945 European thought as epitomised in Adorno's endlessly quoted dictum that poetry is barbaric after Auschwitz. As many critics have pointed out, whilst this concept has had a lasting impact on cultural theory, Adorno himself went on to re-work and re-examine the assertion during his lifetime (Luckhurst 5, Felman and Laub 34). The enduring idea of the unrepresentability of suffering has little resonance with the texts I will examine in this book, although we will see that different writers at different times are more or less willing to delve into the details of pain experiences. In this my work resists the theoretical turn towards unspeakable suffering. Nerea Arruti, quoting from a lecture by Andreas Huyssen, explores the potentially constrictive nature of such frameworks, arguing:

When acknowledging the limits of representation becomes itself an ideology, we are locked into a last ditch defence of modernist purity against the onslaught of new and old forms of representation, and ethics is in danger of being turned into moralizing against any form of representation that does not meet the assumed standard. (3)

The danger of taking Scarry's assertion that pain destroys language and applying it to literary texts without necessary qualifications is that it becomes, in effect, an ideology that purports to respect difference (the uniqueness of your pain cannot be described) but actually homogenises all suffering into the same (pain is inevitably unrepresentable).

Another of Scarry's key assertions is that pain is intrinsically characterised by doubt. The person in pain experiences their pain as absolute unignorable certainty, but for the observer it remains unobvious, questionable and ultimately deniable (4). This observation holds much currency in the context of war and torture and coincides with contemporary understandings of the colonial project whereby in order to inflict suffering, those in power seek to deny the essential humanity of the other (Fanon, Césaire). However, there are several potential dangers here, too. Firstly, doubt can be framed as an excuse, a reason not to listen to, or act upon, what is being said, a relinquishing of responsibility when in fact the certainty of pain is apparent. Such was the case in Rwanda, where doubt was used to justify international non-intervention despite many voices clearly articulating the existence of pain. Secondly, Scarry consistently argues that if human beings perceive the other person's pain, then they will feel compelled to act for its cessation. She discussed this position with me when I travelled to interview her at Harvard. I asked her whether people can continue to injure in the full knowledge that they are causing pain, and she responded:

Yes but I think they don't see it, or they have ways of not seeing it. I mean, in the extreme case of a person who inflicts torture you think how could they not understand that it's an injury, they can hear the cries, but the whole structure of torture is designed to let them re-experience that injury not as in that other person's injury but their own power. (unpublished interview)

Is it not also possible that the person inflicting pain sees pain as pain and enjoys a sense of power because they are consciously inflicting that pain rather than as a substitution for the pain? This is not a question I can answer in this book. But the underlying premises of Scarry's assertions and my subsequent query are important. Do we believe pain to be fundamentally wrong, inhumane and to contain an imperative call for its own cessation? If so, how can a person explain their continued inactivity in the face of such eloquent literary descriptions of pain? One of the most convincing answers that is offered to this question from within the field of literary theory is that depictions of suffering both

contain an ethical call for action whilst simultaneously offering reasons for resisting such an assumption of responsibility (Sontag, *Regarding*).

First, though, to recap Scarry's theoretical stance in the context of world literature, in *The Body in Pain*, she argues that pain reduces human beings to a pre-linguistic state and is characterised by features that she argues are universal in nature. Although Scarry refers to Zborowski's 1952 study examining ethnic differences and the role of culture in articulating suffering (109) and also acknowledges the contributions of anthropologists to cultural understandings of constructions of pain (5), ultimately she argues that variation only serves to confirm her overarching thesis:

Even if one were to enumerate many additional examples, such cultural differences, taken collectively, would themselves constitute only a very narrow margin of variation and would thus in the end work to expose and confirm the universal sameness of the central problem, a problem that originates much less in the inflexibility of any one language or in the shyness of any one culture than in the utter rigidity of pain itself: its resistance to language is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is. (5)

For Scarry, pain can be compared, across geographies and literatures, because comparison serves to reveal universally-held truths. Such an assertion is appealing because it means the theoretical framework for understanding pain outlined in *The Body in Pain* can be applied across disciplines to any cultural product, as indeed it has been in practice. However, more cautious regional specialists might question whether Scarry's methodology gives sufficient weighting to cultural difference, given that she consults her (written) accounts of torture through an international NGO based in London and then compares these not to literature from the countries where the torture accounts were written, but to European literary texts. To what extent does Scarry take into account Asian, African or Pacific languages in her assertions about linguistic universality? And if her arguments were to hold true for the extremes of pain in torture, can these insights also be applied to other pain experiences, as they have been by a raft of cultural critics, or do theorists need to look again at the shades of grey that Scarry's book never claims to investigate? Scarry makes it clear that her account of the body in pain is concerned with the infliction of extreme physical pain. My research, on the other hand, will engage with the chromatic nuances of a wide



variety of pain experiences, arguing for the acknowledgement of irreconcilable individuality (Chapter 1), fluid boundaries between mental and physical suffering (Chapter 2) and the signifying contexts of testimonial narratives (Chapter 3).

### **Common experiences of suffering or culturally specific pains?**

*The Body in Pain* might not have been so influential or so widely read if Scarry had focused on the gradations of different intensities of pain, cultural specificity or geographical location – that was never her intention. Such nuances are, however, the focus of a group of medical anthropologists, including Arthur Kleinman, Mary-Jo Delvecchio Good, Paul Brodwin and Byron Good, who have studied pain, and in particular chronic pain, in a range of specific ethnographic contexts. These researchers often cite aspects of Scarry's work as an inspirational starting point and then move on to examine particular assertions in varied contexts. For example, Byron Good alludes to Scarry's argument that acute pain destroys language and subsequently reflects on both his personal experience of subjects searching for language in clinical interviews and Godfrey Lienhardt's account of the Dinka, a Nilotic people of Southern Sudan ("Body" 30). Do these anthropologists study pain in order to reveal universal truths about pain experiences, couched in different expressions, phrased with different terminologies, yet fundamentally the same? Or is there a greater sense of cultural relativism in their comparative approach to pain?

A clue to the answer may be found in Kleinman's 1977 article about the 'new cross-cultural psychiatry'. Criticising the 'old transcultural psychiatry' and its reliance on 'universal' principles which he argues are in fact West-specific categories, Kleinman calls for a specific and careful approach to mental health in its cultural complexity. In doing so, he makes a powerful distinction between illness and disease: 'Disease can be thought of as malfunctioning or maladaptation of biological or psychological processes. Illness is the personal, interpersonal and cultural reaction to disease' (9). He returns to a similar distinction fifteen years later in the co-authored introduction to the volume *Pain as Human Experience*. Here, the researchers acknowledge that 'pain is a universal feature of the human condition' but qualify this with the assertion that 'the cultural elaboration of pain involves categories, idioms, and modes of experience that are greatly diverse' (1). Pain is explored both as an essential part of being a human being and as a culturally specific