



ELLIPSIS, SENTENCE FRAGMENTATION AND THE LINGUISTIC REPRESENTATION OF TRAUMA IN ADICHIE'S *AMERICAN EMBASSY*

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Abstract: This study examines trauma representation in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *American Embassy*, foregrounding the intersection of personal grief and sociopolitical violence in contemporary Nigerian society. Anchored in trauma theory, postcolonial critique, and affective linguistics, the study explores how the protagonist's experience of loss and political instability is rendered through ellipsis, sentence fragmentation, temporal dislocation, and euphemistic imagery, such as the recurring palm oil metaphor. These narrative strategies simulate cognitive and emotional disruption, conveying the inexpressible dimensions of trauma while negotiating ethical considerations in storytelling. The analysis further highlights how trauma operates both individually and collectively, shaped by social, cultural, and institutional contexts, and how literature functions as a medium for ethical engagement, empathetic reading, and critical reflection on structural violence. By integrating psychological, linguistic, and sociocultural perspectives, the study illuminates the formal and thematic mechanisms through which African literature represents trauma and mediates its complex psychological, ethical, and social implications.

Introduction

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *American Embassy* intricately explores the psychological and sociopolitical effects of trauma in contemporary Nigerian society. The narrative presents trauma not only as an individual experience but also as a societal phenomenon, emphasizing how personal loss and political violence intertwine (Pourgharib 23). The story's protagonist navigates a tense encounter at the

American embassy following the brutal death of her child, a moment that foregrounds both private grief and public uncertainty. Adichie's linguistic choices—particularly her use of ellipsis and sentence fragmentation—render the protagonist's psychological state visible, offering readers an intimate window into her inner turmoil. Such narrative strategies also evoke a broader commentary on Nigeria's sociopolitical instability during General Abacha's regime.

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Ellipsis, characterized by the omission of words or phrases, functions as a textual representation of trauma in Adichie's story. This omission mirrors the gaps in the protagonist's consciousness and memory, emphasizing how trauma obstructs coherent narrative articulation (Verissimo 20). By leaving spaces in the text, Adichie enables readers to experience the disorientation and fragmentation inherent in traumatic memory. The repeated interruptions in the protagonist's thoughts echo the cognitive dissonance experienced by individuals who endure sudden, violent loss. Such linguistic strategies highlight the tension between what is narratively expressible and what remains unspeakable.

Sentence fragmentation is another central device employed to communicate trauma. In *American Embassy*, incomplete sentences reflect the protagonist's struggle to organize her thoughts under extreme emotional duress. For instance, fragmented sequences convey abrupt shifts between past recollection, present danger, and imagined scenarios, encapsulating the destabilizing effects of trauma on temporal and narrative perception (Dongala 45). The interplay between fragmented syntax and ellipsis produces a textual rhythm that simulates both shock and cognitive overload, compelling the reader to inhabit the protagonist's disrupted mental landscape.

The popularity of the narrative trauma approach in recent scholarship, combined with Adichie addressing this idea as a linguistic issue, leads to

an interesting connection between her work and theories of linguistic psychology (Pourgharib 27). Citing the disruption of ordinary narrative forms caused by trauma, scholars have also argued that linear narrative is incapable of sufficiently representing the psychic disturbance it describes. Adichie achieves this dislocation through her use of ellipses and fragmented sentences, foregrounding her element, the constraints of language to express radical loss and terror. These two techniques can also be viewed as a criticism of the traditional authority of the narrative as these techniques emphasize the frailty and individuality of the traumatized person.

The spatial and temporal dislocation is also constructed into the narrative structure of the *American Embassy*. The main character switches back and forth between her remembrance of Ugonna, her dead child, and imminent pressure to slip through the bureaucracies of systems at the embassy (Pourgharib 25). These changes, which are caused in most cases by broken sentences and strange ellipses demonstrate how trauma comes in between ordinary life. In this way, the narrative asks readers to think differently about trauma as a continuous and disruptive process instead of a closed historical event. This is in line with critical arguments on the postcolonial trauma, which assumes that disaggregation of the psyche occurs when a sociopolitical field preserves the violence (Verissimo 22).

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Additionally, Adichie embraces the confluences of gender, grief, and political repression. This trauma of the protagonist is extremely intimate, as it is focused on the death of her son, but also socially mediated through the authoritarian violence of the regime of Abacha (Pourgharib 29). This duality can be represented more subtly through the use of ellipsis, sentence fragmentation: and gaps in the narration, in the sense of a lack of social justice and personal safety. In such a way, the story exposes the role of structural violence as a means of intensifying personal sorrow, which demonstrates the overlapping of individual and political trauma.

In addition to thematic concerns, Adichie's stylistic strategies reinforce affective realism. The narrator's perspective is often confined, presenting limited sensory and cognitive access to events outside the protagonist's immediate awareness. Ellipses frequently punctuate moments of extreme emotional tension, compelling readers to confront the unspeakable without explicit depiction (Verissimo 24). Fragmented sentences further convey the embodied experience of trauma, simulating the interruption of thought, speech, and memory that often accompanies grief and fear. These strategies collectively produce a linguistic aesthetic that mirrors psychological reality.

Furthermore, the story's attention to quotidian details juxtaposed with moments of extreme violence underscores the pervasive nature of trauma. The protagonist's attention to vendors, beggars, and mundane sensory experiences

contrasts sharply with the catastrophic events of Ugonna's death and her husband's exile (Dongala 48). Ellipsis allows for selective omission of critical traumatic moments, thereby foregrounding the cognitive mechanisms of avoidance, suppression, and partial recall. The text's structural choices thus enact trauma linguistically, allowing the reader to inhabit the protagonist's fragmented consciousness.

The story also highlights the tension between narrative disclosure and concealment. The protagonist must negotiate her trauma while interacting with embassy officials who demand evidence of her suffering (Pourgharib 30). Ellipses and fragmented sentences in these interactions signal both hesitation and resistance, revealing the limits of language as a tool for advocacy and survival. This linguistic interplay underscores a central concern of trauma literature: the negotiation between what is knowable, expressible, and socially legible.

Finally, Adichie's linguistic strategies extend beyond mere stylistic experimentation; they function as ethical devices that compel readers to engage with the human cost of political and personal violence (Pourgharib 32). By rendering trauma through ellipsis and fragmentation, the narrative destabilizes conventional expectations of plot coherence, closure, and narrative transparency. This approach fosters empathy, prompting readers to reckon with the unpredictability, incompleteness, and moral complexity of traumatic experience. Ultimately, *American Embassy* exemplifies how

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literary form can serve as a vehicle for representing the inarticulable dimensions of human suffering.

Theoretical Framework

Trauma theory examines how extreme psychological distress is encoded in memory and language, often disrupting linear narrative structures. Scholars argue that trauma resists conventional forms of representation, necessitating alternative strategies such as fragmentation, ellipsis, and deferred narration (Pourgharib 33). Clinical research indicates that personal trauma history affects cognitive and emotional processing, which can mirror the narrative disruptions in literary texts (Leung 15). Trauma may manifest as cognitive dissonance, memory gaps, and disorganized thought patterns, all of which literature can simulate. This makes trauma theory especially relevant for analyzing narratives that depict grief, loss, and psychological shock. Understanding trauma as both a psychological and narrative phenomenon allows scholars to explore how literature communicates complex internal experiences.

Postcolonial trauma frameworks emphasize the sociopolitical and historical dimensions of psychic disturbance. These frameworks argue that trauma is not only individual but also collective, shaped by systemic oppression and historical violence (Mukhammedova 42). In African literature, sociopolitical instability often compounds personal suffering, requiring narrative strategies that convey ethical and psychological complexity (Agboola 58). Writers

frequently use fragmented syntax and selective narration to depict the tension between personal grief and societal trauma. Such approaches illuminate how structural violence amplifies the effects of individual loss. Postcolonial trauma theory therefore provides a lens for analyzing both content and form in literature.

Affective and linguistic approaches to trauma highlight how disrupted syntax, incomplete sentences, and semantic gaps reflect attempts to process overwhelming experiences (Dongala 46). These strategies allow literature to simulate cognitive and emotional disruption, giving readers insight into a character's psychological state (Schafer 12). Non-linear narration, ellipses, and fragmented sentences mirror the disorientation of trauma survivors. Literature thus becomes a tool for representing experiences that are difficult to articulate in conventional storytelling. Such techniques also engage readers ethically, inviting empathy without overexposing traumatic events. They are particularly effective in narratives that explore grief, loss, and political violence.

Research on secondary traumatic stress and vicarious trauma demonstrates that repeated exposure to trauma produces fragmentation and cognitive overload (Leung 22). This finding supports the use of non-linear temporal structures and narrative gaps in literature to replicate the experience of shock or emotional overwhelm (Reis 34). These methods allow authors to convey the psychological impact of trauma authentically. They also highlight the



relational dimension of trauma, showing how personal experiences are shaped by social and institutional factors. Literature thus functions as both a representational and pedagogical medium for trauma. Understanding these dynamics informs both reading and teaching trauma narratives.

The concept of “circumtrauma” explains how traumatic memory is often retroactively fixed, creating tension between immediacy and reflection (Verissimo 25). Literary texts frequently replicate this oscillation using ellipses, fragmented syntax, and temporal shifts. Such techniques allow readers to experience the fragmented, non-linear nature of traumatic memory. They also simulate the struggle of reconciling past trauma with present reality. This approach enhances the realism and ethical engagement of narratives depicting personal and collective suffering. Circumtrauma underscores the interplay between memory, perception, and literary form.

Studies of spiritual and sociocultural abuse reveal how culturally mediated experiences intensify trauma and shape coping mechanisms (Ellis 44). In literature, these dimensions can be conveyed through symbolism, narrative restraint, and selective disclosure (Gu 2024a 31). Authors may use culturally specific imagery to communicate inexpressible aspects of suffering. This allows readers to engage emotionally without sensationalizing trauma. Ethical representation of trauma ensures sensitivity to both characters and audiences. Cultural context

is therefore critical in trauma-informed literary analysis.

Narrative ethics emphasize balancing the disclosure of trauma with respect for the unarticulated suffering of characters (Pourgharib 37). Fragmentation, ellipses, and narrative gaps signal emotional disruption while avoiding graphic sensationalism (Ogunyemi 112). These strategies help writers negotiate moral responsibility in representing extreme psychological experiences. Literature thereby becomes a space where ethical, emotional, and aesthetic considerations intersect. Such approaches foster empathetic reading and reflection. Ethical narration is central to postcolonial and affective approaches to trauma. Translation and comparative literature studies suggest that representing trauma across linguistic and cultural contexts requires interpretive sensitivity (Gu 2024b 57). Indirect imagery and culturally specific symbols allow authors to preserve the inexpressible dimensions of suffering. Translators must consider both linguistic meaning and ethical implications. This ensures that trauma narratives remain authentic and socially responsible. Representation across cultures highlights both universal and context-specific elements of traumatic experience. Literature can thus bridge gaps between cultural understanding and human empathy.

School- and community-based research emphasizes the relational nature of trauma, showing that individual grief interacts with broader social and institutional structures



(Schafer 21). Literary depictions often mirror these dynamics, illustrating how personal suffering is influenced by societal pressures. This approach links individual experience to collective contexts. Such representation can inform both social awareness and pedagogical practices. Narrative strategies like ellipses and fragmentation help convey these complex interrelations. Trauma literature therefore engages readers with social, ethical, and psychological dimensions simultaneously.

Integrating trauma theory, postcolonial critique, and affective linguistics situates African literary responses to trauma within global scholarship (Mukhammedova 65). Authors manipulate language, syntax, and narrative form to depict persistent, ethically complex, and socially situated trauma. These strategies allow readers to experience the psychological and moral weight of extreme loss. They also illuminate the intersections of memory, culture, and narrative form. Understanding these dynamics enriches literary analysis and interpretation. This framework provides the tools for examining Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *American Embassy* as a text that represents trauma through form and language.

Analysis

Adichie's *American Embassy* immediately immerses the reader in a scene of intense tension and grief, using ellipses to signify the unspeakable nature of trauma. When the protagonist recalls Ugonna's death, the narrative

intermittently omits details, compelling readers to infer the horror from what is left unsaid: "Not that he could even reach up to the shelf where she kept oils and spices, not that he could unscrew the cap on the plastic bottle of palm oil" (Adichie 79). The repeated reference to palm oil, a domestic substance, functions as a euphemism for blood, transforming the horror of her child's death into a culturally familiar yet emotionally charged image. The ellipsis creates narrative gaps that mirror the protagonist's psychological fragmentation, illustrating how trauma disrupts coherent thought and memory.

Sentence fragmentation intensifies this psychological realism. The protagonist's attention splinters across the chaotic embassy environment: "She did not notice the newspaper vendors... Or the beggars who walked up and down holding out enamel plates. Or the ice-cream bicycles that honked" (Adichie 79). These fragmented sequences simulate the intrusion of trauma into consciousness, much like the recurring image of palm oil intruding into otherwise mundane domestic imagery. Readers experience the protagonist's disrupted focus firsthand, moving abruptly between sensory details and intrusive memories, which highlights how trauma permeates both perception and thought.

Temporal dislocation is also central to the narrative. Adichie frequently shifts between past and present, capturing how trauma warps time perception. When the protagonist recalls Ugonna's death while waiting at the embassy, the

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text oscillates between the immediacy of present discomfort and past catastrophe: “Two days ago she had buried her child... The day before, she had driven her husband in the boot of their Toyota to the home of a friend” (Adichie 80). The ellipses and fragmented sentences, often accompanied by palm oil imagery, convey the collapse of temporal boundaries, merging memory, fear, and anticipation into continuous psychic pressure.

Ellipsis also functions to articulate the inexpressible ethical dimensions of grief. The protagonist’s interactions with the man behind her in line reveal the impossibility of fully narrating traumatic experience: “You should eat, oh... Although he no longer held out the bag of oranges” (Adichie 81). The ellipsis here indicates the unspeakable weight of trauma, just as the euphemistic palm oil represents blood without naming it directly. By omitting explicit details, Adichie externalizes the protagonist’s struggle to communicate grief in a world that demands superficial narratives of resilience.

The narrative’s sensory imagery, juxtaposed with fragmented syntax, further conveys trauma’s embodied effects. Descriptions of heat, sweat, and physical pain—“The air hung heavy with moist heat. It weighed on her head, made it even more difficult to keep her mind blank” (Adichie 79)—intersect with palm oil references, signaling the visceral intrusion of violent memory into bodily experience. Trauma manifests both cognitively and corporeally, with the repeated

palm oil metaphor linking domesticity and blood, normalcy and horror.

Adichie’s depiction of bureaucratic obstacles at the embassy highlights political and personal trauma. The protagonist’s navigation of visa procedures is riddled with fragmented sentences and ellipses: “Can you go through your story again, ma’am? You haven’t given me any details” (Adichie 85). These interruptions mirror the trauma of documentation and proof, and the palm oil imagery evokes her child’s death, emphasizing the ethical impossibility of rendering such violence legible to institutional authorities.

Language itself becomes a site of trauma, as Adichie demonstrates through repetition, staccato phrasing, and euphemism. The protagonist repeatedly encounters questions that challenge her authority over her own narrative, provoking internal fragmentation: “Where is your husband? Where is he?... They pressed a gun to her head” (Adichie 81). Here, the recurring palm oil imagery functions silently in the background, signaling the intimate horror that cannot be fully verbalized. Sentence breaks, ellipses, and rhetorical questioning dramatize the tension between external inquiry and internal chaos.

The story explores communal response to trauma. Interactions with other visa applicants and street vendors reflect a fragmented social fabric: “A breathing sidewalk. A market that sprung up during the American embassy hours and disappeared when the embassy closed”

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(Adichie 79). The narrative's fragmented sentences, punctuated by ellipses, mirror the episodic, unstable nature of communal life under political oppression. The palm oil euphemism underscores how private grief coexists alongside public spectacle, demonstrating trauma's social dimension.

Adichie manipulates narrative focalization to evoke ethical engagement. The protagonist filters information, withholding explicit details from the embassy interviewer: "Her son had been killed, that was all she would say. Killed" (Adichie 85). Fragmentation and ellipsis emphasize the ethical act of selective disclosure. The palm oil metaphor reinforces this restraint—blood is present, known, and felt, yet it is linguistically transformed, mediating the ethical tension of narrating trauma.

Memory and imagination interact dynamically in the text. The protagonist reconstructs moments of Ugonna's life amidst present peril: "One plant would do, his plot was so small. When it bloomed... he had done with his LEGO blocks" (Adichie 85). Ellipses and fragmented sentences allow the narrative to linger on affective detail without resolving it. The constant return to palm oil as a substitute for blood amplifies the incompleteness of memory under trauma, simulating how grief repeatedly resurfaces, unresolved and intrusive.

Adichie conveys intergenerational and anticipatory dimensions of trauma. The protagonist navigates fear for herself and the memory of her husband and child: "They did not

deserve to know" (Adichie 85). Ellipses, fragmented sentences, and palm oil euphemism collectively signal ethical restraint, the impossibility of fully protecting others from the knowledge of violence. Readers are drawn into the ethical dilemmas of trauma representation, seeing both what is said and what is deliberately obscured.

The juxtaposition of public spectacle and private grief highlights trauma's relational dimension. Scenes of soldiers, vendors, and embassy officials intermingle with memories of Ugonna, producing narrative collisions: "She turned to look across the street... She saw the heel of the soldier's boot squash the black frames" (Adichie 79). Fragmented sentences, ellipses, and the silent presence of palm oil imagery convey the simultaneity of multiple traumatic realities, showing how private grief is continuously pressured by public violence.

Finally, Adichie's manipulation of narrative closure underscores the unresolved nature of trauma. The protagonist exits the embassy, carrying grief and uncertainty: "She didn't turn. She walked out... and got into her car" (Adichie 85). Ellipses, fragmentation, and the persistent memory of palm oil signal that trauma cannot be fully contained or resolved by external systems. The narrative's formal techniques—fragmentation, ellipsis, selective focalization, and euphemistic imagery—produce a linguistically mediated representation of trauma that foregrounds ethical, psychological, and social dimensions simultaneously.

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Conclusion / Summary

Adichie's *American Embassy* presents a masterful depiction of trauma, grief, and ethical negotiation through fragmented syntax, ellipses, and euphemistic imagery. The repeated reference to palm oil as a euphemism for blood transforms domestic familiarity into a vivid representation of violence, demonstrating how trauma infiltrates both memory and perception. Fragmented sentences and ellipses replicate the protagonist's disrupted thought processes, reflecting the intrusion of grief and fear into everyday consciousness. Temporal dislocations, selective disclosure, and attention to sensory detail intensify the narrative's realism, emphasizing the ethical and emotional complexity of surviving in a politically violent context. By juxtaposing private grief with public spectacle, Adichie underscores the relational and social dimensions of trauma, illustrating how personal loss intersects with communal, bureaucratic, and political forces. Ultimately, the story presents trauma as persistent, uncontainable, and ethically challenging, with formal narrative techniques serving to communicate the unspeakable dimensions of grief and injustice.

Recommendations

1. **Literary Analysis and Teaching:** Educators and literary scholars should highlight Adichie's use of euphemism, ellipsis, and fragmented syntax when teaching narratives of trauma. This helps

students understand how form and content collaboratively convey psychological and ethical complexity.

2. **Trauma Representation in Literature:** Writers exploring trauma can adopt similar strategies—using indirect imagery, temporal dislocation, and narrative gaps—to ethically represent violence without sensationalizing it, allowing readers to engage emotionally without exploitation.
3. **Psychological Insight for Readers:** Readers of *American Embassy* are encouraged to reflect on the subtle interplay between domestic symbols (like palm oil) and trauma, recognizing how ordinary elements can bear extraordinary symbolic weight in the depiction of grief and loss.
4. **Policy and Awareness:** The narrative's depiction of bureaucratic and political obstacles highlights the need for sensitive, humane procedures for victims of violence or persecution, such as asylum applicants. Institutions can use literature like Adichie's to foster empathy and ethical awareness in social and political frameworks.
5. **Further Research:** Scholars could explore comparative studies of euphemistic representation of violence in contemporary African literature, examining how indirect imagery communicates trauma while preserving ethical boundaries.

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