



MALE VULNERABILITY AND THE BROKEN BLACK BODY IN OKWRI ODUOR'S MY FATHER'S HEAD

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Keywords: <i>Male vulnerability, Black male body, Trauma Theory, Intergenerational trauma, African literature</i>	Abstract: <i>This study examines male vulnerability and the broken Black body in Okwiri Oduor's My Father's Head through the lens of Trauma Theory. It explores how the novella foregrounds the father's corporeal and psychological fragility, situating his experiences within intergenerational, relational, and socio-historical contexts. Detailed textual analysis reveals how ordinary acts, bodily labor, and memory function as markers of trauma, illustrating the complex interplay between vulnerability, masculinity, and ethical witnessing. The study demonstrates that Oduor challenges conventional notions of stoic masculinity by rendering the father's suffering visible and ethically significant. By engaging with the embodied, relational, and moral dimensions of trauma, the novella underscores literature's capacity to illuminate the intricate dynamics of identity, grief, and social responsibility. Findings highlight the centrality of the body as a site of historical, emotional, and ethical significance, emphasizing the interconnections between personal fragility and societal pressures.</i>
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Introduction

The exploration of male vulnerability in African literature has long been overshadowed by a preoccupation with hegemonic masculinity and narratives celebrating male heroism (Azuike et al. 1). Historically, the Black male body has been treated as a symbol of strength, authority, and resilience, while its fragility, emotional complexity, and corporeal precarity have often been ignored. Okwiri Oduor's novella *My Father's Head* provides a compelling intervention in this discourse by rendering the

male body fractured, vulnerable, and ethically visible. Through the daughter's intimate and sometimes unsettling recollections, Oduor foregrounds the father's corporeal and psychological fragility, illustrating how social, familial, and historical pressures converge to destabilize traditional notions of masculinity. This narrative compels readers to confront the tension between societal expectations and the lived realities of Black men, revealing the ethical, emotional, and relational stakes of male vulnerability.

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In My Father's Head, the father's presence is simultaneously tangible and elusive. The narrator's struggle to capture her father's head on paper functions as a metaphor for the difficulties of apprehending male vulnerability and the elusive nature of paternal identity. The father is more often perceived through his absence, his routines, or the fragments of his body and actions, which exemplify the subtle mechanisms through which African men are rendered socially and emotionally exposed (Van Heerden xiii–xiv). By emphasizing corporeal details alongside the intimate acts of care and memory, Oduor challenges conventional representations of men as invulnerable. This nuanced portrayal aligns with scholarship that critiques African literary traditions for neglecting the emotional and corporeal complexity of male characters (Omini 3).

The motivation for this study is rooted in the recognition of a critical gap: while female vulnerability has long been explored within African literature and feminist criticism, male vulnerability remains underrepresented. Scholars such as Dlamini argue that African masculinities are often shaped by external expectations, cultural norms, and intergenerational trauma, leaving little space for emotional expression or acknowledgment of bodily fragility (5). Oduor's novella intervenes in this discourse by illustrating the material, emotional, and social consequences of such

pressures. The father's physical labor, habitual routines, and eventual death all serve as markers of vulnerability, demanding ethical attention from both the narrator and the reader (Harris 12). This study thus seeks to highlight how the novella foregrounds the broken Black body as a site of literary, ethical, and social significance.

The objectives of this paper are threefold. First, it aims to analyze how Oduor represents male vulnerability as a literary and thematic device, using bodily detail, memory, and narrative perspective. Second, it seeks to examine the ways in which social and familial pressures fracture the father's corporeal and emotional integrity, revealing the hidden costs of cultural and gendered expectations. Third, the study interrogates how the novella positions the daughter's memory and gaze as critical in understanding the ethical and relational dimensions of male suffering (Macheso 3). By meeting these objectives, the study contributes to scholarship on African masculinities, trauma representation, and corporeal ethics.

Oduor's narrative style reinforces the thematic exploration of vulnerability. The novella employs lyrical prose, episodic memory, and rich sensory detail to depict the father's fragility, creating a rhythm that mirrors the instability of his body and identity. Repetition, temporal dislocation, and intricate description of bodily gestures and routines emphasize the father's delicate corporeality while foregrounding the narrator's

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struggle to comprehend him (Nabutanyi 7). The act of drawing the father's head becomes a symbolic attempt to reconstruct and understand a body rendered incomplete by trauma, absence, and eventual death. These narrative techniques illustrate the profound interplay between form and content in the novella, demonstrating how literary style can reflect the fragility of the male subject.

Furthermore, the novella situates the father's vulnerability within broader postcolonial contexts, including migration, economic precarity, and sociopolitical instability. Fathers in African fiction often function as moral anchors, and their failure or fragility resonates through familial and communal networks (Dlamini 5). In Oduor's work, the father's domestic labor, attentiveness to small tasks, and bodily decay are emblematic of the pressures imposed by social expectation and historical circumstance. This tension highlights how vulnerability is not merely an individual condition but a socially and historically mediated phenomenon, producing ethical and emotional resonance for the narrator and the reader alike.

In the centre of the novella is the idea of the Black male body as being both evident and not evident, seen and not seen. Even though patriarchal organizations grant men the social power, they, at the same time, exacerbate emotional and corporeal vulnerability because they offer confining expectations (Azuike et al. 4). Oduor

achieves this conflict by paying meticulous attention to the small details of the body, the household, and interactions of character to demonstrate how vulnerability can be meshed with a sense of ethics, recollection, and persona. The novella thus subverts the longstanding presumptions about masculine power, showing the enormous costs associated with outward and inner demands placed on Black men.

These two forces of memory and trauma play a dual role in the novella as they contribute to the narrator excluding the body and the life of her father. The recollections of the daughter of intimate moments and domestic routines, common events, embody the existence of the intergenerational transfer of trauma and the moral considerations of testifying to the vulnerable man (Van Heerden xiv). This position of memory/corporeality displays vulnerability as something constructed both as an experience and as a narrative representation and, in so doing, produces a literary space where the ethics of observation, loss, and relational care are brought into focus.

The philosophical and ethical discussion of the body, mortality, and human relatedness, as well, is brought out in the text of Oduor. Somehow, the novella also insists on the importance of the physicality of the father, not as spectacle but rather as an ethical and narrative site in the novella that demands attention and reflection (Harris 12). It is doing so in line with recent

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scholarship on the “broken Black body,” in which bodily precariousness is used to shed light on social, familial, and psychological realities. The moral side of the given portrayal is at the center since the story encourages the readers to approach the notion of male vulnerability sympathetically and not to superimpose it with abstraction and sentimentality.

The concept of vulnerability is expanded further by the postcolonial theory that seeks to place the father in his vulnerable position within the historical and structural forces, such as the legacies of colonialism and economic marginalization, and social instability (Macheso 3). These outside forces are used to show how fragile the father actually is in relation to his historical situation, thus pointing to how the male body is dependent on and reacts to historical circumstance. Oduor is acutely sensitive to domestic, communal, and sensory detail, a sensitivity that contributes to emphasizing the quotidian conditions of vulnerability and how those may interrelate to and inform context, embodiment, and emotionality.

The novella also disrupts gendered expectations about caregiving, intimacy, and relational observation. By focusing on the voice of the daughter, Oduor shows that male vulnerability needs to be addressed with respect to ethical witnessing, relational care, and subtle observations (Omini 5). The ethics of literature

and the moral responsibility of literature in trying to portray vulnerable weak bodies are effectively brought to the fore and how the intergenerational and relational structures of thought can come up with both a broader picture as well as a greater understanding of the male experience.

In conclusion, Okwiri Oduor’s *My Father’s Head* positions the father’s body as a site of fragility, ethical reflection, and relational significance, challenging conventional depictions of African masculinity. The novella’s intricate narrative style, attentive focus on corporeal detail, and engagement with memory and trauma invite readers to confront the social, familial, and historical forces that shape male vulnerability. By analyzing the broken Black body in this context, the study contributes to scholarship on African masculinities, trauma representation, and ethical literary engagement. Oduor’s work ultimately demonstrates that male vulnerability, when rendered with nuance and care, offers profound insights into human experience, relationality, and the politics of the body in African literature.

Theoretical Framework: Trauma Theory

This study is anchored in Trauma Theory, which provides a critical lens for understanding the fragility, vulnerability, and ethical significance of the Black male body in Okwiri Oduor’s *My Father’s Head*. Trauma Theory emphasizes that traumatic experiences—whether personal,

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intergenerational, or structural—leave indelible marks on the body and mind, shaping identity, memory, and social interactions (Van Heerden xiii–xiv). Within African literature, trauma often manifests in characters who bear the weight of historical, cultural, and familial violence, revealing both visible and invisible scars. Oduor’s novella demonstrates how the father’s body becomes a repository of emotional and physical trauma, as he negotiates the pressures of patriarchal expectation, labor, social visibility, and mortality. Trauma Theory is therefore particularly suitable for this study because it accounts for the ways in which the father’s corporeal fragility and psychological vulnerability are not isolated phenomena but are deeply enmeshed with social, historical, and familial contexts (Azuike et al. 1).

Trauma Theory foregrounds the body as a site where suffering and memory converge, making it central to understanding male vulnerability in Oduor’s narrative. The father’s hands, boots, and fingernails are described in painstaking detail, capturing traces of labor, care, and exposure to danger. These corporeal details are not mere embellishments; they function as textual markers of trauma, documenting the father’s interaction with a world that both demands resilience and denies emotional expression (Harris 12). The novella emphasizes that trauma is embodied—the father’s psychological burden is inseparable from his physical presence,

routines, and gestures. By portraying the father’s frailty through the body, Oduor highlights how trauma transforms ordinary acts into ethically charged moments, inviting the reader to witness suffering with empathy.

Another central concern of Trauma Theory is the intergenerational transmission of trauma, where the psychological and emotional scars of one generation affect subsequent ones. In *My Father’s Head*, the narrator’s attempt to draw her father’s head symbolizes a struggle to comprehend the full extent of his vulnerability and to reconcile with inherited grief (Nabutanyi 7). The daughter’s observations of her father’s habits, his responses to loss, and his eventual death illustrate how trauma circulates within familial relationships, shaping perceptions, responsibilities, and ethical obligations. Trauma Theory thus provides insight into the relational dynamics of vulnerability: the father’s broken body is not only an individual site of suffering but also a reflection of social and familial conditions that perpetuate fragility across generations.

Trauma Theory also questions the boundaries of representation—how traumatic experiences can hardly be explained or depicted (Van Heerden xiv). Oduor presents this challenge in the way the daughter finds it hard to draw her father in such a way that his head would be captured in a drawn form, which symbolically indicates how trauma when it is not fully grasped appears elusive, fragmented, and incomplete. The vulnerability of

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the father is beyond fully admitting or describing and so it is in excess of narrative forms that attempt to contain and put in place the traumatic memory. By focusing on the incompleteness, the disunity, and the distortedness of the surviving of the trauma, the novella follows through with the Trauma Theory when it states that trauma is likened to the totality of the witnessing, the ethical consideration, and the interpretation and effort.

It is also based on the structural as well as the historical aspects of trauma. The weakness of African men as depicted in the text by Oduor is mediated by social as well as historical agents of colonial lives, economic miseries, and political-social insecurity (Macheso 3). With the help of the Trauma Theory, one can read the preciousness that the father is in as the manifestation of both his physical and psychological frailty, in a broader context, both of which are not only individual but also socially constructed. The father does not provide a clear contrast to the main character, yet his routines are laborious, his cares domestic, his emotional set directed and shaken- demonstrating the way the trauma cells both at an individual and structural level.

And, lastly, Trauma Theory points to the moral effects of being exposed to weakness. The novella puts the role of the narrator to see, document, and explain her father-undergoing trauma to the forefront, displaying the moral and relational

aspects of suffering (Omini 5). The daughter is concerned with her father in his vulnerability on intimate grounds of observation, reflection, and narrative reconstruction, which is ethically sensitive, empathic, and relationally mindful. Trauma Theory therefore serves as a key to analyzing the content of the novella itself and its ethical direction, how the literature can become a popular zone to witness, understand, and mediate human weakness.

In conclusion, Trauma Theory offers a comprehensive lens for understanding male vulnerability in *My Father's Head*. By emphasizing embodied suffering, intergenerational effects, representational challenges, structural mediation, and ethical witnessing, Trauma Theory illuminates the ways in which Oduor renders the father's broken Black body visible, ethically significant, and narratively compelling. The theory foregrounds the intersections of corporeal fragility, emotional vulnerability, and social expectation, providing a nuanced framework for exploring how African literature engages with trauma, masculinity, and relational responsibility.

Textual Analysis

The novella opens with the narrator recalling her intention "to summon my father only long enough to see what his head looked like, but now he was here and I did not know how to send him

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back” (Oduor). This initial moment foregrounds both the father’s corporeal presence and the narrator’s anxiety in responding to it. Trauma Theory frames this as a site of ethical and psychological tension: the father’s body embodies a lived history of labor, relational responsibility, and emotional fragility, while the narrator’s interaction with him reflects the weight of intergenerational trauma. The father’s arrival is at once ordinary and uncanny, signaling that the body itself carries histories that are difficult to reconcile.

Oduor emphasizes the father’s vulnerability through detailed attention to his routines and physical labor. The narrator describes carrying “his toolbox to the bathroom... chiselled out old broken tiles from the wall, and they fell onto my boots, and the dust rose from them” (Oduor). These acts of domestic labor, often feminized and overlooked, highlight the father’s corporeal exposure to injury and strain. Trauma Theory interprets such embodied labor as both a survival mechanism and a record of historical and social pressures that shape male vulnerability in African contexts.

The novella also explores the intersection of memory and trauma. The narrator remembers “the day I sat at my father’s feet and he scooped a handful of groundnuts and rubbed them between his palms, chewed them, and then fed the mush to me” (Oduor). This intimate act is charged with intergenerational trauma: it

reflects love, care, and vulnerability transmitted through the body. Trauma Theory illuminates how such small gestures preserve memory while simultaneously marking the body as a site of historical and emotional accumulation. The father’s corporeal fragility, therefore, is inseparable from the affective labor of memory. Physical description further conveys the father’s vulnerability. The narrator notes, “My father had a head. I could see it now that I had the mind to look for it. His head was shaped like a butternut squash. Perhaps that was the reason I had forgotten all about it; it was a horrible, disconcerting thing to look at” (Oduor). The grotesque description destabilizes traditional notions of masculine strength and invulnerability. Trauma Theory interprets the father’s body as a site where aesthetic, emotional, and ethical dimensions of suffering converge, revealing the tension between social expectation and corporeal reality.

Oduor illustrates trauma through the father’s responses to external events. When hearing of a friend’s death over the radio, he “choked on the smoke trapped in his throat” and reflected on mortality, saying, “Even me, you shall hear me on the death news very soon” (Oduor). Here, trauma manifests in both physical and emotional reactions, linking vulnerability to mortality, relational grief, and existential anxiety. Trauma Theory frames this as evidence of the body as a

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medium for processing social, historical, and personal suffering.

The novella engages with intergenerational witnessing as a central theme. The narrator struggles to capture her father's head on paper: "I could see all these things, yet no matter what I did, his head refused to appear within the borders of the paper" (Oduor). This failure mirrors the challenge of representing trauma—the father's experiences cannot be fully contained or communicated. Trauma Theory emphasizes that witnessing is ethically and cognitively demanding, and Oduor demonstrates this through the daughter's partial success in capturing her father's corporeal and emotional presence.

The father's corporeal vulnerability is further amplified by quotidian labor. The narrator notes, "He retrieved his Yamaha drum-set... and sat on the veranda and smoked and beat the drums until his knuckles bled" (Oduor). This physical strain parallels psychological and emotional strain, highlighting trauma as a multisensory experience that permeates the body. Trauma Theory underscores that repeated engagement with labor and ritualized activities can simultaneously express resilience and mark bodily vulnerability.

Oduor contrasts physical presence with social expectation. The father's body is "flattened... on the road... sticky and shiny with fresh tar, and one foot remained inside his tyre sandal"

(Oduor). Trauma Theory interprets this as the extreme visibility of the broken Black body, wherein social and structural forces—here, infrastructure, mobility, and accident—interact with personal vulnerability. The father's death externalizes the risks that continually shape Black male corporeality.

The narrative also emphasizes relational vulnerability. Bwibo tells the narrator, "Your father was a good man and good men never show you their heads; they show you their faces" (Oduor). Trauma Theory helps frame this as a negotiation between emotional openness and social expectation: the father's visible fragility is mediated by performance, masking, and selective disclosure. Male vulnerability is thus both a private experience and a socially coded performance.

Trauma is also present in everyday interactions and sensory details. The father's bodily habits, such as "smoking and listening to narrations of famine" (Oduor), signify attentiveness to global and local suffering, reflecting a relational awareness that deepens his vulnerability. Trauma Theory situates these habits within ethical witnessing, showing how exposure to continuous social pain compounds corporeal and emotional fragility.

Oduor links vulnerability to historical and socio-political context. The old man in the dormitory recounts being "dumped at the old people's home" after political turmoil (Oduor). These

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narratives intersect with the father's own experiences, showing how trauma is socially and historically embedded. Trauma Theory interprets this as evidence of the relational and structural dimensions of vulnerability, revealing how personal fragility is inseparable from broader systemic pressures.

The novella highlights the ethical responsibility of witnessing. The narrator's intimate attention to her father's body—observing “the thick line of sweat and oil on his shirt collar, the little brown veins that broke off from the main stream of dirt” (Oduor)—reflects a conscious engagement with vulnerability. Trauma Theory emphasizes the moral dimension of such observation, framing literature as a space for ethical attention to suffering.

Physicality is intertwined with memory and identity. The narrator reflects, “I remembered the day he found a gold chain tangled in the fibres of someone's excrement... and sold the chain... and brought home the red Greatwall television” (Oduor). Trauma Theory helps elucidate how ordinary, corporeal acts bear the imprint of labor, ethical decision-making, and relational vulnerability, making the body a record of social and emotional negotiation.

The father's vulnerability extends to affective and emotional exposure. He asks about his friend Pius Obote: “If you do not want me here drinking your tea, just say so, instead of killing-killing people with your mouth” (Oduor). Trauma

Theory frames this plea as both relational and ethical: the father's body mediates his social and emotional needs, highlighting the intersections of physical presence, relational expectation, and vulnerability.

Finally, Oduor represents the father's corporeal and psychological vulnerability as intertwined with beauty, care, and everyday rituals. The narrator plucks carnations and arranges them for him, noting, “I plucked a bunch of carnations and snipped their stems diagonally and stood them in a glass bowl... so that my father would not think of shit while he watched the evening news” (Oduor). Trauma Theory underscores that attention to the minutiae of bodily experience—sight, smell, touch—constitutes a form of ethical witnessing, emphasizing the relational and affective dimensions of male vulnerability.

Summary

Okwiri Oduor's *My Father's Head* intricately portrays the vulnerability of the Black male body, situating physical fragility, emotional exposure, and intergenerational trauma at the core of its narrative. By focusing on the physical detail of these depictions of the father, as well as his labour-worn hands, his routines and reactions to loss, Oduor offers details that stress that trauma is both more embodied and relational. This novella reflects that the male delicacy is neither personal, but it is socially and historically developed, and it is influenced by the forces of structural pressure, family, and moral

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obligations, and so on. Trauma Theory complements the experience of the fragile corporeal and psychological condition of the father to look in between the memory lines, connection with care and grief, and moral witnessing aspect, wherein the reader can become ambivalent with the destroyed Black body.

In conclusion, *My Father's Head* is an attempt to subvert a long-established tradition portrayal of masculinity as independent, vulnerable, and unresponsive and to foreground the ethical, interpersonal, and bodily aspects of male distress. By paying attention to the body of the father and its openness, Oduor makes trauma a dominant concern defining identity, family relations, and societal awareness. The novella not only exposes the fact that men are also vulnerable but goes a step further to emphasize the moral urgency of witnessing and making sense of suffering. Finally, it confirms that a work of literature can be used as a place of critical inquiry to investigate the textures of violence around the broken black body, as well as intergenerational trauma, and the ethical imperatives in the witnessing of human vulnerability.

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