



# Bearing Witness through Fantasy: Narrative Voice and Reclamation of Agency in Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Anguish and Anarchy*

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## Abstract

This paper examines the representation of female trauma and the reclamation of agency in Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Anguish and Anarchy* (2024) the third installment of the *Legacy of Orisha* trilogy. Focusing on the female protagonists, the study interrogates how narrative voice functions as a strategy for articulating the complexities of trauma within a postcolonial context. The paper draws on literary trauma theory, to analyse how fragmented narration and testimonial modes of storytelling bear witness to the enduring psychological and political effects of violence. Simultaneously, strands of feminist theory are deployed to understand how Adeyemi positions her female character voices as sites of resistance, where personal suffering is transformed into collective empowerment. Through a close reading of the text to foreground the intersections between trauma, voice, and agency, the paper argues that the interplay of narrative voice and female solidarity, enables Adeyemi to communicate the silenced histories of oppression and re-imagine the possibilities of female agency in a fractured postcolonial landscape. An array of trauma and postcolonial theoretical tenets and snippets of feminist perspectives are used in textual analysis, to demonstrate how Adeyemi's narrative strategies challenge dominant structures of power and foreground the resilience of marginalised women.

## Introduction

Trauma studies have become an important field in literary criticism, offering frameworks for understanding how violence, memory, and identity are represented in narrative. Scholars such as Caruth (1996) and LaCapra (2001) emphasise that trauma often resists linear narration, emerging instead through repetition, silence, and fragmented testimony. In literary contexts, these disruptions of narrative form mirror the psychological dislocations of traumatic experience, making literature a unique site for bearing witness (Felman & Laub, 1992). This temporal disjunction reflects the psychological rupture of the traumatized subject, who exists in a cyclical engagement with pain and memory. Within the text, this fragmentation becomes a narrative technique that bears witness to the enduring effects of colonial violence and cultural erasure. In this way, fragmented temporality not only dramatizes the disorientation of trauma but also provides a means through which characters reclaim agency. Through retelling, repetition, and narrative disruption, Adeyemi transforms the act of remembering into an assertion of voice and subjectivity. Within postcolonial settings, trauma is not



only personal but also collective, arising from histories of colonialism, enslavement, and cultural erasure (Quayson, 2021). Postcolonial trauma theory, in multiple ways, foregrounds how literature captures the entanglement of individual suffering with broader structures of domination and violence.

Tomi Adeyemi's *Legacy of Orisha* trilogy is an apt choice for the current analysis, since it stands at the crossroads of these debates. Drawing from Yoruba cosmology and African diasporic traditions, Adeyemi re-imagines the fantasy genre as a vehicle for political and cultural critique (Evaristo, 2019; Okorafor, 2019). More specifically, the third volume, *Children of Anguish and Anarchy* (Adeyemi, 2024), resonates with this article's ideas of fragmented temporality and agency because the narrative follows Zélie and Amari as they confront the compounded weight of personal trauma and national conflict. Their struggles for survival and leadership are framed through fragmented narration, shifting focalisations, and testimonial modes of storytelling, all of which dramatize the inexpressibility of trauma while simultaneously carving pathways to agency. Adeyemi's emphasis on voice—how it is silenced, fractured, and reclaimed—resonates with Caruth's (1996) notion of testimony and Spivak's (1988) question of whether the subaltern can speak, particularly in relation to women's voices. In many ways, this paper contributes to the growing body of literary scholarship on trauma and postcolonial African literature by extending trauma theory into African-inspired speculative fiction, thereby demonstrating how fantasy can function as a powerful medium for articulating silenced histories and psychological wounds. In addition, the paper foregrounds the experiences of African female protagonists, whose trauma is not only personal but also emblematic of collective struggles against patriarchy and colonial violence. While critics such as Spivak (1988) and Nnaemeka (2004) have interrogated the silencing of women in postcolonial discourse, few studies have examined how African diasporic fantasy re-imagines female voice and agency through narrative strategies. This paper therefore fills a critical gap by showing how Adeyemi uses voice and temporality to dramatise the reclamation of female subjectivity.

*Children of Anguish and Anarchy* provides a compelling site for examining the intersections of trauma, fragmented temporality, and reclamation of agency within a postcolonial framework. Its temporal and emotional fragmentation mirrors the fractured consciousness of the postcolonial subject, making it particularly relevant for exploring how narrative structure becomes a mode of bearing witness to trauma. The text, therefore, stands as a rich literary terrain for interrogating how contemporary African women writers employ narrative experimentation to articulate trauma and reclaim agency in the aftermath of colonial and patriarchal domination.

### **Contextualizing Trauma, Methods and Feminism in Postcolonial African Literary Criticism**

The literary analysis in this paper is hinged on a close reading of Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Anguish and Anarchy* to uncover the ways in which narrative voice functions as a site of trauma expression and reclamation of female agency. The theoretical tenets of literary trauma theory and feminist theory serve as a critical lens for analysing the text. Trauma theory provides a framework for understanding how narrative form and voice reflect the psychological ruptures, silences, and repetitions characteristic of traumatic experience. It allows the analysis in this paper to explore how the female character's fragmented subjectivities are mediated through their narration. Feminist theory complements this framework by emphasising issues of female subjectivity, voice, and agency within patriarchal and postcolonial contexts. Together, these frameworks facilitate a nuanced reading that situates trauma not only as a psychological rupture but also as a sociopolitical phenomenon tied to gender, power, and history. With a close reading of the primary text, attending to elements such as shifts in voice and temporality the detailed textual engagement highlights how the author constructs



the female character's struggles with trauma and their eventual reclamation of voice and agency. The close reading is enriched through dialogue with critical scholarship on trauma narratives, postcolonial studies and feminist literary criticism, which provide interpretive depth and situate the analysis within broader academic conversations.

But before delving into how trauma, feminism and postcolonial theory are explicated in Tomi Adeyemi's text, it is imperative to interrogate how African women's experiences of trauma occupy a particularly fraught position in African and global literary discourse. Scholars such as Spivak (1988) and Nnaemeka (2004) argue that women are doubly marginalised—silenced both by colonial oppression and patriarchal structures. African feminist critics, including Amina Mama (2001), have highlighted how political and psychological trauma intersects with gender, leaving women to bear disproportionate burdens in both private and public spheres. This double silencing raises urgent questions about how women can reclaim voice and agency in the aftermath of violence, and how literature can serve as testimony for their experiences. Fantasy literature, though often overlooked in trauma studies, offers a productive space for exploring these questions. As Womack (2013) suggests in her work on Afrofuturism, speculative and fantastical narratives create imaginative platforms through which Black writers articulate suppressed histories and envision liberated futures. Granted, it is clear that a lot more needs to be done to foist the study of women and women issues in African literary texts.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings**

Our analysis herein is grounded in interdisciplinary theoretical tenets that combine literary trauma theory, postcolonial theory, and feminist perspectives to critically examine how female characters' experiences in *Children of Anguish and Anarchy* are narrated and how they negotiate reclamation of agency through voice and testimony. Literary trauma theory provides the first critical lens for this study. Building on Cathy Caruth's (1996) notion that trauma resists full representation yet insists on being retold, trauma theory illuminates how fragmented, repetitive, and non-linear narrative strategies function as literary enactments of psychological wounds. Through this lens, the fractured temporality and affective intensity in Adeyemi's novel can be read as textual attempts at bearing witness to collective and individual suffering. Felman and Laub (1992) further argue that testimony becomes a site where trauma finds expression, not necessarily in chronological coherence but in the act of voicing itself. Thus, the narrative voice of female characters operates as a form of testimony that articulates both their silenced pain and their resistance to erasure.

On the other hand, postcolonial theory complements trauma theory by situating suffering within the historical and cultural legacies of colonisation and systemic oppression. Fanon (1963) foregrounds how colonial violence fractures both the psyche and identity of the colonised, producing trauma that is not merely individual but deeply historical and collective. Fanon's foundational ideas remain central to postcolonial discourse, particularly his exploration of psychological and political liberation in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). However, recent Fanonian scholarship, such as *Frantz Fanon: Postcolonialism and the Ethics of Difference* (2024), *The Age of Fanon* (2023) and *Some Sound, Some Fury: Fanon and Psychological Scholarship in South Africa* (Laubscher, 2024), repositions Fanon's thought within contemporary contexts of decoloniality, trauma, and subject formation. These newer interpretations extend Fanon's argument that colonial violence, more so among women, produces both psychological and cultural trauma, asserting that liberation entails not only political emancipation but also psychic repair and ethical reconstruction of the self. Laubscher (2024) underscores Fanon's relevance in understanding postcolonial trauma as a psychological rupture that persists beyond political independence, while Williams (2023) reimagines Fanon as a



theorist of *becoming*, one whose focus on human renewal transcends racial binaries. This modern Fanonian perspective underscores the healing dimension of decolonisation, framing resistance as both a political and psychological necessity.

Bhabha (1994) underscores how colonial discourse produces hybrid identities marked by ambivalence and disruption. Within this framework, women experiences can be read as emblematic of broader postcolonial conditions where colonial and imperial violence continues to shape the present. Mbembe's (2001) notion of *necropolitics* further highlights how domination is enacted through control over life and death. Yet all these tenets of postcolonial theory certainly open pathways for considering African epistemologies as counter-hegemonic tools of agency reclamation. Scholars such as wa Thiong'o (1986) argue for decolonisation of the mind through the reclamation of indigenous languages, memory and cultural practices. Similarly, African epistemologies rooted in oral tradition, spirituality, communal ethics, and embodied practices provide framework for survival and self-definition outside of Western paradigms. This affirms storytelling, myth, and spirituality as epistemic acts that challenge colonial erasure and restore subjectivity after traumatic events. Nonetheless, feminist perspectives further enrich the analysis in this paper by centering the gendered dimensions of trauma and agency. Spivak's (1988) provocative question, "Can the subaltern speak?" foregrounds the silencing of marginalised women in colonial and patriarchal contexts. Feminist trauma scholars such as Tal (1996) emphasize that women's testimonies often disrupt dominant historical narratives by foregrounding embodied pain and resistance, which resonates with the authors focus on voice as survival and reclamation.

## **Key Findings**

### **First Person Voice and Polyvocality as Strategies of Narrating Trauma**

Throughout his novel Tomi Adeyemi employs a range of narrative strategies to communicate trauma and foreground the reclamation of female agency in the *Children of Anguish and Anarchy* (2024). Central to this is the use of first-person narrative voice, polyvocality, fragmented temporality and indigenous spirituality. All together, these strategies underscore how narrative form becomes a site of both bearing witness and reclaiming agency within postcolonial and feminist contexts. The novel *Children of Anguish and Anarchy* follows Zelig and her companions (Amari, Tzain and Inan) in the aftermath of the magical revolution that defined the second novel, *Children of Virtue and Vengeance*. As they confront renewed imperial expansion by King Baldyr, where she uncovers the spiritual legacy of the Sky Mother's Temple and the true scope of Orisha's historical colonisation, Zelig's disillusionment deepens as she encounters both betrayal and spiritual rapture, culminating in a redefinition of her purpose and power. Her path towards agency is not linear but cyclical informed by ancestral knowledge, personal suffering, and the imperative to liberate her people from both physical and psychological chains.

In the opening chapters of the novel, following the fall of the monarchy and the rise of the maji, Zelig and her companions – Amari, Tzain, and Inan- are captured during a pivotal battle by the Skulls, a group of masked, pale-skinned invaders. They are imprisoned and transported across the sea on a foreign ship, stripped off their magic and freedom. The Skulls led by King Baldyr, aim to exploit Zelig's unique powers for their own gain. This harrowing experience sets stage for Zelig's journey of reclaiming her agency. Stripped of her magic, she is haunted by memories of her family. The Skulls seek a maji with the blood of the sun, a power Zelig unknowingly possesses. Despite the torment, she clings to hope, determined to escape and reunite with her loved ones. Drawing strength from her mother's teachings and the goddess Oya, she endures the pain. Witnessing the suffering of other



captured maji, including her brother Tzain fuels her determination to escape and warn Orisha of the impending threat. As the Skull's ship sails away from Orisha, Zelie and the captured maji devise a plan to escape. With Tzain's help, they work together to overpower their captors and seize the control of the ship.

Adeyemi deploys first-person narration as a powerful narrative strategy enables her characters, particularly Zelie, to reclaim agency in the face of colonial violence, personal trauma and systemic oppression. She demonstrates how narrative voice becomes a powerful strategy for bearing witness to trauma and reclaiming agency in postcolonial and gendered context. The act of narration itself is never neutral as trauma theorists argue, voice is central to testimony, the means by which unspeakable suffering is given form and ethical weight. Caruth (1996) notes that trauma resists direct representation, emerging instead through fragmented, repetitive, and belated narratives. Adeyemi's manipulation of narrative voice reflects this difficulty. The fragmented perspectives, temporal disrupts, and the layering of voices not only perform the traumatic wound but also demand recognition from the reader. In this sense, narrative voice functions as testimony, transforming private pain into public memory.

Adeyemi's reliance on first-person narrative voice foregrounds the immediacy of traumatic experience. By allowing her characters to narrate their own stories from within their fractured experiences, Adeyemi not only deepens the emotional resonance of her narrative but also aligns with trauma theorists such as Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Cathy Caruth, who emphasize the transformative potential of testimony and the act of bearing witness. The first-person becomes a conduit through which characters reclaim narrative control over their own pain, reconfiguring victimhood resistance and silence into speech. Even after King Baldyr attempts to control Zelie's body and magic by shoving a medallion into her chest, her refusal to surrender psychologically signifies her deeper strength: "We brought King Saran to his knees. When Queen Nehanda stood against us, we razed Lagos to the ground. I won't allow myself to cower now. I won't bow to any other crown" (Adeyemi, 2021, p. 47). These affirmations are a sign that she is reclaiming control over her own body and mind in a situation designed to humiliate and dominate her. The affirmations are small but defiant acts of resistance, internal strategies for survival that protect her from complete psychological collapse.

As she endures loss, betrayal, and forced manipulation, Zelie's inner resolve becomes a shield against dehumanization. This aligns with Caruth's argument that trauma, when carried and voiced, can become testimony – "a wound that cries out" and bears witness to violence not yet fully understood (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). Zelie's resilience is that cry: a form of testimony that affirms her identity and her will to survive. Felman and Laub (1992) notes that testimony is not merely the transmission of traumatic events but a performative act in which the speaker reconstitutes themselves in the process of narration. In this framework, first-person narration becomes more than a stylistic device. It becomes a medium for reclaiming subjectivity. Zelie's narration is deeply immersed in the lived experience of trauma. She recounts physical wounds, grief, and betrayal with raw emotion, but more importantly, she does so on her terms. The narrative does not speak for her, she speaks for herself. This agency in narration mirrors Felman and Laub's notion of testimony as a dialogic act that constructs identity rather than simply conveying facts. Through her voice, Zelie testifies not only to her suffering but her enduring presence and her refusal to be erased by colonial violence.

Moreover, postcolonial theorists emphasize the importance of voice and self-representation in resisting colonial domination. Spivak's (1988) critical question, "Can the subaltern speak?" highlights the way colonial systems silence the voices of the oppressed. Adeyemi's decision to allow her



protagonist to speak in the first person directly challenges this silencing. Zelig who embodies different aspects of colonial oppression is granted narrative authority. Her voice is not mediated or filtered through an omniscient narrator, but instead emerge with immediacy and emotional rawness, reclaiming her right to self-definition.

Yet, beyond individual voice, Adeyemi also employs polyvocality, distributing narration among her female characters, Zelig and Amari. Each character is allowed to voice their suffering following the dehumanisation of King Baldyr. Amari narrates her pain of witnessing the killing of more maji in the hands of King Baldyr and Zelig on the other hand voices the torture the king subjects to her. Their multiplicity reflects the communal dimensions of trauma in colonized societies. As Fanon (1963) reminds us, colonial violence is not merely personal but structural, wounding the collective body of the colonized. Polyvocal narration resists the isolation of trauma as individual pathology and instead, situates suffering within a shared history of oppression. It also embodies Spivak's (1988) provocation "Can the subaltern speak?" by insisting that the subaltern not only speaks, but speaks in chorus, thereby creating a counter-archive that interrupts colonial silencing.

#### **Fragmented Temporality, Indigenous Spirituality as Agency**

Adeyemi also relies extensively on fragmented temporality to convey the lingering effects of trauma and the contested nature of memory in a postcolonial context. Trauma theorists argue that catastrophic events disrupt linear temporality, leaving survivors caught in repetitive returns to the scene of injury. Caruth (1996) emphasises that trauma is experienced belatedly, with its force recurring in intrusive memories and narrative gaps. Adeyemi translates this insight into narrative form through flashbacks, temporal ruptures, and cyclical returns to traumatic episodes, which, structure the text, foregrounding the inability of her characters to move seamlessly into the future.

For Zelig, fragmented temporality manifests in recurrent recollections of her mother's death and the genocide against the diviners. These memories erupt unbidden, collapsing the boundary between past and present. These narrative disruptions bear witness to trauma by showing its persistence. As LaCapra (2001) observes, trauma involves a compulsive "acting out." Adeyemi mirrors this by disrupting chronological storytelling with abrupt shifts between past and present, intrusive memories and narrative pauses. These temporal fractures bear witness to the unspeakable dimension of trauma because they resist the linear, rational narration that traditional historiography and colonial discourse impose. Instead, fragmented temporality acknowledges that trauma cannot be contained in a neat, ordered timeline. It must be told in ruptures, silences, and dislocations that reflect the actual psychic experience of survivors. Thus, fragmented temporality becomes a testimony in itself. Felman and Laub (1992) argue that testimony is not simply about recounting facts but about communicating the affective and disruptive force of trauma. Zelig's sudden reliving of her past shows how memory collapses this temporal distance.

Fragmented temporality is not only about testifying to pain but also opens up the possibility of reclaiming agency. By controlling the act of narrating trauma through fragmented time, female characters like Zelig and Amari transform their memories from private suffering into collective testimony. What once immobilized them becomes part of a larger story of resistance. Nnaemeka (2004) argues that reclaiming agency does not always mean outright confrontation but can also mean negotiating new ways of survival. The use of fragmented temporality gives the heroines the authority to structure their own stories, on their own terms, even if those stories are broken. This reclamation of narrative control constitutes an act of agency, as it resists the silencing forces of colonial and patriarchal systems.



Zelie's embrace of indigenous spirituality also becomes a path to personal agency in the face of colonial violence. After the Skulls and King Baldyr forcibly suppress her magic and identity, Zelie turns inward, reconnecting with her ancestral lineage and the divine powers of Orisha to resist psychological and spiritual erasure. While in the cell of a moving ship, Zelie prays to Oya for help in the middle of her despair and disillusionment: "I don't know how to carry on. I don't know how to hold on to the will to live. "Oya please..." I whisper the words, risking the heartbreak of another unanswered call. But thunder still rumbles through the ventilation. Shaft. I have to believe that even this far from Orisha's shores, the thunder means Oya is here to last" (Adeyemi, 2024, p. 13). Her belief in the Oya, the deity of life and death grounds her in a worldview that predates colonization, affirming a sacred identity that imperial narratives cannot rewrite. In the face of imperial violence and epistemic domination by King Baldyr and his colonial regime, Zelie spiritual practices become acts of reclamation and resistance. Her faith in Oya functions as both a personal anchor and a counter-discourse to the colonial narrative that seeks to devalue and erase Orishan cosmology. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o explains in *Decolonising the Mind*, "The biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism... was the cultural bomb" (Ngugi, 1986, p. 3). This "bomb" is meant to make colonised people reject their traditions, languages, and belief systems. Zelie's prayer to Oya, especially in moments of crisis, directly counteracts the erasure. Rather seeking salvation through colonial forms of power-technology, militarization, or assimilation-Zelie turns inward toward the spiritual systems of her ancestors. In doing so, she affirms the legitimacy and strength of indigenous knowledge and refuses to allow her spirituality to be colonised.

Masterson (2010) highlights the importance of narrative and symbolic resistance in postcolonial literature. He emphasizes that reclaiming cultural symbols and belief systems is central to disrupting colonial hegemony. Zelie invocation of Oya not only asserts personal faith but also restores a collective cultural identity that colonialism attempts to dismantle. As Masterson notes in his analysis of African postcolonial narratives, such symbolic reclamations often serve to "reconfigure notions of power" by destabilizing colonial authority and re-centering indigenous worldviews (p.88). Through spiritual devotion, Zelie resists the imperial framing of maji culture as primitive or dangerous and instead elevates it as sacred and powerful. Furthermore, Oya-as a deity of death and transformation becomes a metaphor for Zelie's own journey. Her embrace of Oya is not just religious, but existential. She embodies the transition from grief and victimhood to action and transformation. In this sense, spirituality is not an escape from political struggle, but a mode of empowerment that fuels Zelie's resistance and grounds her identity.

Zelie's spirituality not only restores her own agency but becomes a catalyst for collective resistance. As a Reaper, her connection to the dead and her rituals of communion link her to generations of maji who have been silenced by King Baldyr. She says: "I reach for every spirit that has fallen, everybody tossed to the seas by the Skulls. I think of every maji we lost on their ships, every New Gaan left floating in the Black Bay. No life will be lost in vain" (Adeyemi, 2024, p. 365). Her leadership in sacred ceremonies is not just symbolic, it is functional, reviving cultural memory and uniting Orisha's oppressed peoples in a shared sense of purpose and identity. This communal spirituality resists the fragmentation that colonial trauma often produces. According to Caruth, trauma "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be full known," and can therefore fracture narrative coherence (1996, p. 4).

Zelie's spiritual rituals, especially after regaining her Reaper status following the attempt of King Baldyr to harvest her powers, offer a form of collective testimony that transcends this fragmentation, allowing survivors to bear witness together. Her act of honoring the dead is not only mourning but also restoring a sense of shared history, identity, and sacred duty that binds the community in



resistance. This echoes Fanon's insight that "the colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence" (Fanon, 1963, p. 13). Zelig's form of violence is spiritual, memory based, and community centered. The act of remembering their gods becomes an act of war. In stark contrast to King Baldyr's technological domination and attempts to harness magic through invasive tools (like the medallion), Zelig's spirituality emerges as a decolonial force. The Skulls view magic as a resource to be extracted and controlled- a mirror of historical colonial enterprises that sought to commodify land, bodies, and beliefs. Zelig resists this framework by insisting that magic is sacred (Adeyemi, p. 363). By rooting her identity in the divine, she reframes her trauma not as defeat, but as sacred suffering that demands resistance. Her fight is spiritual, not merely strategic. This offers Zelig's spirituality as a counter-narrative to the colonial project: where the Skulls seek to erase and replace, she seeks to remember and restore.

### Conclusion

The analysis has demonstrated that Adeyemi deploys narrative strategies of narrative voice, polyvocality, fragmented temporality and indigenous spirituality to communicate and reclaim female agency. By granting her female characters' narrative control through first-person voice, Adeyemi ensures that their pain and resilience are articulated in their own terms, disrupting silences imposed by both patriarchy and colonial power. The polyvocal structure further amplifies marginalised voices, constructing a collective testimony that resists erasure and validates communal memory. Fragmented temporality reflects the disjointed nature of traumatic experiences while simultaneously opening pathways for re-imagining futures beyond violence. Most importantly, Adeyemi grounds her narrative in indigenous spirituality, which functions as both as a healing force and a means of recovering African epistemologies erased by colonial domination. Collectively, these strategies affirm that storytelling is not only an act of bearing witness but also a form of resistance, through which female characters reclaim agency and reconfigure identity.

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