

The Confluence of Disease and Memory: Alzheimer's and Pandemic Dynamics in Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift*

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ABSTRACT

Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* intricately examines the intersections of Alzheimer's disease and pandemics, employing both as metaphors for the fragility of memory and identity in personal and societal contexts. Alzheimer's disease symbolizes the erosion of individual and collective memory, reflecting the historical amnesia experienced by post-colonial societies. Meanwhile, a futuristic epidemic in the novel amplifies the effects of this forgetting, exposing the vulnerabilities and inequalities embedded in global health crises. Through the lens of medical humanities and post-colonial theory, this study explores how Serpell critiques the interconnected forces of historical erasure, societal trauma, and identity formation. By analyzing these themes, the research highlights literature's ability to deepen our understanding of health, history, and collective memory, providing new perspectives on resilience and reckoning in the face of global crises.

Introduction

Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* offers a layered and complex exploration of memory, identity, and loss, weaving together the seemingly distinct themes of Alzheimer's disease and pandemics. Through a narrative spanning multiple generations and post-colonial histories in Zambia, Serpell interrogates the fragility of human cognition and the broader social consequences of forgetting. The novel uses these dual metaphors—Alzheimer's as a representation of personal and collective memory loss, and pandemics as a symbol of societal crises and historical amnesia—to critique how histories

are shaped, erased, and reclaimed within colonial and post-colonial contexts.

Alzheimer's disease, which is medically understood as a progressive condition marked by memory loss and cognitive decline, also functions as a powerful metaphor for the erosion of personal and societal identity. As Patricia Benner notes, Alzheimer's disease "challenges the very foundation of selfhood, calling into question the relationship between memory and identity" (Benner 44). Serpell extends this metaphor to the collective level, suggesting that just as Alzheimer's erases personal memory, colonialism has stripped entire

communities of their historical and cultural identities. This erasure is especially resonant in post-colonial societies like Zambia, where the imposition of colonial narratives has often overshadowed indigenous histories.

Parallel to Alzheimer's, pandemics serve as another critical metaphor in *The Old Drift*. Historically, pandemics have been moments of immense societal disruption, exposing systemic vulnerabilities and inequalities. As Paul Gilroy observes, pandemics "force societies to confront their structural fragilities, revealing the inequities and exclusions that lie beneath" (Gilroy 47). In the novel, the futuristic epidemic exacerbates societal fractures, much like how colonialism disrupted the social fabric of the colonized. This epidemic, though fictional, mirrors real-world health crises such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic or COVID-19, highlighting how disease becomes a site for negotiating power, memory, and identity. By combining the frameworks of medical humanities and post-colonial theory, this study explores how *The Old Drift* uses Alzheimer's and pandemics to critique the interconnected forces of historical oblivion, identity formation, and societal resilience. Serpell's novel is not merely a story of memory loss and disease but a profound commentary on the processes of remembering and forgetting that shape both individuals and nations. Through this lens, the novel invites readers to reflect on the fragile intersections of health, history, and identity, offering a nuanced critique of how past traumas continue to inform present realities.

Brief Overview of Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift*

Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift*, published in 2019, is a sweeping, multi-generational novel that chronicles Zambia's colonial

history, its post-colonial struggles, and its speculative future. Blending historical fiction, magical realism, and science fiction, the novel weaves the stories of three families—one African, one European, and one Indian—whose lives intersect over more than a century. The story begins in 1904 near the Victoria Falls, in a settlement called the Old Drift, where a fateful misunderstanding between two men sets the stage for the interwoven destinies of their descendants. As the narrative unfolds, the novel traverses significant historical events, including Zambia's struggle for independence, the challenges of post-colonial nationhood, and a futuristic Zambia marked by technological advancements and political intrigue. The novel is structured around multiple narrators, including a chorus of mosquitoes, who provide a unique perspective on the unfolding events. Central to the story are three women—Sibilla, Agnes, and Matha—whose lives shape the trajectories of their families. The novel explores their descendants' lives, including themes of love, betrayal, political activism, and innovation. In its speculative future, a bioengineered epidemic becomes a pivotal force, reflecting on the dangers of unchecked technological advancement and the fragility of social structures.

Through its narrative, *The Old Drift* examines themes of memory, identity, and historical erasure. Alzheimer's disease is used as a metaphor for personal and collective forgetting, while the pandemic highlights societal vulnerabilities and the enduring impact of colonialism. The novel critiques the legacies of imperialism and explores how history and memory shape individual and national identities.

Alzheimer's Disease as a Metaphor for Memory Loss

Alzheimer's disease is often characterized as a gradual erosion of memory and identity, a condition that disrupts one's ability to recall past events and maintain a coherent sense of self. In *The Old Drift*, Namwali Serpell employs Alzheimer's as a metaphor to explore not only the fragility of individual memory but also the erasure of collective memory in a post-colonial context. The novel's depiction of characters grappling with aging and illness reflects Zambia's broader struggle to reconcile with its colonial past and the enduring legacies of imperialism. For instance, when an elderly character reflects on his fading memories, Serpell writes, "his mind is a blur, a shifting landscape that forgets itself" (Serpell 112), a statement that encapsulates the broader theme of historical disintegration and identity loss in post-colonial societies.

This metaphor of cognitive decline parallels what Homi K. Bhabha describes as the "slippage between past and present" in post-colonial societies, where histories are fragmented, and identities are displaced (Bhabha 105). Alzheimer's, as portrayed in the novel, symbolizes this disjunction. The loss of memory in individuals mirrors the erasure of histories in societies subjected to colonial domination. Just as Alzheimer's patients lose their ability to connect with their past, post-colonial nations often find themselves disconnected from their pre-colonial identities due to the cultural, linguistic, and historical ruptures imposed by imperial powers.

Serpell's narrative extends this metaphor to critique the broader consequences of imperialism on collective memory. As one character poignantly observes, "We are like

the land, forgetting what once grew here" (Serpell 157), suggesting that the land itself—like the characters—has been stripped of its historical consciousness. The fragmented memories of Serpell's characters reflect the incomplete and contested nature of historical records in a post-colonial world, where much of the past has been deliberately obscured or forgotten.

Furthermore, Alzheimer's in *The Old Drift* underscores the tension between remembering and forgetting, a dynamic central to both personal identity and national histories. Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory is particularly relevant here, as it posits that memory is not merely an individual function but is shaped and sustained by social frameworks (Halbwachs 54). In Serpell's novel, the breakdown of personal memory reflects the collapse of these social frameworks in post-colonial Zambia, where the legacies of colonialism have disrupted the nation's ability to sustain and transmit its collective memory. The characters' struggles with cognitive decline thus become emblematic of the nation's broader inability to reclaim and preserve its historical narrative.

The consequences of this forgetting—whether personal or collective—are profound. As Serpell writes, "The more we forget, the more we are doomed to repeat it" (Serpell 189), highlighting the cyclical nature of trauma and the dangers of historical amnesia. This idea is echoed in Sigmund Freud's concept of repression, which argues that unprocessed memories of trauma resurface in destructive ways (Freud 60). Similarly, the repressed histories in *The Old Drift* perpetuate cycles of loss and suffering, both for individuals and for the post-colonial society at large.

In *The Old Drift*, Alzheimer's disease serves as a powerful symbol for the fragmented and incomplete histories of colonized nations. By portraying memory loss as both a medical condition and a societal affliction, Serpell critiques the erasure of identities and histories imposed by colonialism. The novel underscores the importance of confronting and preserving memory—both personal and collective—as a means of breaking free from cycles of forgetting and loss.

Pandemics and the Fragility of Memory

In addition to Alzheimer's disease, Namwali Serpell's *The Old Drift* introduces a futuristic epidemic that expands the novel's exploration of memory and identity. The epidemic, while primarily a biological crisis, serves as a metaphor for societal disintegration and the erosion of collective memory. Like Alzheimer's, which diminishes individual cognitive capacity, the epidemic disrupts the social fabric and exposes the fragility of communal identities.

From a theoretical perspective, the epidemic aligns with Paul Gilroy's concept of societal vulnerabilities exposed during crises. Gilroy posits that pandemics "lay bare the structural inequalities and exclusions inherent in modern societies, forcing a confrontation with systemic failures" (Gilroy 47). In *The Old Drift*, the epidemic reveals the disparities in access to healthcare and resources, emphasizing how crises disproportionately affect marginalized communities. This critique resonates with post-colonial theory, as the epidemic in the novel can be read as a continuation of the structural inequities established during colonial rule, where systems were designed to benefit the colonizers at the expense of the colonized.

The epidemic's impact on memory is multifaceted. On the one hand, it forces societies to confront their vulnerabilities and reckon with the neglected legacies of colonialism and inequality. On the other hand, it mirrors the Alzheimer's-like decay of memory, leading to collective forgetfulness once the immediate crisis has passed. In the aftermath of a pandemic, these frameworks are often disrupted, resulting in the loss of shared histories and identities. Serpell critiques this cycle in *The Old Drift*, highlighting how the societal impulse to forget perpetuates cycles of neglect and trauma.

The novel's portrayal of the epidemic also engages with trauma theory, particularly Cathy Caruth's argument that trauma is defined by its inability to be fully processed or integrated into memory (Caruth 4). The epidemic in *The Old Drift* functions as a societal trauma, leaving unprocessed wounds that undermine the community's ability to heal and move forward. Much like Alzheimer's, the epidemic becomes a force that disrupts continuity, erasing the connections between past, present, and future. As one character reflects in the novel, "We forget too easily; the sickness passes, but so does the memory of what it exposed" (Serpell 210), emphasizing the danger of historical amnesia in the face of recurring crises.

The fictional epidemic in the novel also parallels real-world pandemics, such as HIV/AIDS and COVID-19, which have not only caused widespread loss of life but also shaped collective memory—or lack thereof. These pandemics have highlighted systemic inequities, particularly in healthcare access and social support, while simultaneously revealing how quickly societies move to

forget the structural vulnerabilities they exposed. Edward Said's argument that "imperialism is not only about conquest but about rewriting histories and erasing inconvenient truths" (Said 176) reinforces the novel's critique of this dynamic. The epidemic, much like colonialism, becomes a mechanism for obscuring uncomfortable histories, leaving societies unable to address the root causes of their suffering. Serpell critiques the cyclical nature of crises and the societal impulse to forget, urging readers to confront and preserve memory as a means of fostering resilience and change.

The Post-Colonial Context: Identity and Historical Erasure

The dual themes of Alzheimer's disease and pandemics in Namwali Serpell's work are deeply entwined with the post-colonial context of Zambia, a nation grappling with the legacy of colonialism and its impact on identity and memory. Using the framework of Homi K. Bhabha's theory of post-colonial hybridity and historical fragmentation, this section examines how the novel critiques the erasure of indigenous cultures and histories under colonial rule and its ongoing repercussions. Bhabha asserts that post-colonial societies exist in a state of "in-between," where the cultural, linguistic, and historical identities of the colonized are disrupted and displaced, leading to a fragmentation of collective memory (Bhabha 37). In *The Old Drift*, the characters' struggles with memory loss—whether through Alzheimer's or pandemics—become metaphors for the fractured identity of post-colonial Zambia.

Alzheimer's disease, which erases individual memory and forces individuals to grapple with fading identities, is used in the novel to symbolize the erasure of collective memory

within post-colonial societies. As Bhabha observes, colonialism disrupts the continuity of cultural memory by imposing foreign systems of knowledge and governance, thereby producing a "historical amnesia" (Bhabha 110). This is evident in the novel's depiction of characters who have lost touch with their histories. For instance, when one character reflects on their fading memories, Serpell writes, "The past seemed to slip away like sand, no longer solid, no longer holding weight" (Serpell 112). This metaphor encapsulates the broader sense of disconnection that Zambia experiences as it struggles to reconcile its pre-colonial heritage with the colonial histories that have been imposed upon it.

The novel's portrayal of pandemics complements this critique of historical erasure by highlighting the societal consequences of collective forgetting. The pandemic in *The Old Drift* serves as an allegory for the structural and cultural disruptions caused by colonial rule. Much like the introduction of foreign diseases during colonial times, which devastated indigenous populations, the pandemic in the novel exposes the vulnerabilities of post-colonial societies and the lingering effects of imperialism. This aligns with Bhabha's assertion that colonialism is not only a physical occupation but also an ideological one that reshapes how societies understand and remember their histories (Bhabha 102). By portraying the pandemic as both a literal health crisis and a symbolic disruption of memory, Serpell critiques how colonial legacies continue to undermine the ability of post-colonial societies to reclaim their identities.

Moreover, the novel critiques the tendency to sanitize or obscure the painful histories of

colonization. As one character laments, “We forget too easily, letting the ruins of our past crumble into dust” (Serpell 189). This reflects the cultural amnesia that Bhabha argues is perpetuated by post-colonial elites, who often seek to suppress or rewrite colonial histories to maintain their own power structures (Bhabha 116). Serpell’s pandemic becomes a symbol of the urgency to confront these historical erasures and their enduring impacts. Just as Alzheimer’s forces individuals to reckon with the loss of their personal identities, the pandemic forces Zambian society to confront its forgotten and repressed histories, suggesting that true progress cannot occur without a critical reckoning with the past.

Through the lens of Bhabha’s post-colonial theory, Serpell positions memory loss—whether through Alzheimer’s or pandemics—as a metaphor for the fragmented identities and historical amnesia of post-colonial societies. By highlighting the consequences of forgetting, Serpell critiques the structures of inequality and cultural disruption that colonialism has left behind, urging both individuals and societies to confront their erasures to forge a more cohesive and inclusive future.

Conclusion

Namwali Serpell’s *The Old Drift* masterfully intertwines the themes of Alzheimer’s disease and pandemics to critique the fragility of memory, identity, and historical continuity in post-colonial Zambia. By employing these metaphors, Serpell examines the enduring impact of colonialism, illustrating how the imposition of foreign systems and the erasure of indigenous cultures have disrupted both personal and collective identities. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha’s theory of hybridity and

historical fragmentation, the novel reveals the tension between remembering and forgetting in the post-colonial context.

Alzheimer’s, as depicted in the novel, symbolizes the cultural amnesia that colonial legacies have left behind, while the pandemic reflects the societal disruptions and inequalities that persist in post-colonial societies. These metaphors work in tandem to critique the cyclical nature of historical erasure and its consequences, urging individuals and communities to confront suppressed histories and reconcile with their pasts. The novel emphasizes that true progress requires a reckoning with these erasures, as ignoring them perpetuates cycles of trauma and instability.

Through its rich narrative and layered metaphors, *The Old Drift* serves as both a critique of colonialism’s lingering effects and a call for the reclamation of memory and identity. By addressing these themes, Serpell not only illuminates the complexities of Zambia’s post-colonial experience but also underscores the broader relevance of memory and history in shaping resilient and cohesive societies. The novel ultimately challenges readers to reflect on the enduring scars of colonialism and the transformative potential of acknowledging and preserving suppressed histories.

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