

## **Moral and Physical Gangrene in the Novel: *The Wound*, By Malick Fall**

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### **Abstract**

The reality of contemporary African life, especially its unwholesome aspects, is often reflected in West African francophone writing of the last half of the twentieth century. Its depiction can be either realistic or symbolic. There can be either accurate representation of dictatorships and corruption, in which fiction hardly veils reality, in such novels as *La vie et demie* (Life and a half) (1979) by Sony Labou Tansi, *The laughing cry* (1987), by Henri Lopes, or *Tropical Circle*, by Alioum Fantouré (1989). Or those ills could also be revealed in symbolic ways, in such novels as *Saint Monsieur Baly* (1973) by Williams Sassine, *Xala* (1974) by Sembene Ousmane or *La carte d'identité*, (The Identity Card) (1995) by Jean-Marie Adiaffi, in which lepers, cripples, the blind and disabled, beggars and those suffering from oozing wounds abound. This second figurative representation of Africa's ills prevalent during that period, will be analysed, with reference to the novel *The Wound* (1967) by the Senegalese writer Malick Fall. It is characterised by manifold and complex forms of symbolism. Indeed, in addition to presenting visual and clinical authenticity, other levels of significance can be found.

### **The Hero's Village**

This work's central character, Magamou, used to live in a village where he experienced a sense of "solidarity with the group to which he had felt obsessively attached" (26)<sup>1</sup>. This group was the community of his clan, village and family.

Faithful to tradition, Magamou had never claimed he suffered the burden of an individual responsible for his own fate. The existence of the community transcended his own (...). At that time, he had become conscious of being enriched through the wisdom of his clan (...). He knew he was bound by invisible threads to a system which transcended him (27).

But his compatriots did not respect the existing social system; they warped, deformed and abused it. So Magamou left his village, being aware of the lies,

moral vacuum and bad faith of the villagers. He sensed an existential slime in which they wanted to engulf him. He remembers:

I discovered around me ruined characters, degrading pleasures, the gelatinous habits of men lacking resilience. (...). The only solution, and my salvation, was to flee, to go and try elsewhere to increase my meagre chances as a rebel” (38).

So he departed, with his head full of dreams, seeking liberty and happiness: “I had the wind in my head, the sea-breeze in my heart and, in my legs, pins and needles, which felt like ants urging me on.” (39).

### **The Wound and its Consequences**

During his journey towards town Magamou suffers a serious accident resulting in a deep, extensive leg wound. He realises then that nothing in his situation has changed. His wound attracts red ants and flies and ironically, he feels that these ants have now become his companions. So having fled the mental confinement of his village, he finds himself in town, now, as a prisoner of his own body and of the society on which he depends for his survival. He had loathed the beggar’s life previously forced upon him by the routine of the Koranic school. But now he is reduced to be a permanent beggar, occasionally indulging in petty theft. This is how he can supply his most basic needs and maintain his rotting body, for his stinking wound prevents him from obtaining any employment.

His leg wound, persistent, purulent and oozing, gnaws him from within and gradually invades his whole body. Magamou does not have any confidence in doctors, so will not consult them. Hospitals are an anathema for him, as he explains by saying, “rare are the sick who come out of this place healthy in mind and body” (21). Amputation is unthinkable for him, even if it proves life saving, for he believes that “an amputated man, a diminished man, is no longer a man”, for he loses all human dignity (86). The resulting stench of wound putrefaction nauseates everyone around Magamou and drives them away. His resulting isolation from fellow humans is almost complete. As a decaying and wandering carcass, he becomes “a prey to the irony, irritation and aggression” of those around him (50) and the whipping boy of the market people (50).

But Magamou also tortures his fellows, with his destructive, violent and bitter comments. They are infuriated as he imposes a kind of mental urticaria on them.

He was an expert in wielding irritating comments. Magamou was a virtuoso. (...) He very happily excoriated

those puritans, whom his sensuality did not fail to try harshly at times (172).

So, rejected by fellow human beings, he seeks and treasures the company of animals: vagrant dogs, alley-cats and even a carrion eating bird accompany him on his wanderings. But in spite of these tribulations Magamou constantly seeks the company of others.

Later, after being denounced by the market's guardian for his disruptive influence, he is incarcerated in a locked psychiatric hospital cell. This is an open cage, windswept from all directions, from which he finally manages to escape. Yet then, he is even more restricted, for he has to wander far away from the market, for fear of recapture and still he must rely on others. Otherwise he has no way to survive.

He had the feeling he was living in an immense prison, with invisible, but terribly real walls (137)

Magamou's wound accentuates his difference from fellow human beings. Even more completely set apart from society, now, he is forced to question the existential depth of his being. Within him now there is an impassioned probing of the meaning of life and of his own unfathomable nature. His questioning of the significance of everything around him is carved in his ulcerated flesh and so irritates him, that blood is drawn.

### **The Hero's Disintegration**

Malick Fall describes the devastation of Magamou's illness and wound in excruciating clinical detail.

A thick yellowish liquid, with streaks of blood", he writes, "was dripping" from his ulcer. "His veins stood out", "his leg was swelling", "his teeth, clattering", "his whole body was shaking with fever (74).

Magamou himself has an overwhelming vision of his gangrenous limb.

The gangrene will rise higher and higher, he tells himself. It will blight your pelvis, crush your backbone and your ribs. It will devour your insides. Pus will triumph everywhere; in your eyes, under your tongue, in your ears (...). It will gobble up your brains. It will engulf your heart, your heart!" (133).

The erosion and total destruction of Magamou's body reflects the psychological disintegration of the hero. He is overcome with a severe

neurosis or psychosis. Magamou's wound, consuming the hero from within, is a psychoanalytical symbol *par excellence*. From the level of organic pathology, we reach a psychological plane. The ulcer symbolises a psychic disintegration characteristic of schizophrenia, a psychotic condition which manifests as psychic disintegration, accompanied by ambivalent thoughts and feelings, paradoxical behaviour, withdrawal within oneself and most especially the loss of touch with reality. Each one of these symptoms seems to be present in our hero.

First, Magamou is broken apart and crucified. He tortures himself.

“How can I see clearly within myself? There is always a permanent conflict between this voice and that. I am torn apart. I do not know which way to turn” (177).

Such instability characterises Magamou, who is overcome by contradictions, “adoring today what he had sacrificed the day before, and repudiating what he had defended an hour previously” (105). He is ambivalent; a disillusioned misanthropist, sombre, morose and uncommunicative, who vents his spleen on society. But also he needs the society in which he is immersed; he hates solitude and constantly seeks the company of others. Pessimistic, inactive and apathetic, he sometimes retreats into self contemplation. But at other times he becomes militant and rebellious, with unabated optimism which urges him to continue the struggle towards cure of his ulcer and so to regain a normal life after re-entering society.

### **The Hero's Sensitivity to the World around Him**

Magamou possesses an extreme empathy for the world around him. At times, he demonstrates sensitivity to the poetry of objects and his contact with them is part of his integration into his everyday world. But more often, the pressures resulting from the realities of his life — especially the multiple assaults of flies and vermin — occupy his consciousness. As flies are often associated with both physical and moral decomposition, there is an insidious atmosphere of corruption and generalised decay. So attacked by flies, fleas, lice, bugs and red ants, he suffers continuous torture. Vermin eating him from without correspond to his interior decay. He lacerates himself with continuous scratching, drawing blood from his back and hips. Reality chafes and skins him.

### **Attempts to Evade Reality**

Magamou tries to turn his back on this reality, which flays him. He seeks a safe haven in the past, in futile dreams and in madness. Unable to accommodate himself to the present, he escapes into the past, towards places and moments, selected by himself. Then he loses contact with reality, for when he evokes the past, it is to assure himself of his own existence and also

to satisfy his own needs and desires, by recreating his world. His solitude is filled with daydreams and recollections. But these memories are manipulated, and some are outrageously embellished, while others are deleted from his repertoire (26). His dreams provide a means of escape from reality, as reality is unable to satisfy him.

So as an extreme reaction to his present surroundings, Magamou wishes to escape into madness.

He was painfully envious of all those lunatics, walled up in their imaginary world (54).

Oh how happy I would have been to dissolve into an unfathomable neurosis and to enter the paradisiacal profanity of dementia”, he exclaims after an attack of delirium (206).

At times, Magamou is apparently successful, but at others, he is totally coherent and fully conscious. Magamou is one of those who are “widely devoured by the sublime imaginings of their idealism” and who “keep dangerously close to the madness of a personality harshly confined in its dreams”. This is a madness which drives them to “wanderings and tachylalia” (Dabla, 1986: 126). Indeed, Magamou indulges in a steady monologue, a true logorrhoea which almost drowns him in a deluge of words and drains him, while he is trying to maintain control. He speaks continuously, but this monologue often develops into a dialogue, for he partitions himself into two while meditating on his destiny and condition. There is a close relationship between words and wounds, the words spoken by Magamou and the wounds being his bodily tribulations. But can words lessen the torture of wounds?

### **The Wound Mirrored in the World Around**

The landscape is not spared by this leprosy. Magamou’s foul, sickly epidermis is mimetically reproduced and staged in the places he frequents. Malick Fall delights in evoking such sordid details and dwells on macabre, decrepit landscapes. The dilapidation and the putrefaction of these places mirror the condition of human beings. In a typical such scene, there are piles of stinking garbage, mounds of rubbish, fetid stacks of debris (63), the verdigris walls of mouldy cells are crawling with vermin (73), walls of the streets through which Magamou walks are leprous (187) and there are “the mire” and “treacherous mud” in which “his worst enemies hide: fish bones, rusty nails, broken bottles, fragments of glass” (65-66). Such is the setting for his squalid existence. The dermis of the landscape – “brown slime”, “cesspools”, “clay from which imprisoned air bubbles escape like ephemeral buds”, these reproduce the necrosed epidermis of the sick man. Magamou “delights” (93) in this

nauseating atmosphere, reflecting the existential slime in which he is languishing.

Magamou's debilitation is a reflection of the world around him. His contemporaries also have relinquished traditional values. Strong men, who, in the past, were unshaken by the state of affairs around them, have vanished! Magamou's malady has undermined him and dissipated his strength and endurance capacity. It relaxes the defensive tension of his will just as it relaxes the tension of his skin. So one day, when a guard suddenly drenched him with cold water, he reaches a state of deep self loathing, giving way to a tearful flood of self pity. This weakness dishonours him, for he has broken "the chains which link him to the past" and has betrayed his "contract as a man" (75-76), betrayed his initiation master (the man "with the heart of a lion" for whom fear was unknown, the elder with "the thick skin of an elephant" (75)). In contrast Magamou has a soft, easily penetrable skin. Determined to harden himself and resist, he resolves to "bear up" and to "face up". He will encase himself in green wood and cover himself with spikes (138), for he "must kill the old man, in him, who had such extreme sensitivity" (173).

Magamou fails in this project of self-building; his body and spirit still are subject to discord and division. His wound, with its putrefying flesh, and oozing secretions, empties Magamou of his strength, just as his tears had drained him of all self respect, and as his logorrhoea had dissipated all wellbeing and rendered him an empty shell. This leakage and total discharge of his essence indicate the impossibility for Magamou to circumscribe and assemble his thoughts and himself.

### **Symbolism in the Work**

The novel *The Wound* offers multiple symbolisms, with vast philosophical, moral and social implications. It is in the tradition of the novel of the quest, of the search for an ideal for mental health and happiness through social integration. It exposes the disillusion which can accompany experience. It also presents, as is shown by Dorothy Blair, the conflict between the individual and society for whom the non-conformist is a "festering wound" (Blair, 1976: 300). We have seen how people have rejected this man, who differs from them and whom they consider as a dangerous lunatic. But for Malick Fall, the non-conformist is an essential member of society. Just as Magamou refuses the amputation of his sick limb, the author rejects the mutilation of the group in which the presence of the individualist is crucial.

Furthermore, Blair also suggests that although this novel is not overtly political, it is possible to draw a parallel between the detention of the individualist rebel, Magamou, locked in a cage for lunatics at the hospital, and the imprisonment of recalcitrant intellectuals in the former Soviet Union's psychiatric hospitals.

*The Wound* also is a novel of self-knowledge and self-acceptation. For Magamou, the wound is the mark – the stamp – which characterises his being. When the hero is finally cured by Khar-the-Ancient, Magamou becomes aware that his wound had given him an identity and awarded him titles of nobility. He realises that, when liberated from his wound, he repudiated his true self and particular destiny, of being “the man-with-the-wound”. Indeed, he had ended up by being accepted as the “man-with-the-wound” by the market people, who uttered indignant cries of protest when he was arrested and taken away. Once he is cured, he becomes “unseen, insignificant, anonymous” (171) and “an ant, amongst other ants” (172).

“You must admit that you had been spoilt, with your wound”, he tells himself. “You had been, in your own way, the centre of everything. (...) And now? You have lost all the interest of others: you are a drop of water in the pond. You now lack your titles of nobility: your wound, your vermin and your stench” (172).

### **Africa Mirrored in the Novel**

On the scale of Africa, in the words of Ngandu Nkashama, “the symbol of the “wound” which preserves (...) the several layers of Magamou’s splintered and exploded consciousness, with its gangrene, its stench and its tragic way of being eaten from inside, is also the sign of today’s Africa.” (Ngandu Nkashama, 1984: 197). For Malick Fall, this ailment which gnaws the hero from inside and progressively invades him, represents the sickness and the corruption which affected African society in the second part of the XXth century.

The author’s lengthy descriptions of the hero’s putrefaction, his insistence on describing his decay, symbolises his horror at the dissolution and depreciation of African traditional principles and values.

This physical softening and liquefaction within the hero reflect the dissolution of a stable, solid, ancient world, linked to ancient mythical cosmologies and Magamou fears that this disappearance might be definitive. His wound symbolises his awareness of the collapse of an epoch and of a society. Awareness of it gnaws him from within, undermines his mental strength and causes his disintegration and his madness. Malick Fall does not think that improvement can come from external agencies such as the International Money Funds or the World Bank, and this is echoed when Magamou refuses the external help of doctors and hospitals.

Attracted by the town’s pleasures and promises, people leave the bush and become the prey of vultures – the European colonists at one time and the new African leaders later. This society has surrendered what it knew for the unknown, and relinquished its traditional values for an unsuitable adulterated modernism, which was not created for it. It is ready to deny its own identity.

Before Magamou knew the significance and the value of the “hallmark” which branded and individualised him, he hated his body and wished he was someone else (43). He was wrong, implies the author of the novel. Malick Fall suggests that Africans must cherish their individuality and accept their distinctiveness – even their imperfections. All this is the price of such individuality. Magamou, a spokesman for his author, scorns servile imitators:

(He) had no patience for Black women (...), who aped Europeans to the point of wearing wigs. He had only scorn for those who confined their body in narrow dresses, which gave way to the pressure of cellulite (104).

He detested men such as Daouda, those hostages trained to vilify Africa for a glass of champagne at a cocktail party, or for the edge of a chair at a dinner party, between people of good standing. (...) He pursued Daouda with hatred (59).

Finally, as Ojo-Ade writes, this wound is the symbol of a number of ailments in our modern world; “solitude, unscrupulous ambition, materialism, alienation, the sale of oneself and of those close to one and lack of conscience” (Ojo-Ade, 1983: 445). This is the cancer which threatens the existence of modern civilisation, on whose base is also built contemporary society; “a society in which the bigwigs devour the little ones in the mixed sauce of the indifferent, the ineffective talkers and the mystics” (181).

## **Conclusion**

We have offered an analysis of the rich symbolism of the “wound”, in this novel of Malick Fall. Two aspects of this symbolism, in particular, have held our attention: on one hand, the wound is a defect within and a mark on the hero’s body. It signifies the collapse of an epoch and of a society in Africa. His awareness of his ulcer pains him, it gnaws him from inside and provokes extreme mental distress. On the other hand, this “hallmark” branded and engraved in his flesh, grants him his identity and his unique value. Without it, he is otherwise an anonymous nonentity. But the hero must not delude and deceive himself; he must keep this awareness alive and alert at all time, however harrowing this is for him. Moreover, in the midst of his society, he must maintain an alertness to the failings of other men’s consciences; he must arouse and stir them. If we quote Malick Fall’s direct expression, he himself must remain the “shit stirrer number one” (172). Magamou provides an example of a man who finally attains total and conscious self acceptance. At the very end of the novel, after his last attempt at suicide, when he sees prisoners, “men perhaps condemned to death, still clinging to life” (249), he realizes that any evasion in the past, in dreams, conformism, madness or suicide, is not a solution, but the answer lies in the hand to hand struggle with,



and the courageous confrontation of, problems that require solution. He suddenly discovers that it is crucial to continue living. “Magamou would bite heartily into the couscous of life; he would drink with big gulps from the marvellous springs of pleasure. He would bathe in life for ever” (250). So Malick Fall makes him overcome the wound both physically and mentally, as he trusts Africa will overcome its present tribulations.

### Note

1. All quotations in the text have been translated from the French by the author. References in the text indicate the relevant page number in parentheses. E.g. (21).

### References

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