

**BENEATH THE MASK: PERSONALITY DISORDERS IN THE FEMALE
CHARACTERS OF OYINKAN BRAITHWAITE'S *MY SISTER THE SERIAL
KILLER***

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Abstract

Mental health disorder in Nigeria has often been misperceived and sidelined. As such, people's view of mental illnesses is the seemingly deafening ones where sufferers see invisible things and/or gesticulate wildly. The burden of the writer with *My Sister the serial killer* in mind, is to expose the 'lesser' types of mental health issues that is often overlooked and its possible causes. This paper, taking a cue from the trauma framework, interrogates the psychological and sociological effects associated with repressed pain. Fulfilling its purpose of functionality alongside aesthetics, it is hoped that through this artistic representation, people may learn to properly manage and possibly avoid issues that threaten our collective existence.

Introduction

It is no gainsaying that thematically the Nigerian literary enterprise has soared. From the first generation to the third generation writers of Nigerian literature, the themes have dealt with issues that are pertinent to the Nigerian society. This is in cognizance with the function of literature as a socially purposeful enterprise.

In a country that is becoming increasingly austere, the mental health of Nigerians has become a resonating subject matter and one that should be taken seriously. Ebuka Onyeji in *Premium Times* reports that the permanent secretary of the ministry of health, Abdulaziz Abdullahi, representing the federal government, notes that three in every ten Nigerian suffer one type of mental disorder. At a stakeholder's workshop at a mental health forum in 2018, Abdullahi notes that about 20-30 percent of the Nigerian population suffer from mental health disorders and that by 2020; mental health challenges will become more life threatening than physical diseases like HIV/AIDS. It is therefore no wonder that Nigeria in a recent past has witnessed and is still observing a surge in the suicide rate amongst its population. Unfortunately, the level of awareness of issues of mental health in the country is still abysmally low.

Gratefully, this is where literature intersects with society. This is to say that through its ability to creatively depict things, literature will serve as a testimonial for divulging the nature of mental health issues, its triggers and nuances, and by so doing, reflect same in the broader picture of the society. Thus, Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister the Serial Killer*, foregrounds mental health issues as a socially related human condition. With the portrayal of the female characters and their struggles in the text, Braithwaite elucidates that mental health disorders are not limited to the usual conceived image of a psychotic individual, roaming the streets but

it is inclusive of the often neglected and adjudged insignificant ones like personality disorders, with its triggers rooted in man's inhumanity to man.

Basically, personality refers to an embodiment of characteristics that make up an individual person. The American Psychiatric Association avers that it is a manner of thinking, feeling and behaving that distinguishes a person from another. Similarly, Olley Benjamin observes that personality is the 'emotional, behavioural, intellectual, and physical characteristics of an individual' (328). However, it becomes a disorder when personality traits become so rigid, inflexible and unhealthy that it begins to interfere with the pattern of thinking or action in the individual's day to day functioning. The aforementioned APA in its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders- V* defines personality disorders as, '... enduring patterns of inner experience and behaviour that deviates significantly from the norms of the individual's culture, is pervasive, inflexible, has an onset in adolescence or early childhood, is stable over time, and leads to distress or impairment' (646-49). The causes of personality disorders have been linked to, but are not limited to, genetic/biological factors, traumatic experiences and situations, dysfunctional homes and parenting styles, influence from environment and social conditions. In most cases, a person with personality disorder considers his/her behaviour normal and puts the blame on others for what they face or are going through.

According to *DSM-V*, personality disorders have been grouped into three types. There is the cluster A type, characterised by odd, unconventional and bizarre behaviours which includes schizoid, paranoid and schizotypal personality disorders. Cluster B which is characterized by dramatic, emotional or erratic behaviour includes the antisocial, borderline, histrionic and narcissistic personality disorder while cluster C includes avoidant, dependent and obsessive - compulsive personality disorders. In this paper however, emphasis will be on the cluster B, centring on the antisocial personality disorder and cluster C, focusing on obsessive – compulsive personality disorder.

Antisocial personality disorder defines a mental health condition that portrays a deeply ingrained pattern of being manipulative, exploitative and violating people's rights without care, guilt or remorse. People with ASPD as it is called, tend towards a delinquent impulsivity, recklessness, deception, irritability and criminal behaviour. They lack empathy and regard for other people, even though they might seem amiable on the surface. On the other hand, obsessive – compulsive personality disorder as described by *DSM- V* is typified by a pattern of persistent preoccupation with orderliness, cleanliness, perfection and control that significantly impairs the individual's interpersonal relationships amongst other factors. With this in mind, this paper sets to examine the characters of Ayoola and Korede, who beneath the mask of 'normalcy' they wear daily, display symptoms of mental impairment. Through the portrayal of these characters, Braithwaite foregrounds a germane discourse, aligning with the tenets of 'responsible literature, in faithfulness to its spatiotemporal milieu mirrors, all experiences ...' (Chike Okoye, 94).

Roots in Trauma

Even though that studies show that the aetiology of personality disorders is not exactly known, it has been linked to several factors, like biology, genetics, environmental, social issues or trauma, amidst other dynamics. Nonetheless, this paper buttresses that the core of the mental health condition that the author in this text tries to project lies in the painful experiences witnessed by the characters as a result of the dysfunctionality in the family setting. Although that in medicine, trauma has been conceived as a serious bodily harm, however, in this paper,

we are concerned with its description as an insufferable or unpleasant experience that destabilizes a person's emotional and mental state. Here, trauma is viewed as a social problem where one inflicts pain on another.

As such, this paper gravitates towards the traditional trauma framework as exemplified by Cathy Caruth. Relying on the Freudian polemic of repression, Caruth argues that trauma defines an intense pain and aggravation invading the mind. Moving further, she also reasons that this pain does not take effect immediately but is condensed in the victim's psyche, which later resurfaces to haunt the bearer of the pain. The response to this belated consequence of the traumatic ordeal that the bearer has gone through results in aggressive behaviours that do not conform to societal norms.

Hence, *My Sister the Serial Killer*, building upon this premise, explores the repressed traumatic experiences and abuse that the duo of Ayoola and Korede experienced at the hand of their irresponsible father. Described as an unreliable character, a liar and a sadist, Korede and Ayoola's father meted violence and heavy physical abuse on his daughters, alongside constantly cheating on his wife by bringing young girls into their home. He has no qualms 'selling' out his daughter to a lecherous old man in order to secure a business contract and when a younger classmate of Ayoola dared show interest in his daughter, Ayoola paid a gruesome price that involved a cane, her skin turning red, her cries turning into a low whimper and the pain been 'so hard to bear' (184). In their home, a fear of Kehinde; their father; a fear that smells, 'acidic, metallic, sharper even than the smell of vomit' rules. He was neither a daddy nor a father, he was 'the law in [their] home' (184). Therefore, having repressed various domestic maladaptive situations, the characters – Ayoola and Korede drift to behavioural patterns that tend towards mental health disorder.

Personality Disorders in the female characters of Braithwaite's *My Sister the serial Killer*

Ayoola in the text is described as beautiful. Korede; Ayoola's older sister and the pervading voice that runs through the narrative observes that 'Ayoola's skin is a colour that sits comfortably between cream and caramel' (64). She describes Ayoola as a 'Bratz doll' (53). Furthermore, she notes that 'Ayoola was beautiful' (55). Even Femi; Ayoola's boyfriend that she murdered wrote her a poem eulogizing her beauty; 'I dare you to find a flaw/in her beauty/or to bring forth a woman/who can stand beside/her without wilting' (6).

Again, not only does Ayoola exhume a sense of self-confidence that can be described as bewitching and enchanting, she is gregarious, extroverted and sanguine. Walking into her sister's office one day;

... Every head turns her way and stays there... She looks as though she has brought the sunshine in with her. She is wearing a bright yellow shirtdress ... her feet are in green, strappy heels that make up what she lacks in height ... she smile at me, and saunters in my direction. I hear a man mutter 'Damn' under his breath (53)

Not only had the man from the above excerpt fixated on Ayoola's rapturous apparition, Korede's colleagues at the hospital were equally drawn by her sister's charm and friendliness. Moreover, Tade; a doctor in Korede's hospital and an object of Korede's infatuation, was enraptured by Ayoola's persona. But beyond this mask, Ayoola is broken. Having constantly repressed the pain of her father's high-handedness from her adolescence, Ayoola becomes sociopathic, murdering every man that enters into a relationship with her. Her father thus becoming a metaphor for every man that '...was angry ... [and] screaming at her ...' (6). It is

similarly notable that she uses her father's 'nine-inch blade' for the killing. This knife, during his lifetime, holds more affection for their father than his family. He cherishes this knife, taking extreme care of it like one would cherish a newlywed bride, as such that Korede remarks that it was only at such times that she, '...ever witnessed tenderness from him' (38). Moreover, he never allows any member of his family to touch the knife. Ayoola, daring to try one day, her father, '...dragged her out by her hair... [and flung] her across the hallway' (39). It is therefore no wonder that she despises her father by using his symbol of power over her to dominate other men. Each time she impulsively kills a man; she kills her father, meting out the same kind of treatment that she endured to him. Each time Ayoola kills; she exerts power and authority over the image of her father.

In Nigeria, one of the cardinal rights of an individual is the right to life, but Ayoola tramples on that right for the men she dates. With the three men she killed, she infringes on their right to live by murdering them because her father murdered her will to 'live'. Her beauty and vivacious personality draw men to her but her pattern of thought towards them have become inflexibly etched around violence, oppression and pain, it therefore interferes with her reasoning, thereby hampering her formation of a stable relationship. At the beginning of the text, Korede relates that each time, 'Ayoola summons [her] with these words – Korede, I killed him' and that '[she] had hoped [she] would never hear those words again' (*Words*). Unfortunately, Korede's wish was not fulfilled, for in her confession to a comatose patient in the hospital where she works, she laments, 'Femi makes three ... three, and they label you a serial killer' (45). As such, Korede recognizes that her sister has become a sociopath.

Antisocial personality disorder has been linked with no feeling of guilt or remorse when the rights of others have been violated. One would have thought that after each killing, that Ayoola would show a certain sense of guilt or even be shaken that she had to stab another human being but no sooner does she have Femi murdered and she is already on social media, posting pictures and tweets. Even though Femi was her boyfriend for a month, she does not recall his surname and replied with only a shrug when her sister requested for his name from her. Similarly, commenting on her insensitivity, Korede notes that, 'there is music blasting from Ayoola's room ... days ago, we gave a man to the sea, but here she is, dancing' (34). In addition, with Gboyega's death on a trip to Dubai with her, she is indifferent and off handedly replied her sister's question about her trip, 'it was fine ...except ... he died' (127). Korede recalls that in recounting the tale, 'her eyes are on fire, she is telling me a tale she thinks is fascinating' (128). Again, she absent-mindedly comments 'Yes, I'll miss him' and continued on a seemingly more important and less boring fancy, as if Gboyega was not a human being that she left for dead in a foreign country.

A rational thinking person would not take to social media so soon after her boyfriend's death. She should have been sober and perhaps subdued but, demonstrating a high level of impulsivity attributed to ASPD, she, not thinking of the consequences of her actions, made a post 'Femi is missing' so soon after his demise. With this, one wonders if she even gave a thought that she would be a suspect in his death. Also, Ayoola is manipulative and exploitative. She had her sister cleaning off her messes after she is done killing. Korede narrates that, 'she had done her bit; the rest is left to me' (10). Moreover, she doesn't care for Tade and doesn't care that Korede likes the doctor. To her, he is just a game. It is important to understand that Ayoola been a witness to her father's many episodes of infidelity and having been deeply scarred by that experience, she finds it easy to exploit and manipulate men to her own advantage. Gboyega funds her fashion business and she ends up killing him. Even though Tade drools over her, he

is to her another plaything, she cheats on him with Gboyega; a married man and makes no apologies for it. She doesn't mind toying with her sister's feelings for Tade as says to her, '... he[Tade] isn't all that different from the rest of them ... He isn't deep. All he wants is a pretty face' (70). Equally, Ayoola manipulates her sister Korede into choosing sides instead of assuaging her conscience. With her failed attempt at murdering Tade, she; Ayoola got stabbed instead and when the police came for investigations, she said to her sister, 'It's him or me, Korede ... you can't sit on the fence forever' (209).

Moreover, Ayoola lies with a straight face that Korede remarked, 'My sister is in the wrong profession. She should be in front of the camera ...' (101). She is equally described as 'inconsiderate, selfish and reckless ...' (123). She sees nothing wrong in her behaviour, choosing instead to play the victim. She says to her sister, 'these days, you look at me like I'm a monster ...this is victim shaming, you know ...' (23). Considering the African culture where females are supposed to be domesticated, Ayoola is always tardy, scattered and not minding who she keeps up waiting for her. She cannot cook and she informs Tade uncaringly that she cannot cook to save her life. Korede declares that, 'it'll be interesting to see whether she can do anything more strenuous than putting bread in the toaster' (42). When asked to chop vegetables; 'she chops the spinach quickly and roughly ... with no care toward what the finished product will look like ...'(43). Not wanting to learn and not being bothered by it, she prefers instead to take pictures of 'the pot of simmering efo ...', uploading to Snapchat, she tells her followers, 'Hey people, efo loading' (44).

Although this carefree, careless lifestyle can ordinarily be perceived in a 'normal' population, Ayoola's is worrisome because it shows a consistent pattern of someone living in the shadows of pain and 'acting-out' because of it. With the high rate of young adults, especially in Nigerian schools displaying antisocial behaviours, Ayoola's characterization is apt, depicting a socially related syndrome of child – upbringing mismanagement that often results in catastrophes for the society at large. If Ayoola's family had been a safe haven, perhaps her mental status would not become sociopathic. If perhaps her father had been a more responsible parent, mental health issues would have been avoided.

In the same vein, with Korede, one witnesses a pattern of rigidity and fixation with order, control and perfection. In psychiatry, this disorder is known as obsessive - compulsive personality disorder. OCPD as it is commonly referred to, is a mental health disorder that is characterized by extreme preoccupation with control, perfectionism and orderliness. Olley is of the view that persons with this personality disorder experience 'personal insecurity, doubt and incompleteness, leading to excessive conscientiousness, checking, stubbornness and caution' as such that there is, 'perfectionism and meticulous accuracy and a need to check repeatedly in an attempt to ensure this' (329). Furthermore, the cause of this disorder has been linked to childhood traumas that is inclusive of abuse that pre-empts the need for being 'perfect' all the time. It is also attributed to style of parenting that is highly controlling, protective or punitive (Psychology Today).

Korede fits into this paradigm. She shows an extensive preoccupation with being perfect, but, beneath the mask of a calm demeanour that she wears each day, she is a character that nurses insecurities and an inferiority complex about a lot of things. First, she is obsessed with her defectiveness with her looks. Comparing herself with her sister, she notes that she, '...can't pinpoint the exact moment [she] realized that Ayoola was beautiful and [she] was ...not' (55). She attests that she 'resembles a voodoo figurine ... the colour of a Brazil nut, before it is peeled

... and composed only of hard edges ...' (53/64). Again she acknowledges that in secondary school, 'the boys would write lists of those who had figure eight ... when they drew [her], it was with lips that could belong to a gorilla and eyes that seems to push every other feature out of the way' (55). As a result, she lives in denial and constantly masks her inadequacy. She would have nothing to do with boys in secondary school and would not voice out her feelings towards Tade. She likes him but would not tell him, she likes him but would not even acknowledge that to her sister who gave her a chance to 'stake her claim' before embarking on her 'prove a point' journey that Tade was in no way different from their father. In a desperate bid to wrench Tade out from her sister's 'witchcraft' and win his heart, Korede's insecurities and feeling of being incomplete pushes her to wear make-up which she was not used to. When that did not go well, she rushes to the rest room in the hospital to wash away '... traces of make-up and tears' (74). In essence, wash away her failure at an attempt to be perfect.

As such, having internalized the trauma of imperfection from childhood, Korede seeks for support from home but that was not forthcoming. Recalling the manner of punitive upbringing she had and her experiences at the hands of their dictator-father, Korede became incredibly fixated on hating him. Even with his death, she despised and detested his image. She ensures that there is no reference to him at all in the house by either burning or selling everything her father ever possessed. Acknowledging that it 'was no great loss', she '... sold every other painting he had bought for cash ...' (60). With their father's chair at the head of the table, '[she] burnt it down to a crisp in a bonfire just outside [their] compound ...' (57). In every Nigerian home, the chair at the head of the table would normally be left for the father. Even in his absence, no one sits on it; it is a symbol of respect, reverence and authority. But with the burning of the chair, Korede shows her contempt for her father. She demystifies his person, power and authority and forbids him to rise to a position of authority again. On the day he died, Korede stood still and let him die. Being a nurse, she is bound by duty to offer some help to a dying person but because she has been marred by the pain of her father's malevolence, she had stood over him while he bled away. That day, she commented that, 'For the first time, we were taller' (80). By this, Korede depicts an obsession with a spiteful hatred for her father. She resents him and resents the idea that he constantly demands perfection from his family while he, himself seems far away from being perfect.

Korede equally struggles with a maniacal persistence with control and orderliness. At home, she runs the family, controlling her mother, her sister and the house help. She seems to be the support system in the house, seeing to everyone's need but this type of support is one that emanates from a deep seated yearning to be perfect, to be in control and in charge. She is the one that cooks while Ayoola stands aside; she cooks and organizes things while her mother sits still reading Mills and Boons, relishing a surreal type of romance that lacked in her own marriage. When they were young, she was the one protecting Ayoola from their father's tyranny as such that she assumes a sense of morbid obligation towards her sister. She loves that Ayoola had to depend on her. To her, 'Ayoola is inconsiderate and selfish and reckless, but her welfare is and always has been [her] responsibility' (123).

When Ayoola kills, she is the one that is called in to clean up the mess. Here, cleaning does not only refer to the physical act of wiping surfaces but it equally extends to Korede's meticulousness and fanatical accuracy when she assumes control over her sister's latest kill. When she arrived at the murder scene of Femi, she 'checked his pulse thrice, and then thrice more' (9). She set the cloth Ayoola had been wearing on fire and made sure to enter her latest kill in her diary. With the physical cleaning, she never trusts anyone to do it the way she does,

as such that with Ayoola's offering to scour Femi's blood that spilled onto her car's boot, Korede retorts, 'I take my homemade mixture of one spoon of ammonia to two cups of water ... and pour it over the stain ... Ayoola could never clean up as efficiently as I can' (3). Korede maniacally cleans that for her to calm down her nerves and think, she cleans and tidies repeatedly. In contrast to Ayoola's room that is '... basically drowning in dress patterns and different coloured fabrics, hers has 'nothing out of place ...'(98). She owns a 'cabinet ... filled with everything required to tackle dirt and diseases – gloves, bleach, disinfectant wipes, disinfectant spray, sponge, toilet bowl cleaner, all purpose cleaner, multi-surface cleaner, bowl brush plunger and caddy, and odour-shield trash bags' (98).

As with her sister Ayoola, the emphasis is on the psychosocial impact of mental health disorders on the sufferer and the general populace. In Korede's case, OCPD brings her into confrontation with people. At the hospital, it hampers her relationship with her colleagues. Daily, she gets into a confrontation with Yinka, Bunmi and Chichi because she constantly orders them around, else they will 'be forced to listen to [her] well-rehearsed speech about the code and culture of St. Peter's' (33). She has no friends amongst her colleagues. She is seen as judgemental, pushy and condescending that Yinka yells at her, 'Who died and made you head nurse' (143). As a result of her father's demand on his family for perfection and keeping up with public image, Korede being psychologically marred, develops a rigidly, inflexible, fastidious, over bearing, overly meticulous and demanding personality that she inadvertently pushes others towards the edge with her demands for perfection, structure and control.

Conclusion

As mirrored by Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister the serial killer*, the family is recognized as a child's first and most important agent of socialization. It is through the proper interaction of elements in a family setup that its young imbibe values that inform personality and enables one to function in the larger society. But when the family becomes a toxic environment, it produces an array of psychologically scarred, distraught and mentally impaired humans. By depicting the female characters traumatic experiences from childhood to adolescence and its resultant effects in this text, Braithwaite alongside exposing the nuances of personality disorders, equally colours this narrative with a tincture of salient didacticism. She highlights the fact that personality disorders as a range of mental health issues can be triggered by human elements, as such, we may learn to properly manage and possibly avoid issues that threaten our collective existence, beginning as it were, the family.

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