

Psychic Reality of Female Characters in Ahmed Yerima's *The Sisters* and Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu*

Oyeronke Anike Oyeleye Ph.D.

Department of English, Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo

Abstract

*Psychic reality is a conceptual reality developed, to denote the level of reality specific to unconscious processes. It refers to an object of characterisation, understanding and exploration in psychoanalysis. Existing literary scholarship on women's psychology which focused mostly on women's psychological imbalances does not define the psychic reality of female characters in Nigerian dramatic literature. This study was, therefore, designed to examine the psychic reality of female characters in selected southern Nigerian plays, to determine the dynamics of their actions. The Feminist Model of Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic Theory was adopted as the framework, while the interpretive design was used. The two plays, Ahmed Yerima's *The Sisters*, and Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu*, were purposively selected due to the similarity in their characterisation of post-traumatic stress disorder.*

Attention is given to female reactions to social and marital frustrations. The analysis reveals a range of literary strategies deployed by the playwrights in conveying different psycho-manifestations of female characters and psychic scenes in the texts. The two texts reveal that the psychic reality of the female characters are reflections of their traumatic experiences which eventually affects their understanding of internal and external realities. Thus, social and marital frustrations, are major challenges of social development.

Key Words: *Psychic reality, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*

1.0 Introduction

In Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), psychic reality refers to the force of reality associated with the subject's internal fantasy life, which could oppose and even dominate a

character's understanding of her external realities: in other words, it could seem more "real" than reality itself.

As projected in the selected plays, the psychic reality is an after-effect of an extremely traumatic event that includes direct personal experience of the threat of death or severe damage to the affected characters. This experience develops into severe distress, anxiety and depression for years, the victims often feel detached or estranged from loved ones. According to the British Association of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, 2019 edition, and the Anxiety and Depression Association of America, the experience is described as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. PTSD is a serious, potentially debilitating condition that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a life-threatening event. Such as a natural disaster, serious accident, terrorist incident, sudden death of a loved one, war rape or other violent personal assault. It is characterised by four main types of symptoms.

- (a) Re-experiencing a traumatic event through intrusive distressing recollections, flash backs and nightmares.
- (b) Emotional numbness and avoidance of places, people and activities that are reminders of the trauma.
- (c) Feeling cut off from others and other negative alterations in ways of thinking, understanding, learning and remembering.
- (d) Marked changes in arousal and reactivity, including difficulty sleeping and concentrating, feeling jumpy, easily irritated and angered.

Cathy Caruth (1996) notes that posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), is a reflection of the 'direct imposition on the mind of the unavoidable reality of horrific events, the taking over of the mind, psychically and neurobiological, by an event that it cannot control' (6). She also notes that PTSD seems to provide the most direct link between the psyche and external violence.

2.0 Psychic Reality of Female Characters in Ahmed Yerima's *The Sisters*

Ahmed Yerima is a renowned playwright, theatre practitioner, lecturer and one-time director of the National Theatre in Lagos but is currently the Head of the Department of dramatic arts at Redeemers University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria. His play, *The Sisters*, is a story of the bitter truth and painful reality. It unveils the vanity and deceit that characterise the lives of the high in society and stresses also the transience of political power and social status. It is a long tortuous movement of revelations that demonstrate the fact that all humanity is flawed and that we know

very little about ourselves and the world. The play is filled with secrets untold, engaging dialogue and revelations of how a patriarchal society affects womanhood. The death of the president provides the sisters occasion to come to terms with the realities and to re-examine their lives after all the disappointments and misfortunes they have been through.

Given this, the psychic reality is a reflection of a traumatic experience which eventually affects an individual's understanding of internal and external realities. Trauma is caused by an overwhelmingly negative event that causes a lasting impact on the victim's mental and emotional stability. Its sources can be either physical or psychological, resulting from domestic violence, natural disasters, severe illness or injury, or the death of a loved one, as we have it in *The Sisters*. Taiwo's loss of her husband and pregnancy, Funmi's loss of her husband and entire marriage of thirty years. Taiwo's understanding and interpretation of her internal and external realities conflict with the response of other people around her. She is left alone to live a lonely life without the assistance of her family. The president, her late brother-in-law had ordered the killing of the soldiers involved in the plotting of the failed military coup, which her husband, Joe, had been a part of. She gets to know about his involvement a few hours before Joe's execution. It has been a very cold, painful and traumatic experience for her, these past 10 years and she has not recovered from the traumatic experience of her husband's sudden separation from her through death, as she casts her mind ten years back in the excerpt below:

Taiwo: (Pours more drinks into her glass...)

Like yesterday. Ten years... It was Joe. We spoke in low tones. He swore he believed he was being followed, but had to see me and explain to me. He told me that he was aware of the consequence, and he was not afraid to die, but he wanted me to forgive him. As we kissed I assured him that all was forgiven, there was this loud being, and the whole front door of our quarters caved in. There must have been up to twenty or more of them. I did not know what to do. ... I stood in front of Joe, shielding him from them, unaware that Joe was trying to pull out his gun ... The young officers shot at him, but the bullet went straight for my pelvis. (She begins to cry). They beat him to a pulp, and dragged him out of his house, in front of his two months pregnant wife like a dead dog killed in the streets by a car. (p. 28 – 30)

Taiwo blames her husband's death on Dipo, her brother-in-law, now late president. She remembers the dreams she had while she was sedated at the hospital ten years ago, this experience has become part of her psychic reality ever since then - as she narrates:

Taiwo: No one told me. The doctors had even sedated me. I slept all night. But I was restless. I had terrible dreams. First, I saw Joe and I checking into a hotel. Joe rushed to lie on one of the twin beds, but as he did, it turned into a coffin. There and then, I knew. (p. 31).

In Freudian psychoanalysis, the unconscious is the storehouse of those painful experiences and emotions those words and fears, guilty decisions, and unresolved conflicts we do not want to know about because we feel we will be overwhelmed by them. Taiwo was able to connect her dream with the actions of her parents and Joe, invariably, she could connect her psychic reality with her physical reality; her silence and loneliness connect with her psychic reality to conclude that her husband was dead. No words were spoken, she could read their actions which is a symbolic recreation of her experience. Unconsciously, Taiwo's dreams give her a confirmation of her fears, of the reality of her husband's death, and this without the doctor's intervention. In her second dream:

Taiwo: Then, mother and father came into the room, beckoned to him without a word, Joe rose and followed them leaving me all alone. I just knew.
(p.31)

Invariably, Taiwo's internal fantasy dominates her understanding of her external realities, so it becomes almost impossible for her to mourn her brother-in-law's death like every other person. Her husband, Joe's, death, even though it's been ten years, is more real to her than the actual reality of Dipo's death. As a result of this, Taiwo prefers to observe Joe's remembrance in her bright flowery dress with red shoes and bag than to appear in black to mourn Dipo's death, her late bro-in-law while she ignores Nana's comment on her odd outfit of all red instead of black:

Nana: As a mark of respect to the dead ... Even if you must disrespect him with your red dress ... You behave as if nothing serious has happened.
(p. 10)

As an expression of Taiwo's internal reality, Taiwo celebrates instead of mourning Dipo's death, his death to her is a sign of victory over her worst enemy, Joe's murderer. As earlier mentioned

in chapter three, Taiwo's moment of victory is accompanied by, her brandy and cigarette, these are representative symbols of celebration as opposed to mourning. In her statement:

Taiwo: Besides I did not want anyone to share in my supreme moment of glory. God had handed over the moment to me, and in triumph, I scribbled ... death ... oh death ... which breaks through the mighty walls ... of Egypt. Treks down the well-paved road to Jericho only to snap the neck of the almighty. (p. 11)

Metaphorically, the above statement is Taiwo's expression of victory over her enemy, who had just been defeated by death.

Since Joe's death, Taiwo's psychic reality of society has been that of callousness, and wickedness. The society, among which her sister, Funmi, and her late brother-in-law, Dipo, have played the principal role of wickedly and brutally, separating her family (husband and unborn child) from her and also denying her the use of her two legs, is in her opinion a cruel one. She considers Funmi to be a distant relation to her and a mere First Lady, who cares only for herself and takes decisions to favour her at the detriment of other's choices. She addresses her as First Lady. In Taiwo's words, Funmi has no right to force her and Toun into mourning their Late brother-in-law's death in the manner she did, in Taiwo's words:

Taiwo: ... that is why we have been bundled like criminals against our wishes by state security to come and mourn our late great brother-in-law, Mr President. (p. 13)

To her, mourning is a personal decision:

Taiwo: Mourning is a private and personal thing. I did not think our outgoing First Lady had a right to share members into cars and planes ... (p. 13)

Taiwo: ... No has a right to force me to do what I do not want to do ... (p. 15)

Taiwo makes it clear that she is not interested in paying any condolence visit to anyone, worst of it all, her sister Funmi who does not deserve any of her sympathies:

Taiwo: Funmi is the First Lady ... She has everything. She is Her Excellency. She needs no one. She commands and we mere mortals, must obey. And she dumps us in government planes to obey her every wish. (p. 14)

Funmi's relationship with her sisters in the past ten years has been like that of the bourgeoisie and proletariat. The differences in their socioeconomic class created a wide gap which is now difficult to bridge, although they are all now widowed and single, Taiwo and Funmi are widowed, Toun is divorced and Nana remains unmarried.

3.0 Psychic reality of the female characters in Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu*

Osofisan's *Women of Owu* is a play that recounts the devastating experiences of war, with artistic manipulations of the message through effective characterisation and dialogue. The mental crises of the play could be categorized as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, suffered by the distressed victims of war who lost loved ones, dignity and liberty. The characters include; Erelu Afin, wife of Oba Akinjobi, Orisaye, daughter of Erelu, Adummaadan, Erelu's daughter-in-law who is also widowed and a host of other women that experience a series of mental disturbances resulting from the excruciating effects of war. The women in Femi Osofisan's play, *Women of Owu*, are women of royal status who are empowered by royal background but, disempowered by war. The play which is an adaptation of Euripides's *Trojan Women*, is located in the South Western Nigeria. It tells the plight of the women in a defeated town and the sufferings imposed by war. Oyo machinery and warriors from the tribes of Ijebu and Ife had surrounded the city of Owu, on the premise that they were there to liberate the people from their oppressive king. After seven years of siege, the city walls are finally broken through and the allied forces entered. They killed all men and children, mainly sons. The affected women projected, are the empowered women who are now victims of war and are compelled into becoming wives and whores of their perpetrators, the unbearable memory of the cold execution of their sons and husbands has affected their emotional and psychological state of mind, which turns them into psychopaths, who now crave to avenge the death of their sons and husbands.

Orisaye, one of the surviving daughters of the murdered king, and devoted priestess of Orunmila, shows traits of anti-social personality disorder, on hearing the news that she has been given to one of the generals of war as a wife. She sees her forced marriage with the war general as an opportunity to avenge the death of her father, and brothers who were brutally murdered by the man who now longs for her hand in marriage. She says:

Orisaye: No! Leave me alone! Get your light,
Don't steal my own!
I am going to be married to a king, don't you know?

This torch is for our bridal night! See, how the flame dances
Prettily, gracefully
To the waves of our passion! Ah,
All the gods are awake with us! Their watchful eyes
Follow us with blessings
As I go to the bed of my king!

Erelu: Orisaye, my daughter–

Orisaye: ... Mother, you should be laughing and singing for me! The air should be ringing with your prayers! Or is it that you cannot see very well in this surrounding darkness? Take this then, I brought it for you!

Chorus Leader: Hold her! Hold her, Erelu, she will burn herself? She's out of her senses!

Erelu: Come, my daughter, give me that! Let me hold it for you.

Chorus: She's out of her senses. Insanity is the drug of misery.

Orisaye: What? You think I'm mad? (Laughs) They think I am insane, mother!
But it is not madness
All our dead will be avenged!

Orisaye: ... till I put a blade to his lovely throat ...

Erelu: Ah! QmQ mi, Orisaye! (p. 27).

Orisaye, under goes emotional breakdown resulting from the brutalities of war and becomes a sociopath, she seeks to kill and avenge the death of her people.

The psychic reality of the women characters in the play is that of shattered hopes and revenge. The members of the Oba Akinjobi's family, in particular, experience mental fragmentation arising from the traumatic effect of the war. Consequently, Erelu is exposed to us as someone whose mental state has been ruined by the agony of the war that claims the lives of her five healthy sons, while her lovely daughters that have been betrothed to princes are left plundered by the generals and soldiers of their rival camp. In the words of Erelu, the surviving queen of the ruined Owu kingdom:

Erelu: ... But so what? When fate has decided to strike you down what amount of crying can help? That's what I keep telling myself, I say – Resign yourself, Erelu Afin, and accept it all with forbearance! But Nature is

weak: my tears pour out nevertheless (*She cries, as she sits up*)...Oh I wish I could die, die! Or fall silent. In a hole where sorrow can no longer reach me! Who will save Erelu Afin? Who can save me now? (p. 10-11)

Erelu's traumatic experience from the dehumanisation and violation of her daughter's innocence by the rapist warriors results in depression, she has given up hope in life and would rather die than live to remember those moments of torture. In the same vein, Orisaye manifests symptoms of schizophrenia, a clear case of divided self which is a symptom of a schizophrenic illness and bipolar disorder. These mental disintegrative features are caused by the despairing experiences of war.

Orisaye: Mother, you're crying! Is it because of my brothers
Fallen in battle? Wipe your tears, that is an old tale
Now. Today we are celebrating. For I am going to
Be give away in marriage. (p. 28)

Orisaye's motor and behavioural disorders convey the uncontrolled drifting of her thought. This suggests that her thoughts, actions and emotions are not her own, but are forced upon her by the external force of traumatic experiences of war.

4.0 Psychological conflict expressed through interior Monologue and Soliloquy in Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu*

Soliloquies and interior monologues share one thing in common; they both involve a solitary speaker. But their difference lies with who is listening. A monologue is from the Greek word '*monos*' meaning 'single' and '*legein*' meaning 'to speak'. It is a speech delivered by a single character to an audience. While soliloquy is from the Latin word '*solus*' meaning 'alone' and '*loqui*' meaning 'to speak' it is a speech a character gives to himself.

Certain things prompt authors and playwrights to portray their characters in a particular way. Such things include; inner thoughts, speech, action, physical description, reactions and or effects on other characters. These technicalities are very important in characterisation as the author might need to portray the character's thoughts and feelings. Or what goes on in their minds?

Some writers employ interior monologue to create reports on the stream of consciousness. This technique allows the playwright to present characters with depth. Thus, one can assess the character from inside and outside.

This technique of stream of consciousness is comparable to some techniques that are used by playwrights; such as aside, interior monologue or monologue. All these are products of the mind or psyche of the speaker. A good example of a monologue is found in how Osofisan reveals the depressive state of Erelu through the device of soliloquy. The interwoven characteristic despondent rhythm of the play is made manifest in Erelu's self-talk. Her drifting mind is projected through her utterances:

Erelu: ... (to herself)

Look at me! A slave! To whom will they sell me? To the flesh merchants of kano or Abomey? Or straight to the white masters in the cold castles of Cape Coast? Will they put padlocks on these wrinkled lips, and chains on these old and withered feet? Ah, they will brand me their hot iron, Me! I am going to be maid to some foreign matron: I will watch night and day over her brats, or slog away in her kitchen, picking vegetables, my body covered in sores! Me, Erelu of Owu! (p. 16-17)

Soliloquies are projected solely for the audience, as a medium of information to them on the character's motivations and state of mind. A similar literary device is an 'Aside', here, the character directs his speech to the audience while other characters on stage are unable to hear.

5.0 Social conflict as factors responsible for psycho-disorder in the Femi Osofisan's *Women of Owu*

Conflict is an opposition or a tug of war between contradictory impulses. Colman (2000), states that 'a conflict is the anticipated frustration entailed in the choice of either alternative'. Conflicts occur in the individual when more than one, equally powerful desire or motive is present at the same time and pressurize for immediate satisfaction. If any one of the motives is weak, it will be suppressed and the stronger motive gains satisfaction. Conflicts give rise to a lot of tension in the individual, he/she becomes completely disturbed. Tension continues until a decision is taken and the conflict is resolved.

Also found in Femi Osofisan's play, *Women of Owu* is the conflict of war, resulting from an embittered and betrayed husband, Maye formerly married to Iyunloye the beautiful woman, who was captured and forced into marriage by the Owu prince.

Festus Idoko, (2019), agrees with Freire (1970) that, leaders who refuse to adopt dialogue tend to be oppressive in character and more so where such leaders impose their decisions. According to

Festus, such attitudes in leaders are manipulative and liberate no one. Invariably, a lack of constructive dialogue can lead to conflict and war. This is evident in the play, from the excerpt:

Maye: Rubbish. But I don't blame you,
You have no idea how badly she hurt me,
Or how much I feel betrayed (p. 48)

The plot of the play presents women as victims of war. This historical play interprets one of the major wars in the history of eighteenth-century Yoruba nationality. It reveals an aggregate of the experience of women in times of war. Owu women in the play suffer a tragic fate worse than their male counterparts who are already dead. For instance, they are forced to live with men who have killed their husbands and sons. These women of Owu, particularly the ones of marriage age, are expected to be faithful as wives and mistresses to the people who have killed their husbands and sons. But the traumatic experience cannot be erased from their memories, it will eventually erupt and become a character trait, Erelu's conversation with one of the soldiers, Gesinde, gives us an instance of this:

Erelu: Ah Poor you! So you can be So easily frightened by a Little fire! What you think is a human body set ablaze is just my daughter Orisaye, running around with a touch. The war has affected her badly and she's ... well, no longer in control of her sense.

The play exposes its reader to the mental state of Orisaye, and other women victims of war whose psychological conditions reveal symptoms of antisocial personality disorder and seek revenge on their loved ones either in this life or beyond:

Orisaye: ...This will be the harvest of your escapade here: A defeat worse than our own. At least our men died on our soil here where gentle hands could close their eyes and cuddle them home to our ancestors. But you! You are cursed already to end on the road of battle and plunder. How I pity you! (p. 30).

Orisaye's emotional disorder is evident in her incongruity of feelings when she demonstrates the wrong emotion of joy in her present despondent situation. Ironically, Orisaye regards her current condition as worthy of celebration. The absurdity of Orisaye's action is brought to the fore through Osofisan's appropriation of verbal irony as a literary tool. It is awkward to see that Orisaye is celebrating such a forcefully contracted marriage between her and her cruel captor, the

same man who had ordered the slaying of her brothers and facilitated the sexual plunder of her sisters, the same notorious man that orders the destruction of Owu and the loss of their royal status, it is this same man that Orisaye is now happy to meet. It is evident that she has lost her sense of empathy, and is only displaying actions that unpleasant situations such as theirs have forced into her mainstream. As reflected in the excerpt:

Orisaye: ...O women, rejoice, all these men have been marked down for a fate worse than yours ... so let's go animal! take me quickly to my husband who is waiting to die in my arms. Let dirges accompany us to our wedding since kusa is determined to taste the food reserved for a god! together we shall know a most violent death, as Obatala party to funeral feast! so goodbye mother. I can't wait to join my husband on our journey to perdition... Song! Sing my wedding song (p. 33)

Unwritten social codes resulting from socio-cultural conventions perceive and present women as objects to be possessed by men for sexual gratification and dutiful implementation of domestic assignments. For example, another woman victim, Adumaadan, laments not only the loss of her husband and sons but also the loss of control over her body.

Adumaadan: But if you ask me, it is myself I pity now. Deoti is dead at least she can no longer feel any pain. How much luckier then than the rest of us who are still alive, who have been spared perhaps only for greater torment. ... now I am a widow about to be mated with the very man who murdered my husband! (p. 40-41).

Adumaadan's lamentation is an indication that she has no choice but to love and care for her "new husband," who murdered her first husband and children in her presence. She does not see herself as fortunate, though a war survivor, but is forced to love and care for her enemies. Her position reflects the gendered perception of women in the traditional Nigerian Society. The misconceived primary gender roles of women in ancient and contemporary Nigerian society are those of wives and mothers. In conflict and war situations, women, children and physically challenged individuals are always the vulnerable groups, and for this reason, there is always a need to protect them physically emotionally and psychologically.

However, in the play, women's rights are grossly violated, and they are rendered to a state of nothingness. Among other damaging effects, the ugliness of war conflict is also marked by dehumanization and violations of women's bodies. In addition, women lose their natural and personal rights to the control of their womanhood as during wars the majority of them become victims of rape. Erelu laments how the "innocence" of her daughters already betrothed to kings, is "abused" by the rapist warriors. (p. 10).

Apart from rape, the play also depicts the women suffering from other forms of mental torture, as can be seen from Orisaye's experiences. Orisaye is a devotee to the god, Orunmila, and this makes her super human with the ability to forecast the future yet despite this power, she is a victim of war from two major perspectives – her god has disappointed her and the human world dominated by men has also violated her sanity.

Conclusion

The foregoing investigation reveals that part of the social responsibilities of the contemporary Nigerian dramatist is the recreation of experiences that impinge on the psychological conditions of the female gender. Through the dramatisation of literary characters, the mental conditions of female characters in the selected Nigerian dramatic works are projected. Thus, the analyses carried out in this study give attention to female reactions to social and marital frustrations, which is one of the major challenges of social development. The discussion above reveals a range of literary strategies deployed by the playwrights in conveying different manifestations of female characters' psychic reality and psychic scenes in the texts. The male characters in *The Sisters* have military power but are disempowered through death which is a form of permanent absence. They all die before the play starts. We only know about them through flashbacks. So, the measure of power they enjoyed while alive is narrated. Through this method, they are rendered helpless and completely powerless. In Osofisan's *Women of Owu*, the male characters of the Owu kingdom are disempowered by the brutality of war, all of them have been killed by the soldiers who formed the allied forces from Oyo, Ijebu and Ife, while the same soldiers who caused their death are also doomed to face the unforeseen wrath of Lawumi, the angered goddess of Ife, which will lead to their eventual demise before they reach their destination. The female characters in the two texts are left behind to suffer and bear the consequences of actions taken by the absent men. These traumatic experiences are the resultant effect of the psychic reality of the

female characters like Taiwo, Funmi, Toun, and Nana in *The Sisters* and Erelu, Orisaye, Adumaadan and Iyunloye in *Women of Owu*, respectively.

References

- Abrams, M.H. 2005. Dramatic monologue. *A Glossary of literary terms*. 8th Edition. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth. 70-71.
- Abrams, M.H. 1981. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Caruth, C. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Deutsch, M., & Coleman, P.T. 2000. *The Hand Book of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Freud, S. 1955. *Studies on hysteria (1895)*. London: Hogarth Press.
- Freud, S. 1963. *A General introduction to psychoanalysis*. Trans. J. Riviere. New York: Permabooks.
- Freud, S. 2010. *The Interpretation of dreams (1900)*. New York: Basic Books.
- Freud, S. 1960. *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. Trans. James Strachey, London: Heinemann.
- Herman, J. 1997. *Trauma and recovery: the aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books.
- Herman, J.C. 1992. Complex PTSD: a syndrome in survivors of prolonged and repeated trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 5.3: 377-391.
- Osofisan, F. 2006. *Women of Owu*. Ibadan: University Press PLC.
- Yerima, A. 2001. *The sisters*. Lagos: Malthouse press.