

## VIOLENCE IN THE ERA OF SOCIAL MEDIA: A READING OF OYINKAN BRAITHWAITE'S *MY SISTER, THE SERIAL KILLER*

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### Abstract

Violence has a lot of offshoots but the type represented in Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* explains how violence is etched on the mind of a child who has witnessed and suffered different forms of violence by her father and who grows up to challenge and kill any man who as much as raises his voice at her. Braithwaite through her writing explains the part played by social media in aiding to the faster spreading of information which though an advantage can also be a demerit. In the text, Ayoola and Korede's father's death is finally announced by members of his family after they have exhaled the collective breath they have held for a long time due to the violence meted out to them by their patriarch. In later years, when Ayoola becomes the abuser, her victims did not stand that chance because as soon as Korede finishes cleaning up and disposing of the body of one of her sister's victims, the missing body becomes a hashtag on Instagram. Photos and videos Ayoola posted on Instagram further help investigators in identifying and connecting her victims. This article sets out to look at how children react to violence as adults and the way social media help to further spread the news about issues that certain units will rather be left hidden. It will achieve this by showing different reactions to violence by analyzing *My Sister, the Serial Killer* through the lens of Trauma Theory which will further reveal the state of the characters' psyche while handling violent situations.

**Keywords:** Violence, Abuse, Social Media, Hashtag, Trauma, Victim, Patriarchy.

### Introduction

Social media has made the dissemination of information easy and accessible. J. Obar opines that "social media play several significant roles in all domains of our lives such as sharing ideas and suggestions between people, generating contents like comments, digital videos and photos, and messages. It can be said that social media sites are interactive internet-based applications because without the media, people in societies would be isolated from the rest of the

world" (Obar 67). Just like we can obtain information and communicate without hitches, the demerits of such quick access to information lay gloom within reach as communication and information in the wrong hands may eviscerate a populace. The 'Mercy Corps Foundation' sees social media as 'a powerful tool for communication, connection, community and, unfortunately, conflict. It has created new, highly accessible channels for spreading disinformation, sowing divisiveness and contributing to real-world harm in the form of violence, persecution and exploitation' (Mercy Corps Foundation). The advantages of social media go hand in hand with its demerits. This is why 'the Ceasefire Centre for Human Rights' in their essay argue that "deliberate misinformation, including false allegations and dehumanization of targeted groups, has been an enduring feature of conflict over the ages. But in the social media age, the process has accelerated to an unprecedented degree" (Ceasefire Centre). The centre further notes that "there is currently a debate around the effectiveness of restricting social media to prevent violence when tensions are running high. While many governments impose social media controls in an attempt to lessen dissent or division, easing restrictions can unintentionally empower and unite extreme voices" (Ceasefire Centre).

Lending his voice to the merits and demerits of social media, Rotimi Onadipe argues that "social media is a great platform for connecting with people, building relationships, sharing ideas and expanding businesses" (Onadipe). The pervasiveness of the usage of social media also engrosses internet swindlers who set up numerous social media accounts and pages and join many social media platforms to perpetuate harm and dwindle their victims.

### **Braithwaite's Niche in African Literature**

Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* explores domesticity and African tradition in a way that is different from what is obtainable in literature penned by African writers. This shift in her writing is not to be attributed only to the opportunity given to the characters in her text to thrive above laundry, cooking, taking care of their children and being totally subservient to the men in their lives, her work presents us with female characters capable of matching ruthlessness with ruthlessness, taking an eye for an eye and in covering of tracks for crimes they have committed. Braithwaite's work is a deviation from the way African women have been portrayed in literature. Of course, it shows marginalization but at the same time, its depiction of women who stand tall against any form of marginalization trumps the victimization of women in the text. From earlier writings depicting women of African descent, only a handful

are portrayed to transcend the ordinary; nurturing children and pandering to the never-ending requests of their men. Female characters are constructed to characterize the same role placed on them by the culture and traditions of their environment.

Braithwaite's intention with the creation of Ayoola and Korede is to give voice to women who have experienced violence to not just speak up about it but also to act on it. The gap that this work fills in literature surpasses transcending a violent upbringing and cowering under the shackles of patriarchy, it also shows how violence in homes and the society is handled owing to the wizardry of social media. The novel exposes us to two female characters; Korede and Ayoola. Their relationship surpasses the typical sibling relationship. They are also bound by the violence they experienced by their father and also witnessed meted out to their mother. This violence made them swear to protect each other. Korede's relationship with her sister in spite of their bond is mangled up. Her loyalty to her sister sometimes threatens the relationship she has outside of her home.

Reviewing *My Sister, the Serial killer*, N. Roy concentrates on the bond between Ayoola and Korede, the wealth of the siblings' family and Korede's loyalty to Ayoola which always makes her find herself in a dilemma. While also reviewing the text, Lanre Apata talks about the damaging effects of patriarchy in the twenty-first century and the importance of bond and therapy for the victims of domestic violence. Reviewing the work for *The New York Times* Article, R. Fiammetta explores the violence that informs Ayoola's actions; her past with her violent father and the condition that informs her choice of the knife which cuts down her victims. She also explored the writing style of Braithwaite which further helps to show the distinction between it and other texts that bear similar background. Our concern in this research will be how violence is evaluated in the text especially its magnification through social media.

***My Sister, the Serial Killer* and the depiction of violence: Patriarchy as a background that props Braithwaite's creation of the serial killer character.**

While exploring the functions of social media in the swift dissemination of information, we will also look at domestic violence, murder, the subjugation of women and patriarchy as issues tied to the crux of the text. Describing patriarchy as a structure that funds the oppression of women and the way it is analysed in literature, Asante and Mazama see "matriarchy, and the matrilineal system of the ancient southern societies, as barbaric and sexually promiscuous.

This pervasive notion on which patriarchy has based its assumption of superiority has left an undeniable curse on women and it has always been and still is the ultimate reason for the oppression of women in society" (Molefi and Mazama 395). In describing patriarchy, Asante and Mazama also note that patriarchy is "a system that is both oppressive and discriminatory. Patriarchy is oppressive in all areas of society, including social, economic, political and cultural. It is discriminatory in its control of access to power, management of resources and benefits, and in manipulation of public and private power structures" (Molefi and Mazama 395). There is no explanation for patriarchy that shows its merits to modern women since education and literacy have made more women to be aware of their rights. This awareness stands in opposite direction as the features of patriarchy and combats for their annihilation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Trauma theory owes its existence and application to literature and literary works and to the impartation of psychoanalysis. This theory helps to explore the impact, the result and the workings of violence and thus will be fit like a glove in analyzing violence in *My Sister, the Serial Killer*. Traumatic experiences are connected to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) which Cathy Caruth in "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, narrative and History" defined as "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event" (Caruth 45). For Patricia Clough, "Trauma is the engulfment of the ego in memory. But memory might be better understood not as unconscious memory so much as memory without consciousness and therefore, incorporated, body memory, or cellular memory" (Clough 6).

Discussing the exploration of trauma in literary works, Ezinne Odinye notes that "in any trauma novel, the multiple models of trauma and memory explored by the literary artist draws a reader's attention to the role of place (setting), which functions to portray trauma's effects through metaphoric and material resources" (Odinye 45). She further contends that "trauma novel validates how a traumatic occurrence disrupts the relationship between an individual and other people in the society by challenging vital assumptions about moral behaviours and social relationships that are connected to definite environments". (Odinye 45).

Trauma studies is embedded in psychoanalytic criticism which help answer questions posed about human actions. Applying Trauma criticism to this study will help reveal the effects of years of abuse of the major characters and

their consequent abuse on others. From the beginning of the text with Ayoola calling on her sister, "Korede, I killed him", and Korede's response, "I had hoped I will never hear these words again" (Braithwaite 10), it becomes obvious that this is not the sisters' first encounter with violence. The major object of the trauma they suffered is their father whom is supposed to protect them. According to Parker Rhian, "one in three women has suffered from physical violence since the age of 15. In most cases (92% of the time) it's by a man she knows, and that women and children who have experienced abuse and violence at the family level are at a higher risk of incurring a series of mental health disorders including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety" (Rhian 31). Our analysis of this work will adopt Cathy Caruth's "Theory of Return" in trauma studies because trauma can fully be what it is referred to only if the event returns, thus, the post traumatic.

### **The Use of social media and hashtag tool in the dissemination of information**

A hashtag is used to label or make pronounce a content so that when such content is searched for, every information and opinion given about it on social media will appear preceded by the hash sign. Discussing the importance of hashtag, M. Goswami notes that:

It is proven fact that hashtag serves as a data tag while advocating for a cause, connecting the social media users to participate in campaign across platforms through a concisely designed message. Although, the concept and practice of Hashtag activism is relatively new, yet it has achieved a widespread media attention and participation of a large number of netizens for bring issues like human right abuses, justice for victims, awareness on environmental and natural disasters, opposition against government anti-people policies, fund raising, exhorting pressure for bringing law or regulations to curb crimes. (Goswami 4)

Arguing for the introduction of hashtag into social media discussions, Yaverbaum says that Twitter first introduced the hashtag as a means to coordinate conversation online, and the activists of the Occupy Wall Street Movement to coordinate spontaneous protests" (Yaverbuan). He further notes that the "term or the symbol '#'" has been in use on several social media platforms, but most importantly on Twitter. It is used to organize social awareness campaign, initiate

protests and marches, share stories, unite communities, all connected to bring social changes" (Yaverbuan). In the chapter titled, *Instagram*, Korede takes us through the workings of Instagram and how Ayoola wields it to her advantage. It shows how social media sometimes aid in the swiftness of crime coverage. In this particular chapter, the boyfriend that is missing is Femi and the hashtag created for him is "#FemiDurandIsMissing". While Korede cleans and disposes of the body of Femi to avoid any form of connection to them, Ayoola renders her efforts useless by posting on Instagram and telling her followers how she is the last person seen with him. This triggers series of investigation and questions that may have remained unearthed. As Korede puts it, "#FemiDurandIsMissing has gone viral. One post in particular is drawing a lot of attention; Ayoola's. She has posted a picture of them together, announcing herself as the last person to have seen alive, with a message begging anyone to come forward if they know anything that can be of help... She says it makes her look heartless if she says nothing; after all, he was her boyfriend". (Braithwaite 44). Ayoola's obsession with posting about her life and relationships on Instagram is also explored in the part of the narrative when she decides to post her mother's photos on Instagram few minutes of helping the hashtag of her missing boyfriend to trend. The disconnect between the repeated murder she has committed and her quickness to continue her daily life routine as if she is not responsible for the death of three men leaves one wondering on her state of mind. A scene plays out few minutes after lending her voice to the number of persons searching for her dead lover on social media:

Ayoola busies herself chewing on her lip.

"What are you doing?"

"Posting it on Instagram"

"Are you nuts? Or have you forgotten your previous posts? (Braithwaite 49)

The rave over posting on social media is made worse by the inefficiency of the Nigerian defence unit as Korede notes that "Lagos police are not even half that efficient. The ones tasked with keeping our streets safe spend most of their time ferreting out money from the general public to boister their meagre salary" (Braithwaite 52).

Ayoola's obsession with social media is also explored in the scene where her mother searches for a way to make her daughter marriageable; thus, she insists Korede teaches her how to cook. One will be right to think that getting herself involved in other activities will take her mind away from the murder she

commits but her obsession with posting on social media tops her scale of preference:

"Ayoola, are you watching?"

Mm-hmm", she replies as leans on the counter and types furiously on her phone with one hand. She is still gripping the kitchen knife with the other. I go over to her, remove her fingers from the hilt and take the knife from her possession. She blinks.

"Please, focus. After this, we add the *tatase*"

"Got it".

As soon as I turn my back, I hear the tapping sound of her keyboard again...

What are we making again?"

"Efo", the house girl replies. Ayoola nods solemnly and angles her phone over the pot of simmering efo, just as I add the spinach.

"Hey People, Efo loading!"

For a moment, I am frozen, spinach still in hand. Could she really be uploading videos to Snapchat? Then, I shake myself out of the trance. I grab the phone from her and hit delete, staining the screen with the oil on my hands. Too soon, Ayoola. Way too soon. (Braithwaite 79)

Networking on social media and updating one's fans and friends about one's life even when one's life is in danger lends credence to the obsession with social media by some Gen-Zs and Millennials.

### **Depiction of Violence in *My Sister, the Serial Killer***

What is important to Braithwaite is not the art of writing in the traditional sense of it. She is more interested in the relationship of the two sisters and their determination to break the manacles of violence and oppression that surround their upbringing. In the text, Braithwaite reveals the foundation of Ayoola's violence. Through flashbacks, we are shown instances of violence meted out to her mother by her father and her mother's refusal to speak up for herself. For her, she grew up in an environment that normalizes violence and is generally patriarchal. Patriarchy is rooted in the society that engenders and fans it. That is why when some women speak out about the abuse they suffer in the hands of their spouse, members of the society who are witnesses to this abuse barely intervene because abuse and violence have been normalized that such ill-treatment is rarely frowned at. It becomes a case of "what exactly are you complaining about? Did you not learn from the way I choose to carry on irrespective of my own abuse"?

Ayoola's maiming of her victims with the same knife that her father cherishes suggests a continuation of the circle of abuse that she learnt and transformed by her father. Her father's violence starts with slams, slaps and kicks but Ayoola takes it a step further by making sure that the threats to her life by her boyfriends and victims ends in death. Of the knife, the narrator Korede says, "I cannot imagine her resorting to stabbing if that particular knife were not in her hand; almost as if it were the knife and not her that was doing the killing. But then, is that so hard to believe? Who is to say that an object does not come with its own agenda? Or that the collective agenda of its previous owners does not direct its purpose still?" (Braithwaite 31).

The knife that Ayoola uses in killing her victims is the connection she has to her dead father who handles the knife with so much care than he did his children. Since it is the object that got the affection that is meant for Ayoola and Korede, Ayoola in her usual weird nature keeps it with her as a reminder of their father's ruthlessness to his children and his affection for a knife. As Korede narrates:

Ayoola inherited the knife from him (and by "inherited" I mean she took it from his possessions before his body was cold in the ground). It made sense she would take it; it was the thing he was most proud of. He kept it sheathed and locked in a drawer, but he would bring it out whenever we had guests to show it off. He would hold the nine-inch curved blade between his fingers, drawing the viewer's attention to the black comma-like markings carved and printed in the pale bone hilt. I used to watch as he squeezed a few drops of oil out, gently rubbing it along the blade with his finger in soft circular motions. This was the only time I ever witness tenderness from him. He took his time rarely taking note of my presence. Once when she thought he had gone out for the day, Ayoola entered his study and found his desk drawer unlocked. She took the knife out to look, smearing it with the chocolate she had just been eating. She was still in the room when he returned. He dragged her by her hair, screaming. I turned up just in time to witness him fling her across the hallway. (Braithwaite 70)

Violence creates a chasm in the relationship between victims and perpetrators in a family unit. In the case of Ayoola, Korede and their father, their father



becomes not a protector, a partner, and a guide, rather, his children see him as a monster, a dreadful being who expends his strength making sure that his wife and children dread him. For their father, he associates violence and oppression with power. As Ayoola puts it: "We didn't call him Daddy. We never had. He was not a daddy, at least not in the way the word "daddy" denotes. One could hardly consider him a father. He was the law in our home" (Braithwaite 128). Their father ruled their home in a brutal manner and refused to show any form of affection to his children. Korede notes that he showed more tenderness to the knife that Ayoola covets and later uses to kill her victims; "when the guests were gone, he would polish the knife meticulously with a rag and a small bottle of rotor ...This was the only time I ever witnessed tenderness from him" (Braithwaite 32).

Ayoola and Korede's father sees his children not as humans but as commodities. This is exemplified in his giving out his daughter to a wealthy businessman in order to curry favour from him. Korede remembers him in this way; "the man looked like a chief, and when we went to the village for Christmas our maternal grandparents always kept us away from chiefs. Apparently, if a chief saw a girl he liked, he would reach out and touch her with his bejeweled cane and she would become his bride, no matter how many wives the man already had; no matter if the girl in question wanted to be his wife or not" (Braithwaite 122-123). From another angle, Ayoola and Korede's stance against the beatings they received from their father which further fueled Ayoola to handle even threats of violence with murder is connected to their resistance to the background that engendered them. They recognize that to thrive against a patriarchal system which on a normal scale, places women at an unfair disadvantage in society, they have to reject the tag of "the ordinary". The ordinary woman sits where she is commanded to sit and nods while decisions about her are made for her. Korede and Ayoola's contraction with their mother whom is an embodiment of the ordinary woman shows their readiness to transcend the cuddles of patriarchy. Their defiance is connected to the goal to feminism which Bressler explains is "to change this degrading view of women so that all women will realize that they are not a "nonsignificant other," but that instead each woman is a valuable person possessing the same privileges and rights as every man" (Bressler103). He also notes that "women, feminists must define themselves and assert their own voices in the arenas of politics, society, education, and the arts. By personally committing themselves to fostering such change, feminists hope to create a society in which the female voice is valued

equally with the male (Bressler 103). This way, woman will not become passive especially when issues that concern them are raised.

Recalling the time her father brought home another woman and the violence that ensued, Korede notes that:

There was a yellow woman in his arms. We came out of our room because Mum was screaming, and they were on the landing. She never raised her voice to him but that night, she was like a banshee; her fro was free of its bands and the restraints adding to the illusion of madness. She went to wrench the woman from his arm. She wasn't even screaming at her husband; it was the interloper whom she was mad at. I remember hissing at my mother even though there were tears in my eyes... He looked at his wife with indifference. "if you don't shut up now, I will deal with you", he informed her firmly. He always carried out his threat... Moments later, he pulled our mother off her feet by her hair and slammed her against the wall. Then he struck her face... the other woman laughed. "See, my boyfriend will not let you touch me." My mother slid down the wall to the ground. They stepped over her and proceeded to the bedroom... The next morning, the banana-coloured girl was gone and we sat around the table for breakfast, silent except for my father, who spoke loudly about the day ahead and congratulated his "perfect wife" on her excellent cooking. He wasn't sucking up; he has moved past the incident. (Braithwaite 195-196)

The last line of this quote shows men's entitlement of women's lives and their well-being. A crime as grievous as physical violence garners goodwill and comfort for Ayoola's father instead of backlash because of the environment that fuels and encourages such act.

In spite of his character, Ayoola and Korede's father death left a vacuum in the lives of the girls. As his reputation is more important than the welfare of his children, he would have ensured his children's safety and made sure the bodies are properly buried. Korede bemoans that "for the first time in my adult existence, I wish he was here. He would know what to do. He would be in control, every step of the way. He wouldn't allow his daughter's grievous error to ruin his reputation, he would have had the whole matter swept under the rug weeks ago" (Braithwaite 64). Korede's thoughts about her father

helping her and her sister cover up a crime as grievous as murder also reiterates that Korede is not entirely innocent as she knows how money changes hands in a corrupt nation. She is also aware that one is not entirely bad; that an influential patriarch may choose to cover up crime committed even in his own home to escape being punished by the law.

### **Conclusion**

The lives of the characters in the text are bound by a common factor; violence. Ayoola and Korede's mother embodies all the qualities of a patriarchal society and its chokehold on women. Her situation is made worse by her complacency and acceptance of men as her superior and her oppressor. Left for their mother, she will want her daughters to toe her path; total dominance of their lives by men. This she demonstrated by her constant nagging of her daughters to just "get a man" as men are all the same. When her husband decided to give out Ayoola without sparing a thought to her feelings, her mother did not raise her voice against marriage contract. With their father's death, Ayoola and Korede choose another path for themselves. Armed with their voices andchutzpah, the girls triumph over an environment that has set them up to cower. We also see the workings of social media in sharp contrast with the period before its advancement. Every time violence is depicted in the text, social media follows as a close second topic. This article thusly explores the role of social media in the depiction, handling and calling-out of violence while bringing to fore the position women have taken in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in handling violence and violent situations.

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