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The Theme of Psychopathy in Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, The Serial Killer*

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ABSTRACT: Psychopathy is severe emotional derangement that culminates into aggressiveness and antisocial behaviour. A psychopathic is a person suffering from emotional or mental disorder; an aggressive, antisocial and highly impulsive person, who feels little or no guilt and is unable to form lasting bonds of affection with other human beings. This paper explores and highlights the character of Ayoola in Oyinkan Braithwaite's novel, *My Sister, The Serial Killer* as it conducts thorough analysis of the presence and manifestation of psychopathic traits, behaviours and tendencies. It also explores the underlying psychological factors and environmental impact in the character under investigation which forms a major theme in the text. The paper employed a qualitative methodology and relied on the psychoanalysis of Ayoola's character to unravel and determine the presence and manifestation of psychopathic traits, behaviours and tendencies. It also explores the underlying psychological factors and environmental influences that contribute to Ayoola's psychopathic behaviour and actions. It examines how the relationship between Ayoola and her sister has helped ignite the conflict in the novel. The paper examines the impact of Ayoola's psychopathy on the narrative structure, plot development, and interactions with other characters in the novel. The paper concludes with a recommendation that the novel should be read based on the theme of psychopathy in order to curb this deviant behaviour in the society.

KEYWORDS: Antisocial, behaviours, psychopathy, serial killer, tendencies.

INTRODUCTION

Literature is often regarded as a mirror reflecting the complexities of human characteristics. Its characters, plots, and themes, for most part, show profound insight into the human condition, shedding light into the dark recesses of the human psyche and moral dilemmas that shape our lives. Considering how psychopathic characters have been a favourite in literature and how they provide a very subtle exploration of human behaviour, it is vital to look at how authors have used the different portrayals and depictions of psychopathy within the context of the story. This paper explores how psychopathy is portrayed and described by authors in their works, especially in Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, The Serial Killer*. This analysis of the image of psychopathy in literature gives a clue to understanding the intricacies of this personality disorder and the effect it has on the individual and society.

In this perspective, Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, The Serial Killer* is a compelling venture into the confluence of literature and life, delving into the dark and disturbing world of psychopathy and the implicated understanding of human behaviour. The novel highlights the dark yet intricate lives of two sisters, Ayoola and Korede, whose lives are intertwined with murder and deceit. The younger sister, Ayoola's habit is killing her boyfriends, hence leaving the mess to be cleared by Korede, the older sister, and for the crimes to be covered up as well. The crux of the novel, however, what keeps the story going is the question of Ayoola's psychopathic tendencies and what drives her to commit murder. Braithwaite structures the story in a way that makes the line between what is right and what is perceived as wrong very unclear, hence making readers question the tricky dimensions of morality and the evil nature of man.

In creating Ayoola's character, the author poses profound questions about the nature of psychopathy, the influence of family dynamics on behaviour, and society's role in shaping individual's perceptions of right and wrong. "Psychopathy is a mental disorder in which an individual manifests a moral and antisocial behaviour, lack of ability to love or establish meaningful personal relationships, extreme egocentricity, failure to learn from experience, and many more" (Baumeister 411). Similarly Cleckley (1988), an American psychiatrist in the *Mask of Sanity* attempts to clarify some issues about the so-called psychopathic personality. He avers his perception in a clinical interview with parents in a locked institution via a seminal work and most influential clinical description of psychopathy in the 20th century. The basic elements of psycopathy outlined by Cleckley are still relevant today. According to him: "the title refers to the normal "mask" that conceals the mental disorder of the psychopathic person" (p.169). To say the obvious, this is Cleckley's conceptualisation of the psychopathic personality. The novel's elucidation of psychopathic tendencies is in one crucial regard: in the context of modern discussions about criminal behaviour as a form of psychopathy in the face of a new mental health wave. Even though she portrays a psychopathic character, as a lens, her actions in the broader societal representation point to aspects involved in mental illness, social conformity, and the pursuit of power and control, notwithstanding the novel's preoccupation with the character

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Ayoola, one gap still exists in the literature, which is a detailed analysis of the tendencies of the psychopathic lady. It sounds as though indeed a deliberate tendency for both Ayoola and her sister, Korede as in this excerpt: "we need to move the body", I tell her (Ayoola). "Are you angry at me?" perhaps a normal person would be angry, but what I feel now is a pressing need to dispose of the body. When I got here, we carried him to the boot of my car, so that I was free to scrub and mop without having to countenance his cold stare" (Braithwaite, 2018, p 37).

Although some authors have conducted studies on psychopathy portrayal in fictional characters, few studied the case of Ayoola in *My Sister, The Serial Killer* precisely, and the implication of her behaviours on the understanding of psychopathy in an actual setting, this serves as a gap in the existing literature that the present study hopes to fill with an in-depth look at the complexity of this psychological phenomenon through the character of Ayoola in Braithwaite's novel. This paper through the combination of textual analysis and theorised insights contributes to a more detailed understanding of psychopathic tendencies and their portrayal in literature; it bridges the gap between fiction and reality during the exploration of the human psyche. To trace the deeply buried psychological layers within the characters of *My Sister, The Serial Killer*, the paper abides by psychoanalytic literary criticism. This psychoanalytic literary criticism, however, is very well rooted in the Freudian and post-Freudian theories, which will provide a tremendous frame for trying to explore the depth of the psyche of characters. From the dissection of the unconscious motivations behind characters' actions to the unravelling of the symbolic importance of events, this approach weaves a vibrant tapestry of the understanding not only of the subtleties of character development but also of their unconscious motivations, past experiences, and the deep symbolism in their actions.

This paper offers a comprehensive analysis of psychopathic tendencies which form the core theme in *My Sister, The Serial Killer*by Oyinkan Braithwaite, illuminating the ways in which literature reflects and refracts our understanding of the human psyche. The study contributes a deeper appreciation of the nuances of psychopathic behaviour and its portrayal in contemporary fiction through its interdisciplinary approach and critical engagement with existing scholarship.The study also advances the understanding of psychopathy in literature and offers valuable insights into the relationship between literature, psychology, and society.

PSYCHOPATHY IN THE NOVEL

The novel, *My Sister, The Serial Killer* presents a unique exploration of Psychopathic tendencies through the character of Ayoola and by extension her sister Korede who in practicality is her sister's saving grace. While the narrative portrays the complexities of Ayoola's actions and their consequences, there remains a gap in the scholarly analysis of how psychopathy and its broader implications are depicted in the novel. The central problem addressed by this paper is the need for a comprehensive examination of the portrayal of Psychopathic tendencies in *My Sister, The Serial Killer*, focusing on Ayoola's character. This involves the study of the motivations behind Ayoola's behaviour, the impact of her actions on other characters, and the underlying themes of morality and culpability. There is also a lack of research into the broader implications of the novel's portrayal of psychopathy for the understanding of mental illness, criminal behaviour, and societal norms. This paper addresses this gap by exploring how Braithwaite's depiction of psychopathy in the novel contributes to the understanding of issues and challenges contending in the novel surrounding mental health and criminality in society.

In Ayoola's character, there is the presence and manifestation of Psychopathic traits, behaviours, and tendencies, there are underlying psychological factors and environmental influences that contribute to Ayoola's Psychopathic behaviour and actions in the novel. For instance, the relationship between Ayoola and her sister, Korede helps to ignite the conflict in the novel. In sum, Ayoola'spsychopathy impacts the novel on the narrative structure, plot development, and interactions with other characters. The novel approaches the subject of Psychopathic tendencies uniquely, mainly through the character of Ayoola. Yet, in the narration of the complexities of her actions and consequences, a gap remains in scholarly analysis as to how psychopathy is depicted in this novel and its broader ramifications. Thus, the central focus of this paper is on how to offer a comprehensive analysis of the portrayal of psychopathic tendencies as a theme in *My Sister, The Serial Killer*, focusing on Ayoola's character. This includes the study of the motivations underlined in the behaviour of Ayoola, the actions affecting other characters, and, most importantly, undermining themes of morality and culpability.

It is also not researched how the presentation of psychopathy in the novel may affect the general understanding of mental disorders, the causes of criminal activity and social norms. Accordingly, this paper discusses how Braithwaite's *My Sister, The Serial Killer* contributes to the understanding of issues and challenges that compete in the novel surrounding mental health and criminality in society. This paper broadly looks at the analysis of the character of Ayoola in *My Sister, The Serial Killer*. The focus is on identifying and discussing psychotraits, behaviours, and tendencies of a psychopath. That means one needs to look at how these psychological factors, mixed with environmental influences and underlying motivation, interplay and come to make Ayoola's psychopathy. This is portrayed in the narration, either as the development in the storyline of the theme or through the interaction of characters. To make valuable the appreciation of psychopathic representations in literature, this paper finds its strength in character analysis and interpretation of the narration.

Signification of the study on the theme of psychopathy in *My Sister, The Serial Killer*

This study is significant to the society as it provides an understanding of the psychopathic tendencies in literary discourse, using the novel *My Sister, The Serial Killer*. This paper quickly points out details regarding Ayoola in the narrative and the psychopathy of the scene brings valuable information toward the complexities of human behaviour and the delineation of mental disorders in fiction. This brings to light the shades of psychopathy, its outward appearances, the underlying motivations, consequences, and overall impact on individuals and society.Observant readers, through a careful analysis of the character of Ayoola would probably be able to extract insight into the dimensions of psychopathic behaviour, such as manipulativeness, lack of empathy, and impulsivity. This would lead to further insightful discussions and debates on mental health and criminal behaviour, an understanding which induce more awareness and empathy towards humans with psychopathic traits. This study provides an inquiry into the representation of psychopathy in contemporary fiction. It widens, therefore, the lens in literary analysis, through the perusal of views that have been advanced about mental ill health and criminality from the perspective of this novel.

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The critical analysis of thematic concerns gives an invaluable insight into how authors navigate the intricacies of complex psychological terrain characteristic of their stories. Further, the study of the theme of psychopathy in the novel closes the gap between fiction and reality, providing an interdisciplinary dialogue between literature, psychology, and society. The fact of looking at the depiction of psychopathy in literature and motivating scholarly cooperation between the two disciplines in further research with the potential for a better understanding of human behaviour and some mental health problems could increase. This kind of interdisciplinary approach merges the study of literature with psychological perspectives of human condition, thereby advancing our understanding of the complexities of the human condition. Besides, this study has gone functional and practical implications for the readers, the educators, and the professionals in the mental health field.

By reinforcing popular fiction's portrayal of psychopathy as is evident in *MySister, The Serial Killer*, this study engages readers with an invitation to consider their attitudes – whether by theories or spontaneity towards mental illness and crime. In fact, this paper looks at the all-round analysis of psychopathic tendencies in literature, specifically in *My Sister, The Serial Killer* by Oyinkan Braithwaite. Exposure to such portrayal of psychopathy within the context of the novel adds to our understanding of human behaviour, the incredibly broadening scope of literary analysis, and the nurturing of interdisciplinary tendencies insightful and implication-laden, thepaper enriches our appreciation of the complexities of psychopathy and its portrayal in contemporary fiction. McCord and McCord (1956) define psychopath as "an antisocial, aggressive, highly impulsive person, who feels little or no guilt and is unable to form lasting bonds of affection with other human beings"(2). Explaining psychopathy, Kiehl and Hoffman (2011)in their research paper entitled: "The Criminal Psychopath: History, Neuroscience, Treatment and Economics" state that:

Psychopathy has always been part of human society; that is evident from its ubiquity in history's myths and literature. Greek and Roman mythology are strewn with psychopaths, medea being the most obvious. Psychopaths populate the bible, at least the Old Testament, perhaps beginning with Cain. Psychopaths have appeared in the steady stream of literature from all cultures since humans first put pen to paper (3). Similarly, Caroll (1990) defines psychopathy as a mental disorder and as a personality disorder thus:

Psychopathy is a mental disorder in which an individual manifests a moral and antisocial behaviour, lack of ability to love or establish meaningful personal relationships, extreme egocentricity, failure to learn from experience and many more. Psychopathy is a personality disorder defined by a distinctive cluster of behaviours and inferred personality traits, most of which society views as pejorative (411). However, there is distinguishing characteristic of a psychopath that Sandridge notes which is exactly the quality that Ayoola exhibits in *My Sister, The Serial Killer* as is evident in Ayoola's statement about starting a relationship with Dr.Tade thus: "I just don't think it is wise to start something with him". Cause I'll hurt him". I am not saying that" (Braithwaite, 2018, p.6a). According to Sandridge, (2016), the psychopathic person stands in stark contrast to conventional expectation: he often appears perfectly as rational, in control, and calculating (2).

Qualities ofpsychopathic characters and other characters in the novel

Meyer Abrams and Godfrey Harpham (2015) define characters as "persons represented in a dramatic or narrative work, which are interpreted by the reader as presenting particular moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities by inferences from what the persons say and their distinctive way of saying it – the dialogue – and from what they do – the actions. The grounds in the characters' temperament, desire, and moral nature for their motivation" (46). Similarly, Dickson (2023) states that "characters in this context refer to human figures and personalities created by the author of the story to occupy the fictional landscape of the story" (80).

To a psychopath, the feeling of remorse is completely absent in his/her life. In *My Sister, The Serial Killer*, there is no element of remorse in the life of Ayoola, rather it is found in her sister, Korede. This element of lack of remorse in Ayoola is explained in the words ofYinka to Ayoola thus:

When Ayoola returns that evening, she fingers the roses, takes their picture and is about to post it online when I remind her, once again, that she has a boyfriend who has been missing for a month and who she is supposed to be mourning. She pouts "How long am I meant to post boring sad stuff?" "You don't have to post and at all" "How long though?" "A year I guess". You must be kidding me" (Braithwaite, 2018, pp.76-77).

Remorse is a gnawing distress arising from a sense of guilt for past wrongs. It is a distressing emotion that rises from acceptance of personal responsibility of an act of harm against another person. Often, with further reflection, the remorseful individual may desire that the act had never occurred at all and wish to make restitution towards the victim. It is not a term with standardised meaning across the sciences, social sciences, and humanities – or even within any particular field. Bandes 2016 speaks of the criminal justice systems having reliance on evaluating defendants' remorse as fundamentally flawed, as it hinges on subjective, often inaccurate assessments of the demeanour rather evidence" (p.139). Given that Bandes highlights the unreliability of judging remorse based on demeanour, other experts suggest other alternatives. Bandes pushes for a deeper understanding of the role of emotion in law, particularly on how they influence legal decisions of life and liberty. Panwar and Suvidha (2017) refers to a family of emotions they call the "retractive emotion". These include guilt, shame, regret, contrition, repentance, and remorse. Their shared core is the sense of withdrawal from one's action, omission or state of being, entailing the feeling of "I wish I had acted otherwise" (15). Another quality that a psychopath lacks is the feeling of guilt and the feeling to apologise for any wrong action or misdeed. Baumeister et al (1991) define guilt as a "form of emotional distress and a common factor in behavioural decisions. People invoke guilt feelings to apologise for misdeeds, to express sympathy, to manipulate others, to refuse sex, to discipline children, to bolster self-control, and more, and they perform or avoid a stunning variety of actions because of the anticipation of guilt" (243).

In the novel, Ayoola feels no guilt when she killed Dr. Tade, her boyfriend and police haunts her for the crime. She claims that she is stabbed by Tade, rather than admit her crime, her mother interrogates her in the novel thus: "can you tell us what happened?" "He proposed to me and I said I wasn't interested and he lost it. He attacked me" (Braithwaite, 2018, p. 209). In succession, Ayoola kills her three boyfriends and shows no sign of guilt or remorse. In guilt, the object of concern is some specific action (or failure to act). There is regret or remorse over "the bad that was done" and a sense of tension that often serves as a motivation for reparative action. The tension, remorse and regret engendered by guilt can be quite uncomfortable, particularly when reparation is blocked for one reason or another. Consequently as a psychopath, Ayoola is untruthful and displays antisocial behaviour. As in the above excerpt, she lies to her mother and sibling and she wants them to believe her untruthfulness and

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antisocial behaviours in the novel. From the narrator in the novel (Korede), it is clear that Ayoola is quite untruthful in her discussion with her boyfriend Femi's mother concerning the where about of her son thus:

"...clear, did he tell you if he was going to go anywhere?" I shake my head violently. "No, ma I left him pretty late", Ayoola replies. "He was not at work the next day" "Ummm... sometimes he used to jog at night ma". I know, I told him, I told him all the time it was not safe" (Braithwaite, 2018, pp. 22-23).

According to Mahon (2008), "A lie is an untruthful assertion, that is, the speaker believes the statement that is made is not true, or is false... the speaker is attempting to get the hearer to believe a falsehood. Note, however, that this falsehood is not normally/what the speaker is stating. Rather, the falsehood that the speaker is attempting to get the hearer to believe is that the speaker believes the statement to be true" (9).

Antisocial behaviour is a cluster of problematic and disruptive, aggressive and rule-breaking behaviours, the core of which involves persistent violations of societal norms and the rights of others, for instance, bullying, killing, stealing and many others. Just imagine the manner Ayoola kills Femi with a knife jab straight to his heart. "She killed him on the first strike a jab straight to the heart. But then she stabbed him twice more to be sure. He sank to the floor. She could hear her own breathing and nothing else" (Braithwaite, 2018, p. 7). According to Hushmani and Johnson (2017), "Antisocial behaviour is a description for all behaviours attitudes, and personality traits that people engage in that appear to be dysfunctional, in that they often have negative interpersonal and societal outcomes" (1).

CONCLUSION

In literary works, psychopathic characters often serve as intriguing subjects for exploring human psychology and behaviour. For instance, in *My Sister, The Serial Killer*, Ayoola embodies traits commonly associated with psychopathy. She kills three of her boyfriends in succession without empathy and having a pendent for violence. This novel mirrors the society and links psychopathy to manipulative behaviour, receptive character, and a callous disregard for others. In contrast, Ayoola's sister is protective of her as she kills her three boyfriends. She is practically her sister's saving grace as she knows the best solutions for cleaning the blood of her sister's victims. She also provides the trunk of her car to secure her sister's victims. Not that she gets any credit for the coverage.

In a similar vein, in Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* Amy Dunne exhibits psychopathic tendencies through her manipulative and calculated actions as Ayoola does in *My Sister, The Serial Killer*. A thorough reading of Braithwaite's *My Sister, The Serial Killer* reveals the characteristic trait of manipulation for no personal gain, which Ayoola expertly employs throughout the novel for which she gets at her victims. This portrayal aligns with studies indicating that "psychopaths often use charm and manipulation to achieve their goals (Flynn, 2012, pp. 120 – 125). Moreover, the character of Tom Ripley in Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented* Mr. Ripley provides another compelling example of psychopathic traits in literature. Ripley's ability to deceive and manipulate others while "maintaining a facade of normalcy reflects research findings on the superficial charm and deceit commonly observed in psychopathic individuals" (Highsmith, 1955, p. 85).

Ayoola in *My Sister, The Serial Killer* embodies psychopathic traits such as lack of empathy, strategic planning and a penchant for violence. Her calculated and remorseless behaviour throughout the story aligns with the characteristics of a psychopath, traits like impulsivity, aggression, and a disregard for societal norms. Her manipulative actions and lack of emotional depth also reflect the common characteristics associated with psychopathic personalities. These literary portrayals align with scholarly research on psychopathy and sociopathy, highlighting key traits such as manipulative behaviour, lack of empathy, and a tendency towards violence. By examining these characters and their interactions within the respective narratives, readers gain insight into their impact on interpersonal relationships and society in general.

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