

THE POWER OF NARRATIVE: ARTISTIC REPRESENTATION OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN SUNNY ALLI'S *LAGOS GIRLS* – A FILM

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Abstract

The power of narratives in films offers a profound means of reflecting on, questioning and addressing societal issues. This research explores the artistic representation of domestic violence in *Lagos Girls*, a film by Sunny Alli, analysing how the narrative structure, visual techniques and character portrayals contribute to the depiction of this sensitive and often silenced issue. Through a detailed analysis of key scenes and character arcs, and by incorporating Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, the study examines the role of film in raising awareness about domestic violence within Nigerian society while also considering its broader societal implications. By delving into the complex interplay between personal trauma and social norms, the paper demonstrates how *Lagos Girls* employs artistic expression to challenge traditional narratives surrounding gender, power and violence. Furthermore, the study highlights the potential of film as a medium for advocacy and social change, offering a nuanced understanding of how domestic violence is both represented and contested in contemporary African cinema.

Keywords: artistic representation, domestic violence, visual techniques, film.

Introduction:

Conflict as a literary concept connotes the struggle between two opposing forces. These opposing forces could be human or non-human characters upon whose actions or in-actions the work of art depends. Literature reflects social life in its entire ramification and it is shaped and conditioned by the realities of the society. Society itself is influenced, affected and controlled by the human elements in it; otherwise it would have been static. The human elements in literature and society relate and interact, this coming together, whether in the society or literature introduces diverse interactions which result in what Akorede (2011) describes as a "network of actions and reactions".

The portrayal of the intricacies and the complexities of human relationships in African literature and popular literature prepare the ground for the depiction of varying levels of conflicts. Dare while discussing the importance of conflict in literature observes that it helps in the development of plot. He describes conflict as the "struggle between two opposing forces". Conflict according to him could be physical, external, spiritual or internal. Five basic forms of conflict have been identified in literature. These are: (a) man versus the society, (b) man versus elementals (gods), (c) man versus nature, (d) man versus self and (e) man versus man (Akorede, 2011).

Forms, Causes and Methods of Marital Conflict

Marital conflict or domestic violence as a pattern of behaviour involves the molestation by one partner who sees himself or herself as superior to the other in an intimate relationship such as marriage, cohabitation, dating or even within the family. Marital conflict that more often than not results in violence can occur in many difference forms, ranging from physical aggression or assault, to threats, sexual abuse or marital rape, sex denial or domineering. It can also appear in the form of intimidation or stalking or pestering, neglect or financial deprivation or irresponsibility. Studies have identified eight distinct forms of the manifestations of violence in marital relationship (Cronholm, Fogarty *et. al.* (2011), Idris, Aziz, Khalid *et. al.* (2018) and Lazareanu and Leontie (2023). These include:

(i) Common Couple Conflict: Cronholm, P., Fogarty, C. *et. al.* (2011) describe common couple conflict as the most common form of marital conflict in existence which often occurs between couples since marital conflict is a popular phenomenon in marriages. It arises in a single argument where one or both partners physically abuse

each other. However, it sometimes unintentionally gets out of hands thereby leading to other forms of violence that could be life threatening if it is not properly managed.

(ii) Intimate Terrorism: in Idris, Aziz, Khalid *et. al.* (2018) perspectives, this involves the use of coercive control and power by one partner over the other, that is, one of the partners is violent and controlling. This could be through the use of threat, intimidation or isolation. A partner wishes to control every aspect of the other partner's life through the art of dictation. It could include a mutually violent action such as battering and that might require medical attention. It is an act that is often perpetrated mostly by men against women who often times, try to also violently resist such violent actions. Women in this regard often act more violently in retaliation or self-defense than the men.

(iii) Mutual Violent Control: Idris, Aziz, Khalid *et. al.* (2018) also assert that this occurs when individuals or both partners are engaged in both controlling and violent behaviour. This is also known as violent resistance or self-defense.

(iv) Physical Abuse/Battery: Unlike the common couple conflict, Lazareanu and Leontie (2023) argue that it is an intentional and unwanted contact with a person with an abusive behaviour whose action causes pain or leaves bruises on an individual. It is a way through which a partner who sees himself or herself as being superior maintains power and control over the other partner through the use of physical force in a way that ends up injuring the person or puts him or her at the risk of being injured. This act could involve scratching, punching, biting, strangling or kicking. A less powerful individual in this instance may also be molested through throwing of objects, pulling of the hair, grabbing of one's clothes, the use of sharp and harmful objects such as knife, rape as well as grabbing one's face to maintain eye contact. This act is often very harmful and could require medical attention at the end of the incidence.

The above discussed forms of abuse are capable of causing traumatic experience for the victim, hence the exploration of Cathy Caruth's trauma theory.

Theoretical Framework

Trauma theory examines the impact of a traumatic experience of an individual. It queries how traumatic experiences, either psychological, emotional, financial or physical affect human beings, their relationships and their societies. Rooted in both psychology and literary studies, trauma theory draws from works of psychologists like Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. Caruth (1996) posits that individuals who experience significant psychological distress due to traumatic events often struggle to articulate or fully process their experiences. The theory explores the ways trauma disrupts both the internal psyche and external realities, leading to fragmentation, silence and delayed or fragmented memory. In literature and film, trauma theory seeks to understand how trauma is represented, transmitted and how it shapes identity, narrative and collective memory.

One of the tenets of trauma theory is the unrepresentability of traumatic experience. This implies that the representation of the effects of a traumatic experience is difficult because the victim lacks adequate words in language or other traditional forms of expression. This is as a result of the fact that the traumatic experience overwhelms the individual's ability to process or narrate the experience, leading to silence or a sense of fragmentation in the narrative. Caruth sees trauma as a "wound that speaks" (88) but that it often defies clear articulation.

Similarly, trauma theory also concentrates on the fragmentation of memory due to the overwhelming impact of the events which causes the mind's inability to process it. By implication, victims of trauma experience gaps in their memories which might result in distorted perceptions or flashbacks. In literary and cinematic representations, this fragmentation often manifests as a fragmented narrative or non-linear storytelling, reflecting the disjointed and distorted nature of memory after trauma.

Artistic Representation of Trauma in Sunny Alli's *Lagos Girls*

Sunny Alli's *Lagos Girls*, directed by Abiodun Olanrewaju, represents a female controlled marital conflict depicted between Omoyeni's parents and Adeniyi on the one hand, and Omoyeni and Adeniyi on the other. The film has its setting in Lagos. Lagos was the federal capital city of Nigeria until 1991 when it was moved to Abuja. It is a cosmopolitan city with several ethnic groups, cultures, traditions and religious groups which result in an amalgamation of sometimes contradictory ethical values and standards. This has made Lagos a highly notorious setting for the manifestation of the good, the bad and the ugly. Attitudes and behaviours of people living in Lagos as a geographical entity, range from the extreme of virtue to the extreme of vices. It is a place where weird civilization originates from and whoever comes from Lagos is seen as an "eye opener" because they bring along with them new ways of life which are not known by people in the rural areas.

Vices cohabit with values, immorality compete with morality and the people living in this environment are conditioned, influenced and controlled by the realities to either bring out the best or the worst in life. Some of the characters live the life that is unacceptable in the society. This is exemplified in the characters of Morola one of Adeniyi's girlfriends and her friends, Joyce and Rukayat. They are portrayed as pretender in the films. Morola introduces Joyce as someone who grew up in the United Kingdom which implies that she does not understand

Yoruba while Rukayat is introduced as someone who does not speak Yoruba. Unfortunately, they both sit when Adeniyi speaks Yoruba language to them asking them to sit. Also, when Adeniyi abandons them at the eatery, they both speak Yoruba language to the eatery attendant when she starts embarrassing them. It was discovered that the friends lied to Adeniyi about their identity and they had no money to clear the debts. This sets the ground for the discussion and understanding of the setting in *Lagos Girls*.

It is crucial at this juncture to examine some of the techniques employed in depicting the effects of the conflicts on its victims in Lagos girls.

One of the techniques used in depicting the extent of the conflict is the angle of the camera, to give close shots of important situations and scenes. For instance, a close shot of the individual's different plates of food is made to emphasise the difference between the size of meat served to the father and his wife and daughter. Also, when Omoyeni eventually brings her father's meal, a close shot is given to it to emphasise how she drops it on the table without any sign of respect.

The camera close-up of the mother's meal is taken as the woman pulls a piece of meat with her teeth. This clearly shows the extent of the humiliation being experienced by the father. Through the help of the camera, the audience is able to make a comparison between the expected feeling of either satisfaction or frustration. Another instance of the use of the camera shot is when Clara gets set to go out. The camera closes up on her and a close shot of the clothes and shoes she is wearing as well as the bag she carries is slowly taken. This is also done to expose the type of phone she uses. This is further acknowledged by her other house mates who give an analysis of what her appearance is worth as they compare her appearance with the place she stays.

Another technique employed in the film is the use of gestures. For instance, while Omoyeni's father is waiting to be served his meal, he sits on the chair with one hand on the arm of the chair and the other one placed on his lips as he looks away from his wife who is already eating. This gesture represents sadness and loneliness among the Yoruba. His wife on the contrary, sits on the chair with her wrapper falling in between her legs as she slowly eats her food, not minding the fact that her husband has not been served.

The look on the father's face when the food is eventually served, reveals that of unbelief, embarrassment and dissatisfaction:

Baba: *Wa n bi bayi, Omoyeni,
Ewo 'leleyii ti o gbe kale bii ounje ikoko?*

Father: Come here, Omoyeni,
What did you put here like a baby's food?

This makes Omoyeni to change her countenance as she looks at the food in disbelief.

Omoyeni: *Ounje omo ikoko bii bawo? Ah!
Eyi to kan yin ni mog be siwaju yin yen*

Omoyeni: How is it like a baby's food?
I just served you your own share of the meal.

The father is surprised and shocked. He touches his chest unbelievable and responds:

Father: *Ounje to kan emi?*
Omoyeni: *(pelu igboya) Yeh!*
Father: *(o na owo si Omoyeni ati si abo iyawo re)
Omoyeni lenu e
Pelu aduru nkan to bu siwaju iya e yii*

Father: My own share?
Omoyeni: (with all effontery) Yes!
Father: (points from Omoyeni to his wife's plate)
Is that coming from you?
With all these that you served your mother with?

The mother on the other hand looks contemptuously at her husband and smiles to her daughter, blinking to her with one eye as a sign of approval.

Omoyeni: *(o n rerin) Daddy, e funny gan o
Nkan to wa niwaju mummy?
Sebi mummy lo nko owo obe sile
Tori e ni won se le mo eran siwaju won ba yi
Ti o ba wu yin, ti e fe je eran to to yii ni nu obe
E ko owo obe sile, very simple, abi?*

Omoyeni: You are too funny (laughs)
Are you referring to what I served mummy?
Is she not the one providing for the upkeep of the family?
That is why she could have these varieties of meat to

herself alone. If you wish to have such varieties of meat
in your meals too, provide for the upkeep of the home.

As soon as she finishes speaking, she walks arrogantly out on her father. She is stopped by her mother who, as a way of intimidating her husband, uses a baritone voice to ask Omoyeni to make a cup of cold tea for her.

During this period, the father's gesture helps to express his feeling. He sits quietly on the chair as his daughter speaks, his finger still pointing to his wife's plate with embarrassment written all over him. To show the extent of the embarrassment, he slowly puts his finger in his mouth as he looks away from his wife and daughter as a sign of regret. He rinses his hands, getting ready to eat while the other child comes in with several pieces of meat in her meal. At the sight of this, the mother scornfully smiles and the father looks from the daughter to his wife and mischievously smiles to himself.

Another instance is when Omoyeni introduces Faruq to her mother and insists he should add five more notes to the money he intends to give her mother. Faruq meets her father where he is washing and when he is about to give him some money, Omoyeni stops him by pulling his hands back. When the father sees Omoyeni's actions, he smiles and shakes his head. When Omoyeni comes back to pick her box, her father asks her to help fetch some water and she declines, to his uttermost surprise. Still with his mouth opened, he slowly stands up and keeps looking into space, he looks at himself from head to toe, closes his mouth and immediately reopens it again, speechless. In the same vein, Omoyeni instructs her sister to switch off the generator which she buys, despite the fact that her father claims he needs it. She abuses her father that he is irresponsible to have made her buy the generator.

The language of the film is enriched with the use of proverbs. Proverbs express the strength in an utterance that cannot be achieved through the use of everyday words. The mother advises through the use of proverbs that one should make do with whatever one has. Also it points to the facts that no human is perfect and that a woman who is rejected by one man would eventually be married by another man. According to the mother, one of the proverbs she uses implies that one would not refuse to get married because some women are bad – *omi o ni ru lamu ki a to ri e fo sa!* The woman in this context is likened to a water pot and her behaviour is likened to the unsettled water in the water pot. In this regard, the water pot would not be broken because the water in it is not clean. That is, a woman would not be abandoned because of her bad behaviours. In her words:

Mother: *Se o ri ibi ti o o soro de, oko mi, o ye mi ju bee lo*
Sugbon ranti o, omi o ni ru lamu,
Ki a tori e fo sa
Se o ri ounje ti omode ba ko sile baayi,
Omo kan naa ni o ma a je
Bi obinrin kan ba se ti e
Iwo naa a de bo sita, waa wa elomiran
Oko mi, oto ni ki eniyan wa onigbese e dele ko ba
Oto ni ki tun bao wo lowo e

Mother: I understand beyond your imagination. But
remember, a pot would not be broken because the water
is unsettled and a food refuses by one child would be
consumed by another child. If a lady misbehaves, you will
find another one. My dear, it is one thing to plan, and it is
another thing to achieve it.

Code-mixing is another technique in the use of language in the film. Instances of code mixing are evident in Omoyeni's conversation with her friends, husband and relatives. Words such as 'funny', 'ignore', 'to make it worse', 'quarter', 'craze', and 'meaning', amongst other words are used by some of the characters in the movie.

Characterisation in the film is another element through which the issue of marital conflict is expressed. The film-maker brings his characters to life through the information they provide about themselves from the way they speak and their relationship with other people in the movie. For instance, Omoyeni's act of waywardness is determined through her sister who claims that she has the right to check her sister's bag since she leaves home for five days, and that she is sure that she is now rich. This is confirmed when she tells Faruq that she does not feel like sleeping at home and that she needs to pack her bag so that she can spend the weekend with him. Omoyeni's threat to her husband when he ignores her friends also exposes her personality. In her words:

Omoyeni: *O de mo mi o! Ti emi ba se quarter n kan*
Ti o se yen fun e o mo pe o ma a dun e gan!
O mo mi o 'Yeni ti mo ba bere, won ma a ni wipe craze
ori mi ti bere ma worry, ti awon ore ti e ba ti wa, obe to
gbona lalala ni mo maa da le won lori!

Omoyeni: ...and you know me quite well. If I do a quarter of
what you have done, you will feel very bad about it.
You know me, 'Yeni. If I start with you, people would

say I have gone crazy. Do not worry, I will pour a very hot pot of soup on your friends when they come.

Adeniyi's constant silence when there is conflict in the home or whenever his wife insults him portrays him as a good man who tries to avoid problems. All through the movie, Adeniyi never instigated conflict in the home. Though, he tries to make his stand known as the man in the home, he never forces his wife to do anything.

Adeniyi's experiences with different women have not been palatable. This is made evident in his conversation with his mother when she is appealing to him to get married. In his words:

Mother: *Jowo oko mi, s'aanu mi...*

Mo fe ki o wa iyawo alalubarika wale wa

Fun mi oko mi, s'aanu mi

Adeniyi: *Maami*

Se e ri, ko si omo gidi ni ita mo

Bi e ti n wo mi yii, Maami, mo ti fe orisirisi

Gbogbo won patapata ni mo ti se exam fun

Opolopo won lo fail

Won o ni iwa, won o dara

Iwonba change to wa lowo eniyan ni won fe gba

Mother: Please, my dear, I want you to get a good wife

Adeniyi: My mother,

Look, there are no good girls out there again.

As you are looking at me, I've had many girlfriends.

I have tested all of them and most of them failed

They are not good!

They are only interested in my money.

The above submission validates Alli's indictment of some women as being unreliable with the way Adeniyi speaks about them in the movie.

One important development in the movie is that the two men being maltreated are not in control of their home. For instance, Omoyeni tells her husband that she needs a car and at his refusal, she says if he does not buy it, another person would. Omoyeni's threat to surprise her husband reveals the extent of her insubordination in the family. She disregards her husband's instructions at will and wishes to control the family. The threat reveals her promiscuity which she flaunts in her husband's face:

Omoyeni: *...sebi o o fe raa fun mi ni?*

Maa jo e loju. Ma a ra fun ara mi

Adeniyi: *(o rerin) Wa a ra fun ara e?*

Nibo lo ti fe ri?

Se o fe lo ji owo ti o fe fi ra a ni?

Omoyemi: *Ti iwo o bar aa elomiran a ra a*

Adeniyi: *Meaning pe o ti ni ale kan ni bi kan ti o*

Ma a ra fun e ti emi o ba ra a fun e, abi?

Omoyeni: *Emi? Ale? Olorun maje e*

Ta lo n ba e so 'ro ale?

Adeniyi: *Ti won ba bi e daa.....*

Iwo gbe moto olori buruku kan wale

Omoyeni: ...I will surprise you since you don't want

To buy it for me, I will buy it for myself.

Adeniyi: (smiles to himself) You'll buy it for yourself?

Where do you want to get it from?

Do you want to steal to buy it?

Omoyeni: If you don't buy it, someone else would.....

Adeniyi: It means you have concubine somewhere

Who would buy it for you if I don't.

Omoyeni: Me? Concubine? God forbid!

Who is talking about being involved in an extra marital affair?

Adeniyi: If you are the true child of your parents

Dare me to bring a useless car here.

From the above extract, it can be deduced that men alone do not have monopoly of evil in marital conflicts. As much as Adeniyi tries to salvage the marriage from crumbling by ignoring Omoyeni's excesses, Omoyeni sees

nothing wrong in her actions. She is bold enough to tell her husband that someone else will buy the car for her if he refuses to buy it. This can be described as an act of disrespect from the wife towards the husband.

The costumes and make-up used in the film also play significant roles in exposing the attitudes of some of the characters in the film as well as confirming the film maker's perception of the vices inherent in some of the residents of Lagos State. For instance, Omoyeni and her friends' mode of dressing confirm their promiscuity as they frequently appear in very short gowns with high heel shoes. This in reference to Omoyeni contradicts the supposed appearance of a married woman especially in the Yoruba culture which gives preference to chastity. At times, the group of friends appears in very expensive dresses which portray them as people who are financially comfortable whereas, Clara stays in a room apartment with her mother whose whole business worth just a stipend. Also, their financial comfort is antagonized when the group of friends ate the suya meat they earlier threw into the waste bin. Aside this, the characters dressing depicts them as people who are educated as both males and females' characters mostly appear in western dresses which include shirts, jean trousers and belts amongst others for the men while the women appear mostly in short length dresses which are assumed to be imported clothes, along with expensive jewelleryes. The use of native dresses is restricted to the older characters in the movie and this is used to differentiate between the ages of the characters.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study explores the various narrative styles and artistic techniques employed in the depiction of domestic violence and traumatic expressions on the victims. The study discovers that the perpetration and effect of domestic violence is not only depicted through the conversation between the victims in the film, but it is depicted through the use of other artistic means such as the angle of the camera, the gestures of the characters, the language use and the costume and make up used by the characters. These artistic devices contributed to the presentation of the characters and their state of mind.

Filmography

Lagos Girls (2012)

Script Writer: Sunny Alli, Producer: Sunny Alli, Director: Abiodun Olanrewaju,

Screenplay: Sunny Alli, Remmy Badru, Bukola Abiola and Oyewumi Jumoke

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