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The girl-child and absentee mothers in Yejide Kilanko's Daughters Who Walk This Path and Chinelo Okparanta's Under the Udala Trees

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Abstract: Literature has been an avenue through which the society is viewed. In this paper, a major aspect of the society is portrayed as it examines the issue of absentee mothers and the girl child in Nigerian literature. By means of betrayal trauma theory and attachment theory with the content analysis method, this study through Yejide Kilanko and Chinelo Okparanta's Daughters Who Walk This Path and Under the Udala Trees examine the impact of pain of betrayal on the girl child and its effect on the society as against previous studies that explored the bildungsroman/womanist approach. This study finds that the authors in their novels address a prominent societal problem and that through their engagements in the novels, they hope to bring about a much needed societal change.

Keywords: Absent mothers, girlchild, maternal absence, identity formation, African Literature

INTRODUCTION

African literature, of which Nigerian literature is a huge part, is a repository of a broad range of themes that oftentimes reflect the society. The theme of the family as a central unit of society has resonated with diverse African/Nigerian literatures with many aspects of the family x-rayed. Basically, the word 'family' suggests relationship, however, an attempt to conceptualize the term is often subjective. This is because the meaning of the term depends on how people view it. According to Onyegasi Uchechukwuka (n.d), 'there is not a set or monolithic definition for the term 'family' ... the definition of family has become a spacio-temporal consideration because the meaning changes for people across space and time' (2). Furthermore, he believes that,

> ... peoples' experience and events shape their definition of family. Practically, the events of births, deaths, divorces alone can dramatically dislodge or modify how one defines family. This could give rise to an individual's definition of family to

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> be based on events. So, as long as one experiences any of these practical events outlined, coupled with other events surrounding them, the likelihood is there for one person to have myriads of definitions of family. (2)

Regardless of the above, we note that the definition of the term 'family' is usually considered along two lines. The first is in biological terms, while the second is in relational terms. While the former highlights biological ties and orientations, the latter foregrounds the family in an associative sense where people who have a common objective/goal but do not have a biological affinity regard themselves as family. In this sense, Murdock cited in Gittins (1993) defines family as 'a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation and production ...' (1). However, family as it concerns this paper is the one that posits a biological standpoint. In this sense, it is often defined as a unit containing people related by blood. Here, the origin of the family is usually by marriage. Marriage is simply a union between a man and a woman but might equally be between a man and more than one woman as it is the case with polygamous families. Onyegasi recognizes that it is '... an essential step towards family formation ... [and] a socially recognized and approved union between individuals, who commit to one another with the expectation of a stable and lasting intimate relationship ...' (3). When marriage is consummated between a man and wife/wives, children are naturally expected of that marriage in that oftentimes, family is '... defined by the children factor' (Onyegasi, 3). In his own view, Toyin Falola links marriage and procreation together because to him, in Africa, '... readiness for marriage comes with the responsibility of procreation ...' (144). Thus, childbearing is seen as a way of growing the society bringing about the usual notion that the family is the bedrock of every society.

With the arrival of children in a marriage, new status is accorded the man/wife or wives, where the man becomes 'father', the wife/wives becomes 'mother' and both become 'parent'. Invariably, 'fatherhood', 'motherhood' and 'parenthood' come with levels of responsibility. Usually, the responsibility of nurture and care is naturally expected of parents towards a child. Nurture designates the attention and care given to a child in order for that child to grow, develop and become a vibrant member of society. Nurturing a child is a total package that encompasses seeing to the child's physical, spiritual, emotional, mental and psychological needs, providing love and security and putting in place measures that make for the child's effective development. Even though that in these contemporary times, the responsibility of rearing children from childhood to adulthood is reposed on the father and mother, however, traditionally, the mother has a larger role to play in the life of the child in terms of child care and nurturing. Noer Aziza (2020) elucidates that even though that both parents share a responsibility in the job of nurturing a child but '... mothers have dominant action in educating the children ...' (251). Thus, from conception to birth to the journey of growth, the role assigned to the mother can never be underestimated. Pir Hassan Shah (2023) posits that

> a mother's unique relationship with her family makes her able to give physical, psychological and moral care that no one can replace ... mothers shape the way their children develop ... becoming a mother is an incredibly demanding

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> occupation; a mother not only mediates how members of her family interact with one another but also how her family interact with the outside world. (6)

Similarly, Sadaqatullah Sadiq, Anwar Jamal and S.S. Jamil (2012) write that 'she is not just your mother, she is the nurturer, doctor, nurse, teacher, house keeper, homework helper, cloth washer, cheer leader ...' [and that] '... mothers do a lot and ask for nothing in return ...' (67). Evidently, the importance of mothers is obvious in the celebration of the annual Mother's day. This is a day set aside every year to celebrate mothers and the gift of motherhood. Every year, Abraham Lincoln's famous quote 'all that I am, hope to be, I owe to my angel mother' resonates to emphasize the importance of mothers in the life of a child at home and in the society as a whole.

Conventionally, a mother is regarded as the female parent of a child. She is one who births a child/children and takes responsibility for the nurture and care of the child/children. Emelda Egbekpalu (2022) observes that 'traditionally, mothers are those who are married and have children ... [and that] in other words, to be a mother is to be married and have children' (159). Here, even though that Egbekpalu's position represents a universal perspective of who a mother is, the delineation of 'mother/motherhood' has been extended to include any woman who takes an active part in the nurturing of the child/children irrespective of her biological connection with the child. Therefore, Alicia Birong (2023) notes that 'mothering' is not only about birthing a child but '...being a person who cares for others with compassion and care' (n.p). Mother/motherhood in this sense extends beyond biological interpretation but she is seen as a central figure socially and culturally. Going from the above, a mother can be anyone, usually female of whom a person looks up to as a role model or inspiration. A mother can equally be a single parent who has adopted a child or who serves as a guardian to a child/children like in the case of a school headmistress/principal/teacher or 'likely places where children are steadily under her care ...' (Egbekpalu, 159).

On the other hand, the word 'girl child' is a complex word comprising of the terms 'girl' and 'child'. UNICEF, adopting the United Nations (UN) convention on the Rights of the child defined a child as a human below the age of eighteen years. In the world over, this definition stands as the universal definition and acceptance of who a child is. In Nigeria as well, the Child's Right Act of 2023 sees a child as any person below the age of eighteen. Conceptualizing the Nigerian child, Paschal Okafor and Uju Nnubia (2013) write that

> The Nigerian Child refers to that young human being between the birth and puberty who grows into a fully fledged man or woman with time. The child has the right to life, dignity of human person, personal liberty ... He/she is entitled to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. He/she has right to freedom of expression, movement and association, freedom from discrimination. (103)

From the above, we understand that the child - whether male/female is as good as any human and as such deserves the right and freedom to life and all that pertains to it and this is why Nigeria has set aside every 27th of May to celebrate the Nigerian child. Moving on, we recognize 'girl' as a female child. Thus, juxtaposing the definitions of the terms 'girl' and 'child' implies that a girl child is simply a female child who is below the age of

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eighteen, that is, from infancy to early adulthood. Hadiza Mohammed (2020) acknowledges that 'the girl child is the female child before adulthood; that is one below the age of 18. The girl child phase spans from infancy, childhood, pubescent to early adolescent age ...' (n.p). At this phase of life, the girl child like any other Nigerian child deserves rights to life and liberty to bloom. Within this designated age range, one usually finds that the girl child is often malleable and her physical, psychological, mental, spiritual and emotional stability in adulthood stems from qualities picked up from her mother. Again, on account of the sexist nature of Africa, the female gender, the girl child inclusive is always perceived as weak and is often subjected to all manner of abuse. Consequently, it is the mother's duty to properly guide and guard the girl child on her journey to womanhood, providing models of strength, support, courage and encouragement. Even though that this is the traditionally recognized standpoint, one now finds that there are exceptions to this case as some mothers unfortunately abscond from this responsibility, hence, making them 'absentee mothers'. With the trend of children with deviant behaviours, this study becomes impactful because it examines the effect of absentee mothers on the girl child herself and on the society in general.

An absentee mother refers to a woman who for some reason is unavailable for the job of parenting that nature has bequeathed her. This woman is either unable or unwilling to provide the physical, emotional or psychological support that her child requires for healthy development. While Venus Namu (2021) recognizes that an absentee mother is '... a person who is supposed to be your mother but isn't either physically/emotionally present or both' (n.p), Sola Owonibi and Olufunmilayo Gaji (2017) acknowledge that 'the absence of the mother may manifest physically, emotionally and/or psychologically' (112). Shalini Nadaswaran (2011) also notes that while the absentee mother may not be physically absent, 'they are emotionally absent in their spiritual connectivity with their daughters' (26). From these delineations, we understand that even though a woman who is a mother may be physically present in her child's life but her inability to provide the emotional support that her girl child needs shows that the mother is an absentee mother. This also shows that being a mother to a girl child is an all round obligatory function necessitated for the child's healthy development. This goes to say that the absence of a mother in the life of a girl child leaves a significant void that is often detrimental to the child and to the society as a whole.

In Nigerian literature, the worth of a mother is foregrounded in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart. Old man Uchendu said to Okonkwo at the start of his exile years at Mbanta:

> Why is it that the commonest names we give our children is Nneka or Mother is supreme ...It is true that a child belongs to its father. But when a father beats his child, it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you ... And that is why we say that mother is supreme. (106/107)

Regardless of Achebe's position, Nadaswaran (2011), Owonibi and Gaji (2017) contend that absentee motherhood has become a trope in third generation Nigerian women's

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writing. However, the study of this trope reveals female characters, that is, the girl child who instead of being affected by their mother's absence is equipped 'with emotional fortitude to achieve their sense of empowerment' (Nadaswaran, 26). What this means is that the study of absentee mothers versus the girl child as evidenced in novels like Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus, Chika Unigwe's Night Dancer, Sefi Attah's Everything Good Will Come or Unoma Azuah's Sky-High Flames tilts towards a bildungsroman/womanist reading of the young female character. While this is applaudable, this work however takes an opposite direction in the sense that it highlights the pain and trauma of betrayal that the girl child suffers at her mother's absence and the attendant deviant behavioural pattern that is detrimental to the society.

In this article, we locate this discourse within the framework of Betrayal Trauma Theory expounded by Jennifer Freyd and Attachment theory by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. Betrayal trauma propounded by Jennifer Freyd, is a type of trauma perpetuated by someone on whom a victim relies on for survival, protection or support. Betrayal trauma occurs when there is a violation and a breach of trust; when a caregiver or a partner either in an organization, family relationships or marriage violates the trust and dependence reposed on him/her. Freyd explicates that it is a kind of trauma that arises when the people or institution that a person depends extensively on for survival abuses the person's trust or welfare. Jennifer Gomez and Jennifer Freyd (2019) explain that

> People are relationally connected with one another at multiple levels (e.g., within the family, with needed institutions, with other members of minority groups). Abuse that occurs across these relationships that violate the trust implicit in these connections are viewed as betrayals. (79)

Thus, according to Gomez and Freyd, betrayal trauma theory '... focuses on the social relationships in which abuse occurs (79). Betrayal trauma theory is an appendage of trauma theory which acknowledges trauma as a deep emotional/psychological pain that oftentimes overwhelms the victim's ability to cope with daily living. Therefore, Trauma Theory accounts for narratives of pain that accosts an individual when an external shock hits the said individual/victim that has a negating impact within. Jennifer Freyd extends the narrative, locating the pain of betrayal within the context of trauma theory. Betrayal trauma theory (which will be referred to as BTT hereon), acknowledges family betrayal as one of its appendages, thus 'betrayal trauma theory focuses on abuse perpetrated by close others ... family betrayal involves familial dynamics that negatively affect victims' (79). Since mother – daughter relationship is primarily domiciled at the home/family front, this paper finds that it is an advantageous base to stand on in examining daughter – mother relationship or the lack of it in the above novels for it exposes the pain of betrayal that the girl child bears by the mother's absence from her life. How the pain of mother's absence negatively impacts the society, Gomez and Freyd (2019) explain thus:

> ... pain motivates change in behaviour ... suppression of natural reactions to betrayal can occur. These information blockages are dissociations between normally integrated aspects of processing and memory. Exposure to betrayal trauma ... is linked to many costly outcomes, including dissociation,

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> hallucinations, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), self-harm, and poor physical health. (79)

What the above means is that pain, especially pain of betrayal brought on by a close other provokes a change in behaviour. Freyd lists dissociation - this dissociation is in terms of a psychological disconnect from the caregiver in order to ensure survival for the victim. This explains why caregivers of abused children in a family setting are not easily trusted. As such, children who cannot repose trust in the caregivers at home find it hard to trust people outside the home. They become maladjusted, showcasing anti-social or deviant behavioural characteristics which the wider society views as 'weird'. There may be outbursts of anger, hate spewing, bullying others in school and taking delight in hurting others amongst other characters. So, in the fictional representations above, this work intends to locate the female characters' aberrant behaviours within the standpoint of BTT.

On the other hand, attachment as it features in the second theory denotes a bond/tie to someone or something. Naturally, people tend to form a connection/bond between them and others in familial/sexual relationships or to others within the wider society. Consequently, John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth's attachment theory explains the attachment between a child and its caregiver. Bowlby's and Ainsworth's attachment theory according to Lavinia Gomez (1997), 'takes as its premise that human beings are born with inbuilt patterns of behaviour which promote and maintain relationship, unfolding in an orderly sequence in interaction with the environment' (155). For stability, a healthy human development and wholesome perception of self, creating and maintaining these connections and bonds are not only necessary for an individual but is beneficial for the wider society, for a healthy individual makes a healthy society. Thus, Gomez (1997) explains that 'our primary attachment figures constitute the 'secure base' from which we can sally forth into the world, knowing we have a refuge to which we will return' (156).

Within the family, even though attachment theory recognizes a primary caregiver but it is common knowledge that because of biological connections with the baby from conception to the actual pregnancy to the process of nurturing and continuing throughout life, 'the first attachment is almost always to the mother' (Gomez, 157). This most likely explains why the girl child as young married ladies will often depend on her mother's formula in her own marriage. This is because the girl child as a young married woman knows that her mother's formula has not failed in their home and then she trusts that it will not fail her in her own home. To the child (or the girl child in this case), the mother, even though physically absent sees her mother as a secure base, a place of safety and security and emotional/psychological support. Attachment theory emphasizes support, love and comfort – with attachment theory, 'the attachee' does not see or feel ashamed in showing weakness or fear or his/her vulnerability because of the trust reposed on 'the attached' for safety, security, lack of judgement or condemnation. In cases of attachment, 'the attachee' emotionally releases burdens on 'the attached' knowing that 'someone gat my back', as it is often said in common parlance. Attachment theory equally emphasizes the quality of relationship as against the quantity or length of time as a crucial factor in forming these bonds and connections.

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With respect to the subject under study in this work and to the two novels especially, Bowlby and Ainsworth's alongside Freyd's theoretical base becomes imperative because it highlights the quality of relationship between the girl children in the novels and their mothers. It showcases that these female characters sought to bond with their mothers, to be vulnerable with them but their mothers grossly betrayed that trust and instead of being an emotional support for the children, disappointed them gravely. The response to that pain of betrayal spurs the resultant behavioural pattern witnessed in the characters. So said, both theories chosen for this work ultimately showcases the interconnectedness between absent mothering of the girl child and the psychological costs on the girl child and the society.

Analysis

Following Nadaswaran's, Owonibi and Gaji's argument in their different articles that the theme of absentee mothers vs the girl child resonates in third generation Nigerian female writers prose works, this paper equally acknowledges that Yejide Kilanko and Chinelo Okparanta; authors of the novels used here, are contemporary/third generation Nigerian female writers as well. In both novels, they present female protagonists – Morayo and Ijeoma - who amidst a background of rape and war desired the connection that attachment theory posits with their mothers but their mothers did not live up to expectation for them.

Kilanko in Daughters Who Walk this Path tells the story of Morayo who suffered familial rape at the hands of her cousin Bros T. Her mother had left her in the care of Bros T and their neighbour mama Comfort to attend a wedding at Ilorin. Earlier before then, Bros T had been demonstrating certain behaviours towards Morayo that calls for questioning had her mother been paying attention. Bros T will pull Morayo onto his lap, give her an unusually tight embrace or stretches his hands onto her shoulder in the car or barge into her room unannounced when she was naked. To her, Bros T is her sister's son and by extension her own son and she sees no ill in Morayo at her age sitting on Bros T's laps. Morayo, the narrative voice in the first part of the novel tells us that, 'mummy never said anything when Bros T pulled Eniayo or me onto his laps ... mummy had been present in the room all the while. She just looked up at Bros T and me and smiled ...' (55). Here, we find Morayo's mother evading a truth staring her in the face. In order to 'find innocence' in her sister's son and to stay in his good books by not reprimanding him, she is willing to evade the truth and abdicate her primary responsibility towards her daughter. In our today's world where different awareness campaigns have been raised for mothers to hold their girl children dear in face of any male relatives visiting or living with the family, Bisoye; Morayo's mother grossly failed her daughter and the duty she has towards the young Morayo to protect her from all forms of sexual predation and molestation. What is more worrisome is the fact that she consciously evades the truth. Disregarding the fact that Tayo had been constantly indicted for several kinds of misbehaviours like stealing and peeping at aunty Adunni's naked body while she was bathing, Bisoye betrayed the trust that Morayo reposed in her by choosing to let down her guard and expose her daughter to Bros T's inappropriate amorous designs.

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Suffice it to say that Bisoye is an attention deficit mother. When Morayo's attraction to her classmate Kachi began, her mother did not know about it. When sent on an errand to Kachi's mother's kiosk, she would beautify herself, it didn't seem strange to her mother. At a watch-night service that heralded a new year, Morayo and Kachi slipped away from their families to fan the embers of their blooming young love, unfortunately, Morayo noted that 'Mummy did not ask me where I had disappeared to after service' (59). Sadly, this trend continued throughout the time Bros T was with the family and Morayo's mother did not notice anything. Following the rape incident, Morayo narrates, 'during those months, I kept waiting for Mummy to notice something different about me. A different way of walking. A new scent. Had she not said that she could smell a boy's touch on me?' (80). It is noteworthy that Morayo's question in the excerpt shows the amount of pain she is in on her mother's inattention. True to BTT, Bisoye betrayed the trust her daughter reposed on her for survival. Moreover, this shows that she was physically present but grossly absent from her daughter. This kind of absence amounts to neglect. World Health Organization (WHO) categorizes neglect as a form of abuse occurring within relationships where responsibility and trust is expected. Regarding Morayo and her mother, her continuous inattention to events surrounding her girl child can be viewed as an abuse that poses an emotional harm for the girl child. Throughout the main rape incident and the subsequent sexual abuse under Morayo's mother's roof, her brief pregnancy, the gruesome miscarriage she suffered due to a fall in a gutter on her way back from school and her fainting spell due to a loss of a huge amount of blood, Morayo relates that 'Mummy was not going to notice anyway ... no one had even noticed' (81/86). Here, we see a young girl's yearning for love and a huge indictment on the mother for abusing her girl child by neglecting her innate desire for attention. Needless to say, Morayo's pain found expression in the resentment she harboured towards her mother. She narrates 'that day, I felt a deep anger towards Mummy start to bubble inside of me' (81).

Recall the mention that attachment theory emphasizes the kind of relationship that a mother has with the child as factors in determining bonds in a mother – child relationship. In Morayo's case, the kind of attachment she has with her mother is the type that does not foster friendship between mother and daughter. In mother – girl child relationship, many studies have encouraged open communication and mother friendliness with the girl child in order to impact positively on the young female's life. This will help prepare the girl child for the arduous task of navigating her femaleness in a societal and cultural context that can be quite challenging. In Morayo's case, she remembers building up courage to talk to her mother about her sexuality. She narrates,

> In biology class, our teacher talked about how our bodies change during puberty and how we start having new feelings about boys ... Mummy suddenly slammed the wardrobe door shut ... Startled, I jumped back ... Morayo, what kind of nonsense talk is this? She wagged her finger. Listen, your job right now is to focus on your books and behave like the well-brought up child you are ... I left the room. I should have known better than to ask anything. (54)

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Beyond classes in school, the only place a girl child can adequately receive sex education is with the mother. This kind of education is done under a no condemnation, no judgement atmosphere. It helps the mother to bridge gaps, enhances friendliness between the mother and daughter and helps to uncover any secret the child might have kept. However, in Morayo's case, as it is the case with most girl children in Nigeria, the mother shouts down the young female, permanently putting to a close any kind of avenue for 'that kind of talk'. In the novel, the author uses the linguistic device, '...' to show that Morayo was still in mid sentence and did not expect the kind of dramatic response that she had from her mother. This equally brings us to the 'good girl syndrome' where the girl child is expected to be good and behave in a socially and culturally acceptable manner that even the mother not wanting to be saddled with that emotional obligation, shy away from being the emotional support that the girl child needs for a wholesome wellbeing. Morayo acknowledges that she is treated '... as if [she] is an annoying child' or quickly dismissed on account of her inquisitiveness.

The most painful aspect of Morayo's trauma is her mother's response to her confession of Tayo's sexual molestation. She recalls her mother '... kneeling beside Daddy's feet ... silently pleading for her nephew' (88). She also recalls '...staring at the door ...[waiting] for Mummy. I was sure she would come and look for me' (89). She recounts the conspiracy of silence her mother plunged into regarding the rape and the removal of any kind of succour she would have received from her younger sister Eniola and aunty Adunni. Their house became shrouded in silence and her mother avoided her like a plague. Here, we note that like BTT posits, Bisoye grossly betrayed her daughter when she highly needed an emotional back up and a shoulder to cry on. Thus, Bisoye denotes an absentee mother, for in her neglect of the girl child, even though her physical presence is accounted for, her emotional and psychological presence is missing and that was what the young girl needed at the time of her pain.

The often-resultant effect of absentee mothering on the girl child is psychological and often insidious. What we mean by this is that the weight of the trauma of betrayal keeps on heaping on the psyche of the girl child and soon it overwhelms her capacity to cope. In Morayo's case, she nursed a deep seethed rage against her mother and began loathing herself. In the novel, she recounts that she, '... could not escape the shame that followed her around like a bad smell ... I wondered – who needed me now? (94/99). Soon enough depression sets in as she recalls 'dark cloud surrounding me ... [that] grew even bigger' (96). She equally reported living a 'double life. At school, I pasted a happy smile on my face and pretended everything was okay'. (93). All this, while trying to mask the struggle within. APA reports that depression is treatable and one of the commonest ways to address this mental health challenge is psychotherapy. Psychotherapy, also known as talk therapy aims at using talk to challenge and correct the symptoms of this mood depressive disorder. Psychotherapy must not be administered by health care personnel, it can be administered by family or any close relationship the sufferer might have had. In Morayo's case, her mother should have been there to talk and comfort her and to correct the unhealthy thought pattern

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brewing in her mind but then again, her mother was not there to carry on this responsibility. Alongside depression, Morayo equally became suicidal.

Her troubles left the confines of family and home and became a societal burden when she left for the University. At the University of Lagos, she became a sexaholic, jumping from one bed to another. Not minding the risks involved in her adventures, 'Saturday mornings often found [her] in strange beds after a night of clubbing in town' (200). The irony here is that she does not do it because she likes it, instead she engages in different sexcapades because she '...needed to be in control ... [she] wanted to be able to decide what happened' (200). According to her,

> The irony was that when I lost interest in men during my famine season, it intensified the chase. The fact that I did not need their sweet words or attention drove them crazy. I was like a new frontier they wanted to conquer. But if there is any conquering to be done, I was determined to be the one doing it. (200).

Furthermore, wanting to revenge Bros T's travesty on his gender, she severely hurts true young men like Ladi who were truly in love with her. From Morayo's ordeal here, what is most prominent is that she desperately needed to assuage her pain and her anger is misdirected and in what seemed to her like the best way to achieve her aim, she lashes out at men and deflated whatever ego they thought they had. For instance, she shamed a young man in class thus: '... correct me if I am wrong, but does it not take a complete man to get a woman pregnant? (204).The anger of the young man after her sarcastic reply and the laughter of the entire class at the discomfiture of the young man was her triumph.

It is most unfortunate though that the wider society did not understand her struggles and her pain. The hall porter of her hostel, symbolizing the voice of the society, screamed at her- 'Miss Night Rider, bad morning to you ... yeye ashawo girl. Na book your papa and mama send you come university come read. Na so so man, you go dey follow ... with this your waka waka, you fit get PhD degree for Man-ological Sciences ...' (215). From the old man's tirade, it is understood that all the wider society wants to see is what is before them and not what is beneath. Nobody understands and nobody cares that her outward actions is as a consequence of what should have been.

Lesbianism as a societal burden became the after effect of mother abseentism on the character of Ijeoma; the eleven-year-old protagonist of Chinelo Okparanta's Under the Udala Trees. No matter how liberal contemporary Nigeria seems to be or is becoming, the fact remains that sexual deviance is frowned at and homosexuality is seen as an aberration - people discriminate against the queer lifestyle, nature abhors it and the society as enshrined in the constitution condemns it. But it is a consequence that would have been avoided had mama not abandoned her daughter Ijeoma and given her a reason to yearn and seek companionship that necessitated her descent into lesbianism. Ijeoma in the novel narrates: 'there is no way to tell the story of what happened with Amina without first telling the story of Mama's sending me off ... and if the sending away had not occurred, then I might never have met Amina' (13)

Upon papa's death from a Nigerian civil war grenade which is the background of the story, mama decides to remove everything that reminded her of her husband's death,

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including her daughter. On the pretext that 'I am doing this for your own good' which Ijeoma acknowledges as a lie, mama dumps her daughter on the headmaster and his wife while she skips town. This is one instance where 'I am doing this for your good' does not serve the purpose because the catastrophic consequence of that action outweighs the goodwill that should accompany the said action.

Moreover, the above points to the kind of relationship that existed between mother and daughter prior the tragedy that befell both of them. In the early parts of the novel, Ijeoma describes her relationship with her father in glowing and loving terms whilst that of her mother is a pragmatic, matter of fact relationship. In this kind of relationship, an obstacle like grief as we see in the novel can bring the relationship to an end since the other party is not contributing much to the growth of it. It is like saying 'the bond that held us is broken; there is nothing for me here anymore. I am moving on'. Ijeoma herself tells us that '... she did not in fact have to send me off ... she was overwhelmed even by me ...' (49/50). Here, we take note of the emotional distancing between mother and daughter in the sense that the loss of papa should have brought them together but yet, it is that binding factor that is creating the emotional distance between them. Ijeoma accounts for this when she says:

> there was a distance between us ... there was a strain, she was my mother ... but things were different now ... she felt more like another warden than my own mother, more like a husk – more an emblem of motherhood than motherhood itself ... I could not get myself to fall into the embrace. I stood there, rigid as a post. (86)

Mama's abandonment created the feeling of betrayal that BTT reckons. Ijeoma felt betrayed that the one who she felt attached to in the time when she needed her most, the one who should have understood her confusion and fear, the one who should have been her support bore the thought of deserting her and had all planned it out by the continuous 'errands' she ran between Ojoto and Nnewi. The pain of being betrayed was heightened when Ijeoma's mind pieced together the reason for all the errands that mama had been running. She tells us thus: 'my world had narrowed down to my mother, and now my mother was betraying me' (50). At another instance, she says she was '...still smarting from her desertion of me ... my mind tortured itself with all the possible reasons why my own mother had thought it best to abandon me'. (84)

To further widen the chasm between them, mama treated Ijeoma like pariah when she learnt of her sexual liaison with Amina at the headmaster's house. When mama brought Ijeoma home to Aba, she tells us that, 'the first week I was back with mama, she did not bother speaking to me ... each time I came out she was not there ... nearly a full week passed and not a word between mama and me ... finally, when the first week came to an end ... she was wearing a black gown, as if in mourning ...' (78/79). It is clear from these lines that mama was avoiding Ijeoma like she had an infectious disease. The black gown she wore is symbolic of evil and maliciousness. It spoke volumes to Ijeoma even when nothing was said at all. This attitude drove the two further apart instead of bridging gaps. Perhaps, if mama's attitude hadn't been one of disdain at those early stages, the situation might have been remedied. Mama's covert condescension was infact not covert because it showed in the way she said to Ijeoma, 'there's nothing more important now than for us to begin

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working on cleansing your soul' (80). Her contempt equally showed in the scripture verses she read her each day and the way she emphasized some parts of the verses like, 'Nwoke na nwunye. Man and wife. Adam na Eve. I ne ghe nti? Are you listening?' (82). It also showed in her prayer, 'Almighty God in heaven ... protect this my child from the devil that has come to take her innocent soul away ... protect her from the demons that are trying to send her to hell ...' (88). In a way, this prayer is largely condemnatory and judgemental. It seems mama had already concluded that Ijeoma had a demon in her and she was already doomed to hell. Even Ijeoma said that mama '... believed so much that there was a demon in me'. (73).

In all this, we understand that the relationship between Ijeoma and her mother was not the kind that fostered understanding and empathy; it was a kind of bond that is largely characterized by a sense of facing and dealing with reality. It is a kind of connection that lacks the emotional bonding that was needed to steer Ijeoma to the right course even when she had deviated. Attachment theory reckons that the mother as a caregiver is patient and forbearing, calm and gentle in fostering the relationship needed by the child for a healthy development. In the novel, the portraiture of mama's character did not factor in these caregiver qualities as she is portrayed as a prudish, puritanical and matter of fact 'human'. As such, she lacked the emotional depth Ijeoma needed and earnestly yearned for. And it is known that a person cannot give what one does not have, so mama cannot give her daughter what she wants because she does not have it. Moreover, mama's abandonment was traumatic and it triggered an after effect that has negative societal consequence. In a way, Ijeoma's homosexuality and insistence on carrying on with lesbianism can be likened to PTSD, for BTT notes that exposure to betrayal spurs post traumatic stress disorder(s) as one of its costly outcomes. Ijeoma felt grossly betrayed by her mother and there was a shift in her mental build up, for all mama's effort to re-build Ijeoma after she had been damaged was like fighting a lost cause, even when mama pushed Ijeoma to marry Chibundu, the marriage failed because she can no longer commit to a heterosexual lifestyle.

Conclusion

With the proliferation of social vices like kidnapping, terrorism, banditry and others, the question on different lips is 'o buro nne mulu ndi a?' which translates to 'weren't they born by mothers?' In answer to this question, the authors in these two novels show us how societal monsters are created. It is a known fact that the first step to solving a problem is by identifying the problem. In this study, we find that the authors not only point at a problem but they identify the cause of the problem. Thus, this study, with the hope that it provokes thought and spurs change, explains the 'why' behind behavioural patterns that is often devastating in the larger society. It therefore concludes that the gap in the morals of some females especially in the Nigerian society is as a result of absentee mothers and the non-challant attitude of some parents in child upbringing. Like the porter in Kilanko's text and mama in Okparanta's, people are always quick to judge and condemn, this study hopes that these literary depictions humanize and can bring about the understanding and fellow feeling that makes for a healthy society.

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