

Emotive Suffering and Neo-Apartheid Literary Constructs in Yewande Omotoso's *Bom Boy*

Rita Osarumese Okonoboh-Fagbayi

Department of English, University of Ibadan

Email: rosarumese@gmail.com | ro.okonoboh@ui.edu.ng | Orcid ID: 0009-0001-9441-6845

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Abstract— *Psychological impairments in literary works set in Africa, that foreground apartheid and related discriminatory circumstances in African settings, examine how systemic oppression, anguish, suffering and trauma construct the experiences of individuals and societies caught within these confines. While existing studies on related perspectives have focused on general socio-economic, political and health-related issues, there has been limited examination of literary texts that depict contemporary settings, especially in post-apartheid contexts. This study re-examines literary depictions of the connected motifs of mental distress in Yewande Omotoso's Bom Boy. This is with a view to exploring how alienation, ignorance and social stratification reveal psychological impairments, not just as an individual experience, but as a condition that reflects on collective conditions. Through an analysis of characters, events, and settings, this study demonstrates that contemporary literary works serve as testaments to historical burden of traumatic memory, as well as the resilience exhibited through conscious effort to rewrite narratives, using fiction to establish reality.*

Keywords— *Mental distress, Apartheid, Psychological trauma, Africa, Yewande Omotoso's Bom Boy*

I. INTRODUCTION

Societal experiences, as captured in African literary works, relate to the experiences of underdevelopment that constantly ail the continent and stifle progress. In reading African literature, Lucianne Englert observes that there are several meanings that can be gleaned from what is defined as the literary, when considered from the purview of Africa. In spite of these variations, the main points in African literary writing revolve around similar themes that project psychological suffering that continues to reflect as a blight on the continent through neo-colonial perspectives.

The concept of mental trauma in African texts is one that cuts through several African societies. Nicola Malizia defines psychological trauma as "the direct personal experience of an event that may cause or lead to death or serious injury, or other threats to the physical integrity" (11). In a country like South Africa, apartheid and its attendant consequences served and still serve as mental trauma that function as deterrents to wholesome development. The use of literature to capture the experiences of individuals in a post-apartheid society like South Africa, using succinct representative imagery, is abundant in much of the literary works of South Africans and Africans in general. For instance, J.M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K* (1983), captures this context.

II. LITERARY PERSPECTIVES ON APARTHEID

Apartheid remains a recurring theme in many literary texts that have emerged from South Africa. This is simply as a response to the author's unconscious compulsion not to write outside their contextual environment. Although apartheid can be said to have been long conquered, the consequences that trail its popularity are still exhibited in some parts of South Africa, although to a lesser degree. In May 2013, a report on Cable News Network observed activities in a town called Kleinfontein and its racist ideals closely tied to the apartheid era. According to Nkepile Mabuse:

More than two decades after the death of the systematic racial discrimination policy of apartheid, a community living southeast of South Africa's capital Pretoria is being accused of trying to keep its racist ideals alive. White men clad in military uniforms stamped with an old South African flag guard the gates of the controversial settlement known as Kleinfontein. All the signs within its boundaries are written in Afrikaans, the language that developed out of the Dutch dialect spoken by early colonizers and which is spoken by the town's 1,000 white inhabitants. A bust of Hendrick Verwoerd, the assassinated prime minister considered the architect of apartheid, greets visitors upon entry (1).

As recently as 2023 until current times, concerns have also been raised with regard to apartheid-related circumstances. Deborah Collier provides an instance of the Employment Equity Amendment Act (EEAA), which has recommendations for provision of job opportunities with deliberate attention towards encouraging fair distribution. The problem of apartheid encompasses many of the other issues that reflect mental suffering in South Africa, and writers that have responded to this calling, include J. M. Coetzee, Mark Behr, Zakes Mda, Ivan Vladislavic, Lesego Rampolokeng, K Sello Duiker, Etienne van Heerden, Marlene van Niekerk, etc. There is also the speculation that aside from the major problem of race and class stratification, another effect of apartheid is the trend with South African writers.

Early writing on segregational circumstances in South Africa portray restrictions tied to politics and socio-economic realities. As the apartheid regime reflected legal separation of races and right restrictions, so did literary works become a symbol of protest against such practices (Dar et al.). The concerns have revolved around generalised socio-cultural factors to accommodating medical concerns such as the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) crisis and its ties to apartheid explorations (Juhong and Wenxuan). However, in spite of the focused abundance on these perspectives, there have been limited insight into contemporary perspectives about the lasting influence of apartheid as captured in literary works.

III. PSYCHOLOGICAL ILLUSTRATIONS OF PAIN AND NEO-APARTHEID REPRESENTATIONS IN *BOM BOY*

Bom Boy by Yewande Omotoso, first published in 2011, focuses on class stratification and psychological impairment, as they manifest as physical constructs that obstruct development, which stems from colonialism and uprooted backgrounds. A significant manifestation of this is observed in how such environments foster alienation and isolation. *Bom Boy* is set in South Africa but substantial traces to areas in West Africa are expounded in the narrative. The novel presents the life of Leke, a troubled young man, based in the suburbs of South Africa. He develops strange habits, such as stalking people and stealing, as well as going from one physician to the next in what appears to be an unconscious search for companionship. The text traces the protagonist's formative period to his adult years, depicting his family background along the line and subtly establishing the reason(s) for his clear difference from the couple he has come to call parents, and even other people around him. From childhood, Leke's alienation from society leads him into the development of a strange ailment that is characterised by the dangerous itching of his throat. This is presented in the opening lines of the narrative thus:

A thing had begun to grow like a tree in Leke Denton's throat. It was the same thing that grew when he was picked for the school play and it was there when he was later cut from the cast. It was there when girls glanced away as he walked down the corridors. An invisible rash. (Omotoso, *Bom Boy*, 1)

Leke, as viewed in the excerpt above, can be said to be simply exhibiting some psychological reaction to his black skin, brought upon by the more complex problem of colonialism, clearly realised by the problems of apartheid. M. A. R. Habib explicates on the nature of colonialism, albeit as imperialism, in *A History of Literary Criticism* (2005), when he posits:

Though imperialism is usually understood as a strategy whereby a state aims to extend its control forcibly beyond its own borders over other states and peoples, it should be remembered that such control is usually not just military but economic and cultural. A ruling state will often impose not only its own terms of trade, but also its own political ideals, its own cultural values, and often its own language, upon a subject state (737).

Conveniently identified as colonialism, Leke's mental grief, which is indicated as a result of his non-conformity with the above values, is also clearly analysed in Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963). As Mark Sherry observes, "Fanon believes that colonial wars create specific sorts of mental distress. ... For Fanon, psychiatric impairments are a sign of the horrors of colonialism. Get rid of colonialism, and we will avoid many disability experiences, and that is unquestionably assumed to be a good thing" (14-15).

The experience of apartheid, as treated in the context of this study, is central to the life of nearly every African, consciously or unconsciously, considering the experience of colonialism. It extends beyond the borders of regions, penetrating the very heart

of every African nation. This is why as at the age of eight, Leke is already fully aware of the racist attitudes directed at him, especially with references to the jibes he becomes the target of. As seen in *Bom Boy*:

At school, he moved from class to class, a watery feeling; his hearing dulled as if his head were submerged in liquid. He could barely hear what people said, barely talk back, how would he host a party?

... "Cardboard boy" the other kids called him because of the strange crackers Jane packed in his lunchbox. Or "kid-for-hire" because one of the older boys had seen Jane and Marcus at the parent's evening and worked out that Leke was adopted (1–2).

The context of apartheid extends beyond what may be subconsciously regarded as the simple assumptions of South African confines, reaching far across continents. For instance, Oscar, Leke's real father, is a Nigerian who has come to South Africa to start his doctorate in molecular and cellular biology. The author presents the ignorance of foreigners about Nigeria and the cultures, especially considering the enthusiasm with which Nigerians absorbed foreign cultures, as seen in the expression, "Moremi's story had dotted his childhood with the consistency of birthdays. Oscar was surprised on arriving at the university to find that some of the people he shared a lab with had never heard of Moremi. Some of them didn't even know where Nigeria was" (15). The author also presents contemporary Nigeria and the seeming practice in which vain love for material things take over the simplicity of life and this vanity is sometimes mistakenly referred to as civilisation. As presented in the text, "The ignorance of his lab mates mixed with the opulence of Rhodes Memorial had brewed distaste in Oscar. Here in this country, he'd realised, they memorialised wealthy men – thieves; back home in Nigeria, simple people who sacrificed for the group" (15).

The period described above can be said to be the days before the developmental indices in Africa shifted, rendering the nation – representative of Africa – almost paralysed beyond repair. There was a time in Africa when simplicity, humility and sacrifice earned one respect (Eleojo). In recent times, however, the continent has become so puffed up with an influential population of greedy individuals who are only too eager to further twist the continent into a state of frustrating mental distress. The excerpt above also points to the isolation that fosters psychological trauma, that exists from being an outsider inside. This feeling is mutual amongst Africans who find themselves in the diaspora out of compulsion, desire or simply nature. According to the author, in a note on the Port Harcourt Literary Festival blog, "...*Bom Boy* got mined from these rambling thoughts. About social isolation, being on the outside, about wanting people (friends) but not knowing how to get them. About being foreign" (1).

This sense of outcastness is replicated in the many forums and groups that have sprung up as collectives of Africans in the diaspora and sometimes act as platforms where people come together to share experiences. *Bom Boy* places the average African in the position of centre attraction, albeit sometimes unfriendly. And this also foregrounds the second motif highlighted in this study, which is the ignorance construct. Ola Rotimi, in *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* (1977), explores the elements of psychological trauma, although in ironic terms. The author displays varying levels of literacy in the attempt to portray that illiteracy is no excuse for ignorance or outright stupidity. As such, the level of literacy of individuals within a nation is no reason for the underdevelopment of the country, since illiteracy is not readily described as mental distress in terms of the definition the word suggests.

In *Mapping Intersections: African Literature and Africa's Development*, edited by Anne Adams and Janis Mayes (1998), they observe right on point that "African development, as a concept, is not generally construed to incorporate 'the literary'" (2). In *Bom Boy*, the 'illiteracy' of characters like Elaine does not automatically leave them with the psychologically-impaired tag. Elaine works tirelessly within an academic environment as a cleaner and later as a sales attendant because of her illiteracy. She drives herself hard to embrace survival in spite of her pregnant status and her having to deal with a fiancé in jail. After Leke's father dies in prison, Elaine takes the brutal decision of giving up her son for adoption to Marcus and Jane in a bid to better his lot in life. She sacrifices her comfort in order to ensure that her son grows up to a bright future. As such, Elaine breaks the chain that could have plagued her.

The cycle of poverty is one that envelopes many African nations. As a result, ignorance and staunch refusal to embrace enlightenment of sorts, rather than illiteracy, can be termed one of the issues that reflect psychological suffering that plagues the continent. This is why it is not uncommon to find literate individuals behave or take decisions that speak volumes of ignorance. It is not unusual to find people in government more concerned about how to enlarge their harems rather than focus on development. It is also not strange to read about the tussles for leadership when the gains of acquiring these leadership positions are still largely lacking with regards to the plight of the masses (Yongo).

This ignorance is further expounded in *Bom Boy*, when the events at Leke's workplace are presented. This further represents the notion that ignorance is not usually as a result of illiteracy, as seen in the excerpt:

Leke nodded in Lewis's direction as he clocked in. The security guard, sitting on a chair by the door, pursed his lips in response – Leke was ten minutes late. The workers who were friendly with Lewis would go to lunch without clocking out and he would look away while they were leaving, as if he didn't notice. But with Leke, Lewis was always watching. It was Lewis who had lodged the hygiene complaint against him (111).

Although it may be safely assumed that the security guard may not be formally educated, his constant exposure and contact with the workers should make him know better, like Elaine's situation as a cleaner in an academic environment. However, while the security guard can be conveniently excused, the attitudes of Leke's co-workers are inexcusable. For instance, "Gene had joined the company five days before, and was still unaware of the hidden rule amongst the staff: ignore Leke" (112). Leke's attitude does not also help issues as he prefers to keep strictly to himself, a reflection of psychological suffering in itself, as seen in "From the day Gene arrived Leke had been taken aback by his friendliness, overwhelmed at times. A part of him wanted Gene to leave him alone but another part, more unfamiliar, enjoyed the contact and the attention" (119).

Leke's unfamiliarity with companionship can be attributed to the psychological torture he has suffered since childhood as a result of his skin colour. Leke is not the only one in his work environment who suffers the pain of emotive reflections. His co-workers who are educated have refused to look beyond their noses and instead embraced ignorance as a tool to portray their disgust at the difference between them and Leke when in reality, there really isn't any.

Elaine's position is also one that presents the division along class lines that is common in several contemporary South African literary works. Post-apartheid South Africa is one that is left with no choice but to cement the racist lines, but the class distinctions remain all too obvious. There is no allusion as to the presence or absence of wealth of individuals because of the stark revelation of class structures. As Jeremy Seekings postulates:

Now, in the 'new' South Africa, class inequalities are highly visible all around us. The growth of the black elite and 'middle class' is evident in advertising as in real life. At the same time, huge numbers of black people are confined to an 'underclass' of unemployment, poverty and social exclusion. Most white people have retained the advantages conferred by their class position at the end of apartheid. But, at the same time, a small number of white people are downwardly mobile. The use of aggregate data for racial 'groups' or data on the average for racial 'groups' both obscures the social stratification within racial 'groups' and the extent to which race has ceased to be the key cause of inequality (2).

In *Bom Boy*, there are references to a generational curse on Leke's lineage in which every child born to the family will die young. Oscar's attempt to 'murder' Malcolm Feathers, the man who abused Elaine, his girlfriend, can be said to be premeditated as according to a babalawo (traditional seer), for the curse to be broken, Oscar has to find an evil man and kill him. It is obvious from the events in the text that Oscar is not guilty of actually going through with murdering Malcolm, but his skin colour and the fact that he is found beside a dead Malcolm, nails him. While Oscar is said to have initially nursed the idea of murdering Malcolm even if he had no definite plan of how the deed would be carried out, the matter takes a different turn, as relayed in *Bom Boy*:

Propelled by fright, Feathers moved with a haste his body was unprepared for, he slipped on the expensive smooth porcelain tiles, the sound of his legs sliding and a heavy thud as his skull glanced off the edge of the basin and hit the floor. His body was shaking as Oscar walked into the bathroom. A shiny pool of blood spread onto the yellow floor mat and the wriggling slowed until it felt as though the only sound in the house was a clock ticking. The man's face was not yet drained of all colour but his lips were blue. Oscar went onto his knees and put his ear to Feather's mouth, averting his eyes from the grey saucers wide open and staring. A warm breath, short.

'Help,' he whispered.

As Oscar waited for the breath to grow faint and disappear, he realised that nothing had gone according to plan (230).

The events are clear and police investigations, if carried out thoroughly, would have absolved him of the crime. Besides, he had the chance to run away from the scene of the crime but his thinking faculty, far too slow in response to such situations, betrays him, furthering the context of ignorance as a propeller for mental suffering.

IV. CLASS STRATIFICATION AS MENTAL INJURY IN *BOM BOY*

The issue of class stratification in South Africa, regarding both black and white peoples, has its basis in the introduction to colonialism to the region. This is related to the 1652 Dutch settlement in Cape Town, South Africa. In the early days of this settlement, not all white children were allowed in school as school at the time was for "imported slaves of the Dutch East India Company" (Prinsloo). Children were encouraged to keep coming because of the tobacco and brandy that was served in school. Literacy further spread with the popularisation of religious education. However, as literacy spread to other parts, it was observed that there was genuine increased interest in the acquisition of reading and writing in schools. Yet, contrary to expectations, the output in terms of productivity declined. As Theal, quoted in Frank Molteno, observes, "...there is a very large number of natives on the frontier who attend the mission schools and are taught to read and write, and they become really unfit for other work, and that class of person is increasing, and they are doing... no good to the country" (55).

Alice Hall exemplifies the concept of psychological distress in literature using the works of three Nobel Laureates – Faulkner, J.M. Coetzee and Toni Morrison – to depict what she refers to as 'complex interconnections' found within the "ethical, esthetic and imaginative challenges" (5) as explored in the altered physical outlook. From this viewpoint, Elaine in Omotoso's *Bom Boy* is representative of the 'small number of white people who are downwardly mobile' in Seekings' words. Although she is white, her racial identity doesn't spare her the trauma that comes with being in the lower class. The class stratification and its consequence of poverty is replicated in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* in which the protagonist (Tambu) is forced to feel nothing when her brother dies because it provides an opportunity for her to go to school. This suffering is psychological because Tambu's feelings are muted against any form of pity since what is uppermost on her mind is to better her lot. *Nervous Conditions* also portrays psychological conditions as Nyasha is taken to a psychiatrist when she develops an eating disorder in an effort to be 'white-like'.

Similarly, Omotoso's *Bom Boy* exhibits salient references to psychological impairments. Leke, the protagonist, seeks company by going from one medical institution to another. His alienation from society and his general countenance is sequel to a deep mental condition as his actions cannot be regarded as normal within the society he finds himself. This is also traced to his father's personality. It is this attitude that leads to his father spending time in prison and eventual death. Tsotso, who is a colleague of Leke, has a grandmother who also exhibits signs of psychological distress in her refusal to let go of her daughter's memory. Tsotso also suffers the abandonment and mental instability in school, and is accused of defiling school property when she is caught lying naked on a piano. As such, emotive suffering does not only plague the people as a result of living conditions but as a result of society's refusal to come to terms with the fact that people are unique in their experiences of fantasy.

V. CONCLUSION

The analysis of Yewande Omotoso's *Bom Boy* reveals that contemporary literary works serve as powerful testaments to the enduring psychological impact of apartheid and colonialism on African societies. Through the examination of alienation, ignorance, and class stratification as literary constructs, this study demonstrates that mental distress in the novel is not merely an individual experience but a collective condition that reflects broader societal trauma. The protagonist Leke's psychological suffering, manifested through his strange ailments and social isolation, mirrors the lingering effects of systemic oppression that continue to shape post-apartheid South Africa. Characters such as Elaine and Oscar further illustrate how ignorance and class divisions—rather than race alone—perpetuate emotive suffering across generations.

Omotoso's *Bom Boy* offers an exemplary insight into contemporary explorations of apartheid experiences, as viewed through a neo-oppressive lens. Literary works such as Omotoso's foreground the context of re-documenting history through the mirrored perspectives of narrative as resistance. *Bom Boy* demonstrates that diverse insights into the motifs of alienation, ignorance, and stratification depict apartheid not just as a past political construct, but as a budding contemporary experience that continues to shape actions and reactions to how the world confronts discrimination and engenders social justice.

Ultimately, the novel calls for continued critical engagement with literary texts as vehicles for understanding and addressing the enduring legacy of systemic discrimination. By using fiction to establish reality, Omotoso shows that the consequences of apartheid extend beyond its political end, continuing to influence actions, reactions, and psychological well-being in contemporary African settings. The study thus affirms that dismantling these narrative constructs is essential for achieving genuine social progress and collective healing

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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