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Repression, Memory, and Psychological Healing: A Psychoanalytic and Trauma Theory Reading of *Zainabu Jallo's Onions Make Us Cry* and Yejide Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path*

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Abstract: ***This article examines the representation of psychological trauma and unconscious conflict in Zainabu Jallo's Onions Make Us Cry and Daughters Who Walk This Path through the theoretical perspectives of psychoanalysis and trauma theory. While Onions Make Us Cry explores the psychological consequences of domestic violence and emotional repression through symbolism and dramatic dialogue, Daughters Who Walk This Path presents the devastating effects of childhood sexual abuse and the long process of recovery. Drawing on the psychoanalytic concepts of Sigmund Freud and the trauma theories of Cathy Caruth, this article argues that both texts portray trauma as an enduring psychological condition that shapes identity, relationships, and self-perception. Although the texts differ in genre and narrative technique, they converge in demonstrating that healing begins only when victims confront repressed memories and articulate their experiences. The study concludes that both writers expose the psychological costs of silence while advocating emotional liberation, resilience, and social transformation.***

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Trauma Theory, Repression, Domestic Violence, Sexual Abuse, Zainabu Jallo, Yejide Kilanko, African Literature

1. Introduction

In recent times, psychological suffering has been considered a crucial aspect of social reality in contemporary African literature. Writing beyond cultural repression, gender inequality, and violence. African authors are beginning to question the premise of the concealed emotional toll these realities take on individuals. Yejide Kilanko's ***Daughters Who Walk This Path*** and Zainabu Jallo's Onions represent two significant literary engagements with psychological pains. Both texts fall under different genres, however, both centre on female protagonists whose sense of self is shaped by traumatic experiences.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, previous researchers who have worked on Onions Make Us Cry largely focused on feminism, existentialism and domestic violence, with emphasis on the play's critique of patriarchal control and oppression and women's search for autonomy. The psychological processes underlying how these characters' work through their traumas are not fully explored. This article fills that gap by drawing on psychoanalytic criticism alongside trauma theory, exploring how both texts depict repression, identity fragmentation, memory and recovery as interconnected psychological processes. Rather than treating these themes on, this article argues that they form a single psychic circuit, repression produces fracture, fracture in turn, disturbs and the disturbance of memory in turn conditions the possibilities of healing. Both texts generate a shared generically inflected model of trauma in African women's experiences; one in which silence is not just a symptom of oppression but a psychological defense with its own recovery process represented not as a return to initial wholeness but as an uneven process of re-narration.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative textual analysis approach to examine the representation of psychological trauma, repression, and identity formation in ***Zainabu Jallo's Onions Make Us Cry*** and Yejide Kilanko's ***Daughters Who Walk This Path***. Qualitative textual analysis is appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth interpretation of literary texts by examining language, symbolism, characterization, dialogue, and narrative structures to uncover their underlying psychological meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study is anchored in Psychoanalytic Theory, as developed by Freud (1915, 1923), and Trauma Theory, as articulated by Caruth (1996), Herman (1992), Smith (2014), and Freyd (1996). Psychoanalytic theory provides the conceptual tools for examining repression, the unconscious, fractured identity, anxiety, and the return of the repressed, while Trauma Theory explains the enduring psychological consequences of domestic violence and childhood sexual abuse on memory, identity, and interpersonal relationships. The integration of these theoretical perspectives enables a comprehensive analysis of how traumatic experiences influence the psychological development and behavioural patterns of the protagonists.

The primary data for this study consist of the selected literary texts: ***Onions Make Us Cry*** by Jallo (2013) and ***Daughters Who Walk This Path*** by Kilanko (2012). Secondary data were obtained from scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and other relevant academic publications on psychoanalysis, trauma studies, African literature, gender studies, and literary criticism. These sources provide both theoretical grounding and critical perspectives for interpreting the selected texts.

The analytical procedure involves close reading of the primary texts to identify dialogues, symbols, and character interactions that portray psychological conflict, traumatic experiences, repression, memory, fractured identity, and emotional healing. These textual elements are interpreted through the conceptual frameworks of psychoanalysis and trauma theory to demonstrate how the authors represent the psychological effects of violence and the processes through which their characters negotiate recovery. By combining close textual reading with established psychological theories, the study offers a nuanced understanding of the relationship between trauma, identity, and healing in contemporary African literature.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Psychoanalysis: Repression and Fractured Personality

Freud's concept of repression describes the unconscious as the exclusion of intolerable memories or effects from conscious awareness where they persist and exert pressure on thought and behaviour, returning in disguised form through symptoms, dreams, and displaced actions. Psychoanalytic Criticism asserts that human behaviour is driven primarily by an unconscious mind filled with repressed memories, fears and primitive instincts. Rather than being entirely rational our choices are heavily influenced by hidden desires. According to Freud, traumatic experiences are sometimes, repressed because the conscious mind cannot immediately accommodate them.

Freud's concepts of repression, the unconscious defense mechanisms and psychic conflict provide an appropriate framework for understanding the emotional lives of the female protagonists in both texts. Their silence does not erase psychological pain but instead deepens internal conflict until emotional expressions become unavailable.

3.2 Trauma Theory: Memory, Repetition, and Testimony

Cathy Caruth describes trauma as broadly encompassing ‘an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucination and other intrusive phenomena. She points to the paradoxical and unknowable nature of trauma, whereby an event is not assimilated at the time of its occurrence, but later returns to bear delayed and repeated witness to the wound. Not knowing is an inherent element of trauma: the traumatic event is so overwhelming that it is not fully experienced in the moment and it is not until later that the enormity of what has happened begins to sink in. This offers a language for the temporal disorder that structures both texts. Judith Herman’s Trauma and Recovery clinical framework conceptualizes healing as a non-linear, sequenced process consisting of three core stages: Establishing Safety, Remembrance and Mourning, and Reconnection. This provides a diagnostic vocabulary for assessing how far, and by what means Jallo's and Kilanko's characters move towards healing.

Dominick LaCapra's distinction between "acting out," the compulsive repetition of traumatic experience, and "working through," the effortful, never fully complete process of integrating trauma into a livable narrative, further clarifies the difference between the recursive suffering that dominates much of both texts and more tentative movements toward integration that occur unevenly near their close.

Psychoanalysis and trauma theory allow this article to treat repression, fractured identity, memory and healing not as themes but as a psychic process of what is repressed, which structures how memory operates; how memory operates structures what recovery becomes. In ***Onions Make Us Cry***, moments of healing, where they occur, are collective rather than solitary, arising when women characters find, however briefly, a shared language for grievances previously displaced or deflected. This aligns with Herman's insight that recovery is relational; it requires a witness willing to receive the survivor's account rather than deny or minimize it. The play's dramatic form, built on dialogue and co-presence, is particularly suited to staging this relational dimension of healing.

Daughters Who Walk This Path similarly locates the possibility of healing in disclosure and acknowledgment rather than in solitary insight alone. As the protagonist matures, her capacity to name her experiences first to herself, then to trusted others, marks a shift from acting out toward the more effortful process of working through. Yet the novel is notably restrained in how far it allows this process to resolve; reconnection with family remains partial and complicated, and the narrative declines to offer full reconciliation or closure, in keeping with trauma theory's recognition that working through is infinite rather than complete.

Recovery therefore depends upon acknowledging and narrating previously suppressed experiences. This integrated framework is particularly suited to African literary texts that stage trauma within, rather than apart from, social structures of gender, family, and community, since it allows attention to both the intrapsychic mechanisms of suffering and their embodiment in collective, cultural conditions of silence and disclosure.

3.3 Fractured Identity and the Return of the Repressed

Psychoanalytic theory is primarily concerned with the formation and fragmentation of identity under the influence of traumatic experiences. Freud (1915) argued that the human psyche is molded by underlying unconscious processes, including suppressed desires and memories which are often traced back to early childhood experiences or overwhelming emotional events. When particularly painful experiences are repressed into the unconscious as a means of psychological self-preservation, repression hides these experiences rather than eliminating them.

One of Freud's most influential concepts is the return of the repressed, which refers to the re-emergence of repressed thoughts, emotions, or memories after they have been excluded from conscious awareness. Freud (1915) argues that repressed material inevitably seeks expression because it remains active within the unconscious mind. Consequently, they often return indirectly through recurring memories, dreams, anxiety, emotional disturbances, or compulsive

behaviour. The repression of traumatic experiences frequently results in what psychoanalytic critics describe asfractas fractureddty. Identity becomes fragmented when individuals are unable to reconcile traumatic memories with their conscious sense of self.

The psychological cost of sustained repression, in both texts, is a fracturing of identity that manifests differently across both genres. In ***Onions Make Us Cry***, the dramatic form externalizes fracture through the contradiction between what characters' assert and what their actions or asides portray. The personality the women portray in public speaks of them being content and happy with their life but in soliloquy or in conflict with other women, this personality vanishes, it becomes directly opposite.

This split between public presentation and private presentation effect corresponds to the psychoanalytic account of a defensively organised self, in which the socially compliant persona functions to contain material that cannot be safely integrated.

In ***Daughters Who Walk This Path***, fracture is rendered through the protagonist's narration. The contemplative first-person narration repeatedly returns to the originating trauma in ways that are not fully chronological, producing the belated, intrusive quality of recollection that Caruth identifies as characteristic of traumatic memory. The protagonist's difficulty forming stable attachments, her ambivalence toward her own body, her swaying between self-blame and anger at those who failed to protect her, and regi of the personality that chronic, unacknowledged trauma produces.

Memory in the text does not function as a stable archive to be consulted at will but as a set of returns that the protagonist cannot fully control, a re-enactment in narrative form. LaCapra calls this "acting-out."

In both texts, fracture is not merely a thematic motif but a structural consequence of the repression because certain experiences cannot be integrated into an acknowledged, shareable narrative, the self that carries them becomes internally divided, and memory becomes correspondingly unreliable, recursive and intrusive rather than continuous.

4. Psychoanalytic Reading of Daughters Who Walk This Path

Daughters Who Walk This Path, follows Morayo, a young girl, whose childhood is shattered by sexual abuse perpetrated by a trusted family member. The text traces the enduring psychological effects of this trauma as she struggles with silence, shame, fractured identity and healing. Through Morayo's experiences, Kilanko examines the long-term consequences of sexual violence within a patriarchal society. Morayo's experience reflects the psychological internalization of sexual trauma. Rather than perceiving the abuse as an act committed against her, she unconsciously reconstructs her identity around feelings of shame and worthlessness. Herman (1992) notes that survivours frequently internalize guilt that rightly belongs to the perpetrator. Kilanko uses this recurring expression to demonstrate how trauma fractures Morayo's sense of self and produces an identity governed by repression rather than self-acceptance.

Freud (1915) argues that experiences which are too painful to confront consciously are repressed into the unconscious, where they continue to influence behaviour. Morayo's inability to immediately disclose the abuse illustrates this process of repression. Instead of expressing her pain openly, she internalizes her fear, shame, and confusion, allowing the traumatic memory to remain buried while continuing to shape her emotional life. This allowed Bros T, to abuse her multiple times (Kilanko, 2012, pp. 67–76).

The psychological consequences of repression become evident in Morayo's relationships with others. Although she grows into adulthood and outwardly appears to lead a normal life, she struggles with intimacy, trust, and emotional security. Her hesitation to form close emotional bonds reflects the unconscious fear produced by childhood betrayal.

Morayo's emotional withdrawal is not merely a personal choice but a manifestation of unresolved psychic conflict. The behaviours Morayo projects during her adulthood were the result of childhood trauma. The trauma Morayo suffers is as a result of the sexual abuse she suffered at age 12. Morayo's parents, who had instilled values and warning her against men, unbeknownst to them, that the men they are trying to protect her from is the nephew they house.

Bros T, her cousin stays on their house due to a family issue between her aunt and her husband. Bros "T", started to abuse Morayo when her parents were not home. (Kilanko, 2013, 68–69). This childhood trauma affected her life; as an adult, she developed anxiety due to the trauma and also gets triggered due to the past trauma. The stress she felt as a child and adult could not be separated from the figure of Kachi. Kachi is her first love, that they met again as an adult. Morayo gets anxious when Kachi gets disappointed after sharing her past (Kilanko, 2013, 258–259).

Despite Morayo's efforts to suppress memories of the abuse, they keep coming back through intrusive thoughts, emotional distress and psychological anxiety. Certain situations and interactions trigger memories that she cannot fully control, demonstrating that repression never completely eliminates traumatic experiences. Freud (1915) maintains that repressed memories inevitably seek expression because they remain active within the unconscious mind. Morayo's recurring emotional pain confirms this psychoanalytic principle.

Also, Morayo's identity becomes psychologically fragmented after the abuse. Before the traumatic experience, she possesses a sense of innocence, confidence and emotional security. However, the abuse fractures her identity and self-perception, leading to a lack of trust and fear, because she questions her own worth and struggles to reconcile the memory of herself as an innocent child with the psychological burden gotten from sexual violence. This fractured identity shows the internal conflict between the conscious desire to move forward and unconscious persistence of traumatic memory.

Another important psychoanalytic element in the novel is silence. Morayo initially remains silent due to fear of being punished because the trauma triggers are her inability to speak about her experience to anyone, not even her friends. Psychoanalytic theory suggests that language often fails victims of overwhelming trauma because the unconscious resists direct representation (Caruth, 1996); therefore, silence becomes a psychological symptom of repression rather than evidence of forgetting or recovery.

Herman (1992) argues that recovery from trauma begins when survivors acknowledge their experiences and reclaim personal narratives. Morayo's confrontation of previously repressed memories, made a for reconstruction of her fractured identity and regain emotional agency. By giving voice to her repressed experience, Morayo enters the long, difficult process of healing. The text therefore suggests that psychological liberation is achieved through confronting and understanding the traumatic experiences and not through forgetting them.

Morayo's psychological journey demonstrates how far childhood trauma can affect a victim, even beyond the immediate experience of abuse. It shapes the unconscious desires, interpersonal relationships, emotional development and personal identity. Hence, a psychoanalytic reading of ***Daughters Who Walk This Path*** reveals the text as beyond sexual violence but also an exploration of the enduring power of the unconscious and the difficult process of recovering from repressed trauma.

5. Trauma Theory Reading of Daughters Who Walk This Path

Yejide Kilanko's ***Daughters Who Walk This Path*** makes it evident that trauma is a prolonged psychological condition that shapes memory, identity, and interpersonal relationships. Through the character of Morayo, Kilanko reveals that childhood sexual abuse produces enduring emotional wounds that cannot be confined to the past. Freud's Betrayal Trauma Theory shall be used as a precedent for this discourse.

Freyd (1996) argues that trauma's severity isn't only a function of physical threat or violence, it's also a function of the degree to which the perpetrator is someone the victim trusts. The closer and more necessary the relationship, the higher the betrayal component of the trauma. This resonates with Morayo's experience, having been abused by her cousin, whom she was as a big brother, the trauma is heightened by the virtue of their relationship. Bros T, is a trusted family member, Morayo has faith in him, but he upped her off her innocence, leaving her hurt and broken. This betrayal intensifies the traumatic impact because the violence isn't far from home.

Freyd and Carly Smith's (1996) extension of the theory to institutional betrayal trauma, also fits into the discourse. The theory states that where institutions that a person depends on fail to prevent or adequately respond to abuse, this compounds the original harm. Morayo's family failed her, at dinner, where blurted out the sacrilegious acts her cousin had been melting on her, she expected something, or an act from her parents to her, especially her mother. Instead they became silent about the matter. Despite the abrupt return of Bros. T to Jos by her parents, she needed more, she needed protection, she needed to be heard, but they didn't offer all this, till she became suicidal. Aunty Morenike who had a similar experience as a teenager, was the only one who had a conversation with Morayo, after realizing she was suicidal. Aunty Morenike was raped by her father's friend; Chief Komolafe, at the age of 15 (Kilanko, 2012 pp 105-108). Morayo found solace in Aunty Morenike. Aunty Morenike serves as a counter-institutional witness.

According to Felman & Laub (1992) trauma is defined partly by the absence of an adequate witness at the time it occurred and Laub 's clinical distinction between three levels of witnessing. (Being a witness to oneself, to others, and to the process of witnessing itself). Aunty Morenike had experienced and witnessed an abuse herself and now she's witnessing to Morayo.

Silence and unclaimed experience are part of the traumatic experiences. Herman (1992) contends that survivours of sexual violence often experience silence because trauma overwhelms their capacity to narrate their experiences. Morayo's silence is a symptom of psychological injury. The inability to articulate her experience reflects the fragmentation of memory that frequently accompanies traumatic events. As Dodhy (2017) observes secrecy and silence intensify psychological distress, allowing intrusive thoughts and emotional suffering to persist.

Herman (1992) argues that traumatic experiences destroy an individual's fundamental assumptions about safety and trust, while Caruth (1996) emphasizes that survivours repeatedly relive traumatic through emotional responses that appear disconnected from the original event. Morayo's emotional withdrawal and recurring feelings of shame demonstrate these lasting psychological consequences. It took a toll on Morayo's identity and relationships. She grows into adulthood to struggle with intimacy, trust and self-worth because the memory of abuse continues to shape her perception of herself and others. Despite the destructive effects of trauma, the novel presents healing process as possible through remembrance, narration and supportive relationships. Herman (1992) identifies recovery as a gradual process involving the establishment of safety and reconstruction of traumatic memory, and the restoration of meaningful relationships. Morayo's willingness to confront her past and speak up about her experiences marks an important step towards psychological recovery. Rather than allowing trauma to define her identity permanently, he gradually reclaims agency over her life. Rather than allowing trauma to define her identity permanently, she gradually reclaims agency over her life.

Morayo's journey in ***Daughters Who Walk This Path*** demonstrates that trauma extends beyond the immediate experience of violence to influence memory, identity, and social relationships. By portraying both the devastating consequences of childhood sexual abuse and the possibility of psychological recovery, Kilanko contributes significantly to trauma narratives in contemporary African literature. The text affirms Trauma Theory's central argument that healing does not result from forgetting traumatic experiences but

acknowledging, narrating and integrating them into a reconstructed sense of self.

5.1 Psychoanalytic Reading of *Onions Make Us Cry*

Zainabu Jallo's Onions Make Us Cry is a contemporary African play that explores the psychological, emotional, and social consequences of domestic violence within a patriarchal society. The play centres on Malinda, a woman trapped in an abusive marriage whose silence and endurance reflect the cultural expectations placed on many women to preserve family honour at the expense of their well-being, through her interactions with another female character; Lola unfolds the domestic conflicts she experienced. Jallo exposes the devastating effects of physical and emotional abuse on the human psyche.

The title of the play is symbolic, just as onions naturally produce tears when peeled, the play suggests that confronting painful experiences inevitably evokes emotional suffering. The Onion therefore becomes a metaphor for hidden trauma, suppressed emotions and the gradual unveiling of painful truths. By employing symbolism, dramatic dialogue and psychological realism, Jallo demonstrates that emotional wounds caused by violence and oppression cannot remain permanently concealed. Instead, they continue to shape the victim's identity, behaviour and relationships, until they are acknowledged and confronted.

Jallo's ***Onions Make Us Cry*** presents emotional repression as one of the major psychological consequences of domestic violence. Malinda suppresses her experiences to keep her marriage, she has a cover-story; onions. Freud's (1915) concept of repression, is illustrated. Malinda appears composed, but her unconscious continues to carry unresolved emotional pains.

The symbolic image of the onion reinforces this psychological reality. Just as onions inevitably produce tears when peeled, painful memories eventually demand emotional expression. Freud (1928) argues that repressed experiences inevitably return because they remain active within the unconscious mind. Malinda's psychological deterioration demonstrates this principle as suppressed emotions gradually overwhelm her ability to maintain emotional control.

Furthermore, Jallo critiques the cultural expectation that women should silently endure abusive relationships. Such silence intensifies psychological suffering instead of resolving it (Emmanuel-Olowonubi et al., 2020). The setting of the play in an asylum lets Jallo externalize the return of the repressed. Malinda's murder of her husband is the eruption of violence that decades of silence and displacement (the onions) could not indefinitely contain. Madness here isn't based on pathology, it is what happens when the unconscious can no longer be managed by euphemism.

Structurally, Malinda and Lola mirror each other, both are survivours of patriarchal abuse, one who acted and one who speaks in euphemisms.

Acknowledging Freudian Theory, based on Psychoanalysis. Freud postulates that human beings are tripartite in nature; id, ego, and super-ego.

Malinda as id: Malinda is the character who acts; she kills. In Freudian terms the id is the seat of raw drives, aggression, desire, the pleasure principle unmoderated by consequence or social law. Melinda's murder of her husband is the id's logic executed literally, the unrepressed discharge of rage and anger that has been building under years of abuse. Her descent into "madness" as the play frames it isn't really a loss of coherence; it's the id operating without the ego's usual containment. The asylum, from this angle, is simply the place society puts the id when it refuses to stay repressed.

Lola as ego. Lola, by contrast is the mediator; she is a therapist, someone's profession is reality-testing, she manages Malinda's narrative, tries to keep her secured to sense, occupies the socially sanctioned role of the rational helper. But the ego's job, according to Freud, isn't to eliminate the id's drives; it's to negotiate between them and external reality. Lola isn't perfect for this, as she's a victim of the same violence Malinda suffered, yet she keeps performing the "onions" euphemism rather than naming the abuse outright. That's the duty of the ego, finding a compromise formation that lets the drive (anger) get partial expression without breaching social order. The Superego is arguably not embodied in either women but external to both; the husband, marriage norm, the onlooking patriots, the patriarchal expectation that judges and polices what a wife is permitted to feel or do. Both women are, in this sense, negotiating the same superego pressure from different psychic positions, one, exploding past it, the other by managing around it.

5.2 Trauma Theory Reading of *Onions Make Us Cry*

Modern trauma theory adds a temporal dimension to the classical Freudian model because it doesn't fully capture. Caruth's influential account of trauma describes it as an experience that is not fully assimilated at the moment it occurs; returns later in forms the survivor cannot control, flashback, displaced speech, repetition. The onion euphemism fits this, it is not merely hiding an abuse but evidence that the event has not been integrated into ordinary narrative memory. The wound speaks, but never as itself. Herman's stage model of trauma recovery; safety, remembrance and mourning, reconnection, offers a way to locate the characters within a recovery arc. Both women seem stalled between the first two stages, neither has safety and their language of mourning remains displaced rather than direct.

Dori Laub's work on testimony argues that trauma requires a listener to become fully speakable, and healing depends on someone bearing witness to it. Lola occupies the listening position as a therapist, but she is also a survivor of the same violence; she cannot offer the undamaged, neutral witness the classical model assumes. This double positioning, witness who herself needs witnessing, is a recurring concern in trauma theory when trauma is systemic rather than isolated, and it is precisely Jallo's point; there is no clean outside position from which to hear these women's stories.

6. Comparative Discussion

Both ***Onions Make Us Cry*** and ***Daughters Who Walk This Path*** portray psychological suffering as a continuing process rather than a temporal emotional reaction. From a psychoanalytic perspective, both protagonists experience repression, unconscious conflict and emotional fragmentation (Freud, 1915). While Jallo relies on symbolism and dramatic dialogue to depict emotional repression, Kilanko adopts psychological realism to portray the enduring effects of childhood sexual abuse. Despite the stylistic differences, both authors suggest that healing begins through emotional expression rather than silence (Herman, 1992).

7. Conclusion

The study has demonstrated that psychoanalytic criticism and trauma theory provide complementary frameworks for understanding ***Onions Make Us Cry*** and ***Daughters Who Walk This Path***. Both texts portray trauma as an enduring psychological condition that influences memory, behavior and identity. Repression emerges as central defence mechanism that temporarily hides emotional pain but intensifies psychological conflicts. By encouraging victims to confront hidden memories and speak up about painful experiences, both authors redefine emotional expression as an act of resistance rather than weakness. Their work contributes significantly to contemporary African literature by exposing the psychological consequences of gender-based violence while advocating healing, resilience, and social transformation.

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