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## Child Character, Sexual Trauma and Postmodern Realities in Toni Kan's *Nights of The Creaking Bed*

AKINSETE, CHARLES TOLULOPE

Department of English, University of Ibadan tolu304@gmail.com

### Abstract

This paper critiques the interface between child character and sexual trauma in Toni Kan's *Night of a Creaking Bed*. The book, which is a collection of short stories, accentuates sexual realities of child characters in a postmodern African milieu. The depiction of abrasive sexual reactions in these stories defies sex as morally exclusive, as practised in pre-colonial and early modern African societies. The aim of this paper is foregrounded in sexual trauma and its effects on child characters in short stories that appraise postmodern Nigerian society. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis serves as theoretical base for this paper, with pinpoint focus on Jean Laplanche's theory of general seduction. Using the

qualitative research as methodology, this research examines five selected short stories in Toni Kan's collection, which captures postmodernist version of sexual realities experienced by child characters. This paper therefore pontificates on societal intricacies and consequences of sexually traumatised child characters, within the purview of Nigerian environs, as a result of (direct or indirect) exposure to sex and/or sex related activities at a tender age.

**Keywords:** Child character, Nigerian short stories, Postmodern realities, Sexual abuse and trauma, Seduction theory

### Structured Practitioner's Note

- Studies abound that have treated different forms of violence - domestic, workplace and emotional among other forms of social vile.
- This paper foregrounds sexual trauma and its effects on child characters in short stories that appraise postmodern Nigerian society.
- Readers of this paper will better appreciate the effect(s) and societal intricacies of sexually traumatised child characters within the Nigerian context as a result direct or indirect exposure to sex and/or sex related activities at a tender age.

### Introduction

Characterisation remains key component in

literature, particularly prose fiction. The popularity of the novel as a literary genre can equally be attributed to the introduction of striking characters that enrapture readers with enduring imagination. From several of Africa's collectanea, examples include Meka in Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal* (1956), Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Merhing in Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1974) and Kambili in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003). These randomly selected novels encapsulate critical issues in African history, such as colonialism, apartheid, domestic violence, feminism and so on. As a result, these characters essentially become topical phizogs in illustrating salient African themes, thus foregrounding different character archetypes in African literature over time.



Among these diverse character archetypes is the child character, in which, out of the previous selection, Kambili is the only example. In the literature review of this study, the case of Kambili and her brother, Jaja will be revisited with reference to African literatures that highlight the relationship between child character and trauma. No doubt, the child character is one of the popular character prototypes vastly highlighted in the twentieth century across diverse literatures of the world. More often than not, the child character, in fiction, movies and, especially, folktales are associated with more than just fun, learning and entertainment' especially in relation to children's literature. O'Malley (1968) validates this assertion in his book entitled, *The Making of the Modern Child: Children's Literature and Childhood in the Later Eighteenth Century*, where he describes the evolution of 'the child' during the Victorian Age. Hence, 'the child' is viewed as a momentous symbolic representation for societal reformation.

Also, as contemporary African societies develop, given multifaceted socio-political experiences, the child character began to evolve in adult literatures with serious thematic content. Whether as a dynamic or static character, the story changes as the child ultimately becomes victim of social vices such as war, domestic violence, and all kinds of abuse. Sex and sexuality are common tropes in the discourse of modern African literature. Complexities of the modern era cumulate into a postmodern African culture which deconstructs conservative approach to sex and sexuality. As a result of the antics and aftermaths of Western civilisation, African children are getting more exposed to abrasive sexual culture. Kan's collection, *Nights of the*

*Creaking Bird*, contributes to the bodies of literatures that feature child characters as ill-fated victims of diverse forms of social vices. This paper, however, narrows down the search on the effects of child characters' involvement, albeit directly or indirect, in sexual practices in (post)modern Nigerian societies.

### **Theoretical perspectives**

Freud's psychoanalytic insights and Laplanche's theory of general seduction are adopted as pivotal theoretical approaches in this study. Freud demonstrates psychoanalysis from the mind template which provides a connection between sexuality and the unconscious, the id level at which of all forms of repressed irrational desires and primitive impulses operate. It is from this id level of psyche that human actions become unconsciously expressed. Part of such actions is sex and invariably, its abuse also naturally comes to expression in 'ways that escape a neo-positivistic paradigm' (Zeuthen 2015). This paper, therefore, feeds on Freud's postulation in his paper entitled *On the Aetiology of Hysteria* (1896) that hysteria (perhaps not all forms) can be traced to sexual seduction and ultimately abuse, thus the origin of his Seduction Theory.

Laplanche, the French psychoanalytical theorist, provides a more convincing insight into psychosexual development, having also established the connection between sexual abuse and human mind. But far more reaching to this study is Laplanche's notable extension and perhaps advancement on Freud's Seduction theory. In his work entitled *The Theory of General Seduction* (1987), Laplanche focused a reformulation of Freud's theory on seduction, with the attempt towards theorising development of the



unconscious in its repressed form. He later centres on how the adult does initiate the child's sexual instincts or fantasies. He provides the theoretical frame, which illustrates how child sexuality develops as a result of a relationship between child and the adult, and how this affects the child's development. Laplanche believes that the child constantly gets seduced by a particular adult and that the child inevitably conscripts to such adult's sexuality (Zeuthen).

### Engaging the text

But first, of particular interest is the simple but effective definition of psychoanalysis as a theory that "reads the past in order to make sense of the present. Like a detective story, it starts with effects and traces these effects back to origins" (Jefferson and Robey (eds) 150). Emig foregrounds this import, insisting that "story-telling is the obvious link between psychoanalysis and literature" (175). The title of the selected text, *Nights of the Creaking Bed*, figuratively alludes to certain past, memorable or not, with semantic imports connoted towards sex related experiences. As psychoanalysis is concerned with investigating the background of human activity, this study also engages unstable reactions (hysteria) of child characters, as a result of these *past experiences* recounted in the stories. This paper aligns with the notion that hysteric characters suffer as a result of traumatic reminiscences (Freud 191). While Freud later affirms hysteria also as a representation of wishful thoughts, dreams and fantasies, we gravitate to the extreme form often diagnosed as trauma, especially resulting from sex related experiences.

Freud's reflection on traumatic experiences is foregrounded in his work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1921) where he

establishes the notion that mental issues are often caused by pleasure principle. Among these mental issues includes sexual trauma which is triggered by the unconscious activation of the pleasure principle whereby human instincts for immediate gratification lead to actions that are considered devoid of logic and morality. Woman and children, over the world, are excessively victims of sexual abuse (Watson, L. B., Matheny, K. B., Gagne, P., Brack, G. & Ancis, J. R., 2012). For children, as quite demonstrated by Freud and validated by Laplanche, the consequences of this form of abuse could linger over time and then manifest later, affecting the individual's self-esteem, sexual satisfaction, intimacy, among other forms of hysteria. How these theoretical assumptions evolve and relate to literary experiences that capture the realities of postmodern Africa world is discussed next in this paper.

From the nineteenth century to contemporary twenty-first century, child characters/stories have continuously received global attention, given the rationalities of the modern era. There is no other platform on which child character remained most prominent other than in children's literature, which mostly serves as birthplace for other media sources such as movies, shows, and cartoons. Western civilisation and globalisation aided the spread of child characters across African landscape and beyond. Popular stories about children-characters such as Cinderella, Harry Potter and so on now pose significant threat to the presence and existence African oral folktales, even in written forms. Resisting temptation of deviating into this sensitive discourse, the focus here is rather on child character (as there is clear distinction between child character in children's literature and the child



character in adult literature) with specificity on sexual abuse. While the former expresses didactic, chivalric and moralistic intent, the latter simply reveals grotesque imageries of child oppression and victimisation in a rapidly-changing African world.

Child abuse is a global phenomenon, unquestionably neither restricted nor peculiar to African landscape. However, within the scope of the family as unit of a society, sexual abuse in relation to children is said to be underreported in sub-Saharan Africa, and perhaps beyond (Bowman and Brundige). It is pertinent to state that this phenomenon falls within the grasp of diverse disciplines in humanities, social sciences, law and core sciences. Here, child sexual abuse is critiqued through the lens of literature, that is, examining how child characters evolve as a result of their encounter with irreversible sexual experiences in a fast-changing African world. In a similar vein, focus is essentially on Nigerian literary worldview, as a microcosm of the African continent. Having established this distinction, next is a conceptual review of selected popular novels that correspond to this phenomenon.

The topic of child abuse has indeed been a recurrent theme in several literary texts. Of important note, however, is the dire revelation of the position of a child in the modern world. Mugubi succinctly describes the child's position as 'a sacrifice to the adult world's benightedness, selfishness and savagery'. Oliver Twist in Dicken's *Oliver Twist* (1839) metaphorizes the pains and challenges of orphan and street children and also ridicules societal insensitivity towards child labour. It is one of the popular texts through which the child character becomes archetypal. Laye, the protagonist in Camara Laye's *The African Child* (1953) underscores

the implications of colonialism on young African children as they gradually become torn apart by unrepentant forces of Western civilisation. Also, the young boy, Kunta Kinte, in early parts of Haley's *Roots* (1973) exemplifies the vice of slavery/racism, with immense consequences on two large continents. In a nutshell, serious issues are, more often than not, articulated in adult literatures with children portrayed as protagonists.

Back to the context of the African society, the adult world has, and still, is experiencing a monumental change in every sphere of endeavour. The continuous heartbeat of Western civilisation still pumps irreversible and consequential negative blood through the collapsing vein of traditional African societies. Modernism dominates Africa's diverse mainstream right from the mid-twentieth century. Africa struggles to keep up with its cultural tendencies of modern society as they affect the continent's arts, economy, landscape, literature, and socio-political experiences. But the parody of modernism, as Europe later discovers in the late twentieth century, is not lost to the black continent. Africa reels in the distortion of the modernist's self-consciousness, which oppressively negates pre-colonial communal knowledge. Erritouni states that "the end of colonialism in the second half of the twentieth century, instead of fostering genuine independence, merely paved the way for further economic (albeit cultural) subordination" (151).. With caution thrown into the wind in the name of self-experimentation, African cultural conservatism is sacrificed on that altar of self-expressionism, that is, unrestricted subjective emotions and responses perhaps born from repressive feelings.



Kambili, the child character cum protagonist in *Purple Hibiscus*, is a victim of the scourge of modernism. She, alongside her brother, Jaja, and mother, not to mention her paternal grandfather, suffers exceedingly as a result of her father's (Papa Eugene) extreme indoctrination of Catholic principles. Nietzsche's attack on religion as a source of undermining man's will comes alive in Papa Eugene's atrocious actions against his own wife and children. DeFonza foregrounds violence and silence as themes in *Purple Hibiscus*, while describing the horrific scene in which the children cleaned up their mother's blood after a severe beating by their father. Beyond the delineation of themes, these concepts are preponderant catalysts and sustenance of child abuse, which ultimately lead to trauma. In the end, children absorb and become used to this vice so much that this reality becomes an inseparable consciousness. Children as victims of trauma, like the case of Kambili and Jaja, become insensitive to the notion of violence, hostility, assault, and bloodshed, as if these are normal occurrences (Defonza). This perception is further examined in the selected text for this study.

*Nights of the Creaking Bed* is a collection of thirteen short stories whose narratives are based on different characters existing in cosmopolitan Nigerian society. This is a postmodern world that, at every instance, reflects the parody of modernism with recourse to religion, sex and politics. It is a society that thrives on chaos and disorder at every unit of existence. Stories such 'Nights of the Creaking Bed', 'Broda Sonnie', 'Ahmed', 'My Perfect Life', 'The Passion of Pololo', 'The Phone Call Good Night', and 'The car they borrowed' all exemplify

ambivalent realities of postmodern era. Characters are caught in the overwhelming scepticism of their realities in relation to their individual idiosyncrasies. Disillusioned by the failures of the modern era, each character tries to find some measure of sanity/certainty in an insane/uncertain environment. Four of these short stories however underscore the effects of sexual trauma on child characters.

The first story, 'Nights of the Creaking Bed', from which the title of the collection is drawn, revolves round a dynamic character, who narrates his tainted experiences as a young boy still under his mother's roof. Although victims of a fragmented home, he, together with his brother Meze and mother, flourishes in a community where poverty and lack was like water to fish for everybody else. Through his mother's charitable 'job' and 'boss', this small family is able to cater for itself, and is often the cynosure of all poverty-stricken eyes. However, the reality was far from the truth as expressed by the young narrator:

Everyone saw us, Meze, my mother and me, as the rich ones. We were the ones who had a garage and could park a car if we bought one. We were the ones who never missed school because of unpaid fees and we were the ones who always had light when others didn't... Our neighbours had conceived a perfect life for us... They knew the truth had a different face, but the overbearing misery of their own lives left them blinded to that reality. ('Nights of the Creaking Bed' 12)

The concept of truth here is ambivalent, and



reality becomes elusive. The perceived prosperity of the narrator's family in fact comes at a huge cost. The price was the mother's sexual relationship between a fat Uncle Tony, who, despite the fact that he was married, finds comfort in mother's nakedness, and vice versa. But that was not all. The narrator and his brother gradually grew up to become subconsciously aware of the immorality disguised as a way of life; "It was something we knew without being told, the sort of knowledge that creeps up on you, ... and even though we didn't deny it, ... we prefer those who had gained this knowledge kept it to themselves" ('Night of the Creaking Bed', 9). Eventually, these young boys become public victims of their private horrors they had psychologically tried to endure for so long.

I got my first black eye the day my classmate Damian bared the naked rump of our secret before the whole school. "Your mother is fucking somebody's husband". It was enough to bring bile into my tongue, the rage to the fore of my being and my fist slamming into his mouth... He dredged from the pit of his rage a sentence that ensured I never looked my mates in the eye again. 'Your mother is fucking somebody's husband!' ('Nights of the Creaking Bed' 9/10)

The young narrator suffers deep-seated psychological wounds as a result of the uncouth revelation by Damian, his classmate. Immediately, his only alternative reaction was violence. He fights physically as the only way to battle his distorted psyche. Mugubi (2012) attempts a description of the

young narrator's trauma, stating that "the anatomic and intellectual vulnerability of children makes them easy prey to varied forms of victimization from adults". The young narrator's mental defences of his knowledge about his mother's illicit sexual affairs come crashing down. Even though he takes out a few teeth from his classmates, it offers no relief. He knows he has lost that battle; his will crumbles completely; he loses his sense of self-worth, confidence and whatever that is left of his identity.

Speaking of identity, that the young narrator didn't arrogate any name to himself is quite symbolic. This simply validates his invisibility, as well as physical and psychological enclosure, as he loses his sense of identity due to that shameful public encounter with his unabashed classmate. But the trauma is far from over. He experiences a barrage of sordid encounters with neighbours who gradually strip off his confidence as a young boy. He becomes the intermediary between the unforgiving society and his defenceless mother. Indirectly, he suffers from his mother's sufferings till it reaches an unbearable climax.

When you are fifteen and you are in full grip of adolescence, your mother's nakedness is not the best thing to behold. So, one evening when my mother ran out of her room stark naked, and screaming at the top of her lungs, I felt a stirring that leaves me flushed with shame when I recollect it. (Nights of the Creaking Bed 14)

After endless nights of witnessing, and perhaps mentally participating in his mother's sexual proclivity, his psychological



cuts deeper with the traumatic death of Uncle John. The disgrace/pleasure of sighting his mother's nakedness and the public shame mars him for life. The young narrator, even after time had passed, admits that he "felt, and continue to feel, like an alien in a foreign land" (Night of the Creaking Bed 15). In the end, he decides against getting married and, perhaps as a way of overcoming his guilt, caters for Uncle John's widowed wife and only son. This story seems more like a confession, rather than a narrative, born out of the craving towards finding some measure of psychological relief, as Josef Breuer had begun with his psychotic patients. However, it is uncertain whether the young narrator finally escapes his traumatic ordeal as a result of his exposure to sex at a tender age.

Sexual trauma is, in fact, more acute in 'The Passion of Pololo'. The short story revolves round Pololo, a hitherto young boy, who with shock witnessed unforeseen sexual scene between his mother and a young man (Uncle Mike, a student medicine) right on her matrimonial bed. The world comes crashing down and Pololo's reality becomes irrecoverably distorted. His brain could not register his fading reality of a hitherto happy home with loving parents who seem to adore each other, against another vicious reality of her mother's brazen infidelity. The imagery of his mother's naked body under Uncle Mike's deconstructs his sense of morality. With his silence, he automatically feels like an accomplice. His trauma is so serious that he begins to stutter. The irony of the story is evident in the notion that Pololo's father, an intelligent psychiatrist, began to caution him without even having the slightest clue of the cause of his son's sudden change.

Pololo watches his father across the

dining table. He wants to say, 'My tongue is fettered by a secret I cannot utter.' He wants to open his mouth and scream and yell and lay bare his mother's shame. But he cannot. The image that rears up in his head will not let him. He watches his very intelligent father and wonders how he can be so blind." (The Passion of Pololo 28)

This last statement confirms a postmodern reality affirmed by postmodern tenet of the rejection of reason/fact, as this cannot cater for absolute reality, only versions of it. The ambivalent tunes of realities overwhelm the reader, with the discovery of two characters, father and son, living in the same space but are experiencing separate versions of truth and reality as differently conceived. While Pololo's father thrives in a deceptive dreamlike world of his perceived reality, his son suffers in the harsh realities of his traumatised experience, on which scars him for life.

Pololo's immature experience of visual sex drives him towards the very brink of insanity and physiological torture too. He was about 13 years of age, at the threshold of full adolescence. First, he, alongside his friend begins to derive pleasure from masturbation. When caught, his mother begins to shed tears of guilt, knowing full well the cause of Pololo's distorted sexual development. Maden affirms that mothers are usually more frequent child abusers, as established in this short story, and in fact the previous (3). However, the popularity of fathers in terms of parental abuse is more substantiated. Irrespective, the exposure of a child at a young age to sex or sexual related activities is noxious, and often leads to severe



trauma. Keuthen establishes the fact that, “child sexual abuse very often expresses itself in a special way characterised by being absent” (2). So sexual trauma, therefore, is not restricted to a child's directly involvement in sex or sexual related activities.

The climax of Pololo's psychological disorder becomes explicit, as he begins to revel in the image of his mother's “naked breasts heaving, one hand outstretched in a plea, a finger on her lips urging silence” (*'The Passion of Pololo'* 30). He is trapped in that psychotic state. He only relives that elusive reality when he makes love for the very first time. In his moment of delight, he screams out 'Mother'. Although he later makes love to other girls, there remains an insatiable feeling within him. “He knew what it was but could not fathom how to lay hold of it. But he knew that someday, his sojourn would lead him to that which he sought” (*'The Passion of Pololo'* 32). And indeed, it does. One quiet evening with his father out on a trip, he goes into his mother's bedroom naked. Ignoring his mother's mournful but defenceless expression, he stares lustfully and intently at his mother's naked body.

'Onions' is another heartrending story of a physically abused child, Dele, who was forced by the mother to sell onions on Christmas day. This narrative revolves round a family of two, in which the protagonist co-exists with irate mother, who constantly reminds him of his worthlessness. The story is also a reminiscence of a scared past. Dele is depicted as a victim of circumstance. Every day, he is being verbally and physically abused by his mother, who continues to hurl insults at him. She kicks, slaps and heavily beats him, depending on the gravity of his offence. However, the reason for his abuse is

Dele's ultimate offence, which is having an irresponsible father who drank himself to death. Dele's mother takes it out on her son. She gives him no break as she orders him to go sell onions on Christmas day. Dele's shock and searing pain of not getting new clothes for Christmas becomes further aggravated;

I walked out, the tray on my head, through the sea of children who had dammed themselves on both sides to allow me to pass. I walked past them, blinded by tears and anger, into the sun. I walked past the thronging spectators at the festive arena, past children hurrying to church in their new clothes and past men already drunk and staggering. There was a feast of joy all around and I was the lone mourner. (*'Onions'* 104)

Dele tries to find comfort in the thoughts of his unknown father. But he never finds a reprieve. In the midst of his psychological trauma, he sees a man he knows as “one of those who slapped mother's buttocks,” (*'Onions'* 106) and also physically abuses him. He greets the man but he is ignored. His invisibility bites harder. His hunger and swelling anger aggravate, and he decides to go back home, irrespective of whatever his mother would do to him. The short story ends with the rise of rebellion in Dele. As the narrator of his story, he speaks of a past which defines his present character. Although his character never matures, his nonchalant tone, as he describes how his mother loses her life to drinking, effectively emasculates any iota of emotional attachment. Dele's character can only elicit violence, sadism and psychological strain.



In a similar vein, the final story, 'The Devil's Overtime' recounts the miserable experiences of a deliberately abandoned child in the hostile environment in Lagos. Prior to his abandonment, which was carefully planned by his estranged mother, the nine-year-old Daniel lived with his mother in a remote community far from city life. The open sentence of the short story deconstructs that pseudo reality that expresses cupid love between mother and child, across different cultures, religion and even in modern times. This story creates a cognitive dissonance on the part of an average reader, whose philosophy might have been structured on the order principle that modernists proponents try to project. The proposed reality of this story is that mother's love for her child is *not* exactly infinite, and certainly *not* universal.

My mother wanted to see the world, but I was like a noose around her neck, a piece of rope that tethered her to the village, a swollen foot that would not let her run with the wind and take flight. ('The Devil's Overtime', 108)

The notion of a child as imperative complement to a union in modern African societies is being subverted. Parents now publicly abandon their children as a result of modern African precepts that encourage individualism, a reality that was not common in the precolonial era. Bringing a child into the world, during that period, was sacred. It was an action that came with longstanding responsibility and dutifulness. The rhetorical statements of Daniel's mother are evidently traumatic for her young son, who has no

father figure: "You see? One day I will wake up and I will be sixty years old and I will ask myself, 'What have I done with my life? Will I say, 'I had a baby boy whom his father rejected'? Is that what you want me to say?' ('The Devil's Overtime' 109) Daniel's relief comes from his grandmother's retort. 'Did anybody force you to spread your legs for that good-for-nothing? ('The Devil's Overtime' 110). Like the precolonial times, Daniel grandmother dies, and Daniel's mother (modernism), despite its failing sense of order, takes complete charge.

The use of real-life setting deconstructs the fiction mode in this narrative, as Obalende, a popular locale in Lagos, is known for its reputation. It is 'home' to street children who without choice, venture into varied crimes and other life-threatening activities that claim their lives and space, only to be replaced by hundreds, if not thousands of more children. Daniel and Mikolo (Michael) are literary prototypes of street children who are mentally, physically and mentally abused by adult individuals and the society in general. Often seen as dregs and danger to the society, these dirty dishevelled children are neglected and avoided like a plague by all and sundry. They negatively assimilate into the modern society, into the world of sex, gambling, drugs, alcohol and diseases by criminals such as Baba Ejiga, who, like pimps, use these homeless children to their own advantage. After three years in the street, Daniel is finally rescued but the damage is done. His liver fails due to heavy consumption of local gin. Michael also meets a tragic end, all as a result of a failed modern Nigerian society.

Postmodern realities are being reflected in contemporary African literatures, as portrayed in Kan's collection of short stories.



These realities defy the concept of order and premonition of man's control over his 'id' or emotions based on his rationality. The portrayal of the child character in literary texts of the twenty-first century foregrounds the significant import of traumatic realities affecting children in the real world. Among this vice is the sexual trauma, which, more often than not, is expressed by adults with children as direct or indirect participants. Kan's collection of children characters foregrounds the postmodern reality of sexual trauma in contemporary Modern African society, which affects the victims both physically and psychologically. Enforced by silence, they become totally enclosed, with little or no sense of identity.

From the nameless young character in the first story, 'Nights of the Creaking Bed', to Pololo, and finally to Michael and Daniel, the consequences of sexual trauma escalate; the situation only becomes worse. Africa, therefore, needs to shift its gaze from the grand narrative by adult characters (who justifiable still tell postcolonial tales) to child character narratives that now tell chilling tales of their postmodern realities and experiences in unforgiving modern African settings.

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