

Diabolism and Male Child Preference in the Cause of Mental Illnesses in Ebuka Onuma's Film, *Moment of Madness*

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Abstract

This paper examines diabolism and male-child preference as the cause of mental illness in *Moment of Madness*, a Nollywood film. Mental illnesses have become like a cankerworm eating deep into the fabric of global societies. Places of treatment that patients' relatives choose for victims depend on the cause of the illness. Factors causing mental illnesses depicted in Nollywood are also under-studied. This paper uses Attribution theory and textual analysis methods to read the cause of mental illness in the film, *Moment of Madness*. The study exposes that Nollywood films set in traditional African society portray traditional causes like diabolic as one of the root causes of mental illnesses and male child preference as a leading factor for Charity's use of diabolism to cause mental illness to Mmesoma in the film.

Key Words: Attribution theory, Causes, Culture, Diabolism, Male child preference, mental illness

Introduction

A lot of films in Nigeria are used to preserve indigenous cultures, including oral traditions, and religious practices. Besides serving as a guardian of the African culture and traditions, the films, as well, "propagate changes in the way of life of the Africans over time" (Morolake cited in Blessing Adjeketa 2022:18). Most importantly, the films serve to "spread and preserve African cultural histories and activities that face the danger of extinction" (Maisuwong cited in Blessing 2022:4). While at times, film art deviates from reality because of the necessities of fiction and storytelling by filmmakers whose intention is to entertain and create lovable themes for the audiences, it is expected that films, as much as they entertain, and preserve cultures, should also tell true and believable stories from a culturally and globally accepted perspective.

In addition to cultural and religious representation in some Nigerian films, there is also the portrayal of the Nigerian politics, and youth unrest (Blessing, 2022). Disease portrayal has

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also become a popular feature of Nigerian films. However, disease portrayal is built around several factors, including individual, or group (cultural) views regarding the cause of the disease. Some film maker's desire for portrayal may also depend on the social effect of a disease or illness on society. The portrayal of mental illnesses in film, for example, is born out of the fact that mental health conditions (MHCs) such as anxiety, depression, or psychosis are increasingly becoming the leading cause of disease burden and disability globally (Weye 2020, 16). Nollywood filmmakers have also pitched their creative tent to the representation of mental illnesses not only because Nigeria has one of the most deprived mental health-care systems globally (Abdulmaliket, Kola, and Gureje 2016), but for the estimated of about 20%–30% of the population suffering from a mental health condition (Suleiman, 2016), a significant figure demanding urgent attention for awareness creation.

Therefore, this paper examines the portrayal of the cause of mental illness in the film *Moment of Madness* as a socially constructed product and functions as “human traces or evidence of societal attitudes and beliefs” (Sherman 2012:24). In the following subheadings, the paper briefly examines the meaning of illnesses and mental illnesses, the causes of mental illnesses and thereafter, examines the causes of mental illnesses in Ebuka Onuma's film, *Moment of Madness*. For a better understanding of the cause of mental illness in the film, the paper presents the film's synopsis with a short note on the primary characters that drive the theme.

Conceptual Discuss

Illnesses versus mental illness

Illness is an experience of unhealthiness that is almost entirely personal, and interior to the person of the patient. It is also a state of not feeling fine which is usually a subjective expression of distress felt by an individual (Blessing, 2022:15). Humanity experiences a plethora of illnesses both communicable and non-communicable. The rate at which people visit places of treatment has also increased in the past years and keeps increasing. No individual can therefore say that he or she is completely in good health.

Complete health is a condition of being sound in body, mind, or spirit or as freedom from physical disease or pain. According to the World Health Organization, health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity (WHO 2013:62). By implication, complete health means a state of soundness in the physical, mental, and social well-being of an individual. Blessing (2022). explained that health is a dynamic state or process of well-being that changes with time and varies according to circumstances. It is not only a state or condition of being complete or whole in terms of physiological functioning but mental and moral soundness as well. We cannot also rule out the ecological concept of health which believes that health is an interrelationship between the environment and the individual's quality of life. (Abdul Ali 2016:33-36). As mentioned in the first paragraph, there are a lot of illnesses people suffer from, one of which this paper uses as a case study is mental illness.

Mental illness or mental disorder is a significant dysfunction in a person's thinking, emotional control, and behaviour. A condition that often disrupts a person's ability to relate with others and deal with the demands of life. The terms, "mental disorder" and "mental illness", are most time used interchangeably. Also, the words, insanity, and madness, are used instead of mental illness in everyday communication. In modern Nigerian society, people who are experiencing serious mental illnesses (SMIs) are referred to as being mad. An expression of mental disturbance or distress that manifests usually in the form of unacceptable behaviour. An illness used to describe disorders such as generalised anxiety, social anxiety, panic, obsessive-compulsive, post-traumatic stress, addictive behaviours, depression, etc related to well-being, capable of affecting one's thinking, behaviour, mood, and change of perception. Madness is a psychological phenomenon or a state of psychological dysfunction within an individual associated with distress or impairment in functioning and a response that is not typical or culturally accepted (Theophilus 2013:64).

Causes of Mental illnesses

It is most likely for people experiencing serious mental disorders to present with a universal symptom. But the belief of the issue of causes of mental illness is individualized. This is because an individual's opinion about the cause of mental illness varies. Therefore, while symptoms may be universal, causes are not. The implication is that while victims of serious mental illnesses in Africa (Nigeria) may present the same characteristics (symptoms) as those from other countries or continents, individuals from different regions of the world may attribute the causes to different factors. According to Frank Njenga (2007),

the concept (of perceived cause) of mental disorder is determined by many factors, including the historical context, cultural influence, level of scientific knowledge and capacity to carry out a scientific inquiry, level of education in certain circumstances, as well as many others (166).

Therefore, no one factor is responsible for the causation of mental illness. The biological, psychological, cultural, and social-related factors are all subjects of causation. Adjeketa's extensive discursion on factors leading to mental illness gives this proposition more sense. He mentions predisposing and precipitating factors as leading causes of mental illness. He argues that predisposing factors of causation are constitutional. They are conditions capable of making someone act, behave, or suffer from a particular disease, and these conditions are the sum of the person's psychological and physical predisposition. He lists genetics, physical damage, and psychological influence as belonging to predisposing factors to the causation of mental illness. Besides genetics, he claims that injury to the central nervous system caused by intrauterine, postern disease, and trauma, most specifically to the brain is one of the commonest problems to which human beings react in the form of abnormal intelligence, and that damage to the

endocrine organ can result in a total metabolic breakdown which will directly lead to a presentation of abnormal behaviour by the individual (Theophilus 2013:64).

Theoretical Foundation

Attribution theory is used in this study. Humans in general like to assign a cause to things that happen around them. Attribution theory offers a framework to understand how individuals attribute causes to what happened or what is happening around them. In Africa, for example, nothing just happens. Everything happens for a reason. “Birth, fortune, misfortune, and even death, happen for a reason” (Blessing 2022:32). According to Fiske and Taylor (1991),

“Attribution theory deals with how the social perceiver uses information to arrive at causal explanations for events. It examines what information is gathered and how it is combined to form a causal judgment” (23).

Beth (N.d), also mentions that attribution theory is a branch of social psychology that seeks to understand how people explain the causes of events as well as their own and others’ behaviours. Beth citing Schmitt (2015), also explains that the Theory of attribution is essentially about how individuals try to figure out why something happened. Also, it explores how people’s behaviour is affected once they assign a cause to something. In other words, it is essentially how people determine why something has happened or why someone behaved in a certain way. According to Mcleod (2023), there are two main parts in which attribution can be categorized. They are, internal (or dispositional attribution) and external (or situational attribution). Mcleod (2023) explains that while internal attribution uses the individual’s personality, internal characteristics, attitudes, abilities, etc to explain behaviour, external attribution uses external factors like situation, luck, or other people’s actions to explain behaviour.

Attribution theory fits this study because illness causation in Africa is either internally or externally attributed. While many claim that the causes of severe mental illnesses are internal, many claim that causes of mental illnesses are as a result of external factors like the wrath of god, diabolism, or mysticism. This paper therefore studies the cause(s) of mental illness using Ebuka Onuma’s film *Moment of Madness*

Synopsis of *Moment of Madness*

Moment of Madness is a Nollywood film written and produced by Onyedika Bright Okeke and also produced in 2017. It was directed by Ebuka Onuma. The film is about the family of Ukonu, a retired government teacher and a polygamist. Because of his first wife’s inability to bear a male child, Ukonu marries a second wife, Nneka, with the hope of bearing a male child. His first wife Charity and his daughter Mmesoma are the principal characters in the film. Charity, the first wife of Ukonu, is jealous of her husband’s second wife Nneka, and her daughter Mmesoma because of Mmesoma’s academic intelligence. She is afraid that Nneka will give birth to a male child who will inherit her husband’s

properties as she cannot give birth to a male child. Charity seeks help from a shrine priest who assists her in achieving her evil plot of killing Nneka and her unborn child as well as making Mmesoma mad to prevent her from pursuing her higher education.

Characters in *Moment of Madness*

Ukonu (Lord Frank): Ukonu is a man in his early 60s, a polygamous husband who does not take responsibility for his actions. He retired as a College of Education lecturer but is now a farmer. He marries Nneka, one of his students in search of a male child. His second wife, Nneka dies in labour because of his careless attitude and refusal to take her to the hospital for delivery. He only realises his mistakes after losing Mmesoma to madness. He tries without success to protect Mad Mmesoma from the physical abuse of Charity's daughters.

Charity (Nkechi Nwaje): Charity is a woman in her early 50s, the first wife of Ukonu, and a mother of two girls. Her husband marries a second wife because of her inability to give birth to a male child. She does anything to secure her place and that of her two daughters in the family through mystical and diabolical means. After killing Nneka thinking she would give birth to a male child, she curses Mmesoma with madness to prevent her from going abroad to study. She dies after confessing all she did against Mmesoma and her mother.

Mmesoma (Regina Daniel): Mmesoma is a young girl in her early 20's. The daughter of Ukonu and the only child of Nneka the second wife of Ukonu. She is beautiful and hardworking. She deals with hatred and physical abuse from her father and two sibling sisters. She sells fruits and does daily jobs to pay her school fees and take care of her pregnant mother. She was given a scholarship to study at any University of her choice abroad by *Save the Girls Child International*, a foundation dedicated to educating the girl child due to her intelligence as she made nine (9 A's) in her WAEC result. She suddenly runs mad before she picks up the scholarship offer letter.

Ikenne (Udolisa Suwarity): He is a young man in his late 20's and the only son of his mother. Ikenne is the boyfriend of Mmesoma. He steals from his uncle for Mmesoma's WAEC enrollment fees and to take care of her general needs. Mmesoma became mad while he was out of the country. On his return, he hears about his girlfriend's madness. On finding her, he completed the arrangement and took her to Pastor Williams Agu, who with his prayer team, healed her.

Diabolism and Male Child Preference in the Cause of Mental Illnesses in *Moment of Madness*

Moment of Madness portrays the significant relationships that exist between culture and male child preference in Nigeria. Polygamy is a common practice in African culture. A man may decide to marry as many wives as he wants either to give birth to many children who will assist in his farming business or as a result of the need for a male child. There is relative peace in polygamous homes when there is at least one male child by women in each household.

When there is only one male in the household (owned by one wife), there is bound to be envy and grudges in the mind of the wife who does not have a male child. There is a popular saying in Africa that ‘What affects the eyes also affects the nose’. The proverb implies that, whatever grudges the wives have among themselves, affect the stepchildren.

In many instances, if the senior wife is unable to give birth to a male child, the husband may decide to marry a second wife. When this happens, the second wife will therefore become a threat to the first wife and her children’s inheritance if peradventure she gives birth to a male child. To prevent such occurrences, some first wives go to great lengths to ensure the second, third, or fourth wife, as the case may be, does not give birth to a male child. In the case of an absence of a male child in the family, the life of the prosperous daughter of a compeer may be cut off. These themes are the indices of the cause of mental illness portrayed in Ebuka Onuma’s film. *Moment of Madness*.

The search for a male child, polygamy, craving for dominance, jealousy, and envy are contributing factors to the cause of the main character’s predicament. These catalogs are jointly examined and linked to the cause of Mmesoma’s mental illness.

The conflict in *Moment of Madness* is caused by Ukonu, who in search of a male child, marries a second wife. Charity reveals this in her words to Nkechi.

Charity: Let me tell you, let this be the first and last time you open this wide mouth to call the name of my daughters when you are asking for anything. What is wrong with you? If you want to ask anything from my husband, and you feel you have equal rights as I have in this house as his wife, you quietly tell him what you want. If he obliges you, fine. But if you open this wide mouth to call my daughter’s names again, you will get it hot with me in this house. You are married because of a male child, male child, “uwa” nothing. I have given my husband two beautiful daughters, you brought in one with a question mark and you are carrying this one, yet you are making too much noise in this house. See, let me tell you. He belongs to me not you. If you want anything you know the right way to go about it.

Moment of Madness shows that the phenomenon of male-child preference is not new to the African cultural universe, especially among men with only female children. The desire for a male child in Africa results in a situation where a husband keeps pressuring his wives to have more children. According to Raj (2016), “the failure of a wife to produce the desired results (bearing a male child) prompts men into polygamy in the hope that another woman will give them the son they need” (5). The statement made by Raj is exactly the picture Ebuka Onuma painted in *Moment of Madness*. Charity’s failure to produce a male child makes Ukonu marry a second wife.

The thesis of male gender preference which *Moment of Madness* depicts is also summarised in Chinua Achebe's award-winning novel, *Things Fall Apart* as discussed by Ozumba. Ozumba (2005) states that in Africa, if a child is born, the sex is determined, and if the baby is a male that means greater joy for the parents. Joy for the man, because he has a son who will take his place after his death. The son will continue his family line. A son also gives joy to the woman because he will be the one to properly cement her position in the heart of her husband. Further, having a son also means that nothing can uproot the woman from the family. Giving birth to a son further means that the family now has a voice to defend them in social and community gatherings. On the other hand, Ozumba writes that if the child is a girl (second girl child), the husband and wife welcome her with sundry feelings. Worse yet, if the girl child is coming as the third, fourth, fifth, or sixth without previously having a male child; that is a plentiful reason for sorrow for the family, especially the husband. For him, it brings sorrow because his hope of having a male child to continue his lineage is becoming slimmer. The idea is that the girl child will soon be married off to another man from another family or community. This corresponds with Ozumba (2005) that, "having female children without a male is like tending other people's vineyard while yours is unkempt" (14).

Charity, the first wife gives birth to only female children. She is also getting old, therefore, Ukonu's chances of giving birth to a male child are slim. He has no choice but to marry a second wife with hopes of giving him a son. His reason is cultural. For him, while his female children will marry and live with their husbands in other families, this son will bear his family name. This cultural belief makes men in Africa subject "Women to repeat childbearing at short intervals to satisfy their husbands' quest not only for large families but also give birth to male children" (Nwokocha 2007:36).

The situation which *Moment of Madness* presents exemplifies the "cultural beliefs and practices of the African man. *Moment of Madness* emphasises the aspect of African tradition that demands the man to have a son who is "as of right, the head of the family, and who will be seen and regarded in certain circumstances by the family women as the lord and master whose decision is always final.

With the portrayal of Ukonu's failure to have a male child from both wives, Ebuka disclaims issues in African communities, especially cultural beliefs, and practices, recognising the patriarchal system, with the strong thrust that, "norms, values, and expectations are defined and sustained by men" in virtually all spheres of life (Nwokocha 2007:35).

Scholars like Raj (2016) also link the pressure of the male child phenomenon typified in *Moment of Madness* to the existing socio-cultural practices in many African societies, especially among men. He discusses the cultural disposition on which the character of Ukonu is developed:

Sons act as old-age insurance for their parents because they are the ones who remain in the family's house. For their mothers, they also act as widowhood insurance because widows' claims on the late husband's resources and enjoy a higher social legitimacy if they have sons (Raj 2016:58).

This situation in *Moment of Madness* further echoes Milazzo, that, in Nigeria, women with first-born daughters are significantly more likely to end up in a polygamous union, to be divorced, and to be the head of the household; they also have significantly more children in the quest to bear a male child of their own (10). This cultural perspective portrayed in *Moment of Madness* demands that mothers, really need a son because their status improves substantially when their sons get married: they can exert their power over daughters-in-law. Therefore, African women portrayed through the character of Charity wanting to cement their place in polygamous homes result in using all available methods to get a male child or know the status of either their pregnancy or that of their compeer at an early stage. This curiosity leads many women in polygamous homes who are yet to have a male child to anxiety when the co-wife is pregnant. Charity's anxiety intensifies when she discovers that Nneka, the second wife, is pregnant with a male child:

Nne: The other day I saw your co-hurt and she is even pregnant. When will she give birth?

Charity: Who cares?

Nne: That is supposed to be a source of concern to you.

Charity: Why?

Nne: She might even give birth to a baby boy.

Charity: How do you know?

Nne: Have you forgotten that I am a retired midwife? The look is all over her o.

Charity: Baby boy... ahhh!

Her anxiety leads to jealousy and serious hatred, not only for Nneka, but also for her daughter, Mmesoma, for her academic intelligence. Nneka will not only give birth to a male child who will take over Ukonu's inheritance but also have an intelligent daughter who does not only have the potential to attain a better life than her daughters but with the intellectual capacity of taking over the family properties in the absence of a male child in the family. Charity's temperament, birthed in her not only the idea of wiping out Nneka and her unborn male child from existence but also cursed Mmesoma with severe disability to make her useless to herself and Ukonu's generation. Charity's disposition toward her compeer bearing a male child corresponds with Davison's assertion that "anxiety often accompanies medical tests including prenatal determination of fetal gender at the ultrasound because of the uncertain nature of the findings- pleasant or unpleasant" (Davison 2000: 154). He mentions also that women express anxiety about the pre-determination of birth of gender. Such anxiety could be a result of the uncertainty about having the desired gender; usually male. When the gender is disclosed to them women are either relieved or get more worried. However, the anxiety may be very dangerous for the woman because failure to have a male child might compel the husband to marry an additional wife. This desperation no doubt is because of the pressure from society to have one who will continue one's lineage (Davison 154).

Nwokocha emphasises that in Nigeria, especially among the Ibos, the perceived relative benefit of male children as potential custodians of both identity and lineage has sustained their value over the years. He added that some African women in polygamous homes prefer to have male children rather than female children because of fear of losing their place in the household. The absence of a male child who stands to play dominant roles in the family and by extension, in the community is a thing of shame to the wife, particularly the husband and extended family (Nwokocha 2007:222-223). The character of Ukonu represents an African husband who hopes to leave his inheritance (unmovable wealth included) for his sons to take care of at his exit from this world. Charity's fear, no doubt, is necessitated by the fact that Nkechi, her counterpart, will achieve recognition and status not only by the birth of, at least, a male child but for Mmesomas' excellence. Nkechi will be more fulfilled and ultimately accorded greater respect, relative to her, who has not achieved the same feat.

Moment of Madness further emphasises the plight of men and women in polygamous homes in Africa. African women in Charity's situation prefer to have male children rather than female children for fear of losing their place. While fear of the future is the primary reason that prompts Ukonu to consider polygamy as an option, the same fear of the future coupled with jealousy, stimulates Charity into killing Nkechi and making Mmesoma mad. To protect her children's future and win the love of her husband, Charity consults a chief priest, first, to prevent Nkechi from giving birth to her unborn child for fear that she will birth a male child, second to make Mmesoma suffer from mental illness, preventing her from continuing her education abroad, and coming back to possess Ukonu's properties. *Moment of Madness* further echoes that polygamy is not a guarantee for giving birth to a male child. Rather, it ends in disappointment, an act of dominance, jealousy, and envy among wives.

Besides the factors that contribute to the cause of Mmesoma's mental illness discussed above, mysticism cannot be ignored as the vehicle for the causes of Mmesoma's madness. The catalogs of a male child, and fear of the future which results in jealousy, pushes Charity into diabolism and mysticism. Mmesoma's madness results from Charity's charms. Charity's fear, jealousy, and envy that Mmesoma will leave the village to school abroad and return to dominate her daughters in the village worsen after she succeeds in killing Nneka and her unborn son

Charity: I was jealous, so jealous because Nneka was everything I could not become. She was a kind woman. So, kind at heart, she was beautiful. When I found out that she was about to give our husband a son, I became afraid of losing my position in this house. So, I went diabolical. I tied my husband to myself. I killed her. I also made Mmesonma go mad just to stop her from going to study abroad. I did this to protect both of you, my children.

With the help of a witch doctor, Charity can mystically curse Mmesoma with mental illness. The actions leading to Mmesoma's madness fall under the external causation of illness. Although

Mmesomas's madness resulted primarily from diabolism, which also falls under personality attributes, animosity, aggressiveness, arrogance, selfishness, and envy, are contributory factors. Ukonu's decision to marry a second wife is sufficient for Charity to think that her compeer who is pregnant will give birth to a male child who will join forces with his sister to dispossess her daughters of their inheritance. It is also sufficient for her to be jealous, as the possibility of losing her future and that of her children stares at her if a male child is born and Mmesoma travels abroad to continue her education. She reasoned: "Why will her (Charity's) own daughters be in the village while Nneka's will be going abroad? Over her dead body will that happen". Gordon's (2018) statement echo's Charity's fear and in extension, that of women in polygamous homes in Nigeria. He says that the disadvantaged polygamous wife harbours "resentment toward her mate who has some desirable object or quality that she does not have and cannot get" (412). Charity's envy leads to acrimony toward Mmesoma who was going to be better off than her daughters. She wishes Mmesoma to lose the scholarship and preferably suffer, and the best suffering that can prevent her from traveling abroad is madness.

It is pertinent to look at some characters' opinions on the cause of Mmesoma's madness. The characters of Ikenna and Agu in *Moment of Madness* represent educated individuals and men of God in society, who believe that behind every case of mental illness are spiritual forces.

Ikenna: I feel something is not right.

Agu: The enemy must have done this.

Agu's disposition toward mental illness emphasises Lauren Taylor and Arias Daniel, that, religions across the world strongly believe that spiritual forces are responsible for the cause of all serious mental illnesses. Agu represents religious leaders who do not bother to find out the life history or social life of individuals with mental illness before concluding that spiritual forces are the cause. Whether from genes or environmental factors, most religious leaders claim that the cause of mental illness is spiritual. This belief in the supernatural cause of madness as enforced in the religious cosmology is what *Moment of Madness* re-echoes. The cause of Mmesoma's madness in *Moment of Madness* falls under external attribution theory which emphasises several other factors as the lead cause of any illness rather than linking it to scientific causes such as bacteria, viruses, accidents, or the intake of toxic substances.

Conclusion

The study analysed diabolism and male child preference as the Cause of Mental Illnesses in the film, *Moment of Madness*. The film, *Moment of Madness* is set in traditional Nigerian society with a focus on a middle-class Nigerian family, headed by a retired college of education teacher, Ukonu. It presents a woman (Charity, Ukonu's first wife) in a polygamous home who after two children (daughters) and years of marriage does not have a male child ended up sharing her husband with a second woman. To protect her children's inheritance, she killed

the unborn son of Ukonu's second wife and consulted a shrine priest who assisted her in causing madness to Mmesoma, her stepdaughter.

Moment of Madness presented an aspect of the Nigerian belief system, including magic, witchcraft, and the use of diabolic powers to cause harm and even death. These beliefs which are deeply ingrained not only in the Nigerian traditional society but traditional Africa as a whole, exert a tremendous influence on the everyday life of the people including filmmakers. The film linked male child preference and the fear of women in polygamous homes losing the family inheritance to the cause of mental illness in traditional Africa. As a medium of representation, the film *Moment of Madness* presents that some women are willing to do all they can to protect their belongings, including their husbands, and family properties. Charity, attempting to protect the future of her daughters, results to using diabolic powers to kill her husband's second wife, her unborn son, and cause madness to Mmesoma, her stepdaughter.

Further, the study of the film shows that not one factor is responsible for the cause of severe mental illness. The factors could be internal or external. However, the film portrays external factors- mysticism and diabolism as the cause of Mmesoma's mental illness. The film glorifies the African belief system of apportioning the cause of severe disability to the supernatural. Because film can affect people's understanding and influence their opinion, filmmakers should be more diversified in their portrayal of disabilities especially serious mental illnesses like schizophrenia or psychosis. While filmmakers strive for revenue generation and entertainment, a more authentic, and informational depiction of the causes of mental illnesses is recommended.

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