

**TRAUMA AND MADNESS: THE PSYCHOLOGICAL STATE OF FEMALE
CHARACTERS IN YVONNE OWUOR'S *DUST* AND *THE DRAGONFLY
SEA***

OMWOCHA B. VERAH, B.ED

C50/25225/2018

**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE SCHOOL OF LAW, ARTS, AND SOCIAL
SCIENCES IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN LITERATURE
OF KENYATTA UNIVERSITY**

JUNE, 2023

DECLARATION

This thesis is my original work and has not been presented for a degree in any other university.

Signature Verah Bonareri Omwocha Date: 14th June, 2023

Verah Bonareri Omwocha B.ED (Arts) C50/25225/2018

Supervisors

This thesis has been submitted for award with our approval as University supervisors.

Supervisor

Dr. Mugo Muhia

Department of Literature, Linguistics and Foreign Languages

Signature  Date 26/06/2023

Supervisor

Dr. Stephen Mutie

Department of Literature, Linguistics and Foreign Languages

Signature  Date 18/06/2023

ABSTRACT

This study analyses the psychological state of female characters in the texts *Dust* and *The Dragonfly Sea* by Yvonne Owuor. In the texts, Owuor uses the family as a microcosm of postcolonial Kenya's national dysfunction. The select female characters embody a broken state that alienates, kills, abandons, and metes violence on its citizens. Moreover, the family and the state are read as the sites for women's oppression, suppression, and violence. The selected female characters, who display impossible domesticity and 'otherness', are complex and worthy of attention. The objectives of this study were: 1) To examine the causes of trauma and mental illness in select female characters in Owuor's *Dust* and *The Dragonfly Sea*; 2) To assess the characterization, setting and stylistic choices used in narrating trauma and mental illness in the texts; and 3) To analyse the impact of trauma and mental illness on the select female characters as well as their coping mechanisms. The objectives are examined in the light of trauma theory tenets. Specific references are made to LaCapra's approaches "acting out" and "working through" as psychological responses to trauma; "punctual trauma" proposed by Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman to examine traumas stemming from single events; and "insidious trauma" – to examine traumatic events that are part of their everyday life. Insidious trauma was proposed by Maria Root, Alan Gibbs, and Laura Brown. Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis is also utilized to analyze the unconscious psychological processes that underlie traumatic experiences and the impact of the different traumatic events experienced by the female characters. The research is qualitative, using textual analysis of the primary texts as the key method of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The findings indicated that the female characters under interrogation experienced trauma and displayed symptoms of madness from different traumatic personal, social, and political events. From these events, they experienced both punctual and insidious trauma. Trauma and mental illness in the texts manifests in various forms; the characters, the form and style, and the manipulation of language. The characters also adopt different coping mechanisms as ways of expressing that which they are unable to linguistically. Although trauma is discussed as a precursor to madness, not all traumatic events trigger madness in the victims, although patterns of trauma are used to establish madness. The intertwinement of trauma and madness is seen in this study through the stylistic choices that the author uses to narrate trauma. Finally, it is by narrating their individual traumas that the characters get to heal and consequently heal their collective traumas. This study could contribute to the understanding of trauma and mental illness and shed light on the representation of female characters in literature. It could also encourage further studies on similar topics as well as be an additional reference for scholars, students, and researchers interested in the subject matter. The study recommends an analysis of the psychological state of the male characters in the texts, an examination of other texts by Kenyan authors in the light of the subject matter through the lens of both trauma and feminist theories and the effect of state violence on women and children who suffer most in times of conflict.