

FEMALE MENTAL ILLNESS IN AFRICAN CULTURE, SOCIETY, AND LITERATURE

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In its multifarious nature, imaginative literature often reflects the human condition where and for whom it is created; hence the importance of culture and society in African literature. In Africa's case in particular, literature has become a window into the lives of the people it represents and has also carried out this task in the area of female mental health which is the subject of my research. The recent increase in cases of African women's recourse to physical violence, to include gruesome acts of murder, against their male partners possibly as a result of the effects of some psychological pressures informs my study, especially since there is a poor understanding of female mental illness in African literature and society. Generally speaking, not much attention in terms of government policies and infrastructural interventions is paid to the problem in Africa. There is also the additional challenge of inadequate resources such as health centers, specialized or trained personnel to help prevent, manage or treat mental diseases. Often, sufferers are either misdiagnosed or their ailments explained away using superstitious or religious beliefs. Worse still, unrelated parameters employed for treatment within the indigenous cultures as well as in other (Western) regions of the world are erroneously applied to them. Women are often vulnerable and their well-being further compounded as a result of the factors above. Also, since many African cultures are patriarchal, there are so many dos and don'ts that limit the woman's freedom and voice and go on to restrict and restrain her potentials. Some women themselves are complicit because they are either directly responsible for or are enlisted as enforcers of some of the practices that are inimical to the psychological welfare of other women. These different socio-cultural buffetings continue to create tensions between men and women in gender relationships. They also contribute in no small measure to the mental disequilibrium of female characters in modern African literature. To put it more succinctly, as a diseased condition also largely regarded as reactions to extreme stress in life, African literary narratives identify connections between some female mental illnesses and socio-cultural and environmental experiences as triggers. From a study of this literature, some types of psychiatric illnesses women suffer may be obvious or latent. Some manifest as a result of pressures or conflicts in gender relationships. Again, some of such behaviors are not easily understood as symptoms of a dysfunctional mind especially within a cultural context and could be summarily dismissed, ignored, or even adduced to non-related factors. This study therefore, identifies factors such as childhood and sexual violence, spousal infidelity, betrayal and abandonment, emotional trauma from the loss of a loved one, alienation and identity crisis, superstitious beliefs, silencing and unquestioned submission to male and social orders as well as complicity of women as being responsible for depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, postpartum depression, posttraumatic stress disorders, scarification or self-harm, nervous conditions or even madness in women in African literature.