Navigating Stigma and Silence: Representations of Mental Health in *What if* ……by Linda Mustapha

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex representation of mental health issues in Linda Mustapha's text *What If...*, emphasizing the relationship between societal shame, cultural silence, and the protagonists' inner psychological landscapes. The hush around psychological suffering frequently acts as a secondary antagonist in many modern literary works that come from areas where mental health is still frowned upon. Mustapha's work offers a critical perspective on these relationships, showing how individual suffering is made worse by systemic neglect and the fear of societal rejection. The study uses qualitative content research analysis method, trauma and psychoanalytical theories to examine how Mustapha mirrors the confusing experience of mental illness using literary tropes including internal monologue, symbolism, and fragmented pacing. The author goes beyond the technical categories of diseases to presenting mental health as a common human experience that is greatly impacted by regional customs and religious interpretations rather than as a Western construct. *What If...* is an important addition to the expanding corpus of work on psychological advocacy and the de-stigmatization of mental illness in the contemporary era because it breaks the quiet and forces readers to face their prejudices. *What If...* functions as a counter-narrative to the "culture of silence." According to the text,

characters are often forced into a state of "performative wellness" because they lack the vocabulary to express their emotional suffering. This research concludes that Mustapha calls for self discovery and promotes a revolutionary change toward institutional assistance and empathy throughout the protagonist's journey.
Keywords: Psychological Representation, African literature, stigma, mental health, silence.

Introduction

The modern African novel has experienced a notable thematic transition, shifting from broad socio-political narratives of decolonization and nation-building to a more personal, psychological examination of the individual. While early post-colonial writing frequently employed the "national allegory" to explore collective identity, contemporary African authors are progressively focusing on introspection. This transformation has positioned mental health, previously a marginal or stigmatized topic at the forefront of the African literary landscape. African literary authors frequently mirror the human predicament inside African society. It has become an effective method for extracting insights from society. The authors' and literature's effectiveness and accuracy in depicting mental health problems as a human condition is appropriate.

WHO Fact Sheet (2022) defines mental health as a condition of psychological well-being that allows individuals to manage life's stressors, recognize their capabilities, engage in effective learning and job, and contribute to their community. UNICEF (2021) writes that "Neglecting the mental health of parents and caregivers undermines their capacity to nurture and care for their children effectively." In the modern African novels, mental health transcends a clinical diagnosis; it serves as a perspective for examining the fragmented realities of

post-colonialism, domestic violence, urban instability, and the burden of tradition. Authors are currently confronting the enduring "silence" on madness and trauma, recovering the story of the African psyche from both colonial pathologization and indigenous taboos.

For decades, the African novel has been characterized by the "clash of cultures" that is the effects of colonialism or the opposition to corrupt administrations or corruption. In these works, the "pain" was frequently collective. Contemporary authors such as Tsitsi Dangarembga, Akwaeke Emezi, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Mariama Ba, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Nawal El Saadawi to mention these few have shifted focus to the "interiority" of their characters.

In contemporary society, mental health functions as an indicator of overall societal well-being. World Health Organization (WHO) opines that Mental health constitutes a fundamental human right that influences all aspects of our existence. A character's breakdown is seldom depicted in isolation. Rather, it is portrayed as the outcome of a confrontation between the human soul and a world that is frequently antagonistic, patriarchal, or economically ruthless. Contemporary novels reveal the significant toll of patriarchal stability through characters afflicted by eating disorders, postpartum depression, or fragmented identities. The "contemporary" African novels acknowledge that the remnants of history such as slavery, colonialism, and civil war. are not merely recorded in textbooks; they materialize as sadness, anxiety, and PTSD among the descendants of survivors. Former UN Secretary-General António Guterres in formal WHO policy documents is of the view that "Mental health is integral to overall health." Against this backdrop, it is obvious that children and adults are affected and neglecting children's mental health according to Henrietta Fore, former Executive Director of UNICEF,

(2021) "undermines their ability to learn, work, form meaningful relationships, and contribute to society."

There is a shift from the supernatural to a sophisticated comprehension of neurodivergence and psychological discomfort. Authors are increasingly investigating the biological and environmental origins of mental disease while concurrently addressing African communities' perceptions of " mental health. Modern books frequently occupy the "in-between" realm, depicting characters who traverse therapy and medicine in conjunction with prayer and conventional healing practices. This dichotomy embodies the experiential reality of numerous Africans who navigate two realms of knowledge.

A salient characteristic of the modern African novel's treatment of mental health is its emphasis on the female perspective. Mental health is portrayed through trauma resulting from gender-based abuse or the regulation of female bodies. Silence from the abused and the societal imperative to "endure in silence". For some African women authors, the domestic realm constitutes a locus of significant psychological strain. The portrayal of mental health in many literary texts is often associated with the weight of perfection, that is, the compulsion to become the "ideal daughter," "best spouse," and "career achiever."

The "Afropolitan" experience that is the existence of the globally mobile African has added new dimensions to the conversation on mental health. In texts like *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Second Class Citizen* by Buchi Emecheta and *Call me by my Rightful Name* by Isidore Okpewho to mention only these few, migration becomes a persistent topic, accompanied by the "trauma of displacement." Identity fragmentation, racial trauma and survival guilt are the mental health challenges they frequently face. These

narratives emphasize that the "African mind" is not confined to the continent; it transports its cultural essence into new environments, where it must either adapt or succumb to the challenges of cultural hybridity.

In examining this topic, we must regard the novel not merely as a fictional work, but as an essential repository of the African interior experience. These narratives reveal a continent that is not merely enduring, but courageously commencing to inquire: "What is the true state of our mental well-being?" *What if ……* by Linda Mustafa emphasizes the psychological terrain, presents a more comprehensive, compassionate, and deeply human representation of mental health in the 21st century.

Trauma theory

Literary and cultural studies examine the representation of profound, disruptive experiences such as warfare, domestic abuse, institutional injustice, or significant loss in language and story. Trauma theory posits that certain experiences are so overpowering that they cannot be comprehended or assimilated by the mind at the moment they transpire. Instead, they persist as "unclaimed experiences" that resurface to torment the survivor through flashbacks, nightmares, and repetitive behaviors. The intellectual foundations of trauma theory are frequently attributed to Sigmund Freud and his analyses of troops returning from World War I. Freud observed that these individuals experienced "war neuroses," marked by an obsessive compulsion to re-experience the harrowing events they had endured. He designated this phenomenon as "repetition compulsion." In a conventional psychological context, trauma (derived from the Greek term for

"wound") constitutes an injury to the psyche. In contrast to a physical injury that heals and scars, a psychological injury frequently remains unresolved due to the amygdala, the brain's "alarm system," being perpetually activated. Researchers such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Geoffrey Hartman in the 1990s integrated psychological concepts with literary studies. Caruth's foundational text, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, characterizes trauma as an occurrence that is encountered prematurely and unexpectedly, rendering it incomprehensible.

In literature, this is frequently depicted through fragmented narratives, non-linear timelines, and stuttering writing, wherein the text appears to disintegrate under the burden of the experience. The past encroaches upon the present, or the future is eclipsed by the past.

The portrayal of women with mental health concerns in *What If…* as an impediment to self-discovery

All genders, ages, and backgrounds are impacted by mental health. It involves damaging gender stereotypes and power disparities, as well as physical, emotional, and sexual assault. Amos Mama experiences so intense mental tension that she exclaims, "Oh blast my soul, I saw hell!" (4). According to her, she grieved in silence during those times. "I thought and thought and thought every day" (4). She is not contented with her marriage. She cautions her friends against getting married because marriage can lead to many unpleasant events. "Should I now tell you not to marry because I had a bad experience, or should I warn you of many disappointments that you will come to experience as you become somebody's wife?" she asks (5). All these ugly experiences give her mental stress though she is not frequently

beaten by her husband. The psychological strain she experiences is too much for her to handle. According to UNICEF, "living under terror and experiencing emotional torture are more dangerous and terrible than physical torture (24).

Her husband betrays her and he does not attend to her and their two sons; rather, he derives pleasure from the company of his mistress and other prostitutes. He had a particular affinity for prostitutes, and whenever a new one arrived in town, my husband would be the first to engage with her. (11). Mama Amos' husband beats her often because he is a strong womanizer and whenever the wife confronts her, she gets the beating of her life. According to https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/learning-resources/child-marriage-and-health/gender-based-violence-and-child-marriage/ Abusive marriage correlates with adverse sexual and reproductive health outcomes, such as HIV infection, unwanted pregnancy, unsafe abortion, compromised mental health, depression, and mortality due to femicide or suicide. It may also result in diminished educational achievement and reduced economic and employment prospects. The above is exactly what Mama Amos goes through in her house. She is afflicted with AIDS from the husband because he failed to disclose that he is HIV positive to her. She liquidated her possessions to provide care for her ailing husband when he was sick and could not get help from anywhere. She resides at the hospital with him rather than allowing his mistress to attend to him, and she sponsored the medical expenses; otherwise, she risks being branded a wicked woman, despite the awareness of others around her regarding her husband's mistreatment. She expresses to a friend:

> I remember how my husband, who had forsaken me for another woman, became gravely ill, and instead of his mistress, it was I—financially destitute from

> two years of neglect—who had to attend to him when he was hospitalized. I was compelled to liquidate all my prized possessions to settle the substantial medical cost that… (7)

She laments, complaining of the mental torture and stress she undergoes and counsels her friend against matrimony due to her negative experiences. She expresses, 'Should I advise you against marriage due to my adverse experience, or should I caution you about the numerous disappointments you will inevitably encounter as a wife?' (5). The husband passed away, and she fell ill (HIV she got from her husband) for a period before subsequently dying, leaving behind three children who later discontinued their education. Women are more or less not regarded in the text. Nnyagu and Ozoh in their work ''Female writings in the dynamic Igbo society: A comparative analysis of Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds* and Chimamada Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* '' opine that women should be respected, empowered and be well placed in the society.

"Mental Health and Gender Inequality: The Dual Crisis Affecting the World's Girls and Women" by Megan Rabbitt on October 6, 2023 is of the view that Amina J. Mohammed writes that "Mental health has become a silent pandemic in the lives of many of our young women". She goes on to emphasize that everyone can take action to address the mental health issue that affects women and girls and calls for more action to be taken to prevent mental stress. So many young ladies like Mama Amos, Segun's wife, Mama Amos mother and others died in the text out of depression and mental stress from family violence.

UNICEF in "Gender equality: Child marriage", (2022) opines that 650 million women and girls alive today were married before their 18th birthday. Child marriage, constitutes a grave infringement of human rights, jeopardizing the lives, welfare, and prospects of girls

globally. It encourages psychological issues in marriages. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by mental health issues. It states that many girls and women are currently married as minors, which infringes against their rights and adversely affects their well-being. Women and girls aged 15 to 49 are susceptible to physical, sexual, or psychological abuse from their partners. Violence and hazardous behaviours adversely impact individuals' mental health by undermining their physical, emotional, and psychological well-being, so perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality. Mama Amos' father in the analyzed text frequently assaults the mother (who married at a very young age), derogatorily addressing her with various names, and she never confides in anyone. He perceives her solely as a sexual partner, and so, during her pregnancy, she becomes increasingly ineffectual by remaining passive and relying on her husband for support. "Women are merely a burden," he remarked one day while striking my mother with a belt. "What you all understand is to spread your legs as widely as possible to allow a man to mount you… (14). Violence is not the optimal solution. Mama Amos' mother almost went mad. UNICEF underscores that women's mental health is a critical concern, particularly with marriage and gender-based violence. One in three women encounters gender-based violence, often perpetuated within marriages or partnerships.

Kapoor elucidates this more effectively in his article, 'Domestic Violence Against Women and Girls', stating that Khan, the former head of UNICEF, believes that women and children are not secure in their homes, which are ostensibly meant to provide safety. He goes on to explain that the domicile, once intended to be their sanctuary, has now transformed into a site of terror. Mama Amos subsequently succumbs to domestic abuse and the AIDS acquired from her

husband, so ending her contributions to her family and society as a whole.

Follingstad, Coyne, & Gambone, (2005) assert that emotional abuse may encompass verbal assault, domination, control, isolation, ridicule, or the use of personal knowledge for humiliation (5). According to them, it affects the emotional and psychological welfare of the victim and frequently serves as a precursor to physical abuse. Mental abuse constitutes a grave issue, resulting in significant physical assaults especially on women. Emotional and psychological abuse renders women unstable, inhibiting their ability to contribute significantly to their family and the society at large. It is regrettable that men employ various strategies, such as intimidation, gaslighting and others to dominate women, operating under the misconception that women are inferior and hence lack contributions to domestic and national development. Binta, another character in the narrative, expresses discontent over the prevailing belief in her northern region that women are insignificant, as the majority aspire merely to survive, bear children, and remain with a guy who can provide for them. She expresses sorrow, stating, "However, we in this region merely seek to endure" (57). I desire to exist, procreate, and remain with a partner capable of providing for me. These men, or spouses, are typically selected by their parents, which may result in a guy devoid of conscience or one who does not love the woman to whom he is betrothed, yet has resolved internally to subjugate her. She inquires, 'What purpose does a degree serve if I must return to my community and wed a guy predetermined for me from birth?' (57). Northern society does not anticipate that girls will have a comprehensive education, as they are expected to fulfill traditional gender roles inside the domestic sphere. This society exhibits a disdain for women, and the pronounced discrimination between boys and girls is evident.

Binta is afraid of getting married due to the subjugation, maltreatment and mistreatment meted out by men to their wives. She wonders and imagine the level of wickedness and the psychological strain she would go through. This thought alone made her to abhor marriage. She disgusts marriage and prefers staying single if society will let her be.

Segun, an abusive spouse in the narrative, physically assaults his wife, inflicts injuries upon her, and subjects her to humiliation whenever she fails to remit house rent or payment to their landlord, despite his awareness that she is unemployed; hence, from where does he anticipate the funds to originate? She stated, "For several years, my abusive husband has failed to pay the house rent… whenever Mama Lati inquired about the rent, he would instruct her to consult me" (50). Understanding that I would face severe punishment if I did not appease Mama Lati, the anticipated beatings, bruises, and humiliation left me feeling utterly disoriented. Poverty regrettably exacerbates Segun's malevolence, making him a social misfit. These physical abuses are invariably accompanied by disparaging remarks, causing the woman to question her self-worth and experience feelings of humiliation.

UNICEF accurately states in 'Domestic Violence Against Women and Girls' that '… physical violence is typically accompanied by psychological abuse and often by sexual assault' (4). Segun employs pejorative language against his wife and, on one occasion, attempted to murder her with a kitchen knife. Segun's wife supper will be adorned with numerous dyslogistic and disrespectful terms. Hear her "My husband rendered my life exceedingly unhappy. The day he assaulted me with a kitchen knife was the day I realized I needed to leave my abusive spouse" (67). According to *Investing in Mental Health* (2023), World Health Organisation declares that Mental

health issues impact society collectively, rather than merely a limited, isolated portion. Consequently, they pose a significant obstacle to global development. No demographic is exempt from mental problems; nevertheless, the prevalence is elevated among the impoverished, homeless, unemployed, individuals with limited education, victims of violence, migrants and refugees, indigenous populations, children and adolescents, battered women, and neglected old individuals. The novel under study *What if ….* buttresses the above fact because all the characters with mental stress are either poor, unemployed, illiterate individuals, battered women or women that had early marriages.

Certain married men perpetrate emotional and physical abuse on their spouses, prompting contemplation regarding the nature of the marriages in which certain women engage. Rape by one's husband is a serious case of emotional and psychological suffering which affects individuals wellbeing negatively. It impacts women emotionally, psychologically and socially, as well as adversely affecting their reproductive health. In the analyzed text, Segun sexually assaults his wife, resulting in her frequent hospitalization. Mrs. Segun Ojoba is brutally assaulted by her husband, who threatens her life if she does not comply. The events commenced in the morning as Mrs. Segun intended to leave for work. Segun requested sexual intimacy, but the wife replied that they had sufficient engagement the previous night and was nearly tardy for work. Segun promptly retrieved a kitchen knife and forced her onto the bed. Listen to her

> As I prepared to scream, Segun inflicted lacerations on my wrists. Immediately, blood began to flow profusely. I will achieve my objective, or I will eliminate you immediately. I was brutally assaulted that morning. My vagina sustained the most severe

> injury. It was gruesome. It was excruciating. Experiencing such anguish was shameful. I was unable to visit the hospital due to my embarrassment in disclosing to the doctor that I had been raped by my husband (110–111)

Anaruwa sexually assaults his wife daily after physically assaulting her until she loses consciousness. He boasts once more, 'I restrained her, and each day I violated her until she lost consciousness. … As the months elapsed, she descended into the foolish condition she currently occupies' (155). He abuses his wife to the point of causing her mental disorder. He restrains her with shackles and secures her within the house. Listen to him declare, 'Are you aware that Binta (my wife) is currently confined and secured within my residence?' I drove her to madness (154). UNICEF prioritizes resolving these problems by:

1. Empowering women and girls and promoting equality.
2. Women learning life skills training, and psychosocial assistance.
3. Education and Awareness.
4. Dispelling negative stereotypes and social standards.

Few men also face abuses and mental torture in their homes as some women may instigate domestic violence through incessant nagging and injurious language towards their husbands, prompting the males to silence their spouses. Only a limited number of women has the strength to overpower their husbands. Despite its insignificance, Sandeep et al. indicate that the majority of individuals refrain from reporting domestic abuse due to concerns about social stigma, apprehension of being labeled as a 'woman' (78), or fear that authorities may not believe them, perhaps resulting in adverse consequences for their case. Ali Shahrestani endorses the

aforementioned perspective by stating that domestic violence against men is underreported, and numerous victims of intimate partner abuse have overlooked this dimension, likely in an effort to prioritize the protection of women and bolster feminism.

Factors contributing to mental health challenges among women

WomensLaw.org explains that emotional abuse can be difficult to identify; but listed few indicators to observe which include threats – he may decide what you wear or eat without consulting you. He exhibits excessive jealousy or accuses you of cheating. He could be emotionally and psychologically abusing you, displays rage that scares you, shows excessive wrath against you, but is composed in public. He makes insults or disrespects you, refers to you as "crazy" or "stupid." Gives you the silent treatment or ignores you. He may wish to instill terror in you by driving dangerouly or insists on seeing your phone or social media passwords, checks up on your location, or otherwise uses technology to mistreat you. He blames others instead of accepting responsibility for his/her actions and acts like he does not understand to make you feel stupid. He does not value your thoughts or opinions. He discredits your prior experiences or twists your memory of events. WomensLaw.org also asserts that another indicator potentially leading to emotional abuse is "love bombing." The subsequent indicators suggest that somebody unduly lavishes attention, affection, or praise to manipulate you. It generally transpires during the commencement of a relationship, in the preliminary phases of dating or acquaintance. The individual may seem overly emotional or affectionate, thus functioning as a tactic of manipulation. If your friend is advancing swiftly or is overly idealistic, it may not be as

advantageous as it seems. Excessively hastening the connection, constantly praising you, continuously questioning your location, overwhelming you with calls, emails, or messages and exhibiting irritation if you do not react promptly, endeavoring to monopolize your time, demonstrating envy when engaging with others, encouraging you to relinquish your education, career, or pursuits, offering lavish or excessive presents and thereafter claiming that you are indebted to them are all signs that things are not normal. Proclaiming "I love you" too soon, examining the potential of formalizing relationships through marriage or cohabitation at an initial phase and/or neglecting your boundaries are all red flags.

Timely identification of these signs can improve your safety. It can aid you in setting boundaries, expressing your needs, seeking support, or ending the relationship if you choose to do so.

Conclusion

The depiction of women facing mental health issues in *What If...* underscores the complex interplay between mental wellness and self-exploration. The narrative highlights how family violence and stigmatization frequently intensify mental health challenges, obstructing women's paths to self-actualization. The narrative illuminates the significance of prioritizing mental health as an essential element of personal development and empowerment through Mama Amos and other women's disgusting experiences. The portrayal of women contending with anxiety, sadness, or trauma in the text under study serves as a heartbreaking reminder of the necessity for empathy and assistance. The story characterizes mental health issues not as defects, but as valid reactions to family pressures

and individual difficulties. This change in viewpoint pushes readers to acknowledge the power of vulnerability and the significance of soliciting assistance. Ultimately, the text promotes a more inclusive and empathetic comprehension of women's mental health, underscoring that self-discovery is a complex process necessitating both internal fortitude and external assistance. By magnifying various perspectives, the narrative enhances the discourse surrounding mental health, identity, and empowerment.

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