

**THE GIRL-CHILD, MANIC DEPRESSION AND OTHER
MATTERS ARISING IN IKECHUKWU ASIKA'S
TAMARA**

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Abstract

The alarming, yet steady rise in cases of manic depression among young people has been of grave concern in African societies. Whereas most cases are attributed to economic factors and drug abuse, the role that the family plays in the phenomenon does not often attract the focus of literary scholars. This paper, therefore, brings to the front burner, the epistolary account by a teenage girl, of her tortuous and lonely life's experience in a home that is bereft of parental love and affection in Ikechukwu Asika's *Tamara*. The situation pushes the protagonist, Tamara, to the brink and eventual death. The methodology of research is qualitative. Textual analyses enable the work to interrogate aspects of human thoughts, emotions, attitudes, and prejudices that emanate from the neglect of children in the home by a high-handed father and a docile mother. The study deploys a combination of psychodynamic theory and womanism to validate our findings. This research discovers that the narrator and protagonist, who is the main victim, blames her father's cold and over protective behaviour for her plight while ignoring the role that her mother, who is weak and robotic, ought to play in the lives of her children against the backdrop of a twenty-first century that boasts of educated, active, assertive and emancipated women. The dangers of raising children and young persons in

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such circumstances of indifference and insensitivity are unquantifiable thus necessitating an up-scaling of advocacy by proponents of feminism for responsibility-conscious mothers in homes.

Key words: Manic Depression, Psychodynamic, Emotions and Prejudices.

Introduction

In the last couple of years, African literary scholarship has focused on a myriad of issues including economic challenges, the devastating impact of COVID-19 pandemic, corruption, insurgency, denigration of women, aculturation and migration. Matters of mental health and insecurity have also engaged scholars' attention. Whereas most of the challenges of mental well-being are put at the door steps of economic deprivation, abuse of illicit drugs and spousal abuse, very limited studies have identified parental abuse, in the view of this researcher, with no specific finger, pointing at the in-action of the mother in the home as a causative factor. It remains unclear why this has not been thoroughly explored by literary critics and advocates of feminism. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the role that poor parenting plays in the mental well-being of off-springs especially the girl-child, as depicted in *Tamara*. The scope of the work is the novel under focus, although references are made to *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie; a 2006 novel which shares several similarities with *Tamara*.

In interrogating Asika's pre-occupation, which is mainly the protagonist's malevolence against her father in *Tamara*, the study deploys the qualitative research methodology. The in-text analyses are carried out using psychodynamic and womanism theories, with supporting arguments from other secondary sources.

Tamara, a 2013 novel, set in Eastern Nigeria and Italy, is an epistolary narrative by a teenage girl, Tamara, who pours out venom, literally, on her father, (addressed as such in the novel) for his insensitivity to the yearnings for his love and attention by his family. In her letter to her father, which spans the entire

length of the novel, Tamara exposes her father's high-handedness, insensitivity and over-protectiveness of his children - Tamara and Kizito her brother. Through this exposition the under-belly of failed parenthood, sexual immorality and the lack of family cohesion are brought vividly to the reader.

Tamara is a coming of age story which chronicles the protagonist's life as an innocent girl living with her parents and goes on to her myriads of experiences as a neglected, unloved teenager who seeks love and attention outside her immediate family up to her enticement into prostitution with its dire consequences. In this quest for affection and attention, the first semblance comes from the driver assigned to Tamara by her father. She pushes Dunga, the driver, to have canal knowledge of her and wishes she gets pregnant for him as a memorabilia of their inordinate amorous relationship. Enamored by Dunga's profession of likeness for her, Tamara throws herself at him; demanding and receiving sexual attention until the lovers are caught by Tamara's stern and disappointed father and Dunga is sent away.

In the proverbial "frying pan to fire" experience, Tamara encounters and falls in love with the reticent and self-effacing Obed; a fellow student, who, for no reason given in the novel, is never seen by Tamara after some time; only to discover that she has been put in the family way. Tamara leads a life of waywardness after that, finds her way abroad through peer influence and lands in a prostitution ring in Italy. At the end, she is afflicted by diseases. It is on her sick and dying bed that she pens the letter to her father that is the novel, *Tamara*.

Theoretical Background

Two theories - psychodynamic theory and womanism are deployed in this study to explicate and analyse the novel's pre-occupations. Psychodynamic theory is an aspect of psychological theory, under the concept of mental health and it deals with "human thoughts, emotions, and behaviours" (Leah Kessler n.p). Whereas there are other psychological theories that deal with human behaviours, such as behavioural theory, cognitive, humanistic and biological theories, the

psychodynamic theory best suits the incidents in the text under focus because it interrogates attitudes and prejudices which are connected with the human mind and is “evidence-based” according to (Kessler, n.p). Psychodynamic theory owes its origin to Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis, “which focused on the unconscious mind as the source of psychological distress and dysfunction” (n.p). Tamara, the protagonist in the novel by that title, is undoubtedly a dysfunctional teenager whose traumatic experience in her home makes her a victim of her mind’s distresses which result in manic depression. Furthermore, psychodynamic theory also points to unconscious state of a person’s mind that leads him to unconsciously seek “self-gratification which fuels instincts” (n.p). These fueled instincts result in erosion of moral values and unethical behaviours. Tamara exhibits these traits in no small measure.

Psychodynamic theory also deals with “the unconscious motives that underpin an individual’s personality and behaviour” (Kessler, n.p). In most of these instances, childhood experiences account for the behavioural tendencies and development of the person. These tendencies find ample expression in *Tamara*. Apart from the deployment of psychodynamic theory, womanism is also used in the analyses of this work and to validate our findings.

Womanism on the other hand, is a feminist ideology championed in the 20th century by American author, Alice Walker (Wikipedia, n.p). Although Walker coined the word and propagated womanism movement to address “issues and perspectives facing black women and others (n.p). She defines womanism as “embracing the courage, audacity and self-assured demeanor of black women alongside their love for other women, themselves and all of humanity” (n.p). Recently, however, other literary scholars and feminist writers, like Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo in whose honour this conference is instituted and T.C. Nwosu, have domesticated womanism against the backdrop of the African context to explain the imperative of women to determine what happens in their lives and not the attempt to assert their equality with men. Womanism in this sense emphasises that “biological

differentiations notwithstanding, men and women should be free to organise their individual lives." (Nwosu, xiii). Proponents of womanism espouse the binary idea of the complementarity of genders, pointing out that mutual tasks could be achieved better when men and women cooperate to "ensure the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female (Akachi, Snail Sense...). From the foregoing postulation, it would appear that anything or action that infringes on a person's right to self-determination is bound to have serious consequences on them. It is in this regard that the stifling of Tamara's mother, brother and Tamara, herself, leads to the dire outcomes that are narrated in the letter that Tamara writes to her father on her dying bed.

Review of Related Scholarship

There is a handful of critical essays on Asika's *Tamara*. I will just touch on two of such. Ifeoma Ezinne Odinye avers that the novel deals with social and moral issues which revolve around people in contemporary African societies, averring that practices that encourage good behaviours are upheld while those that smack of bad conduct are condemned. Odinye's assessment is germane to the message behind the novel as Tamara's letter to her father eulogises her aunt, Ebele, who shows her love by caring for her as a child and telling her bed time stories. The teenager, in the same vein, condemns her father for his negligence and lack of the required care to his wife and children.

Writing on Asika's letter-writing style in *Tamara*, Ifeoma Odinye, in another paper, states that the technique enhances the author's creativity because it serves as "an appropriate and emotional tool for self-expression" (n.p.). This is a robust assessment as Tamara, through the long missive to her father, pours out her hatred and anger that she had bottled up over the years.

Luke Ndudi Okolo and Chidozie Ezekwere opine in their evaluation that the novel is pre-occupied with the issue of nurturing in contemporary human society and that the failure of proper nurturing results in the protagonist's natural inclination for sex. They contend further that Tamara's "desire for interpersonal relationship against the wish of her father"

(46) is what leads to the tragedy in the novel. The critics' evaluation reveals a lot about the fact that a dysfunctional family is capable of creating serious social problems.

Examining the novel from the perspective of human trafficking, Adaobi Ihueze and Ebele Okpala highlight the book's exposure of what they refer to as "the awful practice of human trafficking and its consequences on society" (n.p). They attribute the phenomenon to ignorance, poverty, unemployment and parental negligence. These factors are pertinent, no doubt. One must, however, not rule out the strong influence of peer pressure which is what happens to the protagonist of *Tamara* when she is lured to travelling abroad by an acquaintance, *Senorita*, as a way of escaping her debilitating circumstances at home. She ends up, paradoxically, in a doomed adventure and into a prostitution ring.

Lastly in this section, Ezechi Onyerionwu carries out a review of *Tamara* and focuses primarily on the strengths of the novel among which are the letter writing technique; that the critic describes as "the talismanic element of Asika's fiction" (n.p) and the life's lessons of responsive parenting as well as the futility of escapism that lead Tamara to seek better life outside her shores while ignorant of the implications. Certainly the views expressed by these scholars speak truth to the novel under focus. The views, however, do not answer the cause and effect question of manic depression that Tamara suffers; an experience which rules her life and results in unpleasant consequences of involvement in prostitution and the contracting of the fatal disease of cancer. Also requiring interrogation is the apparent docility of Tamara's mother who fails to take action but is rather portrayed as a victim, herself.

The nucleus of this research, therefore, is the exploration of the notion of father and girl-child affinity that leads the protagonist to heap the entire blame of her mis-guided life on her father while ignoring the glaring maternal failure in the successful nurturing of the girl-child.

Notion of Father and Girl-Child Affinity

Pointedly, a special relationship exists between a father and the girl-child in many cultures. This includes the African culture where

the tradition of patriarchy bestows upon the father, the inclination to provide protection, love and emotional support to the female child because of her perceived vulnerability when juxtaposed with the male child in a family. This father/daughter bond ensures that the girl-child trusts her father, feels protected by him and is equipped to face life's challenges. According to Ahsan Hayat, "this relationship has been celebrated across cultures for its significance in shaping a daughter's life and her journey towards self-discovery" (n.p). It is, therefore, not uncommon to hear the younger generation, referred to as the "Gen-Z", banter with the expression - "daddy issues". Daddy issues refer to the natural and inexplicable bonding of the father and the girl-child.

When the author of *Tamara* creatively makes the protagonist to lament the absence of the expected emotional support that leads her to her way-ward lifestyle, it is an affirmation of the age-long imperative of that bonding. Tamara, at the start of her long letter to her father states that:

As a child, I was growing up and searching for so many things, things that I don't even know what they were, or whether sure exist.... I understood very perfectly, as tender as I was that you are a very busy man, a no-nonsense man, a father who can never tolerate a mother and two kids even at the sight of the most minute provocation. I concluded you are a very strict father who insisted even at a gunpoint, that things must be done his own way. (12)

The above extract points to the realisation by Tamara, early enough, that her father is high-handed and stiff. Her words, "as tender as I was that you are... a no nonsense man, a father who can never tolerate a mother and two kinds..." are indicative of her father's iron-fists with which he controls the family.

Chimanmanda Ngozi Adichie paints this same picture in *Purple Hibiscus*, where Papa Eugene is "portrayed as the typical representative of the patriarchy, in the African setting, who believes in stamping his authority on every facet of his household" (Ehanire, 124). Just as Papa Eugene's actions lead to dire consequences for the entire family, Tamara's father's over-bearing attitude and control result in complete alienation

of his wife and two children from him. The trio express their pain in separate ways. For the protagonist who is the focus of this section of the paper, she gradually falls apart as a result of what psychodynamic analyst, Kessler, describes as evidence-based prejudices and emotions (n.p.). Tamara feels a deep kin spirit with her father and expects the feeling to be reciprocated. When that does not happen, she is psychologically damaged and her sense of insecurity, feeling of abandonment and loneliness lead her to fall in and out of erotic relationships with even strangers; persons who she should not ordinarily have any close contact with. This position is accentuated further by what Susan Schwartz avers as “attachment issues” which result in difficulty forming healthy relationships and how “daughter may struggle with trust, intimacy and vulnerability when she is confronted with the problem of an absentee father” (n.p). This was what Tamara experiences and which erodes her self-worth.

Another expectation that a father fulfils in a home is food and other items of luxury. Tamara’s father does not fail in that regard. That he provides luxury for the home at the expense of real care, is condemned by the teenage girl thus:

I had only the stars, the moon and the thick lonely nights.... It was in that silence and vacant hours of the night that many stories and ideas come to my mind.
These are all parts of my childhood fantasies that thrilled me and kept me going on my own longer than any of the things you lavishly provided and which you must have mistaken to be the true source of my happiness (12)

Indeed, Tamara’s father has an erroneous belief, that once he has provided comfort for his family, how else he treats them does not matter. He forgets that he is dealing with human beings with emotions and who require the right attention whenever necessary. Tamara speaks about loneliness. It is this loneliness that drives her to crave the driver, Dunga’s friendship and engages in amorous relationship with him even against the

driver's better discretion and reluctance. She makes it clear in the letter to her father that she would rather have had his desired presence in her life than the money, food and amenities that he provided. Lacking fatherly love, Tamara is psychologically conditioned to embrace, easily, other men she comes in contact with. She becomes a ready victim for peer influence because she seeks love that her family is unable to provide. It is inevitable, therefore, when first, Dunga and also Obed, two men that Tamara falls head over heels in love with, so she writes (81, 94), fail to sustain the relationship, her feeling of rejection intensifies. This leads her to what is referred to, although in another instance as "the comorbidity of depression with anxiety and antisocial personality disorder" (Teater, n.p.).

Tamara's father's impatience and insensitivity to his family's emotional needs and attention lead to the children's hatred of him. Tamara recounts how her father's countenance always "terrified me and I saw my little spirit fly out of me and my courage fleeing in other directions" (20). Her father's harsh words also erase whatever little self-confidence she may have had:

"What the hell are you doing at this time of the night?" You thundered and I shivered.

"Dad... Daddy... I... I... want to show... you my report... report." I almost burst into tears.

"What about your report card? Speak before I skin you alive."

"I... I... I... I" I was lost. The words refused to come forth. (21)

This state of utter fear and erosion of her self-confidence is unhealthy for Tamara. She begins to direct negative emotions towards her father and this culminates in the malevolence in her letter to him while she takes her last breath, for she writes: "I hated you father, I hated you." (21) In mis-directing her affection to Dunga, the driver, Tamara threatens to hate Dunga forever and to kill herself if Dunga fails to reciprocate her love and overtures to sleep with her (78).

The psychological implication of Tamara's threat is of someone who has completely lost her mind and herself. At that point she has become suicidal and that, mental health expert, Zhiwei Lin describes as one of the symptoms of manic depression in young adults (29). Lin states further that "mentally healthy youths will not easily lose their way in the face of people and difficulties and they are more likely to accept the corresponding rules and regulations." (30) On account of Tamara's state of depression and despondence she is driven to "the deadly claws of the now world notorious sex slave-empire by her father's many parental blunders, chief of which is the negligence of the special role of genuine love between father and daughter" (Onyerionwu, n.p). Tamara describes her voyage into this world of uncertainties thus:

We were led into a large compound and there I met a group of other girls, Africans, because they were black. I continued to notice something striking. I was about the youngest of all the girls I saw, however, that did not bother me.... I noticed something again that made my heart skip. Many of the girls were almost naked, with strings and clothes tied all around their private parts (119).

Even in the midst of so much immorality and danger to life, Tamara did not care because she is now bereft of every dignity as she only wishes to be rid of her negligent father. She is young, she is vulnerable, she is inexperienced. It is apparent from the above extract that the protagonist has conquered fear and in spite of her "heart-skip", it is in a no-going-back situation. She appears to gloat about her new found vocation. She states: "Father, I finished my degree in prostitution. I was running my master's programme and would have finished up to PhD level and become a professor of prostitution from a prestigious country like Italy...." (138)

The cynicism in Tamara's words are unmistakable and ought to prick the conscience of her father. From the picture of him painted by the protagonist, there is little chance that he will be affected by his daughter's dismal fate; a fate he had every reason, as a father with filial responsibility, to have altered.

So much has been expressed by the narrative voice in her letter to her father, heaping the entire blame of her failed life on him. If Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's postulation on the complementarity roles of men and women is anything to go by, then, Tamara's mother's action or inaction in the raising of her children deserves to be examined. That is what forms the final section of this essay.

Nurturing the Girl-Child and Maternal Failure

In approaching this issue of Asika's portraiture of Tamara's mother as ineffectual and docile in the affairs of her home, there is the temptation to regard the author's action as that of male chauvinism. However, a female writer, Chimamanda Adichie, does the same thing in *Purple Hibiscus* as mentioned in the early part of this essay. Why do the two writers heap the entire blame of the dysfunctional family only on the father of the home? The answer may appear rhetorical but the fact remains that the position runs against the grain of the twenty-first century realism where women, especially African women, have become more active, assertive, self-assured and more in control of the destiny of their children. If the notion of African women as home builders is to be affirmed, then it is safe to say that Tamara's mother fails her children just as their father does.

Tamara, at the early part of her letter-writing gives the picture of her mother as a caring woman who is there for them. She recalls one of the moments of mother and children thus:

"Children, before I tell you stories, I want to give you a piece of advice. Life is full of many ups and downs. As you grow older, you will find life demanding you to make certain choices.... You must be careful, always listen to your innermost heart and let reason guide you." We listened as her words of wisdom reeled off. (28)

The above excerpt is indicative of a mother playing her role of counselling her children. Tamara's mother exudes confidence and is not afraid to guide her children about the trajectories of life. That being so, it appears contradictory that the same mother

would be unable to discuss career plans with the children for the narrator states that: "No one asks us about our choice of career. Mother felt it was beyond her bounds" (29). Reneging on a crucial responsibility to her little children negates the stance of womanism in the African context as the "complementarity of the sexes; a situation that encourages men and women to perform their respective roles in society for the overall good of everyone" (Ehanire, 161). It remains unclear why Tamara's mother chooses to shirk her role as a parent at critical points.

It is a sad commentary that apart from Tamara, her mother derides her father and ironically calls him "a complete failure" (32). These are harsh words coming from a wife to her husband yet, the novel does not record any incident of violent reaction from the man who has been so insulted. Why then does Tamara's mother not take charge of the home and raise her children in ways to fill in for their absentee father on account of his business engagements, shortcomings and distractions? Again, there are more questions than answers.

The situation in the family is made more worrisome when the mother in the home expects so much from the father and yet contributes very little in the children's upbringing. Tamara's mother chastises her husband thus:

You are too busy with everything.... Look at Kizito, your son. One day, you will wake up to discover how he has become a man and you don't even know who he is.... He is a complete stranger to you and this is tearing him apart. And Tamara will soon become a woman but she knows neither her left nor her right (33).

That is the constant nagging of Tamara's mother and expressing anxiety that the children are falling apart because their father shows no care to the family including her. Evidently, the woman fails to see her role as that of a co-parent who ought to cover the gaps created by a busy man who works hard to ensure that his family does not suffer the economic deprivation that he suffered while growing up. The mother complains about Tamara growing up and not "knowing her left from her right".

Basic things as moral education and lessons of life are taught to the children by their mother because of the assumption that she is thee closer to them and exercises the maternal instinct to ensure that her children turn out well in society. Tamara's mother displays this tendency in the earlier part of the novel where she tells her children stories. It is, therefore, not clear why she perpetually blames her husband for the children's alienating and anti-social behaviours. Her actions and inactions are an indictment of herself.

Soon enough, according to the narrative voice, "mother withdrew from you, from us all.... You drove her insane. That evening she fell sick" (34). Tamara's mother dies and the announcement of this occurrence is made as cold as it can be to the children by their father. He tells them with no emotion: "Your mother is dead. She died this afternoon" (35). Those insensitive words signal the end of Tamara's mother and her obliteration from the narrative. The dismissal of Tamara's mother from the scenes of her children's lives appears like an indication that the woman has no serious place in the home. This researcher believes that this is a stereotype portraiture by the author, again, just as Adichie before him does. This negates the Womanist African Communalism position of Chikwenye Ogunyemi about the family (quoted by Adimora-Ezeigbo) as "a working together in an atmosphere of peace and mutual respect between men, women and children" ("Snail Sense...." 20).

The typical African, albeit Nigerian mother would ordinarily not ignore the nurturing of her children and arrogate that role solely to their father. Nigerian mothers are known to sell their prized possessions – expensive wrappers and jewellery – to see their children through school if it becomes expedient. That Tamara's mother watches as her family dis-integrates is a mark of her maternal failure. She shares the blame with her husband in the mal-adjustment which results in their children's manic depression. This, the narrator fails to acknowledge. It is not a surprise that the son, Kizito, walks away and is never seen again while Tamara, a girl-child remains at home because of the peculiarities of the female with limited alternatives in the

African setting; the girl child is considered vulnerable and Tamara is worse hit by her parent's negligence. This state of affairs should agitate the minds of activists that a mother is culpable and should not be exempted from blame in the nurturing of the girl-child in particular. This is because, in the postulation of Sophia Coveney "adolescent girls have a substantially higher prevalence of depression and eating disorders as well as suicidal ideas and attempts than boys (n.p.). This being the result of intense research, greater care ought to be accorded the girl-child.

Conclusion

The youthful epistolary narrative of the pain and anguish of Tamara is one that should be of interest to not just psychologists and feminism or womanism proponents but also to advocates of good family life. In every sense, Tamara, the protagonist, is a fighter; one who is determined to make a success of her circumstance although she attempts to do so in the wrong ways and exhibits a lot of indiscretions which ultimately lead her to her doom.

Asika's language in the very emotional story is lucid, tone; sombre, yet defiant. The novel is laced with conversations. This aspect would appear unrealistic when considered against the backdrop of the young letter writer being able to recall conversations that occurred years earlier between her parents; some of which she does not directly witness (33). There are also grammar errors that could be permitted if the factor of the narrator's frame of mind is to be held accountable for that (12, 32). Significantly, the strength of the novel is the epistolary style which enables the protagonist to emotively express herself and pour out her feeling of neglect by her over-protective father who is, ironically, insensitive to the family's desire for his time, love and attention. Tamara's father does not encourage any form of proximity between her daughter and the opposite sex. Tamara's mind processes her father's numerous incidents of coldness towards his family and in her defiance, seeks love and warmth from outsiders inordinately.

Tamara's hatred of her father permeates the entire letter while she, literally, absolves her mother of blame in their upbringing which gnawed away their mental state and general well-being. She describes her mother in glowing terms as loving and as "the only pillar I know" (24). Yet, her mother as "pillar" is unable to rescue her children. The narrator fails to perceive that the mother should have done more than telling them bed side stories and admonishing their father frequently for his lack of attention to the children.

Finally, manic depression is real and cuts across all age and class. Younger people are more vulnerable because they are in their formative stage where they need parental guidance to help them navigate the Labyrinths and vagaries of life. This paper, therefore recommends an upscaling of advocacy by proponents of feminism for responsibility – conscious mothers or parents because of the danger to society of raising children in toxic homes that are devoid of love and attention.

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