



The Knife: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Toxic Inheritance in *My Sister, the Serial Killer*

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Abstract: *Oyinkan Braithwaite's My Sister, the Serial Killer transcends the crime thriller genre, employing the knife as a potent symbol to explore the psychological complexities of toxic inheritance. This study delves into the evolving symbolic meaning of the knife through a psychoanalytic lens, revealing how it embodies the unconscious desires, repressed memories, and moral decline of the protagonists, Ayoola and Korede. The analysis demonstrates how the knife reflects the lasting impact of their abusive father and the interplay between past experiences and present choices that shape their descent into darkness. By applying psychoanalytic concepts like the unconscious mind and defense mechanisms, this exploration sheds light on the psychological underpinning of their actions and the enduring influence of childhood trauma. Ultimately, the investigation of the knife's symbolism highlights the novel's exploration of toxic inheritance and its profound impact on the human psyche.*

Keywords: *unconscious desires, repressed memories, toxic inheritance, symbols, knife, childhood trauma, id's primal urges*

1. INTRODUCTION

In literary analysis, symbols serve as powerful tools for authors to explore complex themes with nuanced depth. Using symbols within the realm of literature, they (symbols) serve as powerful tools for authors to delve into the complexities of the human experience. Illustrating upon the tenets of psychoanalysis, pioneered by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, we understand symbols as crucial representations of unconscious desires, fears, and memories (Jung, 1961). These potent elements often bypass the conscious mind, directly connecting to the emotional core of the narrative and its characters (Jung, 1964). As Freud (1900/1953) emphasized, analyzing the shifts in symbolic meaning within a literary work offers valuable perceptions into the complex psychological motivations driving individuals' actions and choices.

Oyinkan Braithwaite, in *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, masterfully utilizes the ubiquitous knife as a multifaceted symbol, tracing the sisters' gradual ethical and psychological deterioration. This ubiquitous object transcends its physical form, accumulating layers of meaning as the narrative progresses. The novel, *My Sister, the Serial Killer* also transcends the boundaries of a mere crime thriller, transforming into a profound exploration of human psychology through the evocative symbol of the knife. This seemingly ordinary object evolves into a potent representation of toxic inheritance, reflecting the enduring impact of childhood trauma and the complex interplay between the conscious and unconscious mind. Employing a psychoanalytic lens, we embark on a journey to unveil the deeper layers of meaning embedded within the knife, illuminating the characters' unconscious motivations, moral decline, and the legacy of abuse that haunts their lives. By analyzing the shifting significance of the knife through a psychoanalytic perspective, this paper aims to illuminate how Braithwaite utilizes symbolism to offer profound insights into themes of decadence, familial trauma, and the darker aspects of human nature.

Drawing upon the tenets of Freudian psychoanalysis, this analysis posits that human behaviour is significantly influenced by the unconscious mind and formative childhood experiences (Freud, 1920). Within this framework, the id embodies primal desires and repressed urges, while the superego represents internalized societal morals and expectations (Freud, 1923). The ego navigates between these opposing forces, striving to maintain a sense of balance and social acceptability (Freud, 1923). According to Snowden, the id is the unconscious while the ego is the consciousness. The existence of

the ego assist the human fulfil his/her desire in a rational way. In her book, *Sigmund Freud*, Pamela Thurschwell (2009) stated that:

“The fear of the father’s power becomes the baby’s super-ego, the internal voice which stops the child from doing things he shouldn’t do or him feel guilty for having done things he shouldn’t have done when he does them (48).”

Nevertheless, unresolved conflicts within the unconscious can manifest as problematic behaviours when the ego struggles to contain the id's unrestrained impulses (Freud, 1930).

However, through the lens of psychoanalysis, the knife becomes a potent symbol of the sisters' unconscious desires and repressed emotions. Inherited from their abusive father, the knife embodies the negative influence and trauma inflicted upon them, ultimately transforming into a tool for achieving a distorted sense of catharsis through violence. Korede, caught in a moral quandary, exemplifies the internal struggle between the superego's internalized sense of right and wrong and the id's pull towards primal urges. This internal conflict reflects the psychoanalytic understanding of human nature as a complex interplay between the desire for societal acceptance and the influence of repressed desires (Freud, 1930).

Braithwaite's masterful use of symbolism, particularly the evolving role of the knife, offers a compelling exploration of human psychology in *My Sister, the Serial Killer*. The multifaceted symbolism of the knife reflects the characters' unconscious conflicts and emphasizes the lasting impact of childhood trauma on their descent into moral decay. The application of psychoanalytic theory enriches our understanding of the narrative by illuminating the deeper motivations behind the sisters' actions and prompting introspection on the profound influence of repressed emotions on human behaviour. Within this framework, symbols emerge as crucial tools, carrying hidden meanings that represent unconscious desires, fears, and memories (Jung, 1964). By analyzing how these symbols shift in meaning throughout a narrative, we can unearth complex psychological motivations driving characters' actions and choices (Freud, 1900/1953; Jung 1964).

This paper explores the multifaceted symbolism of the knife, a central element in the narrative, revealing its nuanced representations of inherited trauma, distorted morality, and the struggle for agency. By analyzing the psychological scars, societal complicity, and Ayoola's paradoxical rebellion, this study argues that the knife functions as a potent symbol of both destruction and a desperate attempt at reclaiming control. Through the lens of psychoanalysis, this analysis delves into the symbolic significance of the knife in *My Sister, the Serial Killer*. Therefore, the paper will explore how the knife evolves from representing paternal abuse to embodying repressed memories, unresolved trauma, and moral decline. By examining how the sisters interact with the knife and its various symbolic meanings, we gain deeper understandings into their unconscious motivations, internal conflicts, and the psychological forces shaping their actions throughout the narrative. This exploration promises to unveil the depths of toxic inheritance, highlighting the enduring impact of childhood experiences, the challenges of navigating moral dilemmas, and the potential for darkness to reside even within the most seemingly innocuous objects.

2. THE HAUNTING LEGACY OF THE KNIFE: A PSYCHOANALYTIC EXPLORATION OF SYMBOLISM IN *MY SISTER, THE SERIAL KILLER*

Within the realm of literature, symbols serve as powerful tools for authors to delve into the complexities of the human experience. Drawing upon the tenets of psychoanalysis, pioneered by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, we understand symbols as crucial representations of unconscious desires, fears, and memories (Jung, 1961). These potent elements often bypass the conscious mind, directly connecting to the emotional core of the narrative and its characters (Jung, 1964). As Freud (1900/1953) emphasized, analyzing the shifts in symbolic meaning within a literary work offers clearer understanding of the complex psychological motivations driving individuals' actions and choices. By analyzing how these symbols shift in meaning throughout a narrative, we can unearth complex psychological motivations driving characters' actions and choices (Freud, 1900/1953; Jung 1964).

From the outset, the ubiquitous knife demands our attention. Inherited from their abusive father, Kehinde, the knife becomes a constant presence in the lives of Ayoola and Korede. Through the lens of psychoanalysis, the knife embodies the negative influence and trauma inflicted upon them by their father, symbolizing his authoritarian control, emotional neglect, and cruelty. Korede said that, “He kept

it (knife) sheathed and locked in a drawer, but he would bring it out whenever we had guests to show it off to. ... I used to watch as he squeezes a few drops of oil out, gently rubbing it along with his finger in soft circular motions” (Braithwaite, 2018).” As Freud (1923/1961) posits, parental figures play a formative role in shaping children's psyches, and negative experiences during this crucial developmental stage can have lasting consequences. For Ayoola and Korede, the knife becomes a tangible reminder of their toxic inheritance, a constant echo of the emotional wounds their father inflicted. That was why she picked the knife before her father’s body got cold. Thus, “Ayoola inherited the knife from him (and by inherited I mean she took it from his possessions before his body was cold in the ground). It made sense that she take it – it was the thing he was most proud of (Braithwaite, 2018).”

As the narrative unfolds, the knife's symbolic meaning expands to encompass various aspects of the sisters' psychological journeys. It evolves from embodying paternal abuse to representing repressed memories, unresolved trauma, and the gradual erosion of their moral compass. The knife's initial appearance in the narrative highlights its connection to the sisters' abusive father and his patriarchal authority. This shows that instead of the home and family being a place for nurturing well-meaning citizens it becomes a place for nurturing criminals and according to Ihueze and Ike (2023) ... Braithwaite spotlights the home as the breeding ground for decadence seeping into the wider culture (22). As Korede describes, her father, Kehinde, exhibits an obsessive attachment to his curved bone-handled knife, never allowing it out of his sight. This excessive possessiveness and the contrasting neglect he displays towards his wife and daughters unveils the depths of his cruel nature and dysfunctional values. Psychoanalytic theory emphasizes the immense influence of parental figures on shaping their children's psyches and relationships (Freud, 1899/1953). The way their father handles the knife as if it is the closest thing to his heart, even the beating he gave Ayoola the day she touched the knife and smeared it with chocolate. Thus,

Once, when she thought he had gone out for the day, Ayoola entered his study and found his desk drawer unlocked. She took the knife out to look, smearing it with the chocolate she had just been eating. She was still in the room when he returned. He dragged her out by her hair, screaming. I turned up just in time to witness him fling her across the hallway. (Braithwaite, 2008)

Here, the knife becomes a potent symbol of the father's damaging parenting style, reflecting his emotional coldness and oppressive control. For Ihueze and Ike (2023) “... This knife is what presents the male authority of Korede’s father in their household, it is the representative of all the traumas the family experience in his hand” (124). It is through this lens that we understand how Ayoola and Korede internalize their father's emotional neglect, viewing the knife as his only, albeit warped, and form of affection. This profound lack of genuine love creates a deep sense of insecurity within the sisters, paving the way for the knife to evolve into a symbol of childhood trauma that ultimately manifests in Ayoola's distorted adult relationships.

As Ayoola inherits the knife from her abusive father, its meaning transcends its physical form. It becomes a tangible embodiment of the repressed memories and inherited trauma that burden both sisters. While Korede questions Ayoola's claimed sentimental attachment, psychoanalytic theory suggests the knife holds unconscious significance, rooted in Korede and Ayoola's childhood pain. As Freud (1915/1957) highlights in his dream theory, the knife likely manifests in Korede's dreams due to its connection to her unresolved emotions. Her (Korede) dream of their father's brutality embodied in the knife becomes a chilling illustration of how the knife resides within her unconscious mind, symbolizing memories and emotions too painful to process consciously. This suggests that the knife acts as a symbol of unresolved childhood suffering, a constant reminder of the psychological scars inflicted by their father. Even when Korede wanted to take the knife from her to stop the havoc she has been committing, Ayoola said, “The knife is important to me Korede. It is all I have left of him (Braithwaite, 2018).” According to psychoanalysis, repressed emotions and desires often manifest through unconscious behaviours deemed unacceptable by the conscious mind (Freud, 1915/1957). In the context of the novel, Ayoola's violent acts committed with the knife can be interpreted as an expression of her repressed rage and pain. The knife transforms into a symbolic instrument, channeling the negative emotions forged in her abusive upbringing. Each murder with the knife becomes a symbolic act of releasing the years of trauma and unresolved anger that fester within her. Korede was even confused that “For some reason, I cannot imagine her resorting to stabbing if that particular knife were

not in her hand; almost as if it were the knife and not her (Ayoola) that was doing the killing.”(Braithwaite, 2018)

However, the knife's symbolic significance extends beyond Ayoola, encompassing the moral conundrum faced by Korede. The knife becomes entangled with her repression and ethical compromises. Despite her revulsion, Korede's loyalty and fear compel her to become complicit in the aftermath of Ayoola's crimes. This internal conflict between her moral compass and her loyalty to her sister is reflected in the symbolic presence of the knife. It embodies the struggle between the id's desires and the superego's morality within Korede, as she sacrifices her own values to protect her sister. The knife appears during scenes of Korede's rationalization and justification, symbolizing the repression of her own conscience that allows her to participate in Ayoola's deceit and murder. This highlights the complex dynamics of familial bonds and the potential for loyalty to cloud moral judgment, even in the face of ethical transgressions.

The knife's journey from a symbol of paternal abuse to a harbinger of repressed memories and unresolved trauma accentuates the enduring impact of childhood experiences on the human psyche (Freud, 1939/1964). As Ayoola inherits the knife, it becomes a physical manifestation of her father's cruelty and neglect, constantly reminding her of the emotional wounds inflicted upon her. This aligns with Freud's (1915/1957) dream theory, where objects and symbols often hold unconscious significance rooted in past experiences. The image of Ayoola grasping the bloodied knife in her (Korede) dream becomes a chilling illustration of the knife's presence in her unconscious mind, embodying the emotional turmoil she struggles to confront consciously.

Furthermore, Ayoola's acts of violence committed with the knife can be interpreted as a manifestation of her years of suppressed rage and pain. The knife's transformation into a catalyst for violence sheds light on the complex relationship between repressed emotions and their potential for destructive expression (Freud, 1915/1957). Through the lens of psychoanalysis, the knife transcends its physical form, becoming a symbolic channel for releasing the pent-up negative emotions she has been unable to process healthily. Each murder with the knife symbolizes a distorted attempt to purge the trauma inflicted upon her, highlighting the potentially destructive consequences of unresolved emotional issues.

As Ayoola utilizes the knife for her murders, it goes beyond representing her past trauma; it embodies her deteriorating ethical compass and diminishing sense of compassion. Ayoola's conscience has eroded to the extent that she has no feelings of guilt after killing each victim, it is just like a game for her. An example can be seen in the excerpt of the interaction between Korede and Ayoola. Thus,

You're not the only one suffering you know.

You act like you are carrying this big thing all by yourself, but I worry too.

Do you? Cause the other day, you were singing, 'I believe I Can Fly.'

Ayoola shrugs. It is a good song.

Try not to scream. More and more, she reminds me of him. He could do a bad thing and behave like a model citizen right after, As though the bad thing had never happened. Is it in the blood? But this blood is my blood and my blood is hers. (Braithwaite, 2018)

The knife's evolving symbolism as a marker of moral erosion further accentuates the complexities of human morality and its potential susceptibility to external influences (Freud, 1923/1961). This aligns with the psychoanalytic concept of the id's dominance over the ego, leading to the expression of unchecked desires (Freud, 1923/1961). The reappearance of the knife during each killing signifies the weakening of Ayoola's superego, the internalized moral compass, resulting in fewer constraints against violence. This descent into moral decay serves as a cautionary tale, highlighting the potential for external symbols, in this case, the knife, to become catalysts for destructive behavior when intertwined with unresolved trauma.

By employing the rich symbolism of the knife and applying a psychoanalytic lens, Braithwaite offers a thoughtful exploration of the human psyche. *My Sister, the Serial Killer* delves into the complexities of human behaviour, highlighting the enduring impact of childhood experiences, the potential for destructive expression of repressed emotions, and the challenges of navigating moral dilemmas.

Psychoanalytic theory, heavily influenced by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, posits that human behaviour is shaped by early childhood experiences and the unconscious mind (Freud, 1900/1953). It emphasizes the interaction between past experiences and present choices in shaping human behaviour. The knife, in its various symbolic layers, represents the cumulative impact of childhood trauma and the ongoing decisions that ultimately corrode the sisters' morality. Its repeated presence during their descent into darkness symbolizes their gradual surrender to the id's impulses and the resulting erosion of their moral constraints.

As the narrative unfolds, the knife's symbolic meaning expands to encompass various aspects of the sisters' psychological journeys. It evolves from embodying paternal abuse to representing repressed memories, unresolved trauma, and the gradual erosion of their moral compass. By analyzing the shifting significance of the knife throughout the novel, we gain a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between past experiences, present choices, and the potential for destructive behaviour.

3. CONCLUSION

Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* transcends the boundaries of a mere crime thriller, weaving a complex tapestry of psychological exploration through the potent symbol of the knife. This seemingly ordinary object evolves into a multifaceted symbol, reflecting the repressed memories, inherited damage, and moral decline that haunt the protagonists, Ayoola and Korede. By applying a psychoanalytic lens, we have delved deeper into the shifting symbolic significance of the knife, illuminating the characters' unconscious motivations and their descent into psychological darkness.

In the captivating novel, *My Sister, the Serial Killer*, the ubiquitous knife transcends its physical form to become a potent symbol explored through a psychoanalytic lens. This analysis delves into how the knife embodies the toxic inheritance passed down to the protagonists, Ayoola and Korede, serving as a Freudian manifestation of their unconscious desires and repressed emotions. Illustrating the framework of Freudian theory, which posits that childhood experiences and unresolved conflicts shape human behaviour, this paper examines the descent of the sisters into darkness. Their abusive and traumatic upbringing, exemplified by their father's negative influence, pushes their egos to succumb to the id's primal urges, culminating in extreme criminal acts. The knife, once a cherished possession of their father, transforms into a haunting symbol of decadence. It fuels Ayoola's thirst for vengeance, morphing her into a cold-blooded murderer. Korede, caught in a moral conflict, is drawn into reluctant complicity due to familial loyalty. By employing a psychoanalytic approach, the analysis reveals how the sisters' act out their repressed desires, with the knife serving as a tangible manifestation of their psychic wounds.

This psychoanalytic exploration illuminates the narrative's suspenseful journey, prompting critical reflection on the lasting effects of toxic environments and the potential for intergenerational cycles of trauma and deviance. Ultimately, *My Sister, the Serial Killer* transcends its genre, emerging as a profound exploration of familial bonds, the enduring influence of the past, and the relationship between nature, nurture, and the darker aspects of human nature. This exploration is further enriched by the multifaceted symbolism embedded within the ever-present and menacing image of the knife. Braithwaite's masterful use of symbolism, particularly the evolving role of the knife, offers a compelling exploration of human psychology in *My Sister, the Serial Killer*. The multifaceted symbolism of the knife reflects the characters' unconscious conflicts and underscores the lasting impact of childhood trauma on their descent into moral decay. The application of psychoanalytic theory enriches our understanding of the narrative by illuminating the deeper motivations behind the sisters' actions and prompting introspection on the profound influence of repressed emotions on human behaviour.

Ultimately, the knife, in its various symbolic layers, represents the cumulative impact of childhood trauma and the ongoing decisions that ultimately corrode the sisters' morality. Its repeated presence during their descent into darkness symbolizes their gradual surrender to the id's impulses and the resulting erosion of their moral constraints. However, Braithwaite does not paint a one-dimensional picture of the characters. She leaves space for the reader to consider the mitigating factors of their upbringing and the complex emotional landscape they navigate.

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Citation: *Adaobi Olivia Ihueze PhD, Ike, Chidimma Blessing, " The Knife: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Toxic Inheritance in My Sister, the Serial Killer", International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL), vol. 12, no. 7, pp. 1-14, 2024. Available: DOI: [https://doi.org/ 10.20431/2347-3134.1207001](https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.1207001).*

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