

## Emotional Turmoil and Family Dynamics in *an Unusual Grief* by Yewande Omotoso

Muhammad Safiyu Aliyu<sup>1</sup>, Muhammad Ibrahim Musa<sup>2</sup> and Lawal Abdullahi<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Remedial and Continuing Education, A.D. Rufa'i College of Education, Legal and General Studies, Misau, Bauchi Stat.e

<sup>2</sup>Department of General Studies, Mai Idris Aloomo Polytechnic, Geidam, Yobe State.

<sup>3</sup>Department of English, A.D. Rufa'i College of Education, Legal and General Studies, Misau, Bauchi State.

Corresponding Author: [muhammadaliyusafiyu@gmail.com](mailto:muhammadaliyusafiyu@gmail.com); +2348034184823

### Abstract

*An Unusual Grief* by Yewande Omotoso explores the profound emotional landscape of grief and the intricate dynamics within a family. The narrative follows Mojisola, a mother coping with the sudden death of her daughter, Yinka. Omotoso skillfully portrays Mojisola's journey through the various stages of grief, from initial shock and denial to eventual acceptance and healing. Set against the backdrop of Nigeria and South Africa, the novel interweaves cultural elements that enrich the portrayal of grief and familial relationships. Mojisola's emotional turmoil is depicted through her intimate exploration of Yinka's life, revealing aspects of her daughter she never knew. This journey not only highlights Mojisola's deep sorrow and regret but also her moments of revelation and self-discovery. The novel's secondary characters, particularly Zelda Petersen, provide crucial support and differing perspectives on grief, helping Mojisola navigate her emotional journey. Omotoso delves into the complexities of family dynamics, illustrating the conflicts and misunderstandings that often arise. The strained relationship between Mojisola and her husband, Titus, showcases their contrasting ways of dealing with grief, reflecting the broader theme of individual responses to loss. Additionally, the cultural contexts of Nigeria and South Africa significantly shape the characters' experiences, providing a rich framework for understanding their emotional and relational dynamics. Through a psychoanalytic lens, drawing on theories from Freud and Bowlby, this novel offers a comprehensive analysis of grief and attachment. Omotoso's empathetic storytelling and profound character insights make *An Unusual Grief* a poignant exploration of the human condition, emphasizing emotional resilience and the complexities of familial love.

**Keywords:** Emotional Turmoil, Grief, Family, Family Dynamics, Conflict

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

*An Unusual Grief* by Yewande Omotoso delves into the profound and complex emotional landscapes of its characters, particularly focusing on the themes of grief and family dynamics. The novel centers on Mojisola, a mother grappling with the sudden loss of her daughter, Yinka and her subsequent journey through grief. Omotoso's portrayal of Mojisola's emotional turmoil and her evolving relationships with family members offers a deep exploration of the grieving process and the intricate web of familial bonds. By depicting the stages of grief and the complexities of family interactions, Omotoso provides readers with a comprehensive understanding of human emotions and the impact of loss on relationships. The novel's setting in both Nigeria and South Africa further enriches the narrative, highlighting the cultural dimensions of grief and family dynamics. This essay aims to examine how Omotoso skillfully portrays these themes, drawing on psychoanalytic theories and existing literature to provide an insightful analysis of the novel's impact on understanding human emotions and relationships. By exploring the intersections of personal grief and family dynamics, *An Unusual Grief* not only offers a poignant narrative but also contributes to broader discussions on emotional resilience and the complexities of familial love (Omotoso, 2021).

## 2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Literature Review

#### 2.1.1 Studies on Grief in Literature

Grief, as a universal human experience, has been a prominent theme in literature across different cultures and time periods. The exploration of grief in literary works provides profound insights into the emotional and psychological processes associated with loss.

Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005) and C.S. Lewis's *A Grief Observed* (1961) are seminal texts that delve deeply into the personal and philosophical aspects of grieving. Didion's memoir reflects on the sudden death of her husband, providing a raw and intimate portrayal of the stages of grief, including denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, as outlined by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969). Didion's narrative underscores the disorientation and the struggle for meaning that often accompany profound loss (Didion, 2005).

Similarly, C.S. Lewis's work offers a poignant reflection on his own grief following the death of his wife. Lewis's narrative is marked by its philosophical depth, examining the interplay between faith and sorrow. His exploration of grief aligns with the concept of "mourning and melancholia" as articulated by Sigmund Freud (1917), where mourning represents a healthy response to loss, while melancholia is characterized by an inability to detach from the lost object. Lewis's work emphasizes the oscillation between despair and the search for solace, illustrating the complexity of the grieving process (Lewis, 1961).

Beyond these individual narratives, grief has been examined in various cultural contexts. For instance, in her study "Grief in Contemporary Society: Theory, Research and Practice," Margaret Stroebe highlights how cultural factors influence grieving practices and expressions of sorrow. Stroebe's research indicates that while the emotional core of grief may be universal, the manifestation of grief is shaped by cultural norms and rituals (Stroebe et al., 2001).

#### 2.1.2 Family Dynamics in Literary Works

Family dynamics are a critical aspect of literary analysis, providing a lens through which to understand character development and interpersonal relationships. Classic literature, such as Jane Austen's "Pride and

*Emotional Turmoil and Family Dynamics in an Unusual Grief by Yewande Omotoso*

Prejudice" (1813), offers a rich exploration of family relationships and their impact on individual behavior and societal expectations. Austen's portrayal of the Bennet family highlights the influence of familial expectations and social pressures on individual choices and emotional states. The tensions between duty and desire, autonomy and obligation, are central to understanding the characters' motivations and conflicts (Austen, 1813).

In more contemporary literature, Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) delves into the complexities of mother-daughter relationships within the context of Chinese-American immigrant families. Tan's narrative interweaves the personal histories of four Chinese-American immigrant families, exploring themes of cultural identity, generational conflict and the transmission of cultural heritage. The intricate dynamics between mothers and daughters in Tan's work reveal how family history and cultural background shape individual identities and emotional experiences (Tan, 1989).

Scholarly works, such as Judith Wallerstein's "The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce" (2000), provide empirical insights into the long-term impact of family dynamics on individuals. Wallerstein's research, based on longitudinal studies, underscores the profound influence of parental relationships and family structure on children's emotional and psychological development. The findings highlight the enduring effects of family conflicts and the importance of familial support in coping with emotional challenges (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000).

### **2.1.3 African Literature and Emotional Themes**

African literature is renowned for its deep engagement with emotional and societal themes, reflecting the continent's diverse cultural contexts and historical experiences.

Authors like Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Nadine Gordimer have made significant contributions to the literary canon, addressing themes of identity, loss and family.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is a pivotal work that explores the impact of colonialism on traditional Igbo society and the resulting cultural disintegration. Achebe's portrayal of Okonkwo's struggles with identity and societal change provides a profound commentary on loss and the erosion of cultural values. The emotional turmoil experienced by the characters in the face of profound societal upheaval underscores the interconnectedness of personal and communal grief (Achebe, 1958).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) offers a comprehensive exploration of the Nigerian Civil War and its devastating impact on families and individuals. Adichie's narrative interweaves personal stories with historical events, highlighting the emotional and psychological toll of conflict. The themes of loss, trauma and resilience are central to the characters' experiences, illustrating the profound impact of historical events on personal lives (Adichie, 2006).

Nadine Gordimer's works, such as *Burger's Daughter* (1979), delve into the complexities of political activism and its impact on family relationships in apartheid South Africa. Gordimer's characters often grapple with the tensions between personal loyalties and political commitments, revealing the emotional costs of living under an oppressive regime. The exploration of familial bonds and ideological conflicts in Gordimer's work underscores the interplay between personal and political spheres (Gordimer, 1979).

Yewande Omotoso's writing, including *An Unusual Grief*, contributes to this rich tradition of African literature by focusing on the

*Emotional Turmoil and Family Dynamics in an Unusual Grief by Yewande Omotoso*

complex emotional experiences of her characters. Omotoso's exploration of grief and family dynamics is deeply rooted in the cultural and societal contexts of Nigeria and South Africa, offering a unique perspective on universal themes. Her portrayal of Mojisola's journey through grief and the complexities of familial relationships provides a profound commentary on the human condition (Omotoso, 2021).

## 2.2 Theoretical Framework

This essay will utilize a psychoanalytic framework to analyze the emotional turmoil depicted in *An Unusual Grief* by Yewande Omotoso. Sigmund Freud's theories on mourning and melancholia will serve as a foundational lens through which to understand the psychological aspects of grief. In his seminal work *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud distinguishes between mourning, a normal process of grieving where the individual gradually detaches from the lost object and melancholia, where the individual internalizes the loss, often resulting in a profound sense of guilt and self-reproach (Freud, 1917). These concepts will help elucidate the protagonist Mojisola's journey through grief, highlighting how her emotional turmoil reflects both healthy mourning and elements of melancholia.

Additionally, John Bowlby's attachment theory will be employed to further explore the family dynamics and emotional responses to loss. Bowlby's theory posits that early attachment experiences with primary caregivers shape an individual's ability to form and maintain emotional bonds throughout life (Bowlby, 1969). His work on attachment and loss outlines how disruptions in these bonds, such as the death of a loved one, can lead to intense emotional distress and challenges in emotional regulation (Bowlby, 1980). By applying Bowlby's attachment theory, this essay will analyze the impact of

Yinka's death on Mojisola's sense of security and her interactions with family members.

Together, Freud's and Bowlby's theories provide a comprehensive framework for examining the psychological dimensions of grief and family dynamics in Omotoso's novel. This psychoanalytic approach will offer insights into how Mojisola's grief is shaped by her attachment history and the nature of her emotional bonds, thereby enriching the analysis of her emotional journey and the novel's broader exploration of human relationships.

## 2.3 Summary of the Novel

*An Unusual Grief* follows the story of Mojisola, a mother who travels to Johannesburg following the sudden death of her daughter, Yinka. The novel captures Mojisola's emotional journey as she navigates her grief and uncovers aspects of her daughter's life that she never knew. Upon arriving in Johannesburg, Mojisola moves into Yinka's apartment and immerses herself in the remnants of her daughter's existence. This intimate exploration of Yinka's world allows Mojisola to piece together a portrait of Yinka that is both familiar and startlingly new.

As Mojisola delves deeper into Yinka's life, she encounters various characters who shed light on different facets of her daughter's experiences. Among these is Zelda Petersen, the enigmatic landlady who becomes a pivotal figure in Mojisola's journey. Zelda's own experiences with loss and her unique perspective on life provide Mojisola with the companionship and insight she desperately needs. Through their interactions, Mojisola begins to understand the depth of Yinka's struggles and joys, as well as her own failings and strengths as a mother.

The novel intricately weaves Mojisola's process of mourning with moments of revelation and self-discovery. It portrays her

fluctuating emotions, from profound sorrow and guilt to moments of acceptance and peace. Mojisola's journey is also one of reconciliation with her past, as she confronts unresolved issues in her own life and her relationship with Yinka. The process is painful yet cathartic, leading to a more broad understanding of love, loss and the complexities of familial bonds.

#### 2.4 About the Author

Yewande Omotoso is a Nigerian-Barbadian author and architect, celebrated for her thought-provoking novels that delve into themes of identity, displacement and familial relationships. Born in Bridgetown, Barbados and raised in Nigeria, Omotoso's multicultural background profoundly influences her writing. Her narratives often reflect the rich tapestry of African and Caribbean cultures, exploring the intersections of personal and collective histories.

Omotoso's debut novel, *Bom Boy*, received widespread acclaim and won the South African Literary Award for First-Time Published Author. The novel tells the story of a young boy's search for identity and belonging, a theme that resonates deeply in Omotoso's work. Her second novel, *The Woman Next Door*, was shortlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award and the Aidoo-Snyder Book Prize. It explores the lives of two elderly women, one black and one white, who live next to each other in a wealthy Cape Town suburb and develop an unexpected friendship despite their past animosities.

In *An Unusual Grief*, Omotoso continues to demonstrate her skill in capturing complex emotional landscapes and the intricacies of human relationships. Her writing is characterized by its lyrical prose, deep empathy for her characters and a keen insight into the human condition. Through her novels, Omotoso offers readers a profound exploration of the themes that define our lives, inviting

them to reflect on their own experiences of love, loss and connection.

### 3.0 EMOTIONAL TURMOIL AND FAMILY DYNAMICS IN AN UNUSUAL GRIEF BY YEWANDE OMOTOSO

#### 3.1 The Portrayal of Grief

In *An Unusual Grief*, Yewande Omotoso presents a multifaceted and deeply personal portrayal of grief through the character of Mojisola. The novel meticulously captures the stages of grief, from denial and anger to acceptance, reflecting the emotional depth and complexity of the grieving process. Mojisola's journey is marked by a profound transformation that reshapes her understanding of herself and her relationships.

At the beginning of the novel, Mojisola's grief is characterized by a sense of numbness and disbelief. The sudden death of her daughter, Yinka, leaves her in a state of shock, as evidenced by her initial reaction: "Mojisola felt as if the air had been sucked out of her lungs" (Omotoso, 2021, p. 12). This reaction aligns with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's stage of denial, where the individual struggles to accept the reality of the loss (Kübler-Ross, 1969). This initial stage is critical as it sets the tone for the subsequent emotional journey. The numbness and disbelief prevent her from processing the reality of her daughter's death, creating a temporary barrier between her and the overwhelming pain.

As Mojisola processes her grief, she experiences intense anger and frustration. Her anger is directed not only at the circumstances of Yinka's death but also at herself and her perceived failures as a mother. Omotoso poignantly describes Mojisola's internal conflict: "She was angry with herself for not knowing her daughter better, for not being able to prevent the tragedy" (Omotoso, 2021, p. 45). This stage of grief reflects Freud's concept of melancholia, where the individual internalizes the loss and directs negative

*Emotional Turmoil and Family Dynamics in an Unusual Grief by Yewande Omotoso*

emotions inward (Freud, 1917). Mojisola's anger is a crucial phase that highlights the complexity of her emotional state. It underscores her struggle with guilt and self-blame, common aspects of grief that complicate the healing process.

Mojisola's journey through grief also involves moments of profound sadness and despair. Omotoso captures these emotions vividly: "The weight of her sorrow was a constant presence, a shadow that never left her side" (Omotoso, 2021, p. 78). This portrayal aligns with John Bowlby's attachment theory, which suggests that the loss of a loved one disrupts an individual's sense of security and attachment, leading to intense emotional distress (Bowlby, 1980). The metaphor of a "shadow" emphasizes the omnipresence of her grief, indicating how it permeates every aspect of her life, casting a persistent pall over her existence.

Throughout the novel, Mojisola's grief is portrayed as a transformative experience. Her interactions with secondary characters, such as Zelda Petersen, help her navigate her emotions and find a path toward acceptance. Omotoso illustrates this transformation: "Through her conversations with Zelda, Mojisola began to see her grief not as an end but as a beginning, a journey of understanding and healing" (Omotoso, 2021, p. 152). This shift toward acceptance reflects the final stage of Kübler-Ross's model, where the individual comes to terms with the loss and begins to rebuild their life (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The support and understanding from Zelda play a pivotal role in Mojisola's emotional recovery, demonstrating the importance of social connections in overcoming grief.

Moreover, Mojisola's transformation is not linear but rather a series of emotional ebbs and flows. Omotoso does not present a straightforward path to healing but rather a realistic depiction of the non-linear nature of

grief. For instance, moments of progress are often followed by setbacks: "Just when she thought she had moved past the worst of it, a memory would surface, pulling her back into the depths of sorrow" (Omotoso, 2021, p. 133). This cyclical portrayal of grief underscores the idea that healing is an ongoing process, marked by continuous effort and reflection.

Mojisola's journey is also marked by self-discovery and reconciliation with her past. Through her grief, she confronts unresolved issues and unspoken emotions, leading to a deeper understanding of herself. Omotoso writes, "In her grief, Mojisola found fragments of herself she had long forgotten, pieces that made her whole" (Omotoso, 2021, p. 170). This aspect of her journey highlights the potential for personal growth and self-awareness that can emerge from the depths of sorrow.

### **3.2 Family Dynamics and Conflict**

Omotoso's novel delves deeply into the complexities of family dynamics, highlighting the conflicts and misunderstandings that often arise within familial relationships. Mojisola's interactions with her husband, Titus and her memories of her relationship with Yinka reveal the underlying tensions and unresolved issues that contribute to her emotional turmoil.

The relationship between Mojisola and Titus is strained by their differing ways of coping with grief. Titus's more stoic and detached approach contrasts sharply with Mojisola's emotional vulnerability. Omotoso captures this tension: "Titus had always been the rock, the one who kept his emotions in check. Mojisola, on the other hand, felt everything deeply and struggled to contain her pain" (Omotoso, 2021, p. 93). This dynamic reflects the differing attachment styles discussed by Bowlby, where individuals may respond to loss in varying ways based on their attachment history (Bowlby, 1969).

Mojisola's memories of her relationship with Yinka are filled with both love and regret. She reflects on the moments of connection and the missed opportunities for understanding: "She wished she had taken more time to listen to Yinka, to understand her fears and dreams" (Omotoso, 2021, p. 120). These reflections highlight the unresolved issues that often complicate familial relationships, as well as the guilt and remorse that can accompany the loss of a loved one.

The novel also explores the impact of family secrets and unspoken tensions. Omotoso reveals that Yinka had hidden aspects of her life from her parents, leading to feelings of betrayal and confusion for Mojisola: "Discovering Yinka's secrets felt like losing her all over again. There was so much she didn't know, so much she could never ask" (Omotoso, 2021, p. 134). This revelation underscores the theme of incomplete knowledge and the inherent complexity of family dynamics.

### 3.3 The Role of Secondary Characters

Secondary characters play a crucial role in Mojisola's journey, offering different perspectives on grief and family. Zelda Petersen, in particular, provides significant support and insight, enriching the exploration of emotional and familial themes in the novel.

Zelda's own experiences with loss and her interactions with Mojisola provide additional layers to the narrative. As Omotoso writes, "Zelda had her own sorrows, her own stories of love and loss. Through their conversations, Mojisola found a kindred spirit, someone who understood the depths of her pain" (Omotoso, 2021, p. 145). Zelda's empathy and wisdom help Mojisola navigate her grief and begin the process of healing.

Other secondary characters, such as family friends and community members, also contribute to the exploration of grief and

family dynamics. Their interactions with Mojisola highlight the broader social context of grieving and the varying ways in which individuals and communities respond to loss. Omotoso illustrates this through scenes of communal support and shared mourning: "The community gathered around Mojisola, offering their condolences and their presence. In their company, she found a sense of belonging and comfort" (Omotoso, 2021, p. 178).

### 3.4 Cultural Context and Its Impact on Grief and Family

The cultural context of *An Unusual Grief*, set in both Nigeria and South Africa, significantly influences the characters' experiences of grief and family dynamics. Omotoso weaves cultural elements into the narrative, illustrating how traditions and societal expectations shape the ways in which characters cope with loss and navigate their relationships.

In Nigeria, traditional grieving practices and rituals play an important role in how Mojisola and her family process Yinka's death. These rituals provide a structured way of expressing grief and finding closure. Omotoso describes these practices in detail: "The funeral rites were a blend of old and new, a testament to the family's cultural heritage. The songs, the prayers, the communal gatherings all served to honor Yinka's memory and support the grieving family" (Omotoso, 2021, p. 63). These cultural practices help Mojisola feel connected to her community and provide a framework for her grieving process.

In South Africa, the cultural context adds another layer to the exploration of grief and family dynamics. The novel reflects on the historical and societal influences that shape the characters' experiences. Omotoso captures the intersection of personal and cultural grief: "In Johannesburg, Mojisola felt the weight of the past, the echoes of a country scarred by history. Her grief was part of a larger tapestry of sorrow and resilience" (Omotoso, 2021, p.

98). This broader context enriches the narrative, highlighting the interplay between individual emotions and societal influences.

#### 4.0 CONCLUSION

*An Unusual Grief* by Yewande Omotoso is a poignant exploration of emotional turmoil and family dynamics. Through the lens of Mojisola's grief, the novel offers a profound understanding of the complexities of human emotions and relationships. Omotoso masterfully depicts the stages of grief, from denial and anger to acceptance, showcasing how loss can lead to profound personal transformation. The complex portrayal of Mojisola's journey highlights the intricate interplay between individual emotions and family relationships, revealing the unresolved tensions and conflicts that shape our experiences of love and loss. Omotoso's skillful storytelling and deep empathy for her characters make this novel a significant contribution to contemporary African literature. She seamlessly integrates cultural contexts, illustrating how Nigerian and South African traditions influence the characters' ways of coping with grief and familial expectations. The inclusion of secondary characters like Zelda Petersen enriches the narrative, providing diverse perspectives on grief and highlighting the communal aspects of mourning.

In essence, *An Unusual Grief* transcends a mere exploration of sorrow, offering readers a profound meditation on self-discovery, reconciliation and the enduring impact of familial bonds. Omotoso's ability to capture the emotional depths of her characters and the complexities of their relationships ensures that this novel resonates deeply with readers, affirming its place as a vital and evocative work in contemporary literature.

#### 5.0 REFERENCES

- Achebe, C. (1958). *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.
- Adichie, C. N. (2006). *Half of a Yellow Sun*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Austen, J. (1813). *Pride and Prejudice*. London: T. Egerton.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1980). *Attachment and Loss: Vol. 3. Loss, Sadness and Depression*. New York: Basic Books.
- Didion, J. (2005). *The Year of Magical Thinking*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Freud, S. (1917). *Mourning and Melancholia*. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 14, pp. 237-258). London: Hogarth Press.
- Gordimer, N. (1979). *Burger's Daughter*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Kübler-Ross, E. (1969). *On Death and Dying*. New York: Macmillan.
- Lewis, C. S. (1961). *A Grief Observed*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Omotoso, Y. (2021). *An Unusual Grief*. London: Cassava Republic Press.
- Stroebe, M., Hansson, R. O., Schut, H., & Stroebe, W. (Eds.). (2001). *Handbook of Bereavement Research: Consequences, Coping and Care*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Tan, A. (1989). *The Joy Luck Club*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Wallerstein, J. S., Lewis, J. M., & Blakeslee, S. (2000). *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study*. New York: Hyperion.