



Beyond Stereotypes: Exploring Female Perpetrators of Domestic Violence. A Narrative Analysis of Sunny Alli's *Lagos Girls*

¹Akinrinlola Deborah Atinuke; ²Olaleye Oluwaseun Mercy PhD; ¹Ogazie Charles A. PhD;
³Akorede-Okeremi Ifeoluwa Odunayo & ⁴Olafusi Tosin Aanuoluwapo.

¹, Dept. of Theatre and Creative Arts
Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo
atinurinlola@gmail.com , charlesogazie01@gmail.com

²Dept. of Geography
Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo
olaleyeom@afued.edu.ng

³Dept. of Early Childhood and Care Education
Adeyemi Federal University of Education, Ondo
ifeoluwaakorede@gmail.com

⁴Department of Yoruba
Adeyemi Federal University of Education
tolafusi15@gmail.com

Abstract

The study subverts traditional notions of domestic violence by examining the complex dynamics of women as perpetrators in marital conflict situations, as represented in the selected video film. Through a narrative analysis of this video film, this research reveals the ways in which women can exercise agency and perpetrate violence, challenging the dominant discourse that positions men as sole oppressors. By exploring the intersections of power, victimization, and agency, this study sheds light on the nuanced and multifaceted nature of domestic violence, highlighting the need for a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between men and women in situations of domestic conflict. Ultimately, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of domestic violence, one that acknowledges the complexity of human relationships and the various ways in which power can be exercised and abused. The study therefore recommends that a more nuanced understanding of domestic violence that acknowledges the agency and culpability of women in violent relationships be emphasised in further studies.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, Women, Victimization, Film

Introduction

Domestic conflict refers to any form of disagreement, disputes or tensions that arise within a domestic setting. Domestic setting, in this regard refers to household or within a family structure. Various factors can be responsible for these forms of conflict, part of which are communication breakdown, differing values and expectations, financial stress and power struggle. Domestic conflict can result into emotional distress, relationship damage or physical health consequences. However, studies have shown that, more often than not, children are more grievously affected by domestic conflict than adults. It significantly affects them emotionally, psychologically and socially which hinders their level of development.

Holt, S., Buckner, and Kruczek (2008) and Mazza and Marano *et. al.* (2021) argue that domestic conflict can cause anxiety and stress in children due to the tension and conflict they are exposed to in the home. They further argue that domestic conflict can lead to fear and insecurity about the stability of the children's family, consequently, they struggle to regulate their emotions by battling with mood swing, irritability and withdrawal from peers. Aside this, Oluwajobi *et. al.* (2024), also discuss the psychological impact of domestic conflict on children. They argue that domestic conflict has the tendency to affect the children's self-esteem and confidence which is caused by the feeling of guilt or shame about the conflict they are exposed to. Furthermore, children's exposure to domestic conflict can equally affect their mental health, hence, leading to depression or anxiety disorder.

Human interactions, from the sociological perspective, according to Otite and Ogionwo (1976) prepare the grounds for conflicts which are described as a by-product of interactions. Conflicts in human relationships, in this wise, manifest in the form of disagreement, quarrel, clash, divergence, difference, inconsistency or argument which may occur between at least two individuals, a group or a community which is as a result of a breakdown of agreement. The conflict between at least two individuals may be prompted by proximity of being co-workers, immediate space neighbors at home or the market place, blood relatives, business associates or marriage partners. The conflicts that emanate between blood siblings or partners in marriage context come under what is described as domestic conflict.

The study examines the conflict between partners in marriage with special focus on the forms and effects of marital disagreements between man and woman in the context of marriage and its

representation in the selected Yoruba movie. The purpose of the study is to highlight the portrayal of conflict between husband and wife in the Nigerian movie. This particular type of conflict is described as marital conflict. In marital conflict, a spouse who sees himself or herself as being superior in the relationship intimidates or molest the other. It begins when one partner behaves in an unpleasant way with the conscious or unconscious intention of hurting the other. It could further be described as any behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm to those in the relationship (WHO 2014).

Marital conflict could be violent in nature where there is display of aggression, outright physical attacks that cause damage or wounds to the person of the 'less powerful' in the relationship. It could be non-violent where disagreements are discussed without oppressive utterances or actions from both partners in the marriage relationship. This is often described as the ideal relationship. Violence in marital conflict could be reciprocal, this implies that both partners are disposed to being violent, either of the partners could be the first to attack the other physically or non-reciprocal, which implies that one partner is violent while the other is the victim. Though Graham and Archer (2003) note that both men and women can control non-violent partners through violence, studies have shown that marital violence is directed on several occasions at women because of male physical strength and women's subordinated status in the society (Esere 2009, Solanke 2012, Alokun 2013). Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) also observes that the societal definition of women as part of their husband's property contributes to their being open to male violence and reduces them to mere possessions and voiceless individuals whose rights can be disregarded.

Alizade *et. al.* (2025) reveals that women, apart from domestic conflict, are equally on the receiving end in politically motivated violence. This could be violence triggered locally or internationally, where several parties or groups are involved in acting out their disagreement through the use of violence. She submits that some violence could be motivated by poverty, inequality, or reactions to the exclusion of a particular section of the population from the power structure at home. She, therefore, opines that to deal with violent conflicts, cultural differences, power imbalances, values and beliefs should be taken into consideration. The interpretation given to conflict in relation to the state of a country may be used as the yardstick to measure the gravity of the effects of conflict between partners.



Though Abozaglo (2011) argues that conflict is normal and inevitable, the negative impact of conflict on the people involved in it cannot be over emphasized. It is believed that dialogue is the best form of resolving matters, but if partners involved choose the use of violence as the means of exercising power, as well as resolving conflict, it can spread and cause damage, loss, grief and human right abuse. There is no form of conflict that does not have negative effects on the people involved either directly or indirectly.

Marital conflict is inevitable since the question of individual preferences and choices naturally come up in the everyday life of living together. It, however, becomes an issue of importance when resolutions involve other parties especially when the issue of physical or psychological abuse and torture comes into it. Marital conflict is, therefore, one of the ways through which gender based violence is mostly directed at women because of their subordinated status in the society coupled with the fact that women in patriarchal societies are often regarded as a little better than children in reasoning and disposition. Since children are usually disciplined through corporal means to discourage them from further misdemeanor, some husbands are inclined to “discipline” their wives without any sign of remorse or guilt. Some scientific investigations which include population based studies have in recent times, supported the increase in the prevalence of partner violence and the death of women through this violence in many parts of the world, among them are Olaleye 2014:4-6 and Peitzmeier *et. al.* (2021).

Mukaro, Mafunde and Mzizi (2025) assert that marriage oppresses women and that the family breeds patriarchy. As a result of the fact that marriage laws favoured men to a great extent that the wife is, culturally supposed to be reduced to whatever the husband wishes to make out of her with or without the presence of marital conflict. To the feminists, happily married women are regarded as obsessive and disloyal. In her opinion, women’s involvement in housework burdens and reduces them to nagging wives.

Stiwanism - an African Variant of Feminism

The place and images of women who are frequently placed at disadvantaged positions had been a major discourse over the years. This is so because feminist critics, public analysts as well as academics like Ogunbola *et. al.* (2024), Ofori (2024) and Udoh (2025) have examined the subordinated positions of women in the society as exemplified in video films and popular music. The quest to discover the identity of women as well as their equality with the male folks had

been the major concern of the feminist critics. The study engages Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism (1994), which is a variant of womanism.

STIWA an acronym for Social Transformation including Women in Africa, is a theoretical framework developed by a Nigerian scholar and feminist – Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie. The theory addresses the specific challenges and realities faced by African women, while also acknowledging the diversity and complexity of African experiences. Ogundipe-Leslie advocates for the inclusion and intersection of women's experience which are conditioned by culture and colonialism. She also prioritizes an African-centered perspective, acknowledging the diversity and richness of African culture and experiences. STIWANISM advocates for a holistic approach to social transformation, addressing the interconnected issues of economic, social and cultural development. It further challenges the dominant Western feminist discourses, highlighting the need for more inclusive and contextualized approaches to feminism. Therefore, its emphasis on social transformation and inclusion can empower African women to take an active role in shaping their own lives and communities. The theory is relevant in this study because it explores the intersection of culture, gender and allocation of power. It questions the affirmation of gender roles, hence, challenging patriarchy while reclaiming the identity of the subjugated woman.

Indirect Oppression and the Effects of Victimization in Sunny Alli's *Lagos Girls*

Sunny Alli's *Lagos Girls*, directed by Abiodun Olanrewaju, represents a female controlled marital conflict as depicted between Omoyeni's parents and Adeniyi on the one hand, and between Omoyeni and Adeniyi on the other. The children who have the support of their mother, in order to victimize their father who is supposed to be the head of the family, do different unpalatable things to ensure that their father is frustrated and humiliated in the home.

Sunny Alli's *Lagos Girls* is a representation of marital conflict where the wife indirectly victimizes her husband. The use of 'indirect' in this article implies that though the conflict occurs between the couples, the mother and her children join forces to victimize the husband so as to reduce him to the position of the voiceless in the family.

The first scene in the film introduces the audience to the family of an averagely old couple with two grown up girls. The mother is shown eating a plate of food with varieties of meat while the father sits on the chair, looking hungry, while his meal is delayed. Eventually, the first child, Omoyeni, brings his food and drops it on the table as if it is meant for a dog. It is the opposite of



what their mother is served with. The food is placed right in the soup with only one piece of meat. This shocks their father and when he asks why, Omoyeni insults him with the claim that their mother is responsible for the provision of food in the family. The father washes his clothes himself and when Omoyeni's fiancé asks why, she says her father does not want anybody to assist him. To contradict this, her father asks her to help him fetch some water from a tap at a close distance, but she replies him with insult.

Adeniyi has been a victim in his relationship with some wrong girls. He believes that women are only interested in the money they can get from a man. Thus, he feels it is not necessary for him to trust any woman. Consequently, he decides to do his chores himself without requesting for assistance from his girlfriend until he eventually gets married, hoping that this resolution would protect his mental health from the effect of any eventual heartbreak. His mother pesters him to get married, but he laments that all his girl-friends fail in his assessment of them and they are only interested in his money. This highlights the societal stigmatization that women are bad and have the tendency to betray their partners' trust.

Maja's family is another family in the film that experiences marital conflict. Tawa, Maja's wife, is outside waiting for her husband- a bus driver- who comes back late. At the sight of his bus, she stands up and blocks the entrance to the house with her hand. She claims her husband often goes to other women whenever he has money to throw away. The following morning, Clara, one of Maja's neighbours is outside brushing her teeth when Maja comes outside to clean his bus. He fixes his gaze on Clara's cleavages as she brushes her teeth. He eventually has sex with her. Another neighbour Remi who sees the duo as they enter the toilet for the sexual act, informs Tawa. Apparently, this makes Tawa very aggressive. She confronts Clara and beats her up. As this is going on, Maja runs out of the compound. This emphasises the fact that female perpetrated violence is sometimes a result of their reaction to the act of infidelity by their husbands which plays out in the character of Maja and his involvement with the female neighbour.

Omoyeni buys a generator for the family, but prefers to switch it on only at the mother's request and refuses the father's request to leave it on. Omoyeni becomes so rude to her father and has the support of her mother. To control Omoyeni, the father uses the newspaper he is holding to beat her and she retaliates. This is a taboo in Yoruba land, it is believed that a child is not supposed to hit any of his parents, no matter the extent of his or her anger. The father expects his wife to



condemn Omoyeni's action. However, she claims the father is at fault to have hit his daughter first. Tofunmi, one of Omoyeni's friends, becomes concerned and ask why Omoyeni, her mother and her sister maltreat their father. She claims he is reaping what he sowed. As far as Omoyeni is concerned, their father ignored their financial needs when they were growing up and when their mother makes it known to them, she swears not to take care of him when she grows up. With this, she has the support of her mother because she single-handedly finances the needs of the children. Tofunmi who is still not satisfied with the excuse tells Omoyeni that the treatment is inappropriate.

Omoyeni eventually marries Adeniyi, has a son by him but neglects her marital responsibilities. Adeniyi gets home one night and meets his son on the chair. He complains that he has not eaten. When he asked of his mother's where about, he claims he has not seen her, nor has he eaten anything since he comes back from school. Adeniyi challenges his wife when she comes back, but she does not show any remorse. Adeniyi informs his mother about Omoyeni's misbehaviour and she ask him to inform Omoyeni to visit her. On getting home that night, he finds his wife with a group of friends drinking alcoholic wine in his sitting room. Though Omoyeni's friends greet him, he does not respond. He switches off the television from the socket and leaves the sitting room without uttering a word. This sends a signal to the guests whom, despite the fact that Omoyeni asks them to ignore her husband, leave immediately after he has entered.

Omoyeni sees her friends off and comes back to meet Adeniyi in the sitting room. Without showing any sign of remorse, she accuses her husband of being unfair to her guests. She shouts at him and threatens to embarrass his friends whenever they visit. She leaves the scene angrily without a single word from Adeniyi.

Omoyeni gets envious of Clara's new car. For the first time in the movie, she speaks like a sane woman when she makes the request for a car from her husband. She promises to change her attitude to that of an obedient wife if her request is granted. At Adeniyi's refusal, she loses her calm and threatens to buy the car if Adeniyi does not. Shortly after her request from her husband, she brings a car home and Adeniyi asks where she gets money to purchase the car. Adeniyi asks her to either return the car or to leave his house, not considering her child. She chooses to leave, on the ground that Adeniyi does not want her to be successful. She goes fully into prostitution and meets her water loo one day when blood starts coming out of her nose along with her other

friends after attending a party. She is taken to a herbalist after she has spent some time at the hospital without any improvement.

Ironically, her father is requested to bear a sacrifice to appease the gods for her healing. At first, the father, considering the treatment meted out on him earlier, refuses the paternity of the children. Eventually, he agrees to bear the sacrifice after the intervention of one of the elders in the family. While preparing to bear the sacrifice, it is revealed that his wife is responsible for his misfortune because he got a lady pregnant while the children were younger. It is also revealed that their mother lied to them that their father was never responsible for their upkeep. Omoyeni eventually dies and their father's business spring back after he embarks on atonement.

The film focuses on Omoyeni's parent's family as well as her own family. The type of marital conflict dramatized in the film can be described as psychological or emotional abuse, and this involves the intentional humiliation of a partner to make him feel bad. This is done to deliberately pull a person down and to make him feel unimportant or guilty. The use of derogatory name calling leaves the victim with deep scars on his or her emotions.

The movie shows that marital conflict does not need to be violent before causing pain on the emotions of the parties involved. The children's delay in serving the father who is supposed to be the head of the family, calls the audiences' attention to an unusual happening in the family. Alli does not limit the conflict to the couples, but involves the children in supporting their mother to humiliate their father, on the mother's instruction. The father is surprised that the mother supports his daughter's rude utterances which makes him stand up and keeps looking at them. In order to remind them of his position as the head of the family, he uses the newspaper he is holding to beat Omoyeni, but she hits him back. The act is more shocking as the father opens his mouth agape and touches his chest calling his wife's name as a means of confirming if his daughter is actually the one doing this.

The movie concludes by showing that Omoyeni's mother is responsible for her husband's misfortune because he once impregnated another woman; the main cause of the crisis. The father could not have been their father, therefore refusing to bear the sacrifice on Omoyeni's behalf even though he eventually wanted to do so. In the same vein, it is revealed that Omoyeni's mother lied to her daughters that, their father had never taken up any responsibility in the family which prompts the children's rebellious attitude towards him.

In conclusion, this study's exploration of female perpetrators of domestic violence in Sunny Alli's *Lagos Girls* challenges prevailing stereotypes and sheds light on the complexities of intimate partner violence. By examining the narratives and categorizations of female perpetrators, this study highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of domestic violence that acknowledges the agency and culpability of women in violent relationships. The findings reveal that female perpetrators of domestic violence are not homogenous group, but rather, individuals with diverse motivations, experiences and circumstances. Therefore, from the perspectives of Ogundipe-Leslie, the perpetration of domestic violence by women can be reduced through their empowerment, hence, providing a source of financial stability for the women which by extension, helps to challenge gendered power dynamics. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of moving beyond simplistic stereotypes and embracing a more contextualized understanding of domestic violence, one that recognizes the multifaceted nature of intimate partner violence and the need for inclusive and effective interventions. The study, hence, recommends that women should build resilience and confidence in both marital relationships and communal life.

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