



A Noirist Analysis of An African Work: Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister the Serial Killer*

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ABSTRACT

Background: While most West African novels continue to be read within realist or socio-political frames, the application of genre fiction is limited. Genre fiction is necessary for the evolution of African literature, so its inclusion allows for new modes of storytelling that challenge dominant narratives, expand thematic possibilities, and engage diverse readerships and analysis. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there are no scholarly papers analysing a West African novel for its genre elements.

Objective: This paper examines a novel written by a West African author and set in West Africa, identifying its use of genre fiction elements. It aims to analyse the text to determine whether it can be classified as noir, the researcher's favourite subgenre of the thriller.

Method: This study employs a close reading of various West African novels alongside scholarly analyses of them. Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* is chosen for containing more noirish features, compared to other West African works. This study uses qualitative content analysis to assess whether the novel fits within the noir tradition.

Results: Although the story presents a morally ambiguous worldview and features elements of noir's cynicism and darkness, it ultimately lacks the stylistic grit and bleak urban realism characteristic of classic noir. Instead, it aligns more closely with psychological domestic fiction or literary crime fiction.

Conclusion: This study concludes that Oyinkan Braithwaite's *My Sister, the Serial Killer* is not noir fiction. However, it has noirish characteristics, and is classified as literary crime fiction.

Key Recommendation: It is time to broaden the scope of West African literature by embracing greater diversity in language, style, and thematic focus. This expansion would complement, rather than replace, existing traditions, encouraging writers to explore new avenues such as entertainment, experimentation, and genre innovation.

Keywords: African Thrillers, Narrative Intent, Genre Classification, Noir Fiction



INTRODUCTION

The rarity of genre fiction in West African literature may be depriving readers and scholars of the intellectual complexity and critical engagement such works can offer. African literature has evolved a great deal since Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. However, the thematic evolution has largely occurred within the bounds of postcolonial realism, incorporating newer concerns such as feminism and diasporic experience, rather than a considerable proportion of authors breaking away from the thematic and stylistic boundaries of the literary mode. As such, the dominant narrative intent of West African literature is still literary realism.

There is a notable scarcity of research focused on genre fiction within the West African literary corpus. This paper seeks to fill that gap by bringing attention to stylistic and thematic approaches that are often overlooked in this part of the world. Closing this gap would not only enrich literary scholarship and appeal to readers who engage with fiction for entertainment, but also offer new ways of understanding and representing Africa.

Because this paper analyses *My Sister, the Serial Killer* with the aim of determining whether it can be classified as noir, it is necessary to first define the subgenre.

What is noir?

As noir belongs to genre fiction, the concept of genre fiction must be clarified before proceeding.

Fiction is commonly divided into two major categories based on narrative intent: literary realism and genre fiction.

Literary Realism: These kinds of stories focus on believable characters, settings, and events, generally avoiding the exaggeration or idealisation of real-life traits, plots, and situations. Subcategories like social realism and critical realism emphasise strictly realistic portrayals, prioritising nuanced explorations of everyday life. Magical realism, on the other hand, incorporates fantastical elements such as mythical creatures and supernatural phenomena, seamlessly blending them with realistic settings, characters, and narratives.

Genre Fiction: These types of stories emphasise structured plots, character types, heightened situations, and clear narrative patterns. They often prioritise entertainment, suspense, or imaginative scenarios over strict adherence to real-life plausibility. This class includes established genres such as mystery, romance, science fiction, fantasy, horror, crime, and thriller.

Noir fiction is a subgenre that can overlap with any of the above genres, but it most naturally fits within crime, mystery, and thriller (Writer's Digest, n.d.).

It is characterized by a dark, cynical, and morally ambiguous worldview. It often features flawed or doomed protagonists, gritty urban settings, and plots involving crime, corruption, betrayal, and psychological tension (Library of Congress, n.d.). The British author James Hadley Chase is an example of a noir writer. All his novels were noir. *Tiger By The Tail* is an example (Chase, 1954).



Tiger by the Tail will serve as my primary source of contextual comparison throughout this work, in order to avoid relying on an overly broad range of references.

While renowned American filmmaker Paul Schrader focuses on noir movies, he emphasizes that noir's philosophy is rooted in existentialist themes such as isolation, despair, and moral collapse — featuring individual characters powerless against fate or systemic corruption (Schrader, 1972).

Noir fiction emerged primarily in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s, heavily influenced by the bleakness of the Great Depression, the Prohibition, and the aftermath of World War II (Silver & Ward, 1992). It was pioneered by writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, whose stories centered on cynical private investigators and gritty urban corruption (Knight, 2001).

The subgenre's cinematic cousin is known as film noir. James Otis Naremore, a distinguished film and comparative literature scholar, recounts that film noir flourished in the 1940s–50s, known for its moody lighting, femme fatales, and doomed characters. Moreover, many noir stories were adapted into films, and vice versa (Naremore, 1998).

This subgenre is characterised by the following key features:

- Tone: Bleak, pessimistic, fatalistic.
- Protagonist and other characters trapped in desperate situations.
- Protagonists: Often detectives, criminals, or a hard, dodgy male anti-hero.
- Morality: Moral ambiguity is central. There are no clear "good guys"; everyone is compromised.
- Setting: Usually urban and shadowy—in a bleakly oppressive atmosphere.
- Style: Hardboiled prose with sharp dialogue.

Supplementary Terminology

Since this paper is intended to be straightforward, two narrative approaches are defined here, as they will be used later in the conclusion. **Character study** refers to a form of storytelling that focuses on a character's internal world, such as their thoughts, feelings, dilemmas, and personal growth—rather than on external events. **Genre formula**, on the other hand, is a form of storytelling that relies more on plot structures and external events. For example, in noir fiction, this includes detailed scenes of characters planning crimes, demonstrating technical skills, or performing precise actions—such as carefully opening a vault or executing an elaborate knife throw.



METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative, literature-based research methodology, relying on secondary sources such as literary texts and critical essays to analyse the narrative intent of *My Sister, the Serial Killer*. In addition, prior experience with Western noir has informed this study, offering a comparative lens through which to interpret the novel's stylistic and thematic elements, which often inform a novel's narrative intent. By adopting a straightforward and minimalistic approach, this paper aims to remain accessible to a broad readership while contributing to ongoing discussions about genre and narrative form in contemporary African literature.

Based on the key features of noir fiction outlined in the Background section, a questionnaire is now formulated to assess these elements systematically. A "yes" for each question supports the story's classification as noir.

Before applying this method, details of the qualitative research that informed the questionnaire responses are provided below. This will be followed by a synopsis of the story, after which the main analysis is presented.

Qualitative Research

My Sister, the Serial Killer by Oyinkan Braithwaite has been a focal point within academia, as can be seen in the works cited in this section.

Anyachebelu and Ogbazi (2022) examine the psychological dimensions of the novel's female characters, with particular focus on the portrayal of personality disorders and the impact of trauma on their behavior. The authors analyse the novel through the lens of mental health awareness activism within Nigerian society.

Messaouda Ouled Ben Said (2021) offers a psychological reading of the novel in her Masters thesis, which analyses how Braithwaite portrays the oppression of women within patriarchal structures. It delves into themes of feminism, psychoanalysis, and the marginalisation of women, highlighting the author's use of oppressed female characters to critique societal norms.

The novel has received an in-depth analysis, focusing on the complex sibling dynamics between Korede and Ayoola (Sulficar, 2024). Nekha Fathima Sulficar's review examines themes of family loyalty, patriarchal oppression, and the psychological motivations behind Ayoola's actions, offering insights into the characters' development and the novel's social commentary.

In a WordPress blog post, a user named Not Chai-Tea (2019) discusses the novel's portrayal of women in crime fiction, highlighting the subversion of traditional gender roles. The post analyses the characters of Korede and Ayoola, exploring their complex relationship and the novel's commentary on societal expectations of women.

Zahrah Nesbitt-Ahmed, a researcher, writer, and blogger, observes that the book introduces a Black African serial killer in fiction, a rarity that challenges conventional portrayals of crime in



literature (Nesbitt-Ahmed, 2019). She notes that the story is told from Korede's perspective, the responsible older sister, rather than the killer's, and adds that the novel offers a fresh narrative angle in African literature. Additionally, the novel's setting in Lagos, Nigeria, is intricately woven into the plot, with cultural nuances and societal norms influencing the characters' actions and decisions.

The cited commentaries and analyses show that although previous discourse about the novel provides in-depth psychological analysis and social commentary, it does not engage in literary categorisation to suggest the novel aligns with a particular narrative intent. Quoting Not Chai-Tea's review, the ending "doesn't allow you to neatly categorise this book as horror, crime or murder mystery. In fact it is probably better described as a family drama . . . Except with a much darker storyline" (Not Chai-Tea, 2019).

There are several more research papers about the novel, but they analyse it through a psychological lens, or only provide social commentary.

The novel is classified as a thriller on online book services and digital reference resources, e.g. Wikipedia (Wikipedia contributors. n.d.). However, to the best of this paper's scope, no theoretical analysis supporting this classification has been published.

A synopsis of my *Sister, The Serial Killer*

My Sister, the Serial Killer by Oyinkan Braithwaite is a darkly comedic thriller set in Lagos, Nigeria. The novel follows Korede, a responsible nurse, who constantly cleans up after her beautiful but deadly younger sister, Ayoola. Ayoola has a habit of killing her boyfriends and always deceiving her sister that she acted in self-defense. The murder victims include two unnamed men, followed by Femi Durand, and then Gboyega (*possibly*). Korede, bound by loyalty, helps her sister cover up the crimes, but she begins to question her actions when Ayoola sets her sights on Tade, a doctor Korede secretly loves. As Korede grapples with guilt and morality for covering up her sister's murders, she confesses her troubles to a comatose patient at the hospital, the only person she can truly confide in. When the patient unexpectedly wakes up, Korede fears her secrets will be exposed. Meanwhile, Ayoola remains remorseless, drawing men in with her charm. Despite her doubts, Korede ultimately chooses blood over morality. The novel explores themes of family loyalty, societal beauty standards, and the consequences of enabling toxic relationships, all wrapped in sharp prose and dark humour. The reader should find out what happens to Tade in the end.

The novel does not clearly attribute a specific motive to the Ayoola's violence. However, it hints at possible trauma or emotional manipulation: Through various flashbacks, the novel reveals a history of patriarchal abuse, particularly at the hands of the sisters' violent and controlling father, who imposed strict roles on them and physically abused their mother. This legacy of control and silence may have shaped both Ayoola's detached, manipulative behavior and Korede's burdened loyalty, offering a quiet commentary on how violence is inherited and gendered. Oyinkan



Braithwaite tactfully lets the narrator hint the reader to a plausible cause of trauma (Braithwaite, 2019, p.37):

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 would take it – it was the thing he was most proud of.

The effortless, thoughtless way she uses the knife later in her life reflects that deep psychological break.

ANALYSIS

An interrogation of the novel is presented below, aimed at determining whether it can be classified as a noir novel or otherwise:

1. Is the novel’s tone bleak, pessimistic, fatalistic?

Yes, it has a bleak opening line that smells of blood and depicts traces of death, and a heavy sense of melancholy was present in parts of the novel. However, it deliberately avoids the pessimistic, fatalistic grit of classic noir. Korede, the narrator, reacts to murder with dry humour and emotional restraint, steering the narrative away from the darkness and pessimism typical of noir. She treats her sister's killings like annoying chores — not life-shattering, fatalistic crimes. The narrator describes her experience (Braithwaite, 2019, p.3):

I am not angry. If anything, I am tired

She is calm and even ironical about the murder. As the story progresses, Korede continues to narrate the seriousness of the crimes while contrasting it with nonchalance. Whereas in noir, the protagonist would immediately curse, and spell doom. There would be a fatalistic sort of “Anyone saw you? Then we make sure they don’t get the chance to sing.”

2. Is the protagonist or any other character trapped in a desperate situation?

Yes, the protagonist, Korede, is in a desperate situation - she’s torn between protecting her sister and doing what’s right, while risking her career, freedom, and conscience. This is typical of noir fiction. Korede narrates the urgency of the situation in Chapter One, titled “BLEACH” (Braithwaite, 2019, p.3)

“We need to move the body,” I tell her

In another chapter, titled “INSTAGRAM,” their mother is curious about the two sisters’ delicate conversation about some Instagram message. The message served as their alibi concerning the disappearance of Femi. The pair stammer as they spin the same yarn to her. It is clear that the protagonist is trapped in a desperate situation that forces her to cover the truth, or else risk her career, freedom, and their family’s reputation. Again, this is a major characteristic of noir.

3. Are any of the main characters cops or hard, dodgy male anti-heroes?

No. The novel centres on a female nurse, who is not a noir archetype.



As a comparison, let us turn briefly to *Tiger by the Tail* (Chase, 1954), which features a character likely to prompt a “yes”: Lieutenant Harry Adams. Although not dodgy, he is a hard cop. Along with a sergeant, he is assigned to investigate the murder of Fay Carson, a prostitute. Their pursuit of the case becomes entangled with political corruption and organized crime.

4. Is moral ambiguity central in the novel?

Yes. Korede is in a dilemma after helping her sister cover up murders, despite knowing it's wrong. She's torn between family loyalty and a sense of justice. She doesn't report Ayoola to the police—not because she believes in her innocence, but because she feels responsible for protecting her. Therefore, the main characters, notably the two sisters, are compromised, which is a major characteristic of noir fiction.

5. Is the setting urban and shadowy—focusing on an oppressive atmosphere?

No. The setting in *My Sister, the Serial Killer* is not consistently urban, shadowy, or atmospherically menacing in the traditional noir sense. While some noir novels do feature locations like family homes, hospitals, and other everyday spaces, they are typically rendered with a shadowy and brooding tone. In contrast, this novel treats such settings in a more neutral or mundane light, which weakens the atmospheric alignment with classic noir. In a noir novel, Korede might become compromised, taking on a suspicious or even traitorous role upon learning about Femi's death. Instead, she remains a warm, affectionate figure—more devoted to family unity than contributing to any shadowy plot twist. These cosy family situations are not the typical urban, shadowy, and oppressive environments that reflect noir's physically moody, textured atmosphere.

6. Is the style hard-boiled prose and full of sharp dialogue?

No, *My Sister, the Serial Killer* chooses to stay clear of the gritty, hard-boiled language of Raymond Chandler, James Hadley Chase, or Dashiell Hammett. It is clean and safe, similar to that of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie—the author of *Purple Hibiscus* (Adichie, 2004). Its clean and elegant prose coupled with a subtle tone place it closer to contemporary literary fiction, for this question. Consider this family-friendly dialogue when the police have towed Korede's car to the station (Braithwaite, 2019, p.104):

I turn to Ayoola.

“I'm using your car to go to work.”

Ayoola frowns. “But what if I need to go somewhere during the day?”

“You can take an Uber.”

“Korede,” Mum begins carefully, “why don't you drive my car?”

Here is a noir conversation, depicted in *Tiger By the Tail* (Chase, 1954):

“Come on,” Tux repeated. “You've been playing with dynamite.”

“O'Brien?” Louie croaked. “Why didn't she tell me?”

“Why should she” Tux said, and dug the gun into Louie's ribs. “Let's go, pally.”



This paper does not condone that anyone refers to themselves as “dynamite,” and then sticks a harmful object into someone’s ribs while at the same time calling them “pal.” This conversation is dark and gritty.

The verdict for this question as per *My Sister, the Serial Killer* is: No, the novel avoids hard-boiled prose and sharp, tense dialogue—sharp, tense dialogue common among dangerous male characters.

RESULTS

Although the questionnaire yields three yeses and three nos, this paper also relies on gut feeling—shaped by the tone, texture, and overall reading experience of the novel. Despite the fact that it has some noir-like elements, the story does not evoke the full weight or aesthetic of classic noir. Instead, this paper proposes that the narrative intent is literary realism, since the novel prioritises character study over genre formula.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined how Oyinkan Braithwaite’s *My Sister, the Serial Killer* engages with conventions of noir fiction, and concludes that novel aligns with psychological domestic fiction. Its narrative centers on inner conflict, family tension, and a morally compromised household rather than external chaos or street-level crime. The subtype known as literary crime fiction also applies, since the story involves crime and cover-ups, conveyed in polished literary language and a subdued tone. Recall that these are simply subtypes within the broader frame of literary realism. Therefore, for the lay reader, literary realism remains the clearest and most useful takeaway.

RECOMENTATIONS

West African literature is due for a creative shift that embraces greater diversity in language, narrative style, and thematic exploration. Moving beyond the dominance of postcolonial realism and social commentary would open space for authors to experiment more freely, entertain more deliberately, and innovate across genres long neglected in the region’s literary tradition.

Readers are invited to participate in scholarly dialogues on the evolving landscape of African literature. In a brief Substack essay, African Literature Academisphere (2025) argues that African writers should “write in whatever language they are comfortable with,” rather than burden themselves with guilt over their language choices. Their articles invite readers to contribute opinions, share research ideas, propose projects, and offer other relevant feedback.



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