



# Mitochondrial Eve

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## Rising Minds: Theatre, Media, and Nigeria's Mental Health Narrative

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### **Abstract**

Mental health is a crucial determinant of societal well-being, yet in Nigeria, it remains heavily stigmatized and underrepresented in public discourse. Theatre and media serve as influential platforms for shaping narratives around mental health, influencing public perception, and fostering dialogue. This paper examines how Nigerian theatre and media depict societal mental health challenges, using Professor Emeka Nwabueze's *Parliament of Vultures* as a case study. The play critically portrays corruption, power struggles, and moral decay, illustrating their profound psychological impact on both leaders and the masses. Through an in-depth analysis of its themes, characters, and dramatic techniques, this study explores how *Parliament of Vultures* reflects the collective mental distress caused by systemic failures. Furthermore, the paper evaluates the broader role of Nigerian media in constructing or deconstructing mental health narratives, identifying gaps in representation and the reinforcement of stigma. By juxtaposing theatre's immersive storytelling with media's far-reaching influence, the study highlights how these platforms can either perpetuate harmful stereotypes or serve as catalysts for awareness and reform. The paper argues that a more nuanced portrayal of mental health in Nigerian theatre and media can foster public engagement, policy advocacy, and a cultural shift towards mental health inclusivity. Finally, recommendations are made on how theatre and media can be leveraged as tools for education, intervention, and policy change, ensuring that mental well-being becomes a national priority.

**Key Words:** Mental Health, Theatre, Media, *Parliament of Vultures*, Nigeria, Psychological Distress, Representation.

### **Introduction**

#### **Background on Mental Health and Its Causes**

Mental health is a fundamental aspect of human well-being, encompassing emotional, psychological, and social stability.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is defined as a state in which an individual realizes their abilities, copes with the normal stresses of life, works productively, and contributes to their community. However, achieving and maintaining mental well-being is often

challenged by a variety of factors, including biological, psychological, and socio-cultural influences. Biologically, genetic predispositions and neurochemical imbalances can contribute to mental health disorders such as depression, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder. Psychological factors, including trauma, stress, and unresolved emotional conflicts, also play a significant role. Socio-culturally, poverty, unemployment, family breakdown, social isolation, and systemic failures can create environments that exacerbate mental health challenges.

In Nigeria, mental health remains highly stigmatized and poorly integrated into public health discourse. Many people continue to view mental illness through the lens of spiritual afflictions, supernatural causes, or personal weakness, preventing affected individuals from seeking professional help. The absence of adequate mental health facilities, lack of government policies, and widespread misinformation further deepen the crisis. While mental health issues affect individuals at all levels of society, certain groups—men, women, and children—experience unique challenges based on societal expectations and vulnerabilities.

## **Mental Health Studies on Men, Women, and Children**

Existing research on mental health often highlights gendered and age-based disparities in mental health conditions. Studies show that women are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) due to gender-based violence, social expectations, and biological factors such as postpartum depression. In contrast, men's mental health issues are less frequently discussed, as societal norms often discourage emotional expression, reinforcing the notion that men must remain strong and self-reliant. This has contributed to higher rates of substance abuse, aggressive behavior, and suicide among men, particularly in Nigeria, where cultural expectations further hinder open discussions about male vulnerability.

Children and adolescents also face unique mental health risks, particularly in environments characterized by poverty, violence, and unstable family structures. Studies indicate that early exposure to trauma, abuse, or neglect significantly increases the likelihood of developing mental health disorders later in life. Despite this, mental health services for children in Nigeria remain underdeveloped, leaving many young

people without the support needed to address psychological distress.

### **Existing Literature on Societal Mental Health**

Research on mental health in Nigeria has predominantly focused on individual experiences, often neglecting the broader societal implications. Existing literature explores mental health from a medical and psychological perspective, focusing on clinical diagnoses, treatment, and personal coping mechanisms. While some studies have examined the impact of mental health on productivity, crime rates, and public health, few have critically analyzed how societal structures—such as governance, corruption, economic instability, and media narratives—contribute to widespread psychological distress.

Mental health discourse in Nigerian theatre and media remains limited, often portraying mental illness through stereotypes, sensationalism, or supernatural explanations rather than addressing its root causes. Nollywood films and mainstream media frequently depict mental illness as madness, violence, or spiritual possession, reinforcing stigma rather than fostering understanding. While some theatre productions have touched on themes of mental health, few have

explicitly addressed societal mental health as a structural issue rooted in systemic failures.

### **Unaddressed Critical Societal Mental Health Issues**

Despite the increasing global recognition of mental health as a public health priority, many critical societal mental health issues in Nigeria remain unaddressed. Political corruption, economic instability, unemployment, and governance failures contribute significantly to psychological distress among citizens. Widespread poverty and lack of access to essential services further exacerbate mental health challenges. Yet, discussions around these societal factors are often absent from mainstream discourse, leaving millions without proper intervention or support.

Theatre and media have the potential to bridge this gap by challenging stigma, creating awareness, and influencing policy change. However, Nigerian theatre has not fully explored how governance and societal dysfunction contribute to mental health struggles, limiting its role in mental health advocacy. This study seeks to fill this gap by analyzing how theatre and media can serve as platforms for societal mental health awareness and reform.

## Focus of the Study

This study investigates how societal mental health challenges are represented in Nigerian theatre and media, with a specific focus on Professor Emeka Nwabueze's play *Parliament of Vultures*. The play serves as a powerful critique of political corruption, power struggles, and moral decay, all of which contribute to widespread psychological distress in Nigerian society. By analyzing the play's themes, character portrayals, and dramatic techniques, this research explores how *Parliament of Vultures* mirrors the mental and emotional turmoil caused by systemic governance failures.

Beyond its literary analysis, this study also examines the role of Nigerian media in shaping mental health narratives. The research evaluates whether theatre and media challenge or reinforce mental health stigma and offers recommendations on how these platforms can be leveraged for mental health advocacy and policy change.

## Structure of the Paper

This paper is organized into five key sections:

1. Literature Review – This section examines existing research on mental health, its representation in media and

theatre, and the gaps in societal mental health discourse.

2. Analysis of *Parliament of Vultures* – This section critically analyzes how the play depicts corruption, governance failures, and their impact on societal mental health.
3. Media and Theatre Representation – This part explores how Nigerian media constructs mental health narratives, including the extent to which it reinforces or challenges stigma.
4. Solutions and Recommendations – This section proposes ways in which theatre and media can be used as advocacy tools to improve societal mental health awareness.
5. Conclusion – The final section summarizes key findings and emphasizes the role of theatre and media in reshaping mental health discourse in Nigeria.

By situating *Parliament of Vultures* within the broader discourse on societal mental health, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how theatre and media can serve as catalysts for awareness, reform, and policy engagement.

## **Literature Review**

### **Previous Studies on Mental Health and Society**

Mental health has long been recognized as a fundamental determinant of individual and societal well-being. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a state in which an individual realizes their own potential, copes with normal life stresses, works productively, and contributes to society (World Health Organization, 2022). Historically, scholars have examined mental health through psychological, medical, and sociological lenses, focusing on its impact on productivity, social cohesion, and public health. Early studies by Freud (1920) and later developments in clinical psychology emphasized the role of internal conflicts and childhood experiences in shaping mental health outcomes (Freud, 1920). However, more contemporary research acknowledges the significant influence of external factors such as governance, economic stability, social structures, and cultural beliefs (Adegbite, 2020; Seidler et al., 2016).

### **Current Debates on Mental Health and Society**

In recent years, scholars have engaged in debates regarding the intersection between

mental health and societal structures. One dominant perspective argues that mental health should be primarily addressed through clinical interventions, focusing on medical treatment, therapy, and pharmacological support (Cochran & Rabinowitz, 2000). However, a contrasting school of thought emphasizes that mental health is deeply intertwined with social, economic, and political conditions (Mahalik et al., 2003). Proponents of this approach argue that structural factors—such as poverty, unemployment, political corruption, and media representation—exacerbate psychological distress, making mental health not just a personal concern but a public policy issue (Okonkwo & Eze, 2021). The increasing role of digital media in shaping mental health discourse is another point of contention. While social media platforms provide spaces for advocacy, they have also been criticized for spreading misinformation and reinforcing unrealistic societal expectations, particularly concerning masculinity and emotional resilience.

### **Mental Health and Its Effects on Men, Women, and Children**

Studies indicate that mental health challenges manifest differently across gender and age groups, with distinct sociocultural

implications. Women are disproportionately affected by depression and anxiety due to factors such as gender-based violence, economic dependency, and social roles that place emotional burdens on them (World Health Organization, 2022). Feminist scholars argue that patriarchal structures limit women's access to mental health resources, reinforcing systemic inequalities (Gammel & Stoppard, 1999). Men, on the other hand, experience unique mental health struggles linked to rigid gender norms. The expectation to display strength and emotional resilience often discourages men from seeking professional help, contributing to high rates of substance abuse and suicide (Courtenay, 2000; Addis & Mahalik, 2003). The suicide rate among men is significantly higher than that of women, indicating a crisis that remains largely unaddressed. Children and adolescents, too, face profound mental health risks, particularly in regions characterized by poverty, violence, and unstable family structures. Research suggests that early exposure to trauma, neglect, and abuse significantly increases the likelihood of developing long-term mental health disorders (Seidler et al., 2016). In Nigeria, limited child-focused mental health interventions leave many young people without the necessary support, exacerbating

psychological distress and developmental challenges.

### **Gaps in Existing Literature**

Despite the growing recognition of mental health as a global concern, significant gaps persist in existing scholarship. One major limitation is the overemphasis on individual treatment approaches while neglecting the broader societal influences that shape mental health outcomes. While developed countries have begun integrating mental health into public policy and governance frameworks, Nigerian scholarship has yet to comprehensively address the role of corruption, political instability, and media representation in exacerbating mental health crises (Adegbite, 2020). Additionally, much of the existing research has focused on Western contexts, with limited scholarly engagement on how African theatre and media portray mental health challenges. There is a scarcity of literature analyzing how theatre productions such as *\*Parliament of Vultures\** serve as cultural texts that reflect and critique societal attitudes toward mental health. This study seeks to bridge this gap by examining the play's narrative structure, character development, and thematic elements as a means of exploring Nigeria's broader mental health discourse.

## Unique Contribution

This literature review has examined the existing scholarly discourse on mental health and its societal implications. It highlights the intersection between mental health, governance, gender norms, and media representation. However, it also reveals a significant research gap concerning the role of Nigerian theatre in shaping public attitudes toward mental health. This study is unique in its approach, as it positions *Parliament of Vultures* as a critical lens through which Nigerian society can engage with mental health discourse. By analyzing the play's thematic preoccupations—particularly its depiction of corruption, power struggles, and psychological distress—this research expands the field of mental health studies by incorporating insights from theatre and performance studies. The next section will provide an in-depth analysis of theatre, media and mental health.

Also, delving into other chapters in discussing the text "Parliament of Vultures", demonstrating how its narrative critiques governance failures and their impact on societal mental well-being.

## Theatre, Media, and Mental Health

### Media Commentaries on Mental Health

Media plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of mental health by influencing awareness, attitudes, and policy discussions. Historically, Nigerian media has contributed both positively and negatively to mental health discourse. Traditional media outlets such as newspapers, radio, and television have occasionally highlighted the struggles of individuals dealing with mental health conditions. However, sensationalist reporting, which often portrays mental illness as madness, violence, or supernatural possession, has reinforced stigma (Adegbite, 2020).

Despite these challenges, contemporary media platforms have increasingly engaged in mental health advocacy. Investigative journalism by platforms such as Premium Times and The Cable has reported on the dire state of Nigeria's psychiatric institutions, highlighting systemic failures in mental health policy (Olusanya & Adegbite, 2020). Social media has also emerged as a powerful space for mental health discourse, with campaigns like #MentalHealthMattersNigeria fostering dialogue among young people. However, the rise of social media has introduced new

concerns, including misinformation and the glorification of mental distress for digital engagement. Scholars argue that while digital platforms have democratized mental health discussions, they also risk distorting narratives by prioritizing sensationalism over clinical accuracy (Seidler et al., 2016).

### **Theatre Productions on Mental Health**

Theatre has historically functioned as a mirror to society, reflecting its challenges, fears, and aspirations. Several Nigerian playwrights have explored themes of mental health, using theatre as an avenue for advocacy and social change. One such playwright is Femi Osofisan, whose works address psychological distress arising from socio-political oppression. His play *\*Midnight Hotel\** (1986) portrays the psychological struggles of individuals navigating economic hardship and personal crises.

Another significant work is Ahmed Yerima's *\*Hard Ground\** (2006), which delves into the trauma experienced by ex-militants and war survivors. The play examines the impact of violence and displacement on mental well-being, shedding light on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in conflict-ridden societies. Similarly, Ola Awakan's *\*Well Done Sir\** explores themes of depression, emotional

repression, and the consequences of societal expectations on men's mental health.

In the international scene, Augusto Boal's *\*Theatre of the Oppressed\** has been widely applied in drama therapy and mental health interventions. Boal's techniques emphasize the use of participatory theatre to engage individuals in self-reflection and healing (Boal, 1979). This approach has influenced Nigerian theatre practitioners seeking to use drama as a therapeutic tool.

### **Critical Analysis of Theatre and Media's Role**

While both theatre and media have contributed to mental health discourse, their impact remains limited by societal biases and systemic neglect. Scholars argue that media coverage often prioritizes political and economic crises over mental health issues, leading to underrepresentation in policy discussions (Okonkwo & Eze, 2021). Similarly, while theatre has engaged with psychological struggles, it has not always been intentional in framing them as mental health issues requiring professional intervention.

To bridge this gap, scholars advocate for a more integrated approach that combines media advocacy with theatre-based interventions. Nollywood, Nigeria's film



industry, has made progress in incorporating mental health narratives, yet many productions still rely on outdated stereotypes (Adegbite, 2020). Future efforts should focus on fostering nuanced representations that humanize mental health struggles and promote professional treatment options.

Theatre and media serve as powerful tools for mental health advocacy, but their impact in Nigeria remains constrained by persistent stigma and misinformation. While investigative journalism, social media campaigns, and theatre productions have advanced public discourse, more work is needed to foster accurate, empathetic representations. This study highlights the need for intentional collaborations between mental health professionals, media practitioners, and theatre artists to ensure that mental health awareness becomes a national priority.

### **Theatre, Media, and Societal Mental Health: A Critical Analysis of Parliament of Vultures**

Parliament of Vultures emerges as a potent cultural critique that interrogates the nexus between systemic societal dysfunction and collective psychological distress. Rather than focusing on individual pathology, the play examines how pervasive corruption,

governance failures, and moral decay inflict a broader mental malaise on Nigerian society. Nwabueze's work challenges conventional narratives by using dramatic form as a mirror to reveal the hidden cost of societal collapse on communal mental health. This analysis explores the narrative structure, dramatic techniques, and symbolism in Parliament of Vultures, situating the text within the broader discourse on societal mental health and arguing that the play compels audiences to reconsider mental well-being as a public concern shaped by systemic forces.

### **Narrative Structure and Thematic Exploration**

Parliament of Vultures is structured as a series of interconnected vignettes that together depict a society in decay. Each segment exposes different dimensions of collective despair—ranging from overt political corruption to subtle moral disintegration. The narrative unfolds in a way that blurs the lines between individual suffering and collective failure. Characters, often emblematic of institutional authority, display a veneer of power that gradually crumbles under the weight of internal conflicts and ethical compromises. This approach resonates with contemporary theories that posit the health of the individual

is inextricably linked to the health of society. By portraying a community plagued by systemic instability, the play suggests that the psychological well-being of a nation is contingent upon the integrity and efficacy of its political and social institutions.

### **Dramatic Techniques and Symbolism**

Nwabueze employs a range of dramatic techniques to underscore the play's critique of societal mental health. Realistic dialogue interspersed with deliberate pauses creates moments of raw exposure where the internal turmoils of characters are laid bare. Minimalistic staging and stark lighting further amplify the atmosphere of desolation, channeling the audience's focus toward the pervasive emptiness that defines a society in crisis.

Symbolism is central to the play's rhetorical power. The recurring image of vultures—creatures traditionally associated with death and decay—serves as a metaphor for the parasitic nature of corruption. These symbols operate on multiple levels: they illustrate not only the predatory actions of corrupt leaders but also the way in which such corruption gnaws at the collective psyche. This imagery reinforces the argument that the deterioration of public institutions directly contributes to a loss of communal mental health. Such

symbolic representation aligns with structural perspectives in social theory, which assert that individual mental distress often mirrors broader societal failures.

### **Societal Resonance and Critical Position**

The resonance of *Parliament of Vultures* lies in its ability to frame mental health as an inherently social issue. Nigerian society, characterized by economic instability, political turbulence, and rigid cultural expectations, forms the backdrop against which the play's critique unfolds. In this context, the portrayal of systemic corruption is not merely a political commentary—it is an indictment of the conditions that foster widespread psychological distress. The play challenges the notion that mental health is solely an individual challenge, urging instead a collective re-examination of how societal structures exacerbate mental suffering.

I contend that *Parliament of Vultures* functions as a crucial intervention in the discourse on societal mental health. By linking the degradation of public institutions to the erosion of communal well-being, the play advocates for a paradigm shift in how mental health is conceptualized and addressed. It calls for an integrated approach that combines political reform with initiatives

aimed at healing the collective psyche. In doing so, the work not only reflects the current state of Nigerian society but also serves as a catalyst for change, urging stakeholders to adopt a more empathetic and comprehensive approach to mental health policy.

In conclusion, *Parliament of Vultures* stands as a seminal text that challenges audiences to view mental health through a societal lens. Through its innovative narrative structure, effective use of dramatic techniques, and potent symbolism, the play reveals the deep interconnections between political corruption, moral decay, and collective psychological distress. This analysis demonstrates that the mental health crisis depicted on stage is emblematic of broader systemic failures—a reality that necessitates a rethinking of both cultural narratives and policy frameworks. By positioning societal mental health as a public concern, *Parliament of Vultures* not only critiques the status quo but also lays the groundwork for transformative dialogue and reform in Nigerian society.

### **Recommendations**

#### **1. Strengthening Media Representation of Mental Health**

The analysis of *Parliament of Vultures* underscores the detrimental impact of sensationalist media portrayals on public understanding of mental health. It is recommended that Nigerian media outlets adopt guidelines for responsible reporting on mental health issues. This entails:

Integrating expert opinions from mental health professionals.

Providing balanced, evidence-based narratives that humanize mental health challenges.

Offering specialized training to journalists and content creators to improve mental health literacy.

Collaborating with mental health organizations to ensure accurate coverage.

Such measures can help transform media discourse from one that reinforces stigma to one that encourages empathy, informed discussion, and public engagement.

#### **2. Enhancing Theatre as a Tool for Advocacy**

Theatre uniquely engages audiences by evoking emotional and intellectual responses. Based on insights from *Parliament of Vultures*, it is recommended that:

Funding agencies and cultural institutions allocate dedicated grants for productions that explore societal mental health challenges.

Theatre practitioners collaborate with mental health experts to produce works that reflect the complex interplay between systemic issues (such as corruption and governance failures) and communal psychological distress.

Workshops and interdisciplinary seminars be established to train playwrights, actors, and directors in portraying mental health issues with authenticity and sensitivity.

Community outreach programs use theatre as a medium to educate and destigmatize mental health at the grassroots level.

These initiatives would empower theatre to function not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a catalyst for social transformation.

### 3. Fostering Collaborative Interventions

Addressing societal mental health necessitates a multi-stakeholder approach. It is imperative that:

Government agencies, non-governmental organizations, media houses, and theatre groups form strategic alliances.

These coalitions design integrated intervention programs that combine policy advocacy, media literacy campaigns, and culturally sensitive theatrical performances.

Collaborative efforts prioritize both public awareness and the structural reforms needed to address the root causes of mental health challenges, such as economic instability and political corruption.

Such a comprehensive strategy will bridge the gap between public discourse and actionable policy, creating sustainable support systems for mental well-being.

### 4. Promoting Mental Health Education and Research

Educational initiatives are essential for reshaping societal perceptions of mental health. Recommendations include:

Integrating mental health education into school curricula at all levels.

Encouraging universities and research institutions to establish interdisciplinary programs that investigate the nexus between societal factors and mental health.

Increasing funding for research focused on mental health in the Nigerian context, ensuring that empirical data informs policy and practice.

Organizing regular academic conferences, seminars, and public lectures to disseminate research findings widely.

A robust research agenda and enhanced educational outreach will foster a deeper, evidence-based understanding of mental health, ultimately guiding more effective interventions.

#### 5. Policy Reforms and Increased Funding

To instigate systemic change, policy reform is critical. It is recommended that:

The government prioritize mental health by integrating it into the national public health agenda.

More resources be allocated to establishing community-based mental health centers and training programs for mental health professionals.

Policy reforms address not only clinical interventions but also the broader socio-economic determinants of mental health, such as corruption, unemployment, and social inequality.

Stakeholders engage in continuous evaluation of policies to ensure they remain responsive to evolving societal needs.

These reforms are vital for creating an environment where mental health is recognized as a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of national well-being.

#### Conclusion

In summary, the analysis of *Parliament of Vultures* reveals that Nigerian theatre and media possess the transformative potential to address societal mental health by exposing the deep-seated interplay between systemic corruption, governance failures, and collective psychological distress. The play, through its innovative narrative structure, evocative dramatic techniques, and potent symbolism, challenges traditional cultural narratives that have long marginalized mental health as a mere individual concern. Instead, Nwabueze's work posits that the deterioration of public institutions and moral decay significantly undermines communal well-being, urging a redefinition of mental health as an issue rooted in socio-political contexts.

The recurring imagery of vultures in the play serves not only as a symbol of predatory corruption but also as an indictment of the societal conditions that foster emotional and psychological disintegration. This allegorical representation compels audiences to confront the paradox of enforced masculine

invulnerability and the ensuing collective vulnerability, thereby bridging the gap between individual suffering and broader social malaise. As demonstrated in the analysis, the raw, realistic dialogue and minimalist staging accentuate the desolation that permeates a society plagued by instability and moral ambiguity.

By situating mental health within the framework of systemic dysfunction, *Parliament of Vultures* contributes a crucial perspective to contemporary debates. It underscores the need for integrated policy responses that address not only the clinical aspects of mental health but also the societal factors that precipitate widespread psychological distress. In doing so, the play advocates for a paradigm shift that recognizes mental health as a public priority—a view that calls for the convergence of political reform, media responsibility, and cultural reorientation.

Ultimately, the insights drawn from *Parliament of Vultures* highlight the indispensability of theatre and media as platforms for advocacy and social change. They not only reflect the current state of Nigerian society but also provide a catalyst for dialogue and transformation. This conclusion reaffirms that any meaningful

intervention in the mental health crisis must be holistic, addressing both the structural dimensions of societal dysfunction and the imperative to cultivate a more empathetic and inclusive public discourse. Future research and policy initiatives would benefit from further exploring these interdisciplinary intersections, thereby paving the way for comprehensive mental health strategies that are as culturally nuanced as they are politically informed.

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