



Reechoing the Thematic Preoccupation of Soji Obebe's A Mind to Atone

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Abstract

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Literature serves as a vital mirror for societal reflection, education, and social commentary. In Nigerian literature, successive generations of writers have addressed distinct socio-political and cultural realities, from pre-colonial traditions to post-colonial struggles and modern governance. This paper examines the thematic preoccupations of Soji Obebe's *A Mind to Atone* and positions it within contemporary Nigerian literary discourse. Through a text-directed analysis, the study explores how Obebe interrogates moral decline, religious hypocrisy, systemic corruption, child neglect, kidnapping, and marital infidelity. Furthermore, applying psychoanalytic theory and moral philosophy, this paper shows how the central theme of atonement and restitution serves as a necessary framework for personal psychological relief and broader societal healing in modern Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigerian Literature, Soji Obebe, *A Mind to Atone*, Thematic Preoccupation, Restitution, Moral Decadence, Psychoanalytic Theory.

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Introduction

Thematic preoccupation refers to the central ideas, motifs, and recurring concerns that a creative writer repeatedly returns to within a body of work. Creative writers do not exist in a vacuum; their relevance to society largely depends on the issues they choose to address (Solanke, 2014). Through prose, drama, and poetry, writers act as social commentators, reflecting historical events, government policies, social ills, cultural resources, and political dynamics. By blending entertainment with critical inquiry through forms such as tragedy, satire, and melodrama, literature raises public consciousness and guides collective action (Adetuyi, 2017; Solanke, 2014; Obot & Omolara, 2025). The trajectory of Nigerian

literature cannot be complete without mentioning certain writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Flora Nwapa, Cyprian Ekwensi, Gabriel Okara, J.P. Clark, and Christopher Okigbo. These writers focused primarily on documenting pre-colonial African societies, the disruption caused by European imperialism, and early post-colonial cultural clashes, as seen in Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*. Others include writers from the 1970s through the late 1980s such as Femi Osofisan, Festus Iyayi, Tanure Ojaide, Buchi Emecheta, Ken Saro-Wiwa, Odia Ofeimun, and Niyi Osundare; focused on the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War, military dictatorships, political corruption, and economic hardship (Emmanuel & Aboh, 2015). While earlier generations dominate literary curricula and



historical scholarship, newer writers address the digital age, contemporary socio-economic realities, and modern moral dilemmas. Soji Obebe's *A Mind to Atone* represents this contemporary canon, offering a critical look at the moral and psychological struggles of modern Nigerian life.

Narrative Overview of *A Mind to Atone*

A Mind to Atone is a 116-page narrative in ten chapters, set in Igbasan, an imaginary village of thirty houses and fewer than 400 residents; the plot centres on interconnected stories, all bound by the central motif of restitution and moral accountability.

The story begins with two schoolboys, Akin and his friend, whom their teacher, Mr John Ladebo, sends to collect palm fronds and bamboo for an inter-house sports event at Ebenezer Boys High School. In the bush, they come across a dog named Apon that has caught a fat grasscutter. The boys kill the dog to take the prey. Later, they try to sell the grasscutter to a politician, who cleverly departs in his grey Peugeot 505 without paying. Soon after, bandits kidnap him, wound him, and drive off with his car.

Seeking spiritual intervention, the politician consults a prophet, who informs him that his misfortune stems from past wrongdoings and advises him to make restitution. The politician tracks down the boys and pays them for the grasscutter. Conviction then drives the boys to seek out the dog's owner to apologise, only to discover he has died. En route, the boys are abducted by child traffickers but manage to escape. They are assisted by a Good Samaritan who is himself embroiled in an extramarital scandal. Ultimately, the boys consult a pastor, who advises them to donate the money to the poor, reinforcing that genuine peace of mind requires complete restitution.

Thematic Preoccupations in *A Mind to Atone*

The text's primary sub-theme is the breakdown of domestic training and parental accountability.

The family is conventionally viewed as the primary unit of socialisation; however, Obebe depicts households, even those of religious figures, as failing in this responsibility.

The household of Pa Sam, a catechist, exemplifies this crisis:

- **Deception and Arrogance:** His sons, Deinde and Diekola, walk around the village carrying thick novels to project an image of studiousness while concealing their deceitful tendencies.
- **Theft and Vice:** The boys regularly steal palm wine from Demula, a local tapper. This culminates in a near-fatal incident when Demula poisons a gourd to catch the thieves, and Deinde and Diekola drink it (p. 4).
- **Sexual Misconduct:** Diekola entices and assaults a Form Two student during a school social night, subsequently threatening her life to enforce silence until the pregnancy exposes the act.
- **Maternal Instability:** Mama Yard demonstrates public hostility and intolerance, publicly stripping a child of his clothes outside the church over a dispute with a local tailor regarding leftover fabric (p. 9).

Obebe utilises Pa Sam's family to illustrate that when the foundational domestic unit collapses, societal degradation inevitably follows.

Counterfeit Religious Leaders and Spiritual Exploitation

Obebe critiques the rise of commercialised spirituality and false prophets within contemporary society. While Pa Sam preaches against deceit, his own household fails to reflect his doctrine. Beyond Pa Sam, the narrative targets the broader proliferation of the "prosperity gospel", a movement prevalent in urban centres where self-proclaimed spiritual leaders exploit vulnerable, wealth-seeking followers. The text shows how religious form

can exist without moral substance, failing to check broader societal decay.

Kidnapping, Child Trafficking, and Insecurity

The text directly addresses the pervasive security crisis in contemporary Nigeria, specifically kidnapping and child exploitation. The abduction of Akin and his friend highlights:

1. The vulnerability of rural and suburban youth.
2. The complicity of rogue commercial transporters in kidnapping networks.
3. The role of greed and poor moral grounding in exposing children to danger (e.g., picking up unowned money left as bait).

Youth vulnerability in both rural and urban areas of Nigeria has become a key national issue. Although young people make up over 60% of the population, structural inequalities make them particularly susceptible to socioeconomic and security challenges. While high unemployment, poverty, and poor education drive youth challenges nationwide, their effects differ between rural and urban settings. Urban poverty and the high cost of living often lead young people into gangs, cultism, cybercrime, substance abuse, and sex work. Meanwhile, weak security in rural areas makes them vulnerable to banditry, insurgency, and kidnapping, with many young men recruited into armed groups for survival. Rural adolescent girls face increased risks of early forced marriage, disrupted education, and exploitation through domestic labour. Rapid urban migration strains housing and infrastructure, forcing young migrants into informal settlements with poor sanitation and police harassment. Effective intervention requires a dual approach: improving rural infrastructure and agricultural opportunities to keep youth local, while also focusing on skills training, job creation, and affordable housing in cities.

Secondly, the role of rogue commercial transporters in kidnapping networks is equally

crucial. Beyond the text's specific context, this highlights broader realities in Nigerian society. The participation of rogue transporters in highway kidnappings poses an insider threat that undermines the safety of interstate travel. Although many transport operators are themselves victims of highway ambushes, some rogue drivers, park agents, and transport staff actively facilitate criminal networks.

Rogue transporters use several tactics, including passenger profiling and information leakage. Rogue drivers or loaders pass passenger profiles, passenger counts, or details about valuable cargo to kidnappers in advance. Pre-arranged Highway Stops. This implies that drivers intentionally slow down, pull over at unsafe or secluded spots, or feign mechanical failures along known high-risk corridors to give armed groups an easy entry point. Route Manipulation: Drivers deliberately deviate from standard or secured convoy routes under the guise of bypassing traffic or bad roads, leading vehicles directly into ambush zones. Logistical Support: Beyond facilitating abductions, rogue operators occasionally assist criminal cells by transporting supplies or moving abducted victims between safe houses and forest camps.

In the contemporary Nigerian setting, several factors may contribute to complicity, including financial motives, coercion, intimidation, and weak regulatory oversight. High ransom payments act as lucrative incentives, supplementing traditional transport wages. Drivers on vulnerable routes often face threats from armed groups, risking their safety and that of their families to ensure compliance. Regulatory gaps are evident through inadequate background checks and limited digital tracking in interstate motor parks, hindering oversight of rogue operators. To address this, motor parks must implement stricter vetting processes, mandate GPS route-tracking, and establish quick channels for passengers to report suspicious driver behaviour.

Greed and a lack of strong moral grounding significantly heighten a child's vulnerability, turning subtle traps, such as money intentionally left as bait, into dangerous or life-threatening situations. When immediate material gain

overshadows personal safety and ethics, children become prime targets for exploitation, kidnapping, and ritual abuse. Children without clear moral boundaries may see picking up lost or unowned money as a harmless windfall rather than taking something that belongs to someone else, and they may ignore the intent behind the setup. To prevent greed and a lack of moral grounding, especially in children, moral and character education is imperative. More succinctly, it instils values of honesty, self-restraint, and the principle that unowned items should not be touched, regardless of value. It is also important to teach children that unsolicited gifts, unowned money on the ground, or sudden financial offers from strangers are major red flags. Essentially, parents should create an environment where children feel comfortable reporting strange encounters or financial temptations without fear of harsh punishment. This can go a long way in addressing greed among children, which can also reduce the number of children falling prey to kidnappers.

Infidelity and Social Betrayal

In Chapter Six, the narrative examines moral compromise through the actions of Ajadi, a hunter who rescues the boys from kidnappers but simultaneously harbours another man's wife. When community elders intervene, Ajadi rejects reconciliation, stating:

"Why should I send her back? She is fed up with her husband, and she decided to marry me; why should I send her away?" (p. 69).

The elders respond by emphasising the destruction of communal trust:

"Ajadi, are you with your senses? We are older than you, and we know how painful it can be for anyone to lose his wife to his friend... what would you gain from that?" (p. 69).

Obebe positions Ajadi's lack of remorse as an antithesis to the novel's central message of atonement. The highlight reveals how irrational it is for any man to pursue another man's wife. The fact that the woman is his friend's wife only heightens the concern, suggesting the man has no conscience. He even dares to invite the husband

to cause harm, which suggests he is driven by overwhelming lust and greed. Infidelity here is compared to a form of hallucination; an addiction that can be incurable once it takes hold. When someone falls into this trap, desire often overshadows reason, leading them to justify wrongful actions until eventual destruction occurs.

Ajadi may not be entirely at fault without the woman's involvement, as it takes two to tango. Such situations happen when a woman is cunning and shows no regard for her husband. It can be argued that the woman willingly gave herself to Ajadi to undermine her husband for some reason. We can remember that a similar case involved Potiphar's wife, who was also crafty and wanted to sleep with Joseph but set him up after he refused. This demonstrates that no reasonable society tolerates such malicious acts.

Theoretical Framework and Psychological Exploration

The thematic structure of *A Mind to Atonement* can be examined through Psychoanalytic Theory, Trauma Theory, and Moral Philosophy:

Psychoanalytic & Trauma Framework:

Drawing on Freudian concepts of the subconscious, the text demonstrates how unaddressed guilt and repressed actions manifest as psychological distress and relational instability (Singh et al., 2025; Broucek, 1991). Guilt acts as an internal disrupter that cannot be suppressed indefinitely without psychological consequence. The mind plays a central role in this perspective. Unfortunately, every action and reaction is closely connected to the mind. Experiences leave lasting impressions on the subconscious, influencing responses. For example, fear memories may remain unnoticed, yet they can unconsciously trigger specific behaviours in certain situations. Observably, childhood experiences can continue to affect a person well into adulthood.

Cognitive Behavioural Perspective: Characters undergoing restitution exhibit patterns aligned

with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), where recognising distorted behavioural choices leads to active steps toward remediation (Keefe et al., 2019). More generally, atonement signifies making reparations after realising that something taken does not rightfully belong to someone, or that an action toward another was unjust. This concept encompasses redemption, forgiveness, fear of repercussions, repentance, apologies, and making restitution. It suits this text because "atoning" often triggers strong emotional responses, allowing examination of how the book shapes the reader's feelings and whether the author's storytelling techniques sway moral judgments.

Reader-Response Theory: By placing characters in moral dilemmas involving shame, fear, and repentance, Obebe invites readers to evaluate their own ethical choices, using narrative empathy to encourage personal introspection (Sloan, 2002). Reader Response theory explores these emotional reactions, highlighting how readers feel when engaging with the text. The book features characters seeking to overcome shame, remorse, or past errors by changing their thoughts and behaviours, aligning with Cognitive Behavioural Theory (CBT). Moreover, the narrative has a religious or spiritual dimension, emphasising themes of forgiveness, grace, and human redemption, which is relevant when characters grapple with guilt, trauma, or the process of seeking forgiveness. It also provides a framework for analysing characters' repressed memories and defence mechanisms.

Soji Obebe's writing is highly pertinent to Nigerian society, highlighting ongoing issues that demand attention. Initially, the church is portrayed as the guardian of morality and spirituality. However, it is ironic that the church often misleads members through false teachings, fake prophets, and actions that contribute to the societal moral decline. For example, if Pa Sam's household exemplifies bad behaviour such as rape, intolerance, theft, and unforgiveness, what can be expected from other community members who are not affiliated with the church? This suggests that religion alone may not suffice to address social problems like immorality and

injustice.

The text also clearly demonstrates that no society is entirely free from social issues like corruption, bribery, kidnapping, harassment, sexual immorality, political manipulation, economic sabotage, fraud, and other vices that weaken social unity and hinder proper functioning. Regardless of government efforts, legal enforcement, and other measures, meaningful progress cannot occur without individuals changing their hearts or repenting for their wrongdoings. In essence, restitution and atonement are crucial for social transformation. This idea aligns with Christian teachings, where both are fundamental principles. It has been said that after restitution or atonement, one experiences a good conscience and peace of mind that surpasses understanding.

The text clearly illustrates repentance: a person commits a wrongful act, recognises its wrongfulness, and then seeks forgiveness from the affected party. Genuine willingness to change is essential for true repentance. The passage includes numerous examples of both sincere repentance and unrepentance. One notable case involves a man who stole a glass cutter from Akin and his friend; he showed remorse when his pastor advised him to return the item. Alternatively, one could interpret his action as motivated by immediate karma; if the repercussions had not caught up with him so quickly, he might not have returned it. This suggests that some people repent not out of remorse but because of the swift consequences. The same logic applies to Akin and his friend.

Conclusion

Soji Obebe's *A Mind to Aton* shows that institutional frameworks, whether legal, political, or religious, cannot remedy social ills without individual moral accountability. Through its characters, the narrative shows that unconfessed wrongdoing generates trauma and psychological disharmony, whereas genuine restitution provides mental relief and restores social order. Ultimately, Obebe asserts that personal repentance and restitution remain

essential prerequisites for societal transformation in contemporary Nigeria.

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