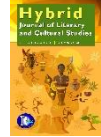




Sexual Exploitation and Gender Inequality: Lessons from Okoh's *The Mannequins* (1997)



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Abstract

This article focuses on sexual exploitation of women in Okoh's *The Mannequins*. The major character in the play uses women as toys for sexual pleasure resulting in adverse consequences for the victims. The play projects the fact that the male gender often takes advantage of their privileged position in the society and greater physical strength to exploit women sexually. This is a contribution to gender inequality in the society. However, this social ill can be curbed through measures such as continuous empowerment of women through education and poverty alleviation programmes as well as intervening measures for men's enlighten against sexual exploitation of women.

Keywords: gender, gender inequality, sexuality, sexual exploitation

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Public Interest Statement

There has been a growing realization of the important role women play in the development of the society hence an ongoing quest for female empowerment and gender equality. This is against the background of patriarchal ideology of male dominance and gender bias and discrimination against women reflected in cultural and religious practices. Women have been in the forefront of the struggles for equality and equity with men. One movement behind this struggle is feminism, which focuses on emancipation of women from oppressive practices and justice including reproductive right and sexuality issues.

Sexuality and gender inequality

Gender inequality has been greatly due to the perception of males as being superior to the female gender. This has given power to men for control and exploitation of women. Some negative cultural practices in Nigeria are in the category of sexual exploitation of women. These include the practice of female circumcision, which is regarded as a mechanism to control women's desire for sex, high bride price practice carried out in the belief that a suitor is going to gain from the woman's sexuality through the pleasure she will give and the children she will reproduce. Early and forced marriages are at times carried out in order to control a girl's sexuality in the belief that without a husband the female involved will become promiscuous. Despite the quest for female emancipation and some gains many feminists still argue that women have not been liberated from oppressive sexual practices. This has been referred to as sexual objectification theory. This position is that women are seen mainly as object for males' pleasures. This view of women has become commercialized through music lyrics, video, magazines, adverts, sports. (Dawn *et al.*) The play *the Mannequins* by Julie Okoh, a Nigerian playwright is written from a feminist angle. It seeks an end to sexual exploitation of women.

***The Mannequins* by Julie Okoh**

The play focuses on Mr. Adudu who has a troubled marriage because of numerous affairs he has with other women. He misuses his position and wealth as the General Manager of a company to lure and abuse women sexually. According to him this started from his wife's attitude of not agreeing to have sex with him while she is breast feeding. After his first affair, he completely loses control and spends much of his time and money moving from one affair to the other including rape and harassment of female workers in his place of work. He is greatly helped by his friend and colleague Mr. Igberaese who usually acts as his errand boy in getting the women. Unfortunately for him, at a stage his workers in his office get tired of his intimidation and harassment of both males (who are close to

females he desires to have affairs with) and females he harassed or used and dumped. They come today and carry out a mass protest against Mr. Adudu's evil ways and ask for his removal. Finally, he gets arrested by the police.

Thematic Analysis of *the Mannequins*

The major theme of the play is sexual exploitation of women. It highlights some causes of exploitation, different ways women are being sexually exploited, consequence and the ways sexual abuse of women can be curbed.

Causes of Sexual Exploitation of Women

Some reasons for sexual exploitation of women which are highlighted in the play include discriminative cultural practices. This is reflected in the acceptance of polygamous practice in African communities such as Nigeria whereby men can marry or have many women in their lives. Mrs. Adudu laments about this: concerning her husband's immoral ways.

*Mrs. Adudu: He thinks I don't know about his secret love affairs. What can I do?
One cannot fight a common belief. Any time I raise my voice, they say I
am headstrong. I cannot tolerate anything and that I behave as if I don't
know that polygamy is deeply rooted in our land. (p.15)*

The Nigerian society generally is more tolerant of men than women having extra marital affairs. This is a reflection of gender inequality and exploitation of women. The disadvantageous position of women in gender relations and cultural contexts in Nigeria give men a lot of power over them. This makes it possible for their sexuality to be easily exploited. Another cause for the sexual exploitation of women shown in the play is the practice of sexual objectification whereby women are valued for their use for men's pleasures. (Barky, cited by Szymanski, Dawn *et al* (online Retrieved, 05/03/2020). Mr. Adudu the major character in the play has this attitude towards women. Women attract his attention easily. He pursues them using different methods ending up with several as his girlfriends. But he treats them like dolls whom he uses and dumps easily. Eriaye a female worker in his company whom he desires to acquire as his girlfriend rejects his attitude as seen in the following conversation:

Mr. Adudu: For the rest of my life I'll take care of you...
*Eriaye: You mean as a fanciful doll, bedecked with sick, silver and gold,
glittering like a parterre, for you to play with and show off to your friends
as the latest acquisition in your menagerie?*

The play also reveals that some women's acceptance of their use as commercial objects is a reason for the perpetuation of the practice. Bharo one of Mr. Adudu's girlfriend is an example of women in this category. She has very little education but enjoys a life of affluence financed by Mr. Adudu. She dresses expensively and boasts of travelling to several countries such as Italy, France, Japan, India and America. She gets regular promotions in the company without deserving it. Her ambition is to marry a rich man. The above attitude contributes to the demeaning treatment of women. In the play Ekata a male worker in the company exhibits such an attitude as revealed in his opinion of Eriaye a female colleague, who is a hard working young lady:

Ekata: *Why is she working so hard? After all, she is a woman.*
 Eriaye: *And so what?*
 Ekata: *So you don't need to struggle so hard in life*
 Eriaye: *Really! How do I keep myself alive...?*
 Ekata: *To hear you speak like that one would think you are a serious person. Hein, na lie. You women in this society are all alike. You believe strongly in reaping from a man's purse.*

Another contribution towards women's acceptance of their sexual exploitation is poverty. An example in the play is Ateso another victim of Adudu's sexual exploits. She first worked in Adudu's house as his household staff but he had her changed to working in his office as a cleaner when his wife became suspicious of his affair with her. She is a very low income earner who also depends on pocket money from Mr. Adudu. When he stops giving her the money she starts hawking moyin-moyin to argument her income. In the play a character Emiator explains Ateso's situation – under your very nose here, Ateso is at the same time a cleaner, a hawker, etcetera. My friend, when austerity bites the stomach, accountably hides behind the door, while survival runs helter skater to the market" (p. 27). It was also due to the poverty of Bharo's family that she agreed after initially resisting him for a long period. She explains as follows:

Bharo: ...Then my father died. I am the oldest of eight children. *The load was too much for my mother. Mr. Adudu was kind, too kind. We never lacked anything. And I could no longer say no. That is how we started. (p. 81)*

Manner of Sexual Exploitation

The play also highlights various ways women are being sexually exploited as shown in Mr. Adudu's behaviour. A common behaviour of his is the usage of his wealth to lure women. At the beginning of the play it is shown that he organized a lavish birthday party that makes use of an entire hotel just to impress a girl he was after. According to him "when a girl proves difficult, you dazzle her face with blue bank notes. Then, she falls "yekpete" surprised. At this his friend Mr. Igberaese ask "you mean you spent all that money just to attract her for your pleasure and nothing more? (p.21) Mr. Adudu also uses his power and privilege as the general manager of a company to sexually exploit many of his female workers. These include Ateso a clearer in the office but once his household staff and Bharo whom he employed as messenger but changed her position to typist though unqualified and gets her promoted on a regular basis. He promises her marriage and makes her abort several times. When she refuses to abort a particular pregnancy, he decides to pay her off with much money. He also unrelently goes after Eriaye a new worker in the company. He baits her with the promise of marriage, a life of great comforts and also offers her much money. But she refuses all this. He then resorts to punishing her by over loading her with work. He goes further to intimidate Emiator a male worker who is friendly with Eriaye. Mr. Adudu asked Emiator to stay away from Eriaye otherwise he would make him forfeit his promotion for the next three years or get his appointment terminated.

Mr. Adudu also takes advantage of girls in vulnerable position of poverty exemplified by Ateso and Bharo. Furthermore, he also exploits under aged girls. This is the experience of Mrs. Adebo and her daughter Iyere. Mrs. Adebo was the niece of Adudu's steward. He got her pregnant in the process of assisting her by driving her to school. Several years later, Iyere the child of this pregnancy goes to Adudu for financial help towards the hospital bills of her sick step brother. He gives her the money and rapes her. Generally, across societies it is difficult for women to get justice when sexually violated such as rape cases. The belief usually is that of consent and acceptance by the women. This practice contributes to the perpetuation of sexual abuse of women.

Consequences

Some of the consequences of sexual exploitation of women indicated in the play include health hazards. This is the case of a sixteen-year-old girl in the play (Emiator's sister) who was sexually violated and got pregnant for a 60-year-old man. The girl also developed V.V.F and died from its complication. Another victim in the play is 13-year-old Iyare whom Mr. Adudu also raped. She gets sick after the experience. The mother Mrs. Adebo lamented: "we have been going from hospital to hospital. Every doctor who examined her said she could never be a real woman again" (p.85). Other consequences of sexual

exploitation like rape include sexually transmitted diseases, unsafe abortion and unwanted pregnancy, include depression, substance use or abuse, distress, mood swings and shame. Self-blame and embarrassment.

Another consequence seen in the play, with regards to male offenders who are married is failed marriages. After many years of endurance of her husband's numerous affairs with women that he treats as toys, Mrs. Adudu decides to work out of their marriage. According to her, her husband's usual habit of being absent from the home led to dysfunctional behaviour of the children. One is serving a jail sentence, another's whereabouts is unknown, about a third was found dead in a hotel room while a fourth is always in trouble due to alcohol and women. The effect of the husband's behaviour on her is insomnia, nerves, mental torture and agony (p.66). A common cause of broken marriages is infidelity by men. Educated and liberated women usually find it difficult to accept this offence.

It can also be seen from the play that sexual exploitation of a woman can lead to continuation of immoral behaviour by her. Bharo exemplifies this. After falling into Adudu's trap, she lives a life of affluence as his mistress though with the belief that he would eventually fulfill his promise and marry her. She also commits several abortions and sees nothing wrong with the commercialization of her body. Most forms of violence against women are sexual. According to Okpeh (21) (cited from drrajivdesaimed.com) violence against women also covers but is not limited to:

- (i) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation.
- (ii) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution.
- (iii) Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the state, wherever it occurs.

Another consequence of sexual exploitation of women is its contribution to gender inequality in the society. Victims of sexual abuse often suffer from low self-esteem. This can lead to inability to fulfill their potentials in the society.

Conclusion

Sexual exploitation of women is a deterrent to the quest for female emancipation as it contributes to gender inequality. It is therefore important that state holders such as victims, men and the government join forces to curb the offense in the society. It is a social vice that can be greatly reduced with respect for women, enlightenment of the society and legislation against the offence by the governments.

Recommendations

Sexual exploitation of women is a serious social issue. However it is possible for it to be curbed in the society. One of the ways is continuous enlightenment and education of society against practices that demean women and present them as property to be possessed and controlled. Therefore, the quest for female emancipation and gender equality should be continuous until the objectives are met. A very important tool for female liberation from negative social practice is education of the girl child. This is a critical variable in the realization of female emancipation. It has the potential of helping women to realize their rights in the society and also to reject abuse by men. Poverty alleviation measures also contribute greatly to female empowerment. It can help women to reject commercialization of their bodies. In the play it is seen that poverty is one of the reasons women allow themselves to be sexually exploited.

According to the WHO report (4) (Online material. Retrieved 12/04/2020) for decades promoting gender equality has been a critical part of violence prevention. This has included interventions that confront the entrenched beliefs and cultural norms from which gender inequalities develop and efforts to engage all sectors of society in redressing these inequalities, both of which are thought to reduce gender based violence. (www.wcd.nic.in)

Another factor that can help is intervening measures for men's enlightenment against sexual exploitation of women. Men like Mr. Adudu in the play certainly need help against uncontrollable habit of sexual abuse of women. The media is also a useful tool that can be used to create awareness against sexual abuse of women. The television, radio, the internet, newspapers, magazines can be used to reach a wide range of people. Women also need to be bold and assertive in rejecting being sexually exploited. Efforts on their own to be economically empowered rather than being dependent on men is also means of preventing sexual abuse, in the play Eriaye is a model to other women. She resisted Adudu's advances to the end despite being offered much money and his threat to terminate her appointment. She is shown to be very hardworking. She goes to work very early and is usually the last to leave the office. Though she only went through a commercial school as her parents could not afford the fees for conventional secondary

school, she registered for evening classes with a continuing education centre in order to be qualified for admission into the university. She states:

Eraiye: I know some women do not understand yet the meaning of the different seasons, so they do nothing but hover around men. But a time will come when they will learn to stand up and say, "No, enough. My body is not for sale. I'm capable of cultivating my talent for my livelihood." (p. 27)

It is also important that victims of sexual abuse speak out and seek justice for the crime committed against them. This has the potential of deterring future offenders. Silence by victims is usually the case due to the fear of stigmatization. In the play workers in the same company with Mr. Adudu get tired of his corrupt ways including sexual harassment and stage a mass protest calling for his removal. They succeed in their objective. This has some similarities with the "me you" (or me too) movement which is against sexual assault of women. According to Wikipedia (en.m.wikipedia.org). The phrase "Me Too" was initially used on social media in 2006, on Myspace, by sexual harassment survivor and activist Tarana Burke. The movement was meant to empower women through empathy and solidarity through strength in numbers, especially young and vulnerable women, by visible demonstrating how many women have survived assault and harassment especially in the work place. Later American celebrities joined the movement. It led to widespread media coverage and discussion of sexual harassment particularly in Hollywood. It brought about the swift removal of many men in positions of power in the United States, while tarnishing and ending political careers of additional men as it spread around the world. In the entertainment industry allegation led to the dismissal of actors and directors alike (Lara Gerassi). However, criticism of this movement show the importance of thorough investigation before carrying out punitive measures against alleged offenders. Legislation against sexual abuse and strong enforcement of penalties against culprits in all societies is a great contribution to efforts to curb sexual exploitation of women. In the play Mr. Adudu gets arrested by the police which is a step to his arraignment in court. This also contributes to the healing process of victims.

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