Domestic Violence in Contemporary Nigerian Drama: A Discourse of Julie Okoh's *In Our Own Voices*

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Abstract

The study examines the issue of domestic violence in contemporary Nigerian drama with a particular focus on Julie Okoh's *In Our Own Voices*. Upon the sad reality that many women in the 21st century still suffer from one form of violence or another with their perpetrators going scot free from the law surge the motivation for the study. The study is predominantly literary in methodology as it relied mainly on Okoh's *In Our Own Voices* as the primary source of data. The findings of the study include that most Nigerian men hide under the cloak of patriarchal tradition to unleash violence on women. The study also finds that the high level of corruption in the Nigerian judicial system constitutes one of the reasons why perpetrators of violence against women are not served their due punishment. It is based on the foregoing that the study recommends the need for the traditional societies in Nigeria to review their cultural values with the view to expunge traditions that infringe on human rights. The study also canvasses on the need for a transparent and working judicial system in Nigeria.

Introduction

Categorically a phenomenon, domestic violence is a type of abuse perpetrated by one person against another in a domestic setting such as in marriage or cohabitation. Often times, when people think of domestic abuse, they make the mistake of equating it to domestic violence. However, domestic abuse is a broader concept, includes any attempt by one person in an intimate relationship or marriage to dominate and control the other. Be that as it may, the converging point is that domestic violence and abuse are used for one purpose and one purpose only; to gain and maintain total control over another. It has

been observed that the domestic abuser uses fear, guilt, shame, and intimidation to wear the abuse to down-keep him/her under his/her thumb. It is important to state in clear terms that domestic violence and abuse can happen to anyone; it does not discriminate. Hence, it occurs within all age ranges, ethnic backgrounds, and economic levels. And while women are more often victimized, men also experience abuse especially verbal and emotional. Scholars of gender studies such as Roxanne Dryden-Edwards and Melissa Conrad Stoppler have identified many signs of abusive relationships with the fear of one's partner as the most telling.

Available accounts in gender studies also reveal that one of the key manifestations of social change in contemporary Africa especially Nigeria is the progressive increase in the participation of married women in the paid labour industry. Relatively, scholars of gender studies such as Mary Wollenstonecraft and Helen Showalter observe that women that are high in marital dependency have or perceive few viable alternatives to marriage, which force them to be more tolerant of negative treatment from their husbands, including physical abuse. They also observe that women who have children and rely on their husbands for financial support cannot easily leave abusive marriages, nor do they possess sufficient resources to negotiate changes in their husbands' behaviour. Based on the observations so far, it becomes unequivocal to say that marital dependency traps women in abusive marriages. Importantly also, researchers on family violence observe that persons who occupy low positions within the economic structure are more likely to use violence. Against this background, Macmillan and Gartner assert that "diminished resources lead to stress, frustration and conflict that can culminate in violence between spouses. Resource deprivation that accompanies unemployment should thus increase risk of spousal violence" (948). Similarly, domestic violence can be physical or psychological, and it can affect anyone of any age, gender, race or sexual orientation. It may include behaviours meant to scare, physically harm, or control a partner. While every relationship is different, domestic violence generally involves an unequal power dynamic in which one partner tries to assert control over the other in a variety of ways. Against this background, this study shall attempt an examination of the issue of domestic violence raised in Julie Okoh's *In Our Own Voices*.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is anchored on Lenore Walker's theory of Cycle of Violence. This theory is divided into three distinct phases which are repeated over and over again in the abusive relation. As a result, domestic violence and/or abuse rarely involves a single isolated incident of violence. Rather, the abuse becomes a repetitive pattern in the relationship. According to Walker, the first stage in the cycle of violence is

tension building. During the tension building stage, the victim is often subjected to less serious nonviolent forms of abuse such as threats and insults. Victims soon come to realize that the verbal threats usually precede physical violence and will therefore attempt to delay its onset. For example, the victim may act compliant in the hope of mollifying the batterer and avoiding a violent outburst, but eventually the inevitable occurs; the physical assault. The second stage in the cycle of violence is acute battering. The acute battering stage is marked by uncontrolled physical aggression, which may be extremely violent in nature. It is during the acute-battering stage that victims are most likely to sustain injuries ranging from bruises, cuts, broken bones, disfigurement and miscarriage to loss of life. The acute battering, however, tends to be abrupt as the violence usually lasts only a few minutes. Immediately following an acute battering incident, the abuser usually acts remorseful.

Walker describes the third stage in the cycle of violence theory as loving and contrite, or the "honeymoon" stage. The batterer is apologetic as well as attentive to the victim. The abuser may shower the victim with gifts, compliments and sincere promises that it will never happen again. The victim becomes reassured that the perpetrator loves her and that the relationship can be salvaged. The victim may actually begin to feel responsible for the violent outburst. Predictably, the stage ends, tension building resumes and the cycle of violence persists.

The Concept of Feminism

Since its emergence as a distinct area of literary discourse, the term feminism has been subjected to a wide range of definitions. Interestingly, these definitions are often drawn from a perspective, be it political, economic or cultural. Of all the definitions of feminism, the commonest is that which associates it with 'struggle'. However, it is pertinent to mention here that feminism transcends the term struggle. It is fundamentally "a collective term or systems of belief and theories that pay special attention to women's rights and women's position in culture and society" (Okoh 7). For Quayson, feminism has been about challenging the representations of women and arguing for better conditions for them (586). In Quayson's analogy, the term representation has two meanings, both of which are relevant to post-colonialism and to feminism. The first and more political one has to do with the matter of political representation, something which even in a democracy arguably never fully satisfies the needs and aspirations of all the people for whom democratic systems are set up. Against this backdrop, Quayson argues that "For political representation to be fully representative, it has to be constantly reviewed by those it claims to serve" (586). The second and no less significant definition lies in the area of the

discursive, in the ways in which metaphors, tropes and concepts are used to project an image of some person or persons. Quayson notes that:

> Discursive representation has serious effects the lived domain of everyday life and crucially sets up forms of potential agency which are offered as a means of defining subject positions in the world. Both political and discursive dimensions of representations are relevant to feminism and post-colonialism, with the two frequently being conflated in general discussions so that the discursive representation of Third World women is often seen as untimely of political consequence (586).

For Haralambos and Holborn, the development of feminism has led to attention being focused on the subordinate position of women in many societies (103). They argue that feminist sociologists have been mainly responsible for developing theories of gender inequality, yet there is little agreement about the causes of this inequality and on about what actions should be taken to reduce or end it.

Drama and Feminism

The issue of feminism has been a recurring decimal in both Western and Nigerian drama. From the classical dramas of Euripedes, Sophocles and Aristophanes, the issue of feminism have been a visible subject in drama. As a matter of fact, the most prominent reflection of feminism envisioned in the classical era is that portrayed by Aristophanes in *Lysistrata* where the women of Athens and Sparta unite and embark on a sex strike in order to compel their husbands to end the Peloponnesian war. Interestingly, Aristophanes' play has inspired a handful of plays with similar plot. One of such plays is J.P. Clark's *The Wives Revolt* and later, Barclays Ayakoroma's *Dance on His Grave.* Drawing from the Aristophanes' model, these plays portray the agitation and struggle by the women for equal or fair treatment by their male counterparts who function as their husbands and fathers. In both plays i.e. *The Wives Revolt* and *Dance on His Grave*, the women drawn from various Niger Delta communities, resort to sex strike and decline from domestic chores as they embark on a self- imposed exile as a way of registering their protest over the denial of their self- worth by the men. Julie Okoh takes a similar cue from Aristophanes in the crafting of her masterpiece *Edewede* where the heroine of the play mobilizes the women in her community and embarks on exile as a way of protesting against female genital mutilation. Like the victories recorded in Aristophanes *Lysistrata*, Clark's *Wives Revolt* and Ayakoroma's *Dance on His Grave*, in Okoh's *Edewede*, women succeed in their protest as the King abolishes the practice of female circumcision in the community.

Similarly, Okoh's *Closed Doors*, is yet another play with a feminist undertone. The women in the play lament that wherever they go "doors" of opportunities are closed against them, they face sexual harassment from their bosses in the office and when they do not oblige to their erotic cravings, they face the threat of losing their jobs despite their years of labour acquiring a degree in the university. In the case of Bola, a character in the play and a graduate, she is a victim of sexual harassment by her boss and loses her job on account of her insistence in terminating the pregnancy which her boss desperately desires to keep. Just as Bola, other characters in the play suffer similar fate. Eki for instance who also is a victim of rape takes to prostitution meanwhile, Belema, Amina and Tracy are all victims of sexual confinement and they seek sexual freedom because the same men who abuse them at will, end up closing doors of opportunities and economic liberation against them. Okoh's choice of floating female characters throughout the play except for the character of the policemen is an intentional dramatic style to classify the play as a feminist play.

Be that as it may, Zulu Sofola departs radically from the view of Okoh in her play *Wizard of Law* where the latter portrays women as gold diggers. This outlook is reflected boldly through the character of Sikira, the wife of Romoni, the lawyer. Sikira is a stereotype of the modern woman to be found in most Nigerian cities. This type of woman often does not believe in marriage as a sanctimonious institution between two people. Such women go into marriage solely for economic gains. Citing Sikira;

> That was how he talked big twenty years ago when he came to marry me. I thought he had something so I agreed to be his wife. I married him and refused the hands of Mamud and Adamu because I thought he was shaking money in his pocket (52).

What is most striking in the above statement is the materialistic streak in Sikira. Obviously, love which should be a major ingredient in marriage is glaringly absent in Sikira's matrimonial life. Her passion for money and fancy clothes makes her resist the urge of showing affection nor care for Romoni. Sofola however, uses Sikira to comment on a popular trend found in most Nigerian big cities. Such women are very exploitative and do not bother to hide it. These modern breed of materialistic and exploitative young women is a contrast to what is obtained in Sofola's image of the traditional women as reflected in the depth of Ogwoma's love in *Wedlock of the Gods*.

It is note-worthy that women like Sirika make themselves vulnerable to men's derision. In this vein, Mary Wollstonecraft admonishes that woman should eradicate the intellect that makes them believe that their major duty is to serve men. She puts it thus: "confined in a

cage like the birds they have nothing to do than to plum themselves…to the desire of establishing...the only way women can rise in the world is by marriage" (75). This is to say that women who bears only cheap virtue think that they can become high in the society by attracting a man. This she said is tantamount to prostitution because to this instance, women are subject to slavery by their sensibility. Outside the dramaturgy of Julie Okoh, the subject of feminism has gained prominence in Nigerian drama with a handful of feminist playwrights who remains consistent in their portrayal of the feminist vision in their works. Such playwrights include: Stella Oyedepo, Irene Salami, Tracy Chima Utoh-Ezeajugh and Osita Ezenwanebe among others.

Domestic Violence: A Global Outlook

The term domestic violence has been subjected to series of definition and interpretation by scholars of sociology and gender studies. It has been described to include behaviours meant to scare, physically harm, or control a partner. History has it that the first known use of the term domestic violence was in an address to the Parliament of the United Kingdom by Jack Ashley in 1973 (*National Women's Aid Federation*). The term previously referred primarily to civil unrest, violence from within a country as opposed to violence perpetrated by a foreign power. Traditionally, domestic violence was mostly associated with physical violence. Terms such as wife abuse, wife beating and wife battering were used, but have declined in popularity due to efforts to include unmarried partners etc.

Domestic violence does not discriminate. Anyone of any age, race, sexual orientation, religion gender can be a victim or perpetrator of domestic violence. It can happen to people who are married, living together or who are dating. It affects people of all socioeconomic backgrounds and education levels. According to the *National Domestic Violence Hotline*:

> Domestic violence includes behaviors that physically harm, arouse fear, prevent a partner from doing what they wish or force them to behave in ways they do not want. It includes the use of physical and sexual violence, threats and intimidation, emotional abuse and economic deprivation. Many of these different forms of domestic violence/abuse can be occurring at any one time within the same intimate relationship.

It has been observed that it is not always easy to tell at the beginning of a relationship if it will become abusive. This is largely because many abusive partners may seem absolutely perfect in the early stages of a relationship. Possessive and controlling behaviours do not always appear overnight, rather, emerge and intensify as the relationship grows (*National Domestic Violence Hotline*). It has also been noted that domestic violence does not look the

same in every relationship because every relationship is different. But one thing most abusive relationships have in common is that the abusive partner does many different kinds of things to have more power and control over their partner. The *National Domestic Violence Hotline* enumerated some of the signs of an abusive relationship to include a partner who;

- Tells you that you can never do anything right
- Shows extreme jealousy of your friends and time spent away
- Keeps you or discourages you from seeing friends or family members
- Insults, demeans or shames you with put-downs
- Controls every penny spent in the household
- Takes your money or refuses to give you money for necessary expenses
- Looks at you or acts in ways that scare you
- Controls who you see, where you go or what you do
- Prevents you from making your own decisions
- Tells you that you are a bad parent or threatens to harm or take away your children
- Prevents you from working or attending school
- Destroys your property or threatens to hurt or kill your pets
- Intimidates you with guns, knives or other weapons
- Pressures you to have sex when you do not want to or do things sexually you are not comfortable with
- Pressures you to use drugs or alcohol

Similarly, Fareo Oluremi quoting *National Network to End Domestic Violence* informs that domestic violence and abuse is not limited to obvious physical violence but includes endangerment, criminal coercion, kidnapping, unlawful imprisonment, trespassing, harassment and stalking (2). The *UNICEF Report* of 2005 corroborates the submission of The *National Domestic Violence Hotline* that domestic violence is a global phenomenon and also that families from all social, racial, economic, educational and religious backgrounds experience domestic violence in different ways. In the United States of America, each year, women experience about 4.8 million intimate partner related physical assaults and rapes while men are victims of about 2.9 million partner related physical assaults.

> In parts of the third world generally and in West Africa particularly, domestic violence is prevalent and reportedly justified and condoned in some cultures. For instance, 56 percent of Indian women surveyed by an agency justified that wife-beating on grounds like – bad cook,

> disrespectful to in-laws, producing more girls and leaving home without informing among others (*UNICEF Report*).

History has it that in most legal systems around the world, domestic violence has been addressed only from the 1990s onwards. Indeed, before the late 20th century, in most countries there was very little protection in law or in practice against it. In 1993, the United Nations published a document titled "Strategies for Confronting Domestic Violence: A Resource Manual". This publication urged countries around the world to treat domestic violence as a criminal act as well as stated that the right to private family life does not include the right to abuse family members, and also acknowledged that, at the time of its writing, most legal systems considered domestic violence to be largely outside the scope of the law, describing the situation at that time as follows; " Physical discipline of children is allowed and, indeed, encouraged in many legal systems and a large number of countries allow moderate physical chastisement of a wife or, if they do not do so now, have done so within the last hundred years. The World Health Organization report titled *Gender, Equity, Human Rights: Gender Based Violence* note that in recent decades, there has been a call for the end of legal impunity for domestic violence- impunity often based on the idea that such acts as private and that the Istanbul Convention is the first legally binding instrument in Europe dealing with domestic violence and violence against women.

It is also pertinent to inform that laws on domestic violence vary from country to country. While it is generally accepted in the Western world, this is not the case in many developing countries. For instance, in 2010, the United Arab Emirates Supreme Court ruled that a man has the right to physically discipline his wife and children as long as long he does not leave physical marks (172). The social responsibility of domestic violence also differs from country to country. Whereas, in most developed countries domestic violence is considered unacceptable by most people, in many regions of the world, the views are different. It has been observed also that violence against women tends to be less prevalent in developed Western nations, and more normalized in the developing world (Felson, 21).

Domestic Violence in Nigeria

The issue of domestic violence has become rampant in contemporary Nigeria. This is largely because there has not been serious judicial mechanism set in motion to arrest and prosecute the perpetrators of this menace. In a pilot study on the abuse of women in the family carried out by Project Alert, a non-governmental Organization (NGO) based in Lagos, it was gathered that of the forty-eight (48) women, sixty-four percent (64%) revealed that they have been beaten by their partners while fifty-six (56%) percent of the forty-eight (48) admitted that they have encountered violence by the hands of their male partners.

Comparable interviews completed in Oyo State and other parts of Nigeria revealed that parallel results. Similarly, Sylvester Obi and Christopher Ozurumba, in a review of the variables related with aggressive behaviour at home in South East, Nigeria, inform that seventy percent (70%) of respondents reported abuse in their family with ninety-two percent (92%) of the casualties being female and the remaining eight percent being male. Abiodun Fawole and Abike Fawole also carried out an investigation on the degree of the issue of abusive behaviour at home among the civil servants working in the Oyo State Government Service. Fawole et al. inform that ninety-one percent (91%) had been beaten by their partners while forty-four (44%) (i.e. twenty-three percent) women had been beaten. Among the married men, the prevalence of beating was thirty-five percent (35%) while among the married women prevalence was fourteen percent (14%) (62).

The reasons for violent behaviour at home against Nigerian women have been a controversial issue for decades. Different theoretical frameworks proposed by social scientists have not given adequate explanation for this problem. However, it has been observed by social scientists that the brutality against women is connected to some variables namely; behavioural issues, low financial status of men and women, age, women's attitude of women to violence against them, gender norms and childlessness. In his research on the abusive behaviour at home in Zangon Kataf and Kaura Local Government Areas in Kaduna State, where the consumption of alcohol featured prominently, Yusuf informs that "…the children expressed the view that their fathers divert money meant for their school fees to alcohol consumption" (139). Similarly, a study by Oladipo, Yusuf and Arulugun, shows that of all the causes of physical violence, behavioural factors of partners were found to greatly influence domestic violence against females. According to Oladipo et al., "…females who had partners that drink alcohol experienced sexual violence more than those whose partners do not drink alcohol (85). Another study conducted by Owoaje and Alaolorun reveals high incidence of physical intimate partner violence in Nigeria. According to Owoaje and Alaolorun;

> Women at the great risk of physical IPV in this study were those who had experienced psychological or sexual abuse, had attitudes supportive of IPV and those whose partners frequently consumed alcohol (51).

This is in corroboration with the findings of Gelles that;

> Marital rape does not occur in isolation …it tends to occur along with other acts of marital violence. Researchers consistently report that women who experience marital rape are also victims of physical violence (77).

Onigboji, Kofoworola and Onigboji, in their study on married women in urban communities in Lagos State, reveal that alcohol abuse of the male partners, among other variables, make women susceptible to physical abuse. Early scholarship on violence against wives in Nigeria emphasized the role of stress in its entirety. From this point of view, it has been observed that diminished resources can lead to stress, frustration and conflict that may culminate in violence between spouses. Haruna Yusuf observes that "when a woman depends on her husband and asks for money when it is not readily available, she also gets battered" (140). Interestingly, numerous studies that have been carried out in Nigeria show that low educational status of both men and women plays a crucial role in battering. Balogun Akinola, after an exhaustive interview on women working in the business sector and different work environments (i.e. girls in schools and colleges in Lagos State), uncovers that "the respondents whose husbands had tertiary education reported least of battering, while those women whose husbands had no formal education formed the largest population of battered women" (125).

Ndubuisi Ezegbe, Ikechukwu Anyanwu, Esther Onyeoku and Golden Abiogu conducted a study with men on the causes of wife battering in two states in the South Eastern region of Nigeria, Ebonyi and Anambra States respectively. Although the opinion of the respondents on wife battering vary as consequently, they have diverse reasons for such acts, they share a common view that illiteracy on the part of the wife is a cause of battering. This finding is consistent with Akinola's study which shows that the low educational status of the female respondents had influence on physical IPV. According to Akinola "those women with no formal education and those with primary education recorded the highest percentage of battering while those with tertiary education had with only sixteen cases" (125).

In a related study carried out by Onigbogi et al., it was revealed that "women with primary education or less education faced an elevated risk of physical violence" (98) The connection between educational status and violence in this study is significant and in line with the findings of Ola Odujirin citing Gelles who stated that physical abuse by woman's partner is inversely related to the woman's educational status. Past research endeavours have shown that the social context of domestic violence is entrenched in the traditional African patriarchal society, where gender roles are assigned to man and woman based on their sexes. Okemgbo et al observe that sexual violence/rape against wives is embedded in the male ideology, where the husband will abuse his wife where something is not done to his satisfaction. Okemgbo et al inform that "About twenty-one percent of the respondents surveyed reported having ever been forced to have sexual intercourse against their will and this happened most between the ages 15-49 (231).

Domestic violence against women is a risk factor for a variety of physical and mental ill health of women. The achievements of women are not only inhibited by the injuries of physical attacks but domestic violence is an implicit threat to social development. Esere et al. assert that;

> By subjecting the woman to rape/violence and without a social structure that endeavours to stop this practice, the women could be made to believe that they are actually inferior to their male counterparts…This can affect their self -image and perception of men in general (2).

The thrust of this segment of review has been to document the various shades and experiences of domestic violence that are peculiar to certain cultures and civilizations.

Our Own Voices: a Contextual Analysis

Synopsis of *In Our Own Voices*

Okoh's *In Our Own Voices* is an extension of her lamentation over the inhuman and tortuous treatment meted on women by their male counterpart in the name of patriarchy. Through the dramatic form dance, which she calls "Choreodrama", Okoh attempts a cataloguing of the various shades of ill treatment which women experience by the hands of their supposed husbands and spouses. The play harps on such thorny and gender sensitive issues as domestic violence, widow inheritance, forced marriage, commodification of women, childlessness and women as sacrificial lamb among others.

Domestic Violence in Okoh's *In Our Own Voices*

Okoh's *In Our Own Voices* is an eye opener against the high level of domestic violence endured by women in Nigeria. In order to defend the position that the issue of domestic violence goes beyond cultures and ethnic boundaries in Nigeria, Okoh draws her characters from the various tribes that make up Nigeria. Even the use of the pronoun "our" in the title of the play suggests that the experience of domestic violence in Nigeria is not just against one woman but various women as can be found in the various societies in Nigeria. This is evident in the very first monologue of Woman 1 thus:

> …domestic violence puts strain on our society as well as on our national economy for the violence occurs in varied forms in thousands of households across the nation. In the homes of the poor as well as of the rich. In the rural areas as well as in the cities, women are suffering. Women

> are dying every day. Rivers of blood flows ceaselessly under the crushing weight of violence. And it is affecting all types of women (Okoh, 5)

Okoh's concern in the monologue above is to argue that domestic violence is no respecter of social or economic status but a wide fire set in motion by patriarchy to oppress and intimidate women. As Woman 1 laments her ordeal further, we come to terms with the reality that she is from a middle class family and a higher executive officer in the Nigerian Federal Civil Service who is financially sufficient but a survivor of domestic violence after several years of mental and physical abuse by her husband. The signs of domestic violence in Woman 1's marriage appeared quite early in her relationship but she was blindfolded by love and so could not protest it before she entered the marriage fully. According to her:

> The abuses really appeared after I've had my first child. He wanted to take full control of my life. I must account to him every movement I made and every action I took. But, playfully, playfully, I resisted then his possessive and controlling behaviours slowly manifested as the relationship grew. If I went for a visit without telling him, he got angry. Before giving me money for shopping, I must itemize what I wanted to buy and how much each item would cost. If per chance, I failed, due to price fluctuation, to buy everything I had listed, he would call me foul names: "Liar, cheat, the sly tortoise, wicked woman." Sometimes, to avoid his insult, I evaded demanding money from him, not even for his monthly contribution to the family upkeep. Even at that, he would still complain saying: 'you dunce, you idiot, you "yeye" woman!' You want to prove that you have money. That's why many men in this country don't want to marry educated women. You want your freedom and liberty. You want to compete with men. You want to be the head of the family. Okay, we shall see who is the head of this family. Alright, we shall see! You swine! (Okoh, 7)

Woman 1's bitter testimony above clearly locates her husband within the domain of patriarchal excesses as he tends to frown at Woman 1's enhanced educational status and sense of financial freedom. For him, his wife should be his slave that he can toss around at will rather than fitting into the shape of a help mate that the woman was naturally designed to be for man. It should be noted here that domestic violence does not only occur in physical abuse alone but includes mental torture of a partner by the other partner. Domestic violence is evident in the constant use of foul and abusive language on Woman 1 by her husband. Calling her by such derogatory names as "yeye woman' "dunce", "liar"

and "sly tortoise" among others are clear evidences of mental abuse and consequently, domestic violence.

Woman 1 narrates the height of her experience of domestic violence by the hands of her husband in subsequent monologues where she portrays how the husband graduates from verbal abuse to physical abuse thus:

> One day, he returned home from work while I was still in the kitchen cooking his favourite dish: Pounded yam and "*genger*" soup with bush meat. I quickly ran to the fridge to fetch him a glass of cold water. Casting a fleeting glance at the empty dining table, he stared at my face and growled: "Where is my food?" Before I could say anything, he landed a hot slap on my face, "Phiam!" The glass of water escaped my grip, shattered on the floor. The water spilled all over me. Why must I return from work to wait for you to cook? Answer "Phiam!" Have you been out frolicking with one of your bosses? Answer me! "Phiam!" He pushed me against the wall and gave me several punches. I slumped to evade the piercing punches. Then he kicked me and dragged me on the hard floor. In my stupor, I could hear the children crying and begging: "Daddy, please now, leave mummy alone! Daddy, please now, leave mummy alone! Daddy, you are hurting mummy. Please leave her alone!" He only left me alone, when he was tired of punching me… (Okoh, 8).

Woman 1's narrative above is a testimony of domestic violence through physical assault. It reveals how most men take advantage of their masculinity to brutalize their spouses over issues that would have been settled amicably through dialogue. As a matter of fact, one can hardly see any justification for Woman 1 husband's expression of anger except that he wants to demonstrate the usual patriarchal ego that men are superior to women. The latter is portrayed by the playwright as a failure both in the context of a husband and a father. Not even the presence of his children could restrain him from punching his wife. He obviously belongs to the class of Nigerian men who lumps their wives and children together as inferior beings especially girl-children.

Woman 1 also suffers sexual abuses by the hands of her husband. After receiving physical assault from her husband, it is expected that she would develop some form of emotional withdrawal from him but the husband thinks differently. He thinks that sexual submissiveness of his wife is part of her marital responsibilities regardless of her level of motivation or emotional arousal. For him, he has paid his wife's bride price and so his wife

must submit to him sexually against all odds. This is another arrogant display of patriarchal excesses. Woman 1 puts it thus:

> Apart from the physical and psychological abuses, I was also a victim of sexual abuses. After receiving insults from him, I usually rebuffed his sexual advances. But without caring for my feeling or condition, he would assert: "You are my wife. I paid bride price on you. You belong to me. Whether you like it or not, I will have it. Come on, relax! Let's have a go! Don't push me. Don't push me. Humh! Humh!" He would lift up my nightgown to satisfy his desire, with me just lying on my back like a log of wood. When he was done and snoring, I would weep bitterly in silence. The fact that I was being used to satiate his sexual urges made me sick… (Okoh, 11).

The narrative put up by Woman 1 above captures the height of sexual molestation which most Nigerian women encounter in their marriages. The idea that a husband would see his lawfully wedded wife as a sex toy is highly disturbing and inhuman as it underscores the feminist protest that men consider themselves as superior species to women. From the narrative above, we also observe that the major motivation for her husband's show of unnecessary authority and superiority over Woman 1 is the fact that he paid her bride price. For most Nigerian men, bride price is the license to maltreat their spouses. Fondly, by paying the bride price, many men think they have already bought the women and so the woman becomes their commodity just like the upholstery in their rooms.

The pitiable state of Woman 1 is compounded by the fact that the Nigerian society does not provide the necessary checks and balances that would protect the fundamental human rights of women. Woman 1 runs to the police for protection against domestic violence meted on her by her husband but rather than offer her the protection she desires; the police prefer to treat the issue with trivial attention by distancing themselves in the case with the sentiment that "wife beating is a family affair." Through the disappointing sentiment launched by the police (a supposed law enforcement agency), Woman 1 is forced to the point of resigning to fate. To add salt to injury, her husband's family always do not see anything wrong in what their son, her husband does. Her mother-in-law (a fellow woman) prefers to threaten her further amidst her trauma rather than sympathize with her situation on hearing that she went to report to the police. Unfortunately, her mother-in-law who could not prevail on her son to stop battering his wife, stands out in defense of her son's domestic violence on his wife. She goes further to threaten Woman 1 thus:

> …Why are you involving the police in our family affair? Don't we have kindred and family –heads to arbitrate in dispute within our lineage? Educated woman! Are you no longer a Tiv woman? Where is your home training? Anyway, you are wasting your time. If the case ever makes it to court, it will remain there stagnant. Bet me! … (Okoh, 13).

It is the consistent battering she receives by the hands of her husband coupled with the cultural restrictions that forbids her to discuss her marital challenges outside her husband's lineage that compels Woman 1 to endure the consistent violence in her marriage to the point that gets deformed by her husband through the pouring of acid on her body. Her husband's reason for pouring her acid is to deform her so that no other man would find her attractive anymore. The narrative of Woman 1 is not just pathetic but highly provoking as it bothers largely on lawlessness and outright disregard of the women's human rights in a country that is a signatory to various human rights charters including the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

The case of Woman 11 is synonymous with that of Woman 1. However, Woman 11's experience bother on the inhuman treatment meted on women in Nigeria by conceiving them as mere commodities to be bought by men for a price. The narration from Woman 11 clearly locates her as a native of the eastern part of Nigeria. She is a victim of her own artistry as a dancer. As a way of community service, she was part of the cultural troupe stationed to dance at the village scare as a way of receiving an august visitor to her community. After a commendable performance as the lead dancer in the community dance troupe, Woman 11 is lumped up alongside other items to be presented as reception gift to the August visitor who happens to be the President of the country. Woman II narrates her case:

> …Everybody rose up and applauded and praised me for having danced so well. Later, they called me aside and dressed me up with beautiful loom woven traditional material…Raising the microphone to his mouth once more the MC announced: "Mr. President, once more, we thank you for your visit to our state. Sir, according to our tradition, we hereby present to you some souvenirs: the best harvest from our farm, the best domestic foul from our poultry, the best bush meat from our forest, the best dried fish from our river, the best fabric material from our loom and because you are a very special guest, we added the best maiden dancer in our state… (Okoh, 22).

The narration above portrays the level of inhuman treatment and debasement meted on the women for no reason except that they belong to the female sex. The reward Woman 11 gets for volunteering to be part of community service and for being good at what she does is to be lumped up as a gift item for an August visitor whom she has never come in contact with. Without seeking her consent, Woman 11's community whisk her with other items like a commodity for her special visitor. In order to justify the fact that the conspiracy against women is largely societal, the August visitor (Mr. President) readily accepts Woman 11 the same way he accepts the other gift items. First, he rises up, smiles at Woman 11 broadly and then declares "all the gifts are accepted. Thank you!" (Okoh, 23). The President's patriarchal ego is evident in his acceptance of Woman 11 as one of the gift items offered him by the community. It therefore becomes scary to note that the President of the country who should lead by example in the protection of the women's human rights is the very person abusing such rights right in public.

The same stretch of domestic violence is noted in the narrative of Woman III where she laments her pitiable condition as a victim of teenage pregnancy. At eleven Woman III was forcefully married off to Alhaji Musa- a man old enough to be her grandfather. The reason for the forced marriage was to enable her serve as her father's collateral for the debt owed to Alhaji Musa. First, she was tricked into moving into Alhaji Musa's house as a house help for Musa's wife who is heavily pregnant but there in the house, Alhaji Musa takes advantage of her innocence and begins to abuse her sexually. Woman III gets pregnant in the process and then the real complication sets in. Woman III narrates:

> One day, I was having unusual pains in my stomach. I informed my co-wife, and she went to fetch the birth attendant. The old woman spread a mat on the floor and asked me to lie down on it. She felt my stomach and said my uterus was contracting normally. Hopefully, very soon, the baby would come out. She rubbed some herbs on my stomach and on my waist. She opened my legs, looked into vagina and murmured: "It seems there is something preventing the baby from descending, despite strong uterine contractions. But don't panic," she said, "these things do happen quite often. It will come down. Let's wait." We waited. The baby did not come out. She did all she to make the baby descend. Instead, the baby was playing pranks on us. It was changing its position every now and then. At one time, the lady said she saw what looked like the baby's brow. At another time, it was what looked like the baby's buttock, and another time, it was what looked like the shoulder or knee. She was not sure. But the

> position of the baby was certainly abnormal. She then said we should pray to Allah for the baby to correct its position by itself… (Okoh, 29)

The scenario above clearly portrays the level of torture and violence which women in the remote part of Northern Nigeria undergo. First, a teenager at eleven is already betrothed to an old man in her grandfather's age bracket. The old man shamelessly goes ahead to abuse her sexually to the point of impregnating her without considering any biological rebound. Even in her pregnant state, she lacks the basic health care that would guarantee safe delivery. The old man responsible for the pregnancy cares less about the state of the health of the little girl he has forced into his household as a wife. Woman III is therefore left with the only option of being delivered by an inexperienced native birth attendant. Expectedly, the delivery process gets complicated and so emergency sets in but nothing tangible is done to save the mother and the child. The need to rush to the community health centre is quickly suggested by her co-wife but nothing still could be done at the moment because the old man (the man of the house) is not on ground to approve the decision. Woman III captures the moment thus:

> After some time, my co-wife suggested they should take me to the Health Center in the next community. The old lady replied, "Mama Halima, you want to put me in trouble? You know very well that in this our community A woman cannot take such decision. That's the man's duty. Besides, women's movements are strictly under male control. None of us is qualified to take her to the hospital. We are women! So, we need a man to take her there, either your husband or a male surrogate." "But our husband is not at home. And there is no other man in this house except children", explained my co-wife. "We'll wait for your husband to return", said the old lady. "He left home at dawn, he may not return till dusk." "We'll wait for him patiently. Sit down. "*Bari mu jira*." "Look at how she is rolling from side to side on the mat. She has been in pain for many hours. We cannot allow her to continue to suffer like this. Already she looks emotionally drained. Please, do something", pleaded my co-wife. "But we cannot do anything in this circumstance. I repeat, we are women", said the old lady. "You are a well-respected woman in this community. You can explain to them why we had to disregard tradition", Suggested Mama Halima. "Babu! Not me-oh! As an elder, it is my duty to preserve the cultural traditions of our land. So, I say let's wait." "For how long are we going to wait?" "As long as it takes your husband to return." (Okoh, 30)

The accumulated delay in the labour process due to some unguarded and irrational patriarchal traditions complicates Woman III's pregnancy to the dangerous extent of losing the baby while also contracting the dreaded Vagina Vesico Fistula (VVF) as her pelvic is not mature enough to host pregnancy. The complications of VVF also includes the offensive smell from the vagina as a result of some rot and decay. In her state, she meets all kinds of stigmatization and abandonment even by the very man that put her in that condition.

Another manifestation of domestic violence against women is in the guise of circumcision. Woman IV who goes by the name, Obehi, suffers series humiliation by the hands of husband because she could not conceive as a result of the complications gathered from a circumcision exercise she was subjected to in her teenage days by her parents. At first, Woman IV enters into a beautiful and lovely union with her husband but seven years into the marriage, her husband's family begin to agitate over her barrenness and in the process they compel their son, to pick another wife. Her husband settles for another wife who also bears him a son and from this development, Woman IV becomes a second class citizen in the marriage. First, she is asked out of her matrimonial room for the new wife to occupy and then given a smaller room. This very act points to the fact that she has lost her position as the first and senior wife of the family. Second, the husband resorts to assaulting her over the allegation that she intends to kill the new born son.

Again, Obehi is subjected to series of violence by her parents and husband respectively. In her teenage, her parents forced her to go through the pains and torture of female circumcision which leads to a major damage in her reproductive organ consequently, she is unable to conceive. Later, she goes into marriage and her barren condition opens another room for her husband to mete violence on her. In her frustration, she decides to walk out of the marriage in search of a new identity and new motivation to still exist as a human being with full potentials. Again her decision is obstructed by her cultural background which makes it impossible for a married woman to return to her father's house. One observes here that oppressive patriarchal values remain one of the greatest obstacles to women's freedom in Nigeria. A woman is abused in her marriage and yet does not have the right as a human person to walk out of such marriage even when the same system cannot protect her from the abuse. Woman IV's story is apparently a pathetic one even as those responsible for her condition go scot free.

The story of Woman V seems to be even deeper and graver than all the already viewed. Woman V is a product of the Ibo background where women are commonly held

accountable for the death of their husbands regardless of the circumstances surrounding the death. Not minding that she is bereaved and so needs heart -warming consolation, the kinsmen of Woman V's deceased husband subject her to series of inhuman treatments all in the name of widowhood practice. Upon receiving the news of the demise of their son, the family of Woman V's husband summon her to the family compound in the community and then compel her to undergo series of oaths in order to prove her innocence in her husband's death. Not even the explanation from Woman V that her husband died of ghastly motor accident could convince her late husband's kinsmen that she has no hand in her husband's death. Woman V's narrative say it all:

> …They claimed they were not satisfied with my explanations that it is strange for a healthy man to die on his way to work. So, I should confess what I did to him before he left the house. I explained that I had nothing to confess. He left the house hale and sound. I was at work when I got a phone call inviting me to come and identify his corpse. I knew about the circumstances of his death through police reports, based on eyewitness information. They insisted that I must take an oath to prove my innocence. They led me to the room where they laid his corpse on a bier, they scrubbed his body, squeezed the water into a bowl and gave it to me to drink, saying that if I die during the one year mourning period, that would confirm me guilty of his murder, which is an abomination. Therefore, my corpse would be thrown into the evil forest for vultures and wild animal to devour… (Okoh, 48)

More painful in the entire inhuman treatment meted on Woman V is the fact that the late husband's family do not consider the trauma which a woman undergoes in the loss of her breadwinner. They deliberately refuse to acknowledge the fact that every ideal marriage is anchored on love and so it is always a traumatic experience for any spouse to cope each time he or she loses a partner. The well- being of their daughter –in-law or sister-in-law means nothing compared to the death of their son and brother. It is also more painful to note that in the same culture the same dose of torture is never meted on the man who loses his wife. It becomes clearer that the Ibo culture on widowhood practice is one of the manifestations of violence unleashed on the woman just to subjugate her into acceptance that she is the inferior of the men folk. In the same Ibo culture, torturing the woman does not only end in accusing her of being responsible for her husband's death but goes to the extent of compelling her to mourn her husband in the most miserable of ways:

> Soon after putting my husband in the grave, I was put into widowhood. The Umuada, daughters of the clan Led me to an open compound, without any privacy. Surrounded only by the Umuada, I was stripped naked. After sacrificing a fowl, uttering some incantations to the ancestors they shaved the hairs on my head, my armpit and my pubic. Then, one of the old widows in the family bathed me, as a mark of final separation from my husband…From there, I was led to my place of seclusion, a dingy room without furniture, but with just an old mat placed on the hard floor, on which I was to sit and sleep throughout the wailing period…I was not allowed to go to anywhere during the first 40 days of confinement. Neither was I allowed to touch with my hands or any object nor any part of my body. For at this period, I was regarded to be unclean… (Okoh, 49).

It is interesting to note that the Umuadas who execute the humiliating treatment on Woman V in the guise of widowhood practice are her fellow women. One begins to wonder if the same-sex feelings does not run in their veins. The deep involvement of the Umuadas in the humiliation of their fellow women clearly demonstrates the fact that the maltreatment and oppression of women in most African societies draw motivation from patriarchal traditions that reduce women to mere commodities and properties acquired by men. Woman V's crime was nothing except that she lost her husband. Apart from the torture from the Umuadas, she also loses all her household properties that she acquired side by side with her husband to the husband's family because she refuses to be inherited by one of her deceased husband's siblings.

Okoh also portrays rape as a form of domestic violence meted on women in Nigeria. Through the character of Woman VI (known also as Tolu), a keen onlooker is exposed to the physical and mental torture associated with rape. As a child, Woman VI experiences rape through the hands of her own uncle who came squatting with her family in the city. As a result of the tight schedule of her parents, Woman VI, at a tender age, finds herself in the custody of Uncle Femi who rapes her and goes ahead to threaten that he would kill her if she reveals her rape experience to anyone. Out of fear, Tolu decides to conceal her traumatic experience and in the process she becomes used to her sensual experience with Uncle Femi. Tolu's real challenge begins from the very day that Uncle Femi was asked to leave the house for committing incest. According to Tolu:

> They discussed with Femi. And he moved out of our house. But that didn't deter us. It brought us closer together. Femi was coming to meet me at school. We would look for a quiet spot in the bush to have fun. Ha-ha-ha-

> ha! As time went by, I could never take my mind off Femi. If I didn't see him for a week, I was in a feat of anxiety. I would bite my finger or pull on my hair. Sometimes, I would tear my books or my clothes. Moreover, I began to have learning problems. My teachers complained to my parents. They were concerned, they advised me. But that didn't change anything. Ha-ha-ha-ha (Okoh, 61).

What began as parental negligence has grown into full psychological imbalance and moral decay on the part of Woman VI. Uncle Femi takes advantage of the consistent absence of her parents and abuses her sexually in the guise of looking after her, now Tolu has gotten used to constant sex and can no longer take her mind off it. Not even the exit of Femi could drop her appetite for sex. Tolu makes bold to confess thus:

> …But when Femi moved out of town, in his absence, I transferred my sexual desire to other men: classmates, teachers, pastors, gatemen! Whosoever was available at the moment of my burning desire became my target I lured them with my body language. You know what I mean. Ha-ha-ha-ha (Okoh, 67).

Tolu's uncontrollable appetite for sex was triggered by the early childhood sexual abuse she experienced through the hands of Uncle Femi. This was made possible as a result of negligence on the part of her parents in her upbringing as a child. Ironically, while she goes about her flirtatious lifestyle even as an adult of 35 years, the man responsible for her shattered sexual life is let go and establish and consequently run a decent family with a responsible woman as wife. Be that as it may, it suffices that so much blame is heap on the society for making the constant mistake of exonerating the perpetrators of violence against women.

A general examination of all the characters in this play clearly shows that Nigerian women are indeed victims of different shades of domestic violence. The violence meted on Nigerian women cut across religious, cultural, geographical and social boundaries. The perpetrators of these violence are both men and women of the respective societies in Nigeria. Okoh's *In Our Voices* is therefore a reflection of the contempt Nigerian women are made to endure. In an agreeable endnote, it suffices to say that women are treated as second class citizens in their own land for reasons that can hardly be explained beyond religious and cultural extremes. Apart from representing the various majority ethnicities in Nigeria, the playwright has portrayed the various trivial circumstances that ignite domestic violence on Nigerian women.

Conclusion/Way Forward

The study has made an attempt at examining the issue of domestic violence in Nigeria through the lenses of Julie Okoh's *In Our Own Voices*. In course of the study, it is observed that most women across the cultures and religions in Nigeria suffer one form of domestic violence or the other. What Okoh has inch-perfectly done is to chronicle the different shades of inhuman treatment meted on women in Nigeria in the name of respect for patriarchal traditions.

Interestingly, this paper has made some findings that are worthy of mention. One of the major findings is sensed in the fact that patriarchy is one of the major reasons most Nigerian women suffer domestic violence in Nigeria. As evident in the play, most women are subjected to one form of violence or the other by either their father or husband as they are many times conceived as mere commodities that can be easily bought via bride price. Some of the women are willed away to a man as a collateral since their fathers could no longer service the debt owed. In the process, their prospective masters treat them with discontent, discord and mischief since they owe nobody any explanation.

This paper also attributes the rise in the cases of domestic violence in Nigeria to the weak and corrupt judicial system in the country. As a matter of fact, it is on course to say that it is habitually difficult for perpetrators of domestic violence against women to be prosecuted. A thorough reading of Okoh's *In Our Own Voices* reveals that none of the perpetrators of domestic violence was made to face the full wrath of the law. It is this weak judicial system in Nigeria that empowers most men to consistently perpetrate violence against women. The study also notes that the oppression, subjugation and maltreatment of women, which has a long history, is still in vogue in this 21st century amidst the spirit of globalization. Ironically, Nigeria is a signatory to most human rights charters and documents, yet it is a great encourager of the different shades of women's human rights abuse. As evident in the play, the bane of the matter exists in the fact that most of the laws of the land seem to work against women's expression of their fundamental human rights. Even the few women that dared to express such rights were greeted with outright rebuff and consequently violence whereas, they have no one to run to. The deduction here is that there are no proactive measures in the implementation of laws that protect the rights of women.

Way Forward

This paper sanctions the need for the law enforcement agencies and the judiciary in Nigeria to step up their games in ensuring that perpetrators of the abuse of women's human rights are brought to book without fear nor favour. Efforts should be made to penetrate most

rural communities in Nigeria and charge them to court for endorsing cultural practices that endanger the mental and physical health of Nigerian women. This is because a handful of these ferocious cultural practices are domiciled in the rural communities. Thus, it is recommended that the government enforce existing laws and consequently ensure the prosecution of offenders so as to serve as deterrent to others.

In another interest, women are also encouraged to speak up and speak out on matters that bother on the infringement of their fundamental human rights. The foregoing textual analysis has revealed that most of the women had their abuses when they were still infants and teenagers but due to certain reasons keep it within them for a greater part of their lives only to open up when they are no longer able to cope with the complications therein. Nigerian women must shout, they must speak and they must consciously spread the bitter truth about their abuses. They must shun the distraction of stigmatization and open up if the required change should come.

Culture is dynamic and not static. By this instance, there is the need for the traditional institution(s) in Nigeria to consciously review the diverse cultures in order to accommodate women as integral part of the society bearing freely the rights to self-expression. The torture which women are subjected to in some part of Nigeria in the guise of widowhood practices must be erased from such cultures. Cultures in Nigeria must also be reviewed in such a way that they should accommodate women's freedom and right (especially on matters relating to choice of married partners) without parental, family or societal interference.

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