

**SEXUAL ASSAULT AND THE FEMALE EXPERIENCE:
A FEMINIST READING OF JUDE DIBIA'S *UNBRIDLED***

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Abstract

This paper is a critical reading of Jude Dibia's *Unbridled* from feminist ideological perspective. Dibia deals with the issue of sexual assault and its attendant consequences on the female character. A systematic and critical approach adopted in this study unraveled the different causes, forms and consequences of sexual assault and violation of female character in literary works. The theoretical framework adopted for this study is African feminist theory. The paper established that the female folks have suffered sexual assault and violation from the male folks in African society and that some men derive pleasure in abusing women. Besides, family background, poverty, and quest for survival expose these women to violation because men take advantage of them in such a helpless situation. The researcher did a critical analysis of the source text.

Keywords: Sexual assault, Violence, Exploitation, African Feminism

Introduction

Sexual assault and violation of women is a devastating social problem in the world today. It is a problem that still exists in present day society. The fact that we live in a modern world with monumental technological advancement has not changed the grim reality that women are discriminated against and suppressed because of the patriarchal moulded structures. The cultural beliefs, traditions and religions of most societies give more attention to patriarchy, thereby ensuring the continuation of the domination and repression of women. Sexual assault is intimidation, bullying or coercion of a sexual nature. It may also be defined as the unwelcome or inappropriate promise of rewards in exchange for sexual favours. The legal and social definition of what constitutes sexual harassment differs widely by culture. It includes a wide range of behaviour from seemingly mild transgressions to serious forms of abuse. Some forms of sexual harassment overlap with sexual assault.

Women are traditionally regarded as mere tools of necessity; housewives, child bearers, home tenders and gratifiers of men's sexual passions. They are left out of decision-making processes in their communities. There are even certain things women are not supposed to do, which are reserved exclusively for men. In the society, women were consistently bruised and brutalized. This was mostly imposed on them by their male counterparts. Women are regarded as the weaker vessels and also as sex objects and political pawns in the games played by men. According to Odinye, the above views "violate their rights as humans and encourage domination and oppressive control which could result to physical injuries, psychological or mental problems" (2). To showcase their commitment to the feminist cause, many writers/activists use their works as platforms to critique patriarchal and sexist values in society that propagate issues such as "... female subjugation, psychological brutality, individual inferiorisation and exclusion on gender lines" (Uko, 2006, p. 82).

To Ezenweke (2011) in her book *A Hindrance to Women Potentials* "women have suffered tremendous marginalization and show of superiority complex in the past, a traditional orientation of many cultures of the world testifies to this assertion" (2). In this regard, she indicates that women's problems vary in the impact of negative cultural practices. Women's potentials have unfortunately

been limited and have not fully been tapped because of socio-cultural prejudices and practices. Jude Dibia's *Unbridled* is aimed at examining aspects of sexual assault and violation which have eaten up the conscience of certain individuals in the country.

African Feminist Theory as a Theoretical Tool

Theoretical framework consists of concepts, definitions, approaches or theories that are employed for different studies. For the issue of sexual assault and the female experience in Dibia's *Unbridled*, African Feminism has been adopted as an appropriate theoretical framework. Feminism in the African context, according to Ogundipe-Leslie (2007), "is not calling for a reversal of gender roles, and it is not a call for a particular sexual orientation; neither is it in opposition to men and African culture." (7). African feminism recognizes the existence of other forms of feminism such as liberal feminism, radical feminism, Marxist feminism, cultural feminism and Islamic feminism. African feminism, according to Ogundipe-Leslie (2007) is "a kind of red flag to the bull of African men" (8).

African feminism, therefore, calls for the overhauling and amelioration of the conditions of women in which women will be economically, politically and socially empowered to enable them to be involved in the societal transformation without compromising their motherhood and recognizing their biological and reproductive rights. Although this view is also shared by other forms of feminism, African feminism lays more emphasis on the complementary roles of both genders in enhancing societal growth and development in addition to the welfare of women.

Mekegwe (2008) defines African feminism, while acknowledging the complexities that surround the linguistic and socio-cultural realities of African women, as "a discourse that takes care to delineate those concerns peculiar to the African situation. It also questions features of traditional African values without denigrating them, understanding that these might be viewed differently to the different classes of women" (10). That is the concern of Olomjobi (2013) when he says that African feminism is concerned with African nuances without disparaging them in view of the various socio-economic classes and socio-cultural backgrounds that define the identities of the African women. He says that:

African feminism rests on the notion that women in Africa are socially constructed by different cultural components. . . . The theory attempts to shift away from misleading notions of equating western values with non-western societies. The point to bear in mind is that African women have different identities and primordial attachment to region and cultural determinants than women from western societies (11).

One of the main objectives of African feminism, according to Omoljobi, is to dismantle the current atmosphere of domination and then transform the concept of gender roles in African societies in order to improve the conditions of African women. In his conceptualization of African feminism, Badeji shows that "womanness" is the center of African feminism. In addition, he describes the relationship between power and femininity as mutual. He also captures other features of African feminism thus:

African feminism embraces femininity, beauty, power, serenity, inner harmony, and a complex matrix of power. It is always poised and centered in womanness. It demonstrates that power and femininity are intertwined rather than antithetical. African femininity complements African masculinity, and defends both with the ferocity of the lioness while simultaneously seeking male defense of both as critical, demonstrable, and mutually obligatory. (13)

African feminism critically interrogates gender discrimination from the African perspective with a view to elevating the roles of African women who are seen traditionally as the carriers of societal encumbrances and whose roles must be made complementary to the roles of the men. It is only in this context that African women can be liberated from the socio-cultural, patriarchal and phallo-centric shackles that have tied them down for long, without which the entire African continent will remain in bondage. This theory is apposite for this paper because it condemns and opposes all forms of gender discrimination and prejudices experienced by African women. It also recognizes the biological and motherly roles of women which do not inhibit them from participating in societal transformation as men do.

Sexual Assault and Violation of the Female Character in Jude Dibia's *Unbridled*

The novelist, through his work aptly illustrates the typical African female experiences mediated by patriarchal practices. One of such practices is sexual assault; a practice so ancient yet essentially fuelled and driven by male desire. Rape is also a crime of violence and control against the female gender. Ebony explains that "rape is an expression of sexual aggression rather than an expression of sexuality. Rape is rooted in non-sexual motivation in the psychology of the offender; it is tied to hostility and anger and the need to exert power and control" (16).

Ngozi the fictional character is a victim of sexual assault and violation through rape. As a daughter born to Mr. and Mrs. Akachi from Ezi village in former Bendel state, her birth was heralded by the heavy rain that fateful night in the entire village and got children running outside in anticipation of dancing in the rain, the entire village and elders believed her birth is tied to the rain, hence they summoned and warned her father thus: "... be careful of that daughter of yours. The gods must have been angry when she was conceived, hence the catastrophic rain" (*Unbridled*, 147).

This accusation and superstitious belief, makes her live a life filled with guilt. She is looked at as evil. The parents also see her as different too, especially her father. Ngozi was a victim of incest and sexual molestation. She was raped by a man she called father at a very tender age. As she narrated her experience with such innocence thus:

I felt I was being watched. I could sense an eerie presence that felt like invincible weight on me. My inner spirit stirred disturbed. I opened my eyes and immediately noticed my father by the doorway staring at me. Not long after, mother departed. I was about to drift off again (sleep off). His eyes were like I had never seen them before. They looked hungry. Not hungry for food, hungry for something else. I quickly noticed that his loincloth stood unnaturally at attention. Was that a staff he hid beneath his cloth? I dare not ask. I sat up as he entered the room. He just kept staring at me like I was some ripe fruit or sumptuous meal waiting to be devoured (*Unbridled*, 148).

Child rape is particularly horrifying and cruel because the very people who should be nurturing and protecting the best interest of the child such as relatives, members of the household, family friends, neighbours and others into whose care they are entrusted, are the ones who abuse them. In Ngozi's case, it was her father, a man who was supposed to protect her. She screamed: "papa can i help you with anything?" he barked at her: "Mechie onu i-shut your mouth. I'm not your father. You are a spirit child. You are not my daughter" (*Unbridled*, 148).

He pounced on Ngozi, ripped off her wrapper, pinned her to the raffia mat on the floor, and sucked her breasts, biting hard on the nipples, parting her tiny legs and stinging his way inside her. He deflowered his own daughter at the age of thirteen, the very night the wife left to assist the younger sister who was to be wedded. Ngozi's traumatic experience can be summed up by Matlin's observation that, although the reactions of victims are many and diverse depending on the nature of the attack they are subjected to, "almost all women who have been raped report that they were terrified, repulsed, confused, overwhelmed, and anxious during the time they were being raped... (and) some also feel detachment from their own body (Matlin 2004). Ngozi was so terrified and confused getting deflowered at the age of thirteen by her own father.

On the other way round, the mother sees her as special and while plaiting her hair whispers into her ear: "No one is as fair as you in this family. You can see that we are all very dark – I, your father, even your brother and sister" (*Unbridled*, 144). Ngozi's mother who was supposed to be her closest friend was too busy to notice that her daughter was being violated by her husband. And when she noticed, she couldn't confront her husband for the fear of being seen as confrontational. Deflowering her was not the last of her evil visitations. Whenever her mother was away and she is home alone, he molests her and he also made sure she is home as often as is possible.

The brother also knew but mentions it not. She decides to confront Nnamdi concerning her father's visits: "Nnamdi, I have to talk to you about papa... papa hurts me." And the reply he got from

Nnamdi is: “Shut up, it is not a woman’s place to complain about her father” (*Unbridled*, 151). His brother’s reply clearly reveals the typical chauvinism of the dominant African male who believes the woman’s place is beneath him; as such she dares not question his decisions or actions irrespective of how vile they are. The negative reaction Ngozi is subjected to, especially by her own brother, is particularly damaging.

She has no say and this makes her lose her respect for her brother and all men. It dawned on her that Nnamdi was like his father; he was a man. She still wondered if he was protecting her father or if he was just too much a coward to challenge him, and this is the genesis of the movement to Lagos. Ngozi’s new friends do not fail to narrate their ordeals which are somewhat similar to Ngozi’s. Princess narrates how she was raped, beaten and made to participate in a fetish ritual, where she, along with several other young ladies, took blood oaths not to ever betray their madam who is involved in human trafficking to the police or anyone else. Princess also cried bitterly when: “... She had clients to service and after the clients complain about her unwillingness to perform certain sexual acts to her pimp, she would get a violent beating that left her bruised and swollen for days”(*Unbridled*, 32).

These rapes and defilements take center stage in Dibia’s rendition. Many of the ladies are forced to indulge in sex though unwillingly. Many are intimidated into it; while a few, willingly gave in for fear of violence or hardship, and are regarded by the people as “greedy” or “sabo” meaning saboteur. However, many of the victims involved in the human trafficking tried consoling her, telling her that she was lucky to be just servicing clients, because the ugly girls who were brought over, and whom no one wanted sexually, always disappeared. These girls ended up being organ donors. Right from the train station, Ngozi Akachi, whom James, her internet partner, refers to as “Erika” is being violated. In narrator’s, “he was pressed against me with his free hand squeezing my buttocks and i was sure more than one passenger observed us. I was not used to this kind of public display and i wasn’t okay with it. His hand was squeezing my buttocks and i wanted to push him away” (*Unbridled*, 11).

On arrival to James’ home in Belham close, she receives another portion of sexual violation thus: “James pulled me further in as he shut the door behind him. He dropped my luggage by the side of the stairs that led up to rooms, i tired saying something, but he grabbed me and began kissing me. I was shocked” (*Unbridled*, 17). Now called Erika, Ngozi Akachi’s welcome is filled with activities she never envisaged. All her expectations from her internet British husband are falsehood. He never received a cheque of over \$20, 000 from his father as part of his trust fund. He lied all the while. He is much younger than he claims. She was further embarrassed by James’ roommates who move about naked in the room: “In front of me was a naked man like a sponge soaking up water; I took in all his nakedness, the almost hairless body of this full-grown adult man. It was Thomas” (*Unbridled*, 59).

Thomas and Providence are James’ roommates and they sometimes act same as James- sociopath. Instead of showing remorse, Thomas rather winks at Erika and flaunts his nakedness in her face. She couldn’t help but: “think that he was trying to convey a message to me. And then she saw his very action pointed like his penis to the fact that he was a man and he believed he was the superior being. How arrogant men are! How vulnerable I was! He may have been nude but I was the naked one” (*Unbridled*, 65). Matlin (2004) posits: “sexual assault, includes sexual touching and other forms of unwanted sexual contact, which may be accompanied by psychological pressure and coercion or by physical threats” (17).

Unfortunately, providence did not condemn Thomas; rather he applauds him for his precariousness. As the novelist says, Erica was violated, both legally and illegally severally by James:

In no time, he was by my side kissing me and fiddling with my bra. I was soon naked before him; the only noise he made was grunting and ejaculating expletives while he jabbed at my insides with his withering prick.... And when he was done, he rolled over and slept, leaving me forgotten, naked and alone (*Unbridled*, 35).

After this shocking experience, it dawned on her that: “Women surrender to men; they lose all forms of their individual identity and become powerless, stripped of every vestige of their womanhood and left feeling naked” (*Unbridled*, 35).

Jude Dibia uses his main character, Ngozi, to expose the predicaments of women in our society; a society where women are relegated to the background and made to undergo difficulties. Women are seen as objects of sexual gratification. The ladies that took Ngozi in when her aunt sent her out had their share of men’s unfair attitude; hence, Uloma’s worries for her age-long relationship with Pius to end in marriage. She spats, “All I want from him is to marry him and have his child.” Pius cheats on Uloma with his time; he prefers spending it with Union buddies than with her (*Unbridled*, 72). Yet, she fights and receives strokes of cane from the police to protect him.

Bessie, Erika’s Ghanaian neighbour in London, also got her own share of violation by her husband. And advises: “The problem isn’t marrying a white man....it isn’t even the motivation for marrying one.” Bessie said, “The problem is men” (*Unbridled*, 88). She continues: “We (women) are the chameleons. Men don’t change, especially not for women, but women are always making adjustments and change to suit men” (*Unbridled*, 88). Bessie tries as much as she could to inculcate independence from men into Erika but she never concurred because her voice is still missing. Bessie represents that voice which speaks and struggles for the rights of her sex to express themselves as artists and intellectuals, and to make a career of this.

Erika’s mother even when she knows that her husband defiles their daughter, remains silent in order to protect her marriage, home and husband. She never exposed or cautioned him. She remains silent just like every other property in the house that is witnesses to this evil. This is based on the belief that it is not in the place of women to question men. They are meant to be seen and not heard.

This Nigerian, Providence, Ngozi meets at London gives her the assurance that some men still respect women. However, Ngozi resolves: “I have finally found my voice”. The email from princess and messages from home concerning her father’s death motivated her to leave London for home, Ezi village, and at last speak her truths with everyone. She opened up her real living conditions with James in London to Uloma and how her father raped her severally to her mother. Her mother and Nnamdi knew all this while and said or did nothing. She speaks out fearlessly for once, unbridled.

Conclusion

The researcher has been able to use the text to develop some common assumptions about sexual assault in women: for example, it is clear that this author do not view sexual violence against women as a natural phenomenon nor as one which should be tolerated in deference to “African tradition”. It became clear that the novel rarely showed sexual abuse against women in contexts where men were strangers to the women. As might be expected, where female characters were physically beaten was located in marital and marital-like relationships. However, this was also the case with rape, perhaps less likely to be thought of as located here. One of the common rape myths is seeing women as being in the “wrong” place, dressing inappropriately, or indulging in provocative behaviour. However, female characters in the text were usually raped by known men – employers, relatives, husbands/boyfriends or aspiring husbands/boyfriends. Thus, the male characters who perpetrate this act are not represented by the authors as abnormal individuals who randomly attack women. This implies their belief that sexual molestation exists in the very structures of society as part of men’s social and structural power over women.

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