

Intra-Gender Subjugation among Women in Nigeria: A Study of Stephanie Okere's *Dry*

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Abstract

Feminism has been preoccupied with rescuing the female folk from the stranglehold of patriarchy. The wave over the years has sought to achieve equality and equity between the male and female gender. However, the oppression of the woman has not been totally a man's affair as history has shown that women also undergo oppression and subjugation in the hands of fellow women. This is what this work terms women on women oppression and this research was geared towards establishing the existence of intra-gender oppression among women in Nigeria. In order to authoritatively achieve this, the researcher hinged the research on Laura Mulvey's Male Gaze theory. The researcher used the qualitative research method with the case study approach for the data analysis. The findings show that intra-gender oppression is prominent within the Nigerian geo-space.

Keywords: Oppression, women and Nigeria

1.0 Introduction

Suppression and oppression have been an age long practice that has trailed man from the early periods to modern times. From time immemorial, the struggle to control the source and distribution of

resources has always maintained stratification in society. The Hobbesian state thus maintains a clear division of man's society into two major classes; the strong and the weak. Due to the absence of the civil law that would maintain a civil society in which there would be law, order and respect for the rights of others, the Hobbesian state thrived mainly on raw and physical power. Thus the strongest had it all and the weak is trampled upon as their survival is at the mercy of the strong.

However, as man became better civilized, the state structure became necessary in order to protect the weak and ensure a more equitable existence. James Fieser attributes the unsociability of man which results in unrest to three major factors;

- i. Selfishness
- ii. Equality of men to one another in both intellectual cunning and physical strength
- iii. Natural quarrelsomeness of man and his perpetual readiness for violent confrontation

With the improvement in law and society, subjugation and intimidation has evolved drastically as man gets refined by the day. However, subjugation and its accompanying vices that seek to acquire power and fan the ego continue to morph and exist in guises.

The need to have control and checkmate the activities of man by fellow man makes it imperative for power to continue to belong to a few. By implication, the few with power implicitly control the majority under power. The result is the class struggles that have existed for long in human society between the rulers and the ruled, the bourgeoisie and proletariat, the man and the woman.

More so, one of the most disturbing places where marginalization has been most evident is in gender. Gender discusses in Africa have been a most exhilarating event. Women in Africa and most

developing countries have been largely dominated by their male counterparts. In gender discusses, patriarchy has been mostly blamed for the woes and travails of women mostly within the African hemisphere. This is mostly because of the systematic exclusion of women from mainstream circles ranging from politics to the core of most social setups. According to Gloria Fwangyil;

Women are subjected to male oppression and suppression at various stages of life. Unfortunately, female oppression is deeply ingrained in the culture of the societies which ensures the continuation of patriarchal control. This situation makes it impossible for women to seek ways of liberating themselves because doing so will be tantamount to challenging the age long tradition and customs of the people. (15)

However, a more often less talked about and scantily addressed is the intra-gender politics that aid the subjugation of women in most social circles. In Africa, most of the injustices allegedly meted out on the women have women at the vanguard of its execution. Women discrimination on women is less discussed as opposed to patriarchy which most times is accused of subjecting women to the second fiddle while projecting the men. It is most disheartening to know that most of the obnoxious widowhood practices in the Igbo ethnic bearing of Nigeria are instituted and executed by women (Nkechi Asiegbu, 33). Added to this are obnoxious practices against women like female genital mutilation, crisis accruing from barrenness in marriage and most marriage related crisis.

Therefore, this informs the dimension of this study as it is headed to interrogate intra-gender politics among women that subjugate, marginalize and discriminate against women. The study is geared to examine the psycho-social damages caused on women by women.

It will do this by systematically examining some selected Nollywood films and painstakingly passing them through the eyes of feminist film theory in order to determine the extent of the damages wrought by the practices in the selected movies on the feminine gender.

2.1 Gender Politics and Women Marginalization in Nigeria

Harold Laswell defines politics as the struggle for who gets what, when and how. Based on the afore definition, life in itself is very political as man is locked in a constant struggle for the acquisition of one thing or the other. Jacob Odeyemi posits that politics determines “who prospers or perishes, who lives or dies, who is favoured or marginalized and who is famed or defamed” (91) Thus the philosopher, Aristotle is of the opinion that man is a political being. The implication is that man is engaged in a constant struggle to fulfil or acquire one desire or the other in order to satisfy the self.

Gender as a social phenomenon is part of this constant struggle to assert and allocate to oneself. Michael Kevane defines gender as “the constellation of rules and identities that prescribe and proscribe behaviour for persons, in their social roles as men and women. These rules and identities may be deliberate or unintended, explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious” (1)

Gender politics has been an age long tradition. There is a constant struggle between the sexes for prominence and relevance within the social circles. Karen Celis et al are of the opinion that;

Across the globe, gender determines who goes hungry and who gets adequate nutrition and water, who can vote, run for office, marry, or have rights to children, who commands authority and respect and who is denigrated and dismissed, and who is most

vulnerable to violence and abuse in their own homes and intimate relationships (1)

Gender politics fans a constant struggle between the traditional and emergent sexes of the world. It apportions roles to the genders and stipulates what is to be expected from members of the different sexes. This struggle is basically between the male and female genders. However, with the evolution in science and technology, transgender has become a reality that the world is learning to deal with though it is yet to become a concrete reality within the African socio-cosmic existence. Gender in Africa has a clear and stringent social bearing on its citizens. A man is expected to do certain things while a woman has her roles succinctly stereo-typed. They are expected to exist within the precincts of these social provisions. A deviation from this usually tantamount in a taboo or is viewed as a misdemeanour within the communal existence. Bertrand Tietrcheu espousing this notion opines;

Gender effectively deals with the question of power in the society. It engages the whole societal body, questioning how power is shared, the leadership, and the different roles of societal components. More precisely, it encompasses how women and men are organized and how they interact in society, including the family, the Church, politics, the economy... (116)

Gender politics in Africa tends to have the feminine gender on the receiving end. Women are given the traditional roles that subject them to the authority and jurisdiction of men in most African enclaves. This results in a systematic subjugation of the feminine gender in which the man is made to think himself superior to a female compatriot. Thus Chimamanda Adichie laments this lopsidedness “we do a much greater disservice to girls, because we raise

them to cater to the fragile egos of males’’ (12). This she claims is conspicuously embedded in the way children are raised in Africa. In her words:

We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls: You can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful but not too successful, otherwise you will threaten the man (13)

This kind of training forms the psychology with which the female child transcends into adulthood.

However, Micheale Keane understudying the gender disparities in Africa is of the opinion that “comparing the well-being of boys and girls, or men and women, is like comparing papayas and lemons. One is sweet and the other sour, and the difference does not imply unequal welfare” (1) The implication of Keane’s argument is that men and women are different in certain ways and should not be compared literally. This means that both genders should be judged or compared within the precincts of their social dispositions. However, not most women will agree with this as opportunity should be made for a level playing ground for all. The argument is that women are defacto demobilized by social provisions from exploring their full potentials when compared to men. X-raying the peculiarities of the Nigerian situation on the place of women in society, Godiya Makama argues that the Nigerian system does not allow the Nigerian woman an equal playing field with the man, thus the yawning gap between the genders in social status. In her words:

Nigerian women, like their counterparts, around the world, face a lot of discrimination that limit their opportunities to develop their full potential on the basis of equality with men. They are far from enjoying equal rights in the labour market, due

mainly to their domestic burden, low level of educational attainment, poverty, biases against women's employment in certain branches of the economy or types of work and discriminatory salary practices. In some establishments women are not allowed to get married or pregnant (122)

However, an obvious fact is that women also have a history of intra-gender marginalization, persecution and subjugation. Women also contribute in aiding the subjugation of women by the society. This becomes difficult and poses a major problem for the feminist movement which in itself is geared towards reducing the level of male domination and gender related subjugation in global communities. Intra-gender marginalization among women is mostly glossed over as the fixation on patriarchy makes it almost non-existent. Unicef as cited in Faloores Omiyinka Olutola posits:

Of all forms of domestic violence, violence of men against women and girls dominates the academic circle more than any other and has been well researched into than other forms. (par. 3)

Women on women subjugation are very evident within the Nigerian socio-cultural relations. Most of the obscene practices meted out against women in actuality have women at the vanguard of its execution. Numerous young women pass through series of unimaginable abuse and intimidation in the hands of their mother-in-laws whose overzealous quest to protect their sons makes them monsters in dealing with their daughters-in-law. Faloores also reports that violence between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law is a common experience among the Yoruba people of Nigeria. In words, "this form of violence has transcended the realm where it was viewed as strictly uncommon occurrence to a worrisome problem"

2.0 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Feminist Film Theory:

The feminist film theory is an offshoot of the second wave of feminism which came to full sway in the late sixties and seventies. Feminism as a movement is geared towards protecting women from the excessive stranglehold of patriarchy. Its main purpose is to obtain an equal playing ground between men and women. In effect, it is geared mostly towards the pursuit and maintenance of equality between the male and the female gender. Its tentacles have grown and spread out to different fields of life.

In film, feminism is mostly interested in how women are portrayed on screen. It frowns against the stereotyped portrayals of women on screen in certain manners that may give negative connotations of the female gender while satisfying the ego and sexual appetite of male audience. Thus the emergent feminist film theory of the seventies which was mostly based on the sociological theory preoccupied itself with the functions and roles that the female characters were assigned within the broader film narrative (Wikipedia, par. 1).

However, Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, written in 1973 and published in 1975 shifted the attention of the feminist film criticism from how women are used in films to how they are viewed in films. Mulvey as cited in [Rachael Sampson](#) believes that women in fact are “the bearer of meaning and not the maker of meaning” (Par.4). The implication is that women rather than being made subjects in a scene are used as complimentary objects just to convey meanings. The totality of her arguments is that there is an imbalance in gender portrayals in movies. She argues that women are mostly portrayed in movies mostly for the viewing pleasures of men. This she calls the “Male Gaze”.

Murvey in her description of the male gaze theory used the language of psychoanalysis to argue that most traditional Hollywood movies only respond to deep seethed sexual drive known as “scopophilia” which may mean exactly the same thing as “Voyeurism”. Janice Loreck describes mulvey’s concept as a “heterosexual, masculine gaze” (Par.6).

More so, Rachael Sampson argues that from a feminist perspective, the feminist film theory can be looked at from three different perspectives:

- A. How men look at women
- B. How women look at themselves
- C. How women look at women.

The whole thesis of this work is predicated on the last pointer which is focused on understudying the intra-feminine gender relationship within the frame work of the movie. This study will rather preoccupy itself with the third perspective in Rachael’s categorization which is ‘how women look at women

3.1 *Dry*: A Synopsis

Dry (2014) is a complex plot story that narrates the ordeals of a mother and child separated by circumstance of abuse. Zara an abused female child is adopted by a humanitarian medical doctor from the USA who comes to Nigeria to render medical help. She is grown and has become a renowned medical doctor too in the USA but is trapped in a present trauma by the experiences from her past. Motivated by her resolve to settle with her past, she elects to travel to Nigeria to stand in for her mother whose scheduled visit to the country is constrained by frail health. On arrival, Zara is faced with the humongous challenge of finding a sustainable way of rendering

medical help to the girl children whom early marriage has led to a medical condition known as fistula.

She is also faced with the challenge of finding her child whom she gave birth to when circumstances forced her to work in madam Kojo's sex shop. Halima on the other hand is given out to a man in marriage against her will at the age of twelve. She becomes pregnant but loses the baby to poor delivery condition in the hands of a local midwife. She discovers that she has lost control of her urinary system and has joined the host of other girls who are trapped in a medical condition known as fistula. As a result, she drips on herself unconsciously. This brings her sever persecution from her mother in-law and some of her co-wives. With pressure from the co-wives and her mother in-law her husband throws her out of the house and she is forced to return to her father's house. The father in turn rejects her and throws her out to the streets. Zara's search for her daughter leads her back to madam Kojo who reveals to her that Halima is her daughter. Halima is brought to her hospital at the throws of death and she eventually loses her to the cold hands of death. Zara canvasses for support from senate and succeeds pressuring the senate to pass law against under aged marriage. She institutes a fistula foundation dedicated to keeping the memory of Halima

3.2 Women on Women Subjugation in *Dry*

The whole thesis of this write up is predicated on the intra-gender relationship among women. It is focused on studying the marginalization, subjugation and dehumanization of women by fellow women. In the film *dry*, this thesis is exemplified in the relationship between the following characters:

1. Halima and her mother
2. Halima and Her Mother in-law

3. Zara and her Aunty
4. Halima and the co-wives
5. Halima and community women
6. Halima and the market women
7. Zara and Madam Kojo

Dry is themed on child marriage and its consequences for the girl child who is coerced into adulthood. Girl child marriage is a prevalent practice in Nigeria especially in the Northern region of the country. Girls most times are betrothed to a man at birth and given to the man in marriage when the girl can barely care for herself. According to Ephraim Elizabeth, “In the North, little girls who have started menstruating are considered mature for marriage and the case of menstruation varies as a girl of twelve can be given out for marriage based on the fact that she has started menstruating” (par.2). Girl child marriage is a constituted violence against the female child. Its effect is catastrophic as it virtually robs the girl of her childhood and traumatizes her adulthood. The decision to give out the girl at premature age is made by the parents of the child who cares little about the girl’s concerns and opinion. This decision is mostly influenced by material benefits that are endowed on the bride’s family by the groom. Simbine Antonia and Yetunde Aluko attribute the major cause of child marriage to poverty (7). Halima’s mother rather than take a position against the enslavement of her 12years old daughter to Sani that already has 3 wives begins to excite her to the prospects of the marriage. One would expect that a mother should protect the child rather than conspire with the husband to enslave her to under age marriage due to material benefits. The more Halima expresses fear and objects, the more she tries to convince her. Here is an excerpt of the dialogue;

Halima: ma, I don’t want to marry now

Mother: Halima, you are too young to understand these things, you are young and this is the right time. When you are old and worn out who will marry you? And Sani is so generous, see all the gifts he showers on us every and then, it seems he is the right man for you

Halima: Why Me? I don't want to go with him

Mother: Halima your father wants the best for you. Since you are the eldest he wants you to get married first before your younger one Danny. She has been betrothed for over a year now, she is waiting for you to get married so her's will come next. Can't you see how excited she is?

Halima: mother please

One however may want to argue that the mother lacked the power to make a difference or stop the marriage considering the patriarchal nature of the society coupled with the religious subjugation of the woman by Islam. However, a contrastive analysis of this situation with a very similar one in Omoni Oboli's *Wives on Strike* (2017) shows that she could have stopped the marriage if she willed it. In *Wives on strike*, faced with a very similar situation, mama Amina begs her husband not to give Amina's hand in marriage at the age of 13. As the husband refuses, Mama Amina goes round to beg her neighbours to come and speak reason into Papa Amina. It is this singular act that ignites the revolution that rescues Amina and a host of other young girls fated by similar conditions from being giving out into marriage at the age of 13. Rather than do same, Mama Halima prefers to relish the material accoutrement that would come from Halima's ill-fated marriage. This in itself is illegal (Tim Braimah: 2) and constitutes a major breach of Halima's child rights and thus is subjugation in every sense.

More so, Mama Sani (Halima's mother in-law) also contributed immensely to the subjugation and marginalization of

Halima from the point she was hit with the obstetric fistula. Rather than rehabilitate a 12 years old girl traumatized by still birth and a medical condition she barely understands, Mama Sani begins a heated persecution against Halima and instigates Sani to throw Halima out of the house. In order to achieve this aim, she dubs Halima a witch. Here is an excerpt from the discussion;

Mama Sani: the whole village is talking about Halima and this dreaded disease she has brought to our house hold

Sani: I don't know what to do

Mama Sani: you don't know what to do? Well if you don't know what to do I do. I will arrange to send her to the *Boker's* house because I even suspect that this is an evil attack or even witchcraft Sani

Sani: Hajia witch craft *kwo*?

Mama Sani: yes, if it is not witchcraft what then is it? Can you imagine the amount of money that we spent on that girl and her family? (debasing her as purchase bereft of humanity and its accoutrements) only for them to turn around and make us a laughing stock in this village. Don't forget Sani they even say she may have committed adultery

Halima's co-wives also connive with Mama Sani to denigrate, persecute and subjugate Halima. They taunt her with the sickness that afflicts her in order to break her psychologically. Severally they isolate her and make her an object of scorn. They spit at her sight and accuse her of adultery. With the combined efforts of Mama Sani and Halima's co-wives, Halima is thrown out of the house under a heavy rain.

More so, judging from the fact that the feminine gender has suffered a lot of intimidation, subjugation and oppression from patriarchy, one would have thought that the cult of womanhood

would mean comradeship and group cohesion. However, the opposite is the case between the women afflicted with fistula and the feminine community in *Dry*. On two occasions, Halima was dehumanized and subjected to bestiality in the hands of her fellow women in their community gatherings. The first time she was disgraced out of the meeting and banned from ever coming close to them under any guise because of her medical condition. They called her terrible names as they hushed her out of the group. The height of the oppression took place in the market place where Halima went to buy food.

The women threw all sorts of food stuff on her and humiliated her out of the market. It was there that she sustained both the physical and emotional injuries that led to her eventual demise. In Ghandi's thoughts, the greatness of a civilization is measured by "how it treats its weakest members". However, from Halima's treatment by the women group, it is obvious that the women group are still far from standard civilization as they are still prone to maligning their weakest members. Zara is another victim of intra-gender oppression in *Dry*. The director through the characters of Madam Kojo and Zara's Aunty showcases the horrific oppression and subjugation women pass through in the hands of fellow women. Zara is raped by an uncle she is living with at the age of 13. She musters courage and tells her aunty who is the uncle's wife and rather than seeking ways to protect the bruised child, the woman accuses her of killing her parents and wanting to also ruin her own family too.

Aunty: why are you crying?

Zara: Uncle raped me

Aunty: you this evil child, after you have killed your parents now you want to destroy my own. God forbid! Look at your

mouth like rape, how do you know what rape is? Get-out from this house you cannot live with me any longer.

As Zara is pushed out of the house by her aunty, she begins to live on the streets and unfortunately lands in the hands of madam Kojo who runs a pimp shop. The director through this narrative once more unearths the horrors of sex trade perpetrated on disadvantaged girls by money seeking capitalists. This is the height of human degradation in the movie and most importantly a denigration of womanhood. She trades Zara in exchange for money and Zara is forced to sleep with a man and in protest bites off the man's ears. Madam Kojo is the quintessential nemesis of the women struggle for self-emancipation. Zara and the other young ladies to her are only commodities that she needs to sale in other to realize her financial ambitions. The following dialogue explains it better:

Madam kojo: Alhaji you see my shop? Alhaji just look at my babes and make your pick.

Alhaji: (pointing at one of the babes): Who is she?

Madam Kojo: wow, she is new in the business

Alhaji: *walahi* I think I like am for this one, I can go for her

Madam kojo: Ok, I will deliver her to you, you will be the first to taste her

Her "shop" as used in the dialogue above is an assembly of ladies who would usually line up for a male customer to make his pick. Her oppression of her female folk further belittles the fight and struggle for restoration of the dignity of womanhood. Such shops and businesses should be a serious concern to every well-meaning person who cares about the woman and her place in society.

4.1 Conclusion

Women on women subjugation and oppression are a fact which this work has laid bare. The researcher is not in any way denying the existence of patriarchy and its consequent relegation and oppression of women. The researcher in this work has just heeded the advice of Chimamanda Adichie in the *Dangers of a single Story* (2009) to make sure that the narrative of gender based oppression and subjugation in Nigeria is complete.

It has therefore departed from the popular narrative of female subjugation by men to intra-gender negations among women. Stephanie Okereke's *Dry* is only but one film. There are so many other films that have evidenced this thesis, a single google search will explicate the obvious. The researcher therefore concludes that intra-gender oppression, subjugation and violence among the female gender is an existing fact in Nigeria. The researcher recommends that the Nigerian feminists should also look inwards in their fight for the liberation of the female folk.

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