

**WOMEN AS GODS, MEN AS PRIESTS AND GIRLS AS
CARRIERS IN RAZINAT MOHAMMED'S *HABIBA***

Ene Edem Ekpo

Department of English and Literary Studies
University of Calabar

Edemene@unical.edu.ng, 07068067149

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0396-0050>

and

Jayne Owan

Department of English and Literary Studies
University of Calabar

jayneowan@unical.edu.ng

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5383-9123>

Abstract

The concept of gender inequality and exploitation of the sexes has been a recurrent and ongoing issue in the literary space. The woman and the girl child are often seen as the peripheral and the exploited 'Others'. This paper is a deconstruction of the notion of patriarchal dominance and exploitation of the girl child and women in general in the Northern Nigerian Muslim society. The man has often been seen in feminist discourse as the impediment for the female's economic, educational and political growth. Through a close reading of Mohammed's *Habiba*, the paper deconstructs the above issue by revealing that it is the man that is actually impeded. He is only a priest in the shrine of the women as gods in his life. The women are portrayed as the exploiters of the girl child. The significance of this paper lies in the fact that the general notion in feminist literary discourse is often the exploitation of the females by the men for their economic, political and educational advancement when in reality the opposite is the case as seen in this text. Through the utilization of deconstruction and content analysis research methodology, the paper comes out with the findings that the problem of the girl child is caused by women. The girl child is made a sacrifice by the gods- the older women and the man is merely a priest who executes orders given

to him by the gods. The paper further finds out that any resistance by the priest in carrying out the order of the gods spells doom for him.

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Introduction

The concept of gender equality in African literature is a recurrent issue. The ‘man’ has often been labeled as the exploiter and the dominant other in the binary relationship between the sexes in the society. Gloria Eme Worugji’s (2010) in “Redefinition of the Position of Women in Osonye Tess Onwume’s Play *The Reign of Wazobia*,” elaborates levels of exploitation of women by men. Given this position, man is seen as the exploiter of the woman for his economic, political and educational advancement. Against the position of Worugji, Chinweizu opines that “Feminist propaganda and conventional knowledge notwithstanding, it seems prima facie odd to claim that women are powerless in society and, in particular, over men.(11) Jane Bennett also corroborates that “the politics of identifying perpetrators of gender-based violence as unequivocally male are complex” (94). This paper takes a position, drawing evidence from Razinat Mohammed’s *Habiba* that the women are really the exploiters. The paper without exonerating the men reveals their roles as collaborators or facilitator of the exploitation. Here, the periphery has been centralized and the central has been pushed to the periphery. Within this text, the man is merely a priest who is doing the biddings of his gods.

Deconstruction is a theory that seeks to question the believed status quo of things in the world. it questions the thought pattern of the binary relationships that exist between opposites. This position is in line with that of Ann Dobie when she observes that deconstruction “overturns the principles that have provided basic beliefs about the truth and meaning.”(149) The meaning sought after is a different one from what was thought to be present. In other words, in deconstructing a text, the critic must look at the corresponding object that aligns with the new experience discoverable in the text. Dobie again opines that “to determine the meaning of a story requires that a reader note the binary oppositions in the text, observe their interactions and relationships, and thereby decode meaning” (156)

The basic tenets that underpins deconstructive oeuvres in literary criticism includes but not limited to the fact the text is not static and that every new reading of a text bring a new layer of meaning of such a text. Also in deconstruction is the agenda of decentering the centre in any semantic oppositional binaries and any centre indeed, can be decentered. It is in this decentering that news beliefs and values can be form and this leads to the advancement of the frontiers of knowledge. The concept of the plurality of meaning is equally ingrained in the discourse of deconstruction. Dobie holds that “deconstruction looks for those places where texts contradict, and thereby deconstruct themselves.” (158) in our text therefore, we are confronted with the exploitation of the girl child at the surface, by the male. However, a cursory reading reveals the underpinnings of that exploitation- matriarchy. This is clearly at variance with the popular position of gender discourse where patriarchy is labelled to be responsible. Our duty as deconstructionists as Dobie notes is to “suspend notice of contradiction in our effort to maintain the conventionally accepted arrangement of absolutes. It (we) resists such simplification by reversing the opposition, thereby displacing meaning, overturning hierarchies, and offering another set of possibilities of meaning that arise from the new relations of difference.” (161)

The question of power in the African literature has been an issue in all its colourations. In many of the writings during the twentieth century, power was vested in God and the gods. Klages Mary holds that “In the Puritan system of belief, God was the center of everything; anything that happened in the world (any event, or unit, of the system) could be referred back to God as the central cause of the event.” (57) Literary texts like Wole Soyinka’s *Death and The King’s Horseman*, *The Strong Breed*, Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God*, and Christopher Okigbo’s *Heavensgates* all feature the gods as the controlling force in the society. These works no doubt were rebutted by other writers revealing that man is the architect of his fate. These rebuttals can be found in Femi Osofisan’s *No More the Wasted Breed*, *Another Raft*, etc. In the field of gender studies, man and patriarchy was seen as the wielder of power in the society. He was seen as the one that determines, like the gods, what happens to anyone in the binary relationship between the sexes in the society. It was therefore thought that man own and controls all the arsenals of power and often uses it to intimidate, subjugate and control the female gender. The woman was therefore seen

as defenceless and powerless. However, Chinweizu holds that "... in human society, it is not male power but female power which is supreme". (11) speaking of the representation of the dynamics of power in the works of female writers, Monica Bungaro holds that "... the dynamics of power in African societies is a major preoccupation expressed in African women's writing today". (67) The gods within the purview of this essay are not the men but the women. They are the ones that dictate the fate of the sacrifice as well as the wellbeing of the priest. The text nonetheless is a rebuttal of the mantra of man as the owner of power in the society. In this narrative, there is a deconstruction of the binary relation between the man and the woman and their social roles in the society. This clearly plays out in the text as it was Hamsatu who told Saleh to push Habiba and Ummi out of his house at the first instance. And when they returned after some years, she was equally the one that sanctioned their stay in the house.

The priest are the men who are there to do the biddings of the gods. They dare not go against their biddings. Saleh fought hypocritically to ensure that *Habiba* is not sacrificed on the altar of marriage to Zubairu as desired by the gods (his mother and wife) but he failed. The carrier is the girl child. She is the lamb of the sacrifice. She is the one that must carry the yoke of the male, female and societal wellbeing as dictated by the gods.

Our conceptualization of the carrier is a contemporary exposition of J. C. de Graft's concept of role play and sympathetic magic. It is a concept of human sacrifice at the altar of the gods for the preservation of the society and the maintenance of the cosmic order. In his paper "Roots in African drama and theatre", he notes: "to preserve the essence of a human sacrifice, then, a ritual is performed at the altar of the god in which the priests are able to induce a kind of personality switch between a maiden and the sacrificial goat, under the combined influence of portions, drugs, spells, chanting and powerfully rhythmic drumming". (1). However, what we find here is not a physical sacrifice of the female child per se but in reality her entire essence, dreams, aspiration and identity is sacrificed for the preservation of the society. This concept of the scapegoat of the carrier features in the dramaturgy of Soyinka and Osofisan overtly. Soyinka's *The Strong Breed* and *Death And The King's Horseman* and Osofisan's *No More The Wasted Breed* are literary exchanges seeking to perpetuate or save the proletariat Other

from the exploitation of the bourgeoisie. The carrier is seen as the paschal lamb that must be slaughtered for the freedom and wellbeing of other members of the society. The carrier often does the job of bearing the peoples sins willingly. This is however when they have been thoroughly brainwashed to believe that it is a blessing for them to do that. In *No More The Wasted Breed*, Saluga was ready to do the dirty job until his mind was deconstructed to see the deception of the bourgeoisie. In our text in focus, Habiba has grown past such layers of deception but is incapacitated by the wimps and caprices of the gods towards her freedom.

Synopsis

Razinat Mohammed's *Habiba* is a story of a girl child struggling against a system whose entire human components gang up against her. It is a saga of male and girl child exploitation by the women in the society. It is set in Northern Nigeria. Habiba, the major character in the text is rejected by the grandmother, mother and stepmother. She is only accepted when her presence in the life of these women will benefit them. She is therefore open to generational exploitation of the grandmother and the mother. She is accepted by her mother only when her presence gives her some emotional succour as a mother. As soon as she gets other children to give her that, she abandons and throws Habiba out. Equally, the stepmother accommodates her only when she is needed to mind her children. The grandmother who rejected her initially only accepts her back when she can be married out to a rich man who will better the economic status of the family. Habiba is married to Zubairu forcefully. She is raped by her forced husband and only finally finds sexual pleasure with her co-wife in lesbianism.

The girl child as carrier of the women's sins

The exploitation of the female child has often been seen in literature as being perpetuated by the patriarchal order in the society. It is always the male gender that receives the brunt of "his evil deeds" against the female gender in the society because the social rules and orders seem to put him at the center against the woman. Talking about gender, identity and social rules which seem to be the pillar of patriarchy, Uko Iniobong notes that "Gender and identity are conceptualized as socio-cultural issues. They are conditioned, defined and sustained by social factors

such as race, class or age and by cultural factors such as folklore, myths, legends and beliefs”.(1). This is revealed in so many texts like Armah Darko’s *Faceless*, Ifeanyi Ajaegbo’s *Sarah House*, Armah Ata Aido’s *Changes*, Mariama Ba’s *So Long A Letter*, Nawal El Saadawi’s *The Woman At Point Zero*, Chinelo Okparanta’s *Under The Udala Street*, Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Life Of Baba Segi’s Wives*, Tenda Huchu’s *The Hairdresser Of Harare* etc. The portrayal of men in these texts is that of rapists, traffickers, ritualists, irresponsible fathers and polygamist, etc. However, Razinat’s book presents us with dissonant narrative. The narrative reveals the oppression of the woman by her fellow woman. This position is corroborated by Jayne Owan thus; “saddening as it is, there is a number of women out there who enhance gender inequality and oppression of women by aligning with the men to work more agony, torment and victimization on their fellow women” (265). Kande suffered it from Hamsatu and Habiba and her sister are suffering from their own mother.

For a clearer portrayal of the exploitation of the girl child, it is important to divide it into generations; the first generation by the mothers and the second generation by the grandmother. Looking at the first generation exploitation of the female child, the hammer falls on Kande and Sardia. Monica Bungaro notes that “the cultural clash in the relationship across generations of females, which was characteristics of some works of the 1980s, is now dramatised through the mother-daughter relationship, a relationship that is shown to generate malaise and traumas. (68). It is important to point out that the exploitation of the girl child by the mothers is only a trauma resistant mechanism of what they (the mothers) are suffering from their mother-in-law. Their sins as judged by Hamsatu, their mother-in-law, must be atoned. The girl child is therefore the lamb of the sacrifice.

The girl child is always subjected to abuse by all human elements in the society including the mother who should actually display filial love. This filial denial is what Bungaro meant when she notes that “one of the new directions African women’s writing is taking today is in fact visible in a more blunt attack on the traditional foundations of society in its myth and beliefs about maternal love and mother-daughter relationships”. (67) When one considers the different gymnastics carried out by others in Habiba’s family, one cannot fail to see the exploitation of the female child by all. Ranging from the biological mother, father,

stepmother, grandmother etc., everyone is looking for how she can carry their burden and once she does that, she can be thrown away like the remains of an orange that was licked. For the mother, she sends them (Habiba and Ummi) away after they had provided her with the emotional consolation she needed after her divorce from Saleh. She saw them walking out to the unknown and as the paschal lamb that is thrown into the wilderness, she kept mute and watched them wonder away. They are thus sacrificed by their own mother. This is true when we consider the analogy Habiba draws between their ordeal and that of a cow who is helpless. “the cow whose photo they pasted on this kiosk must be just as unfortunate as themselves to be moving around with that bell announcing its captivity and bondage to the entire world to see just as they were coming with tiny invisible bells strung to their feet and about to herald their woes of existence to the world” (19). They don’t consider themselves better than the cow whose image is used in marketing a product for the benefit of the producer. Just like the cow is forced to do the biddings of the producer, so are they forced by their mother to go away from her so she can enjoy her new marriage. This issue of sacrifice and exploitation by fellow woman is extensively discussed in Worugji’s (2014) “Woman the Enemy within: An Examination of Tess Onwueme’s *Tell it to Women*”, where she presents the relationship between the educated women and the village women, through the several attempts by the educated women to exploit and sacrifice their kind to their selfish end.

The exploitation of Habiba by the mothers continues as Sadia had to ask her to stop school to take care of the house while she attends to the mother in-law in the hospital. The question almost begs itself that there is nothing wrong for the girl child to help in the house. The matter is like a two side coin. Whereas it may not be wrong, an in fact like Lisa Dodson rightly observes, it can help her to learn lessons of strength and about holding unto her selfhood, nevertheless, when that is done at the detriment of the girl child’s education, which is her strong currency in purchasing her selfhood, then there is every reason to question it. This position resonates with my position at another place that “living life is all about executing the purpose one was created for.” (95) Any attempt to frustrate that purpose must not be taken lightly. for Habiba particularly, who is so passionate about school, and the fact that she is not the only young person in the house, this is a direct affront at her

dreams, aspirations and self-assertion. In fact Ummi cannot help but wonder why her sister who loved school like none of the others had to be the one to sacrifice her lessons to keep the home. The sacrifice of her lessons to keep the home is actually the sacrifice of her essence in life. At this point, the exploitative oeuvres are not very overt. Sadia is a first generation exploiter character that pushes further the plot of the narrative. Her pretence can be unraveled when we consider her role in the exploitation of Habiba. At the outset, she makes some gymnastics that the unwary mind can mistake for a genuine interest in the wellbeing of the female child. She notes that Habiba needs mothering herself when she thought of Zubairu taking her as his wife. The question is, what mothering role did she play in the life of Habiba? She is just a midwife in the process of maturing the carrier. Speaking on this process of socializing the girl child for exploitation, Carol Goodheart observes that “within all cultural groups, gender socialization for female development and behavior has an impact on self-evaluation and identity processes as well as on the social roles that girls and women adopt.” (4) Habiba is first exposed to the kitchen then taking care of her son and finally taking care of the grandmother. These three stages do not suggest mothering. Rather, it appears as a process of preparing Habiba to be able to cook for Zubairu, take care of the children she will be forced to have too early and take care of older members of the family like older wives and mother in-law.

Her preference that Habiba should not leave is another pretence to keep her exploited. She must fight for her to go to school so that she can take her own children to school too. The hypocrisy is brought to the open at the death of her son and her mother in law whom she was exploiting Habiba to take care of; “personally she was not sure where she belonged; was she for Habiba to go or stay on to complete her primary education? A year ago, **the girl helped her with Usman and to divert and cushion the old woman’s trouble but with the two gone from her life forever, she did not know what she wanted for herself much less for some other person** (my emphasis... 125).

The flimsy excuse of helplessness reoccurs in the dismissal utterances of Kande. For her Sadia; “she did not know what she wanted for herself much less for some other person” For Kande “she figured they had their own lives to live and their own destinies to defined; after all every woman was in this alone since mother’s love or hate would

come to nothing in the end” (15). This sounds flimsy and a philosophical hypocrisy. The question is why did these women not arrived here earlier. She (the girl) has been exploited to the elastic limit of the elderly women’s satisfaction and as disposables, they throw her to the bin for other end users. This is seen when Habiba is finally married out to Zubairu and Sadia remained silent even though she protected her children. “Sadia stood on the veranda, her children within her immediate reach and said nothing. Habiba felt the betrayal in her heart as she and her sister wept bitterly.” (135).

Sadia is a very dogged exploiter and god. She pushes her priest just like Ezeulu was pushed by the god “Ulu” and when he was done with him he killed his first son and abandoned him. Sadia pushes her priest until he offered his daughter to meet her demands and just as if that was not enough, she careless about his disappearance. Her pretence of not liking Zubairu, just like Ulu pretended about the white man is an overt one. “She could not help missing the girls and the same time she wondered at what could have happened to Habiba at the hands of that monster, Zubairu. She had never liked the man but at the same time, she knew it was the only way out of the circumstance they all faced.” (146). What circumstance? That of Saleh’s indebtedness to Zubairu in order to feed Sadia and her children. This is a clear consent of Sadia to the whole drama.

For the women, men are used to facilitate their exploitation of the girl child and if in the process, there is the need to sacrifice the men too, they will never hesitate. For Sadia, she could not be excused. Even the children (Habiba and Ummi) knew it. “Sadia suddenly realized that she could not look the girls in the face. She kept assuring herself that it was her father who did the wrong; that is if any wrong had been done in the first place.” (163). Her self-assurance cannot excuse her from the act. To her, no wrong had been done by Saleh in handing Habiba to Zubairu so long as it will be of some advantage to her.

Saleh’s disappearance after the marriage is only worrisome to Sadia when it comes to the provision of food. So long as she can get food for herself and her children, to hell with Saleh. Sadia correctly substitute Saleh for Zubairu even before he makes any attempt of desiring her for a wife. For Sadia, Saleh is death. She is comfortable with Zubairu so long as she is satisfied with all she wants. She calls Zubairu father after he sent her food. Yet this was the same man she

called a “monster”. “Haba, Alhaji, you are **our father now** and my children and I will forever be grateful for this kindness. Allah knows how to provide for his own. He took away my right hand and replaced it with two right hands. How could I have known that I am a favoured woman until now?” (166). Who was Sadia’s right hand and who is her “two right hands” now? Saleh was the one providing for her and since he is no more, (to Sadia, he is dead), she has been provided with two right hands perhaps in Zubairu and Habiba. This message is deeper. It means Zubairu and Habiba have become her providers now and they are better off than a struggling Saleh.

The second generation female exploiters category of the girl child is Hamsatu. The grandmother is another woman in the novel that exploits the girl child Habiba. For her, they remain useless so long as they are not up to marriageable age. When they left with their mother, she made no effort to stop them but when they returned, as ‘grown ups’ in her exploitative judgment, she saw them as potentials for the wealth of Mal. Zubairu and for the prosperity of the family. She made all effort to ensure that Habiba is traded as a product for the wealth of the family.

For Hamsatu, she has the mothers (Sadia and Kande) to exploit alongside the girl child. The problem of a woman remains her fellow woman. In Sadia’s case, she is tormented by her mother in-law for putting one bonny meat for her in her soup. Meanwhile, Sadia puts none for her husband. She (mother in-law) refers to her ration as that befitting a dog and only eats after carrying out a search of the husband’s ration and discovering that there was not even a bony meat there. Hamsatu was unfair to Kande and now also to Sadia, Saleh’s new wife. Sadia could enjoy his new husband because he is her priest. He cannot object to her demands even if such affect the wife and the home. “She could not say she had enjoyed the company of her husband the way newly wedded couples did. She did not enjoy to sit with him in the compound to discuss anything at all. He was always seated next to his mother and would talk to her from that distance” (26) she is a mere sacrifice that has been allowed to live and so cannot come in between the god and her priest. Sadia confesses truly that “.... They were all victims of the old woman’s hideous manipulations.” (43).

The girl child on her part is penned into an inglorious spot that is inimical to her self-assertion by all the forces in the society as controlled by the women (the gods). Her quest for self-assertion is confronted from

all corners. The grandmother's power as a god who dictates what happens is so strong that even nature and the cosmic order seem to tilt to her orders. This is clearly captured in the death scene. "The old woman could not hold on the quantity of the dust she had inhaled and the airlessness of the atmosphere, coupled with the lack of energy due to the fact that she had eaten nothing the previous night, all summed up to deprive her of consciousness and she collapsed on the heap of dust on the floor. As suddenly as it had started, the sand storm began to settle down and the atmosphere began to give way to rays from the sun" (57). Her death provides some rays of sun light for the girl child to breathe but this is soon challenged by her children she has successfully trained to continue at her demise. Her children here are all the women she had exploited who are now working in her footsteps to stop Habiba from rising.

The old woman's untimely death did not alter the plan of the girl child's exploitation. Sadia was rightly positioned to step into her shoes. What plays out therefore is a generational exploitation of the girl from the grandmother to the mother: Hamsatu and Sadia respectively. At the death of Hamsatu, Sadia could not fulfill the pretentious posture she puts up about the old woman wanting to destroy the girl's life. One would expect her to team up with her husband, now that the old woman is dead to ensure that Habiba is protected from the monstrous eyes and desires of Zubairu. This was not done. Rather she continued where the old woman stopped. Sadia did not visit Habiba after marriage as customs demands. The only time she decided to visit was when she needed help from Zubairu. "She did not want to contemplate going back home without seeing Habiba (her carrier) and indeed Alhaji Zubairu. What were she and her children to live on if she should turn back?" (162). The bottom line here is food for her and her children and not Habiba.

The women are always collaborators to ensure that the business of their fellow woman exploiter succeeds. This aligns with the Nigeria's sociocultural order that celebrates patriarchy, which women, as victims collaborate in the propagation of their woes. Uwen and Ekpe lament that the trend is "immersed in this sociocultural environment of a superior male status and a subordinate female one" (73). This, according to Uwen, also manifests in the entrenchment of the language of patriarchy which is "often offensive, instructional and derogatory" expressed in the exercise of "a conventionally legitimized social power" (130-131). This

is rehearsed as Yagana, Alhaji Bukar's wife was made to collaborate in ensuring that the carrier is made to pay the sacrifice. Her claim of not being in a position to stop Zubairu marrying Habiba is like the pretense of Pilate's inability to set Jesus free. "Neither sides wanted to do the task, it was a burden to do. Simultaneously, they saw the role they were made to play as lacking merit but no one was in the position to ask questions as to why they had to perform them if they did not feel obliged to do so." (142). Their silence implicates them in the theatre of the action. If they were not obliged to do it, then let them object it. A man becomes accomplice in the act when he remains silence in the face of oppression and injustice.

In recent times, the issue of rape has made big headlines in different national dailies across the globe. The sledgehammer is often on the male gender as the culprit. However, it may be very disheartening to note that this issue is engineered by women and the men are only pawned for it. What is rape? Jacquelyn White and James Frabutt rooting their position on the parameters of Amnesty International observe that "rape also occurs during cultural rituals involving genital contact, arranged marriages of children, gynecological procedures (rupture of the hymen, genital mutilation, induced abortions), forced prostitution and sexual slavery" (85). Hamsatu therefore cannot claim to be guiltless of rape. She is the master minder of the marriage of Habiba to Zubairu mainly for the economic gain she stands to benefit. Her insistence for her marriage is therefore the seed sown which by natural laws must grow and bear fruit. The physical rape of Habiba by Zubairu after marriage is therefore merely a fruit that is innocently responding to the impulse of the plant that has grown from the sown seed.

For the women, in order to hide the evil of exploiting the girl child, they use men as pawns to cover it up. From Saleh's mother to Sadia, the evil is revealed. Hamsatu before her death attempted to push the blame on Saleh and Zubairu. This, she did by inviting Zubairu to the bait- the carrier. He will be the one to desire and therefore come for her. In the eyes of onlookers, Zubairu is the evil man. No doubt. But the motive of Hamsatu is to reap from Zubairu. She plans to enjoy the wealth of Zubairu for his desire to marry Habiba.

The battle for the identity assertion of the girl child is fought against seriously by the gods and even the priest's attempt to interfere is visited by serious threat. Not even Saleh can help Habiba. His attempt to

do that is visited by a threat to his life. He suffers sleeplessness as well as fainting physically – all traumatic signs: “suddenly, he felt ashamed of himself when he saw that he had attracted the attention of everyone close enough to see what took place. Without thinking, he stood up and before all the protesting voices could tell him to sit down, he himself staggered back on the bench, exhausted. He robbed his forehead continually to cover his face from the people that were asking Kaana if he was sick.” (122).

The female child is therefore left to fight for herself alone. In the pursuit of her self-assertion, since all the apparatus that should have helped her have proved abortive, she transcends societal, cultural and religious norms through adopting a defiance assertive tool of lesbianism through female bonding with Rabi who equally had suffered the same fate as Habiba. This is always the outcome of oppression—a defiance as Katie Jorgensen observes that “... the extreme outcome of identities observed in colonial life result directly from oppression.” (1). The narrative terse paint a cultural and religious pogrom staged by the two as a means of transcending the limitation on them thus: “her bosom had filled and the child would not suck. The older woman had offered to help squeeze the excess milk.... The warm milk had spurted unto the face of the older woman and had flowed between her breast and down through her navel to her cleavages. The warm feeling of liquid flowing into that part of her body had an aphrodisiac sensation in her brains. It was a rustic original feeling that reminded her of the original sin in the life of mankind. Her hold on the soft bosom of the younger mother had triggered off some primitive instinct in both women and rather than squeeze the breast, the older one caressed tenderly The encouraging groans from the other had helped foster the liaison until they had finally discovered the comfort of the bed”. (173-174)

Our conceptualization of a defiant positionality of Habiba through the alternative sexuality or queer tool of lesbianism is premised upon the sociopolitical construct of hostility to such sexual paradigms. This position is corroborated by Jane Bennett when she notes that the “Nigeria’s 36 states are largely conservative in their approach to sexuality, hostile to alternative gender and sexual identities, interested in preserving marriage as the route to social stability and wary of adventurous young women. (83). This defiant positionality is Habiba’s

attempt to bring herself to some sanity, assert herself and restore her sense of psychological health. This is consequent upon the failures of all available defence structures; the society, the family, economic and political power etc. This position is in line with Goodheart when she notes that “psychological health status is directly affected by age, socioeconomic status, ethnocultural identity, and sexual orientation variables, each of which interact with gender to contribute to the health continuum.” (4)

For the purpose of scholarship, it is important to point out the dichotomy that exist between the South and the North of Nigeria that provides the setting for our text in order not to run into the fallacy of hasty generalization. It is true that feminist activism in the South East and South West holds great momentum than what is found in the North. Sharia law which operates in the North is inimical to feminist quest and therefore posts as a roadblock in the North for feminist agenda and resistance. Child marriage holds sway in the North and is backed up by the religious and sociopolitical structure in the society. Nevertheless, in the South, there are such issues like house help, streetism, witchcraft allegation and parental negligence or abandonment, street hawking etc. all covert colourations of the religious and sociopolitical impediments that fight against the self-realization and assertion of the girl child. The weight of these may not be equal to what is found in the North not being backed up overtly by any sociopolitical creed but they are conventional sociopolitical and religious colourations that post a problem to the girl child self-assertion.

Men pawning and the exploitation of the girl child by women

We have already established the fact that the girl child is exploited by the woman and not the men in the society. We must remember that the men are priests in this theatre. Therefore, their exploitation of the girl child is basically as sanctioned or orchestrated by the gods. This position is corroborated by Onuoha Onyeckachi and Humuani Oyndamola when they note that “African men including the boys are simply the finished product of matriarchy. In most cases they are fashioned by the female-portal psychologically to the extent that even their view of the physical world is conditioned. (164). Just like Ezeulu exploited the people for his advantage against the sacrosanct sanctions of Ulu, and later paid for it, this men’s exploitation even though coaxed by the women (gods) is

visited with grave consequences. They are therefore like the “funeral ram which must take whatever beating comes to it without opening its mouth” (229). Here, Saleh’s effort to save Habiba is visited with serious sanction. This section is to reveal the undercoated impulses of the gods in every action of exploitation of the girl child by the priests.

The pawning of men by matriarchy for the exploitation of the girl child is also facilitated by the core essence facilitator- religion. Saleh’s inability or unwillingness to vehemently oppose his mother as regards the marrying off of Habiba is conditioned upon the colouration of religion on him. “She (Sadia) had asked him severally in the past why it was that he allowed his mother to control his life, his answer had been that the prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) wishes that every child remains in the good books of his parents especially the mother, in order to receive the blessings of Allah (SWT) and Al-Janna (paradise)” (43-44). Man by nature is said to be a spirit being or made of a soul. Since spirituality, the bedrock of religion is man’s quest for truth about who he is, what he is and why he is, religion therefore must be subjected to thorough scrutiny to avoid the contamination of the very essential autochthonous spiritual element that should help man in leading a balanced life.

The reason for this scrutiny goes beyond a singular concern for the particular individual to the larger society. Wole Soyinka corroborating this, observes that the dogmatic ideology that are chanted by religion which seeks to threaten man of sickness and the like if he does not abide by its dictates affects others thus; “there is an implicit assault which should be actionable, in the publicised prediction of illness, misfortune or death for any individual. Those who wish may call it psychic assault. Certainly it contains elements of psychological warfare, not simply against the named individual – and this is what needs stressing – it is an assault not merely against the specific individual but against his friends, colleagues and relations.” (23). Saleh’s pawning by matriarchy though it instrument of religion did not just affect him but his children—Habiba in particular and others who were left at the mercy of another man. His disappearance, affected his friends and indeed the entire community.

It therefore appears that even major societal, social and ideological superstructures that serve as foundations of life in this side of the ethereal climb have been surreptitiously configured by matriarchy

to exploit the Others—man and the girl child. It is the most dogmatic ideology to hold when a man's spiritual ideology threatens the very essence of the being of another. True spirituality—the genuine quest for truth is meant to lead the searcher to the spirituality and soulfulness of his fellow man and not the subjection of his partner to the 'Other' definitive. Wole Soyinka speaking on this notes that "... even while nearly all religions that we know of pay lip-service to the concept that man is, in his fundamental being, spirit or soul, it is in the very realm of that common denominator of man's spirituality, or soulfulness, that man has insisted most fanatically, and self destructively, on remaining most separatist." (23-24)

The exploitation of the girl child by the priests as the messengers of the gods is further revealed through the characters of Zubairu, Kaana, Saleh, etc. Saleh's pretence of insisting on the child going to school is easily uncovered. The ease with which he abandons his acclaimed conviction in preference to a friend's advice is mind numbing. The fecundity of the girl child's exploitation from the point of Saleh is seen thus: "he weighed Kaana's advice on one, and his own personal conviction on the other hand, the picture remained grin... He figured that in a man's every action, a sacrifice of price had to be made or paid as it were. In his case, someone had to pay a price for the sake of the others..... Even in the rustic and rudimental exercise of feeding ourselves, some organism pays the ultimate price. (126). How does one wakes up against one's conviction so abruptly. One cannot but judge that it was never a conviction. Habiba is sacrificed as a lamb "for the sake of other". The degree of trading his conviction is even more sarcastic when we come to the staggering realization of his perception of Habiba. She is seen as not more than a consumable organism that must be sacrificed for the rudimental exercise of feeding himself. The issue boils down to his appetite. His claim of trading his conviction is vain. Does one trade one's conviction with "some organism"? his actions ofcourse cannot be against the gods'. He is a mere tool in the hands of the gods in the exercise of her will.

The cannibalism of the pawns on the girl child is so pronounced in Saleh's decision to sell Habiba to survive: "so what was his final decision on the issue? Did he need therefore to sacrifice one of his own for the others to survive? It is believed that when hunger pushes one to the abyss, that one is capable of feeding on his fellow man to survive,

and where there is no other but one self, one resort to eating one's own flesh to keep the heart alive. This sort of behavioural manifestation of man were often inexplicable, they were called survival of the wise" (127). Worugji & Simon (2018) in their work "Apartheid, Patriarchal Domination and the female Search for Self in Tsi Tsi Dagaramba's Nervous condition" enunciate the trade by barter experiences of the female child in general. The work reveals the traditional essence of the girl child as a commodity for the family upkeep among other issues raised against the existence and freedom of the girl child.

Many questions are begging for answers. What criteria did he use in choosing Habiba as the meal for his survival and those of his household. Do you sacrifice your most prized possession at the slightest provocation of discomfort? How wise was this survival maneuvers? How genuine his pride of boasting to Zubairu of his ability to survive? Why did he not send his male children into slavery as he was selling Habiba in order to get Zubairu's money to protect Habiba; his best "flesh"? How genuine was his intention in going to borrow money from Zubairu whom he knows was looking for the slightest opportunity for him to pawn Habiba in the case of his failure to pay? Since when did Zubairu become a family member to Saleh as to make him not to make plans to service the loan? "he saw him more like a member of the family so he would settle the outsiders first before the 'home debt', after all 'blood they say, is thicker than water'" (118). His action is premeditated. He had already traded Habiba in his heart the moment he began seeing Zubairu as a family member and a 'blood' as he was only playing the script of his god. He was only looking for philosophical grounds to excuse himself but he can't be excused. He is a culprit in the exploitation of Habiba.

The exclusive preservation of the men or boys by the god is not a matter of superiority but that of opportunity cost. Just like in the game of chess, the pawns are the ones who protect, the queen and attack the enemies. The capturing of all the pawns leaves the queen unprotected and open for the enemy's assault. This analogue applies to the boys and men. Both the boys and the girls are objects of exploitation by the gods but without the boys or men the gods' enterprise will be ruined. So we can understand why the male children of Saleh were not the ones to be sold out. In fact, they are quietly trained to step into the shoe of their father as pawns for the protection of the gods. We see that the male

children were the ones that were positioned to ensure that Habiba and Umami don't escape. "That night, Habiba and Umami could not escape from the house as Saleh had suspected their every move from the moment he had mentioned the matter to her. he had told the boys to watch their every movement. ... Baba Audu actually saw Habiba as she made for the *zaure* and called his father. "Baba," was all he needed to say and in a flash, Saleh was right in front of the frozen girls. (135). They are already playing their roles as the second generation priests in the shrine of the gods.

Apart from Saleh and his sons, Zubairu is another pawn in this game of exploitation. He is a master exploiter with a bourgeoisie's mind. He uses his resources to gain more wealth and deprive others of joy in life while he swells in it. Hear him: "as for his new found blossom, Mal. Zubairu reflected and grinned like a shy school child at the thought of Habiba. To him, old age was something dreadful and a constant reminder of the fact that one was on the verge of expiration. To handle that, he needed a blossoming youth that he found in the girl, Habiba. The freshness of youth was to him magical and as the saying goes 'an old wine put in a new bottle', was all that one needed to spice up one's life" (116). Zubairu is a powerful priest who is pained because of his economic might. The gods introduce their sacrifice to him and he rushed to the meal. However, he cannot eat it without a price. His money is his price. He uses his money to make others uncomfortable and in the process derived his happiness. This exploitation of the girl child cannot be disconnected from economic powers of the priest which is harnessed by the gods for their benefit. Bennett again avers that; "Although it would be absurd to suggest that poverty causes gender-based violence, it is true that poverty creates an environment of vulnerability for women in which escape from violence is much more difficult than it is in better resourced environment. Poverty is also characterised by poor access to education ... and this might contribute to the normalisation of gender roles in which legitimacy for gender-based violence is increased." (95) the exploitation of Habiba by the god through her priest is facilitated by the fact that she lacks education and economic power to take care of herself.

As an old man who has spent his own life, he will not accept the expiration call of age. He would rather choose to use his money to exploit the tender gold crop's tendril in Habiba as offered to him by the

gods. He quenches the flickers of life in her to ensure his happiness. Zubairu is a metaphor of economic exploiters of the girl child. He uses his money to keep the girl child continuously subjugated. He is evil and will not trade his happiness for even the happiness of his own son who needed a wife after the death of his own wife. Zubairu had a thought of giving Habiba to his son; Liman but fought it strongly. “ in his head, a voice told him to relinquish the girl Habiba to Liman and he jumped up from his lying position as if the suggestion came from other voice in the room. “No”! he said to himself. “Everyone should look for his own happiness”” (114).

A close look at Zubairu’s thought reveals deep layers of exploitation and evil meted by the men as pawns on the girl child for the servicing of their ego and existence. We see the issue of the magic that his marriage to Habiba will do to his life. This concept is what we have referred to earlier as put forward by Joe de Graft. Indeed the girl child is the magical lamb that must be sacrificed for the continued domination of the man as pawns in the exploitation of the girl child. This magic in our world today has been demystified. It is not magic. It is VVF. The girl child is subjected to this pain while the man like the pawn in the chess game goes forward conquering more for his god. The trauma of the girl child in the hands of the men is multifaceted. She can be thrown out from the house any time.

All the players knew that Zubairu’s marriage to Habiba was her death sentence. Even in the family, after the announcement, the mood was that of the death of a member of the family: “a sudden hush fell on the house. It was as if another member of the family had died and had to be mourned.” (131)

The pretence of Saleh is further revealed in the way he handled Habiba’s education with Zubairu nonchalantly. ““take the child, but send her to school”. He turned his back and began to walk away” (127). If Habiba’s education was his primary concern, would he not at least deliberate that and at least arrive at a conditional agreement for the marriage. It reveals cowardice and nonchalant.

Even Habiba can spot Sadia’s pretence. She would not even object to the idea of marrying Habiba out when her husband mentions it. “in her sorrow, she thought of Sadia and wondered sadly why the woman who acting mother to her and Ummi could not say a word to her about what was going on. Was she behind all that was happening? Could

she not say some words of comfort to her or dissuade her father from carrying out his plans?” (133).

The women are trans-generational exploiters while the men are trans-generational facilitators of the exploitation. Hamsatu and Sadia represents grandmother and mother- the exploiters, while Zubairu and Saleh – grandfather and father are the facilitators of the exploitation. It is a systematized process. The grandmother trains the mother and the mother trains the child. The train is revealed thus: “Talatu came some five weeks later to tell Habiba of her husband’s kindness to them. Habiba and Ummi looked at one another, when they heard what the girl had to say. Evidently, the girl had not visited them to see how they were or even to tell them of Zubairu’s kindness five or six weeks ago. They could almost swear that Talatu was in the house to see Alhaji Zubairu for more supplies.” (166). Talatu is now in the exploitation training process just like her mother was fully trained by her grandmother. Nothing validates what we are saying than the innocent thought and observation of Habiba: “she could not place her father or Alhaji Zubairu for that matter in all of these, because they seem like float on the surface of an ocean that were tossed by the vicissitude of greed, cowardice and selfish that determined their every action.” (169). Indeed, they are mere floats. The girl child is subjected to exploitation by the women because of their greed, cowardice and selfishness.

Conclusion

This paper set out to deconstruct the notion of patriarchal dominance in general and specifically in northern Nigeria. The general notion in feminist discourse sees the man as an impediment to the growth and advancement of womenfolk. Through a close reading of the text, *Habiba*, the paper refutes this basing it authority on the findings. The female, (in this case the girl child) is sacrificed by the gods (the older women) and the men are only priests who execute orders. Habiba the protagonist is exploited by her grandmother, stepmother and biological mother while their biddings are carried out by the male folk. Her oppressions and that of her sister are carried out by the women. The oppression of women by fellow women or intra-gender oppression enhances gender inequality as women utilize men to victimize their fellow women. The role of the men is dependent upon the sanctions or

orchestrations of the women therefore one can conclude that the men are priests who carry out the biddings of the gods (the women).

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