

# COUNTERING CULTURAL TERRORISM ON WOMEN IN AFRICA: AN INTERROGATION OF BINEBAI'S *KARENA'S CROSS*

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## **Abstract**

Nigeria is swamped with several acts of violence emanating from political, ethnic, religious, tribal and cultural practices which have created problems for the society. However, long before the very popular acts of terrorism spread in Nigeria, certain traumatic and frightening situations have been on-going, among which is women subjugation. In recent times, it is rampant, trivialised and without concealment in Nigeria. It has ascribed oppression, lack of self will and slavery at all levels. A handful of counter-terrorism theories have emerged towards women liberation and several other methods adopted by committed feminist writers countering the threats posed on women, drama is one of such methods. This paper examines the calculated creative input of playwrights to reprimand the various acts of terror on women in the Nigerian space. The paper engages a literary methodological approach to interrogate Binebai's *Karena's Cross* essentially, to drive home several concerns about issues of terrorism rooted on cultural practices harmful to the female gender orchestrated by the patriarchy. The investigation reveals the several negative practices that are deep seated in culture, aimed at advancing male dominance and inequality in society. It recommends the creation of a strong theatre culture in Nigeria, to key into the influential social discourse and clarifications imbedded in drama. This will be a worthy proactive defensive move for the disintegration of such customs and traditions. It concludes that women must also develop a large heart to confront those issues that question their very existence. Only resilient women with the inclination to rise and be free can counter terrorism against the female gender.

## **Introduction**

Terrorism has eaten deep into all spheres of human existence, it suggests primarily the issues of pain, trauma, hate, and stimulates violence from the individual or group victimised. From the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present time, terrorism has become a word on the lip of every Nigerian and the world beyond. The more attempts we make to give an acceptable definition of the term terrorism, the more we realise that consciously or unconsciously we have been terrorised and have also terrorised others and the more complex the term becomes. According to Antonia Ward, "terrorism remains a contested term". As true as this statement is, certain features and acts dominate the various attempts made to define terrorism. Hence, Jenkins' view will provide an insight to the discourse.

In his word, "...terrorism is violence or the threat of violence calculated to create an atmosphere of fear and alarm – in a word, to terrorise – and hereby bring some social or political change" (cited in Kegley 28).

The above definition captures the harmful effect of terrorism which makes it an issue of national and global consideration. Therefore, whatever causes pain and fear to an individual, a body or group but benefits the initiator is an act of terrorism. How then could cultural practices be linked to terrorism? Culture is an aspect of human society that an individual cannot avoid; it provides the foundation of human existence and every living being has a form of identification; in language, dressing, food, norms and so on. Spencer rightly observes that:

Culture is fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that Influence each member's behaviour and his/her Interpretations of the meaning of other people's behaviour (258).

Consequently, the culture of an individual holds the most vital aspect of such an individual's life, as its practices turn out to be the very first set of laws a person is subjected to and as such, form the basis for human operations. Favourable to some and cruel to others in its offers, so long as such an individual or group exists, the law or ordinances must take its full cause. This have short-changed and limited certain people, deny them of their right, their will and liberty over themselves. What this means is that, the oppressed is forced to accept situations presented hook line and sinker. Any attempt to go contrary, the same cultural laws will be evoked. This is very typical of the African woman's experiences. Thus victimisation and physical abuses that often have women stuck in the margin increases. According to United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) "in a patriarchal society girls and women are often discriminated by culture" (Mattebo et al. 4). Cultural practices initiated by human turn out to be in favour of the male folk in its approach and technique, male dominant society, indiscriminate violence and abuse of women and their human right. These cultural manifestations are the underpinning influences of female oppression, subjugation and other forceful conditions organised and adopted against women in various levels which qualifies its practices as terrorism. Within the context of the word, terrorism is any act that promotes women exploitation, crush their strength, dignity and silence their voices, living others to decide their fate without their consent in all spheres of society. This is a point Shihada makes that, "women are victims of patriarchy fortified by religion, traditions and culture" (167). Promoting female subjugation and a male dominance society, is further built upon from Okolo's vivid representation of what religion entails:

Religion for the traditional African is an inseparable dimension of his life. He is deeply religious. His traditional religion has important claims on his beliefs, conduct, attitudes and feelings (18).

Okolo's submission on religion strongly shows that indeed the culture, religion and tradition as enumerated by the scholarly opinion of Shihada, combine to re-create a woman's world in a negative sense and projects a social imagery that is terribly harmful to women. Most interestingly, some women are inclined towards self-actualisation thus, struggle and resistance is demonstrated. It is on this basis that the selected text, *Karena's Cross* shall be examined.

### **Conceptualisation of Terrorism**

In scholarship diverse outlooks have been put forward on the concept of terrorism all in an attempt to give a clearer understanding or insight to the ideas behind it. This is necessitated by the various areas of life its activities are displayed. During the French Revolution in the 1790s, as a result of the several acts of terror the term terrorism was first coined and used by the French revolutionaries on their rivals. Wisniewski defines terrorism as, "... violence against peacetime targets or in war against non-combatants" (230). There is a common agreement with this definition and that of Stern which affirms terrorism as, "an act or threat or violence against non-combatants with the objective of exacting revenge, intimidating or otherwise influencing an audience" (20). These definitions can be further captured in the *Nigerian Terrorism Act* of 2011 that terrorism means: an act which is intentionally done and results to all or any of the following:

- May seriously harm or damage a country or an International organisation
- Is intended or can reasonably be regarded as having been intended to seriously intimidate a population
- It involves or causes, as the case may be, an attack upon a person's life which may cause serious bodily harm or death (section 1.2).

A complex phenomena that has become frequently in use because of the devastating condition it lives on its victims. *Merriam Webster's Deluxe Dictionary* notes terrorism as "... the systematic use of terror especially as a means of coercion" (1906). This is very metaphoric of the Nigerian woman's fate. The African Union (AU) on the definition of terrorism notes thus:

Any act which is a violation of the criminal laws of a State Party and which may endanger the life, physical integrity or freedom of, or cause serious injury or death to any person... calculated or intended to: (i) intimidate, put fear, coerce or induce any government, body, institution, the general public or any segment thereof, to do or abstain from doing any act, or to adopt or abandon a particular standpoint, or to act according to certain principles; or (ii) disrupt any public service, the delivery of any essential service to the public or to create a public emergency; or (iii) create general insurrection in a State (cited in Oyeniyi 2-3).

On this study on terrorism, the medical profession is not left out, it states that "terrorism is the intentional use of violence-real or threatened-against one or more non-combatants and/or those services essential for or protective of their health, resulting in

adverse health effects in those immediately affected and their community, ranging from loss of well-being or security to injury, illness, or death” (cited in Gregor 29).

Taking the aforementioned definitions into consideration in the Nigerian space, Africa and the world at large, terrorism is all encompassing. As long as the use of force, intimidation and any kind of violence is used for the attainment of one’s selfish goals, it is an act of terror. On this backdrop, kidnappers, ISIS militia group of the Northern Nigeria, militants of the Niger Delta region of the Southern, armed robbers, female genital cutting/mutilators, child marriage, rapists, child trafficking and several other acts of intentional injustices, can be comfortably grouped as terrorism.

### **Counter Terrorism**

Counter terrorism focuses on proactive measures, strategies, plans and ideas that could help to control or curb the causes of these inhuman practices that reduces the quality of life and silences the voices of its victims. These counter terrorism or anti-terrorism measures could come from the individual terrorised, a group, a non-governmental organisation or the Government in a terrorised space. In most cases, anti-terrorism strategies are conceived of in physical terms involving the use of guns. However, there are other major counter approaches such as diplomatic moves and creative interpretation of life. A case in point is that of South Africa. After the denouncement of Apartheid by the International community, in 1961, South Africa was forced to withdraw from the British Commonwealth by Member States that were against the Apartheid system.

Also, a selective economic sanction was forced on the country in 1985, a sanction which isolated it from other countries. This was an anti-terrorism strategy against the racial policy, by the government of the United States and Great Britain. These are instances of diplomatic moves.

Creative interpretation of life by dramatists, such as, Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona commendably added their voices through creative representation of life in South Africa as an anti-Apartheid means. Leshoai has this to say about *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, one of the finest South Africa plays that served as anti-terrorism strategy during the Apartheid regime:

Though there have been plenty of books, films and documents in the past twenty years outlining or illuminating different areas of repression and distortion in South African life caused by apartheid, the recent season of plays by or involving Athol Fugard at the Royal Court provides the first sustained attempt in the struggle to show British theatre audience the terrible effects of the regime in human terms, reaching into the most personal areas of life (125).

These among other measures mounted within and outside the environment of terror in South Africa, led to the dismantling of the marginalisation in South Africa in the early 1990’s. The implication of the above instances is to further establish that to counter terrorism combatant confrontations involving the use of arms and ammunitions should be played down and the root causes of the struggle or hate is resolved.

Consequent on the above, it could be posited that even the prevailing Boko Haram insurgency can as well be tackled by engaging dramatic representation. We will agree with Feltman's opinion on attempt to proffer solution to the growing act of terror and insecurity created by the Boko Harams, when he posit that: "to bring an end to the Boko Haram threat in the Lake Chad Basin region, affected countries must address the root causes that contributed to the emergence of the group, including the social, economic and political grievances of marginalised communities" (www.news.un.org). Feltman is speaking from the aspect of dialoguing and identifying the cause of the Boko Haram's struggle. In the words of Rasaki, "struggle is HATE... when a people are oppressed long enough, they grow to hate and fight themselves" (Ogoh 25). A statement that we could also hold as the root cause of the fast globalising feminist movement and other agitating groups eager to break free from exploitation. Based on the foregoing, the concept of terrorism, its attachment to culture and counter terrorism have been examined to provide a moving picture of the selected text, Ben Binebai's *Karena's Cross*.

### **Theoretical framework**

This research will be framed theoretically by the feminist theory, from the perspective of Barbara Berg. According to her:

It is the freedom (for a woman) to decide her own destiny: freedom from sex determined role; freedom from society's oppressive restrictions; freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely into action. Feminism demands the acceptance of woman's right to individual conscience and judgment. It postulates that women's essential worth stems from their common humanity and does not depend on the relationships of her life (cited in Okoh 7).

This theory is known to fight patriarchal system and is of the opinion that women are entitled to their liberty and every decision concerning their existence. It calls for a space to determine what happens and how it happens to a woman. It requires the free will for decision making on the several issues touching womanhood. It demands annulment of inequality, oppression and all aspects of social reality that places preference on men in their relationship with women, which promotes gender based discriminatory assessments that affect the female folk. The theory is applicable to this paper because it portrays the wish of women to be free.

### **Synopsis of *Karena's Cross***

*Karena's Cross* is written by Ben Binebai, a monodrama swamped with many themes touching women from all works of life. Geographically, it is located in the Niger Delta province of Nigeria. It tells the story of Karena a girl child discriminated against by the culture of Owei-ama (male dominant society). Karena's several experiences of subjugation and brutality in her natal home orchestrated by her father Nemughan into another cruel face of life in polygamy is vividly reflected in her story of early marriage, female genital mutilation and a forced marriage to Daubri after rape with no sanction meted out to him, as well as teenage widowhood at the death of Daubri. At this

devastating moment of her life, her late husband's sister comes with the idea of taking her to Benin for a better future.

An idea that seems to be a dream come through to the young Karena but only to find out that it is a ploy to send her off to Italy for prostitution. She rejects the offer with the determination to break free from exploitation. In her quest to improve on life, fate leads her to Daniel. Karena gains freedom and change of fortune through her encounter with Daniel a medical doctor who later becomes her husband. Her marriage to Daniel marks a turning point in her life as she gets another opportunity to obtain a formal education and becomes the first lawyer in Owei-ama. Together with her husband she transforms her world as she courageously wrest control over the several issues of exploitation on her womanhood and that of other women in Owei-ama. Upon her found courage she triumphed over repression, attains freedom and brings justice to all the oppressed women of Owei-ama land.

### **Harmful Cultural Practices on Women in Africa**

With inhibiting laws and practices that encourage inequality and promotes all acts of women's slavery, education was an exclusive reserve for men and since the words of men are law, the fate of women is hinged on them. Therefore, a practice such as female genital mutilation is a must for every girl child of Owei-ama, whether willingly or forcefully as the case of Karena the heroine of the play. Alongside early marriage at the age of 13 and the troubles of widowhood at the age of 17, after been forcefully raped by Daubri the man she is betrothed to. An act of violation of a woman's self-will and dignity make light of on cultural grounds that Daubri the rapist has her father's blessings to have her as his wife; hence, his action does not attract any form of punishment. Karena says:

**Karena:** ...A village in which law was culture,  
Culture was law and the makers  
And custodians of culture  
And laws were the men.

It is a village where women  
Lived at the mercy of men... (3).

These words are a manifestation of the inequality between the female and the male folk powered by culture and have become the mode of operation, Ideally, Karena's father should have been her first wall of protection. He should have defended her interest, dreams and aspirations but is rather opposing and forcing the cultural laws on her against her desire to be educated.

**Karena as Nemughan:** Your education is not important.  
All your sisters were given out  
In marriage less than thirteen years.  
They are in their husband's houses  
Taking care of their husbands and children (6).

Obviously, Karena is not the first girl whose education has been thwarted against her wish. Such words from a father can be really painful and frustrating. He further says:

**Karena as Nemughan:** You women are empty possessions.  
Training you is waste of money and time.  
When you get married no one  
Will know you are still my daughter.  
My name will be lost. So why must  
I waste my money training you? (6)

Women in this context are seen as inferior to men and treated with disdain, good to meet sexual needs only. As rightly noted by Fagbolu, “women were thought to be mentally socially and psychologically inferior to men, therefore they had little or nothing to contribute when it came to decision making” (29). A very negative ploy targeted at women and is been expressed culturally, politically and even religiously. Hence, Bressler posits that, “they must also reject the notion that marriage is a woman’s-ultimate goal... they must reject that women are mindless weepy, passive, helpless creatures who must wait for a man to come and make their life meaningful” (cited in Azunwo and Kalio 110).

While the teenage girl is thinking of a better tomorrow, her father is busy trading for his selfish interest in the name of fulfilling cultural conditions.

**Karena as Nemughan:** My daughter every  
Age has its ceremony.  
As our customs demand  
You will soon be circumcised.  
We shall celebrate your circumcision  
Ceremony to make some money  
For the family and you will  
Thereafter be given out in marriage (5).

The young heroine, Karena, is subjected to this inhuman, deadly and barbaric act of genital cutting as custom demands and her description of is vivid:

**Karena:** The old women took me to  
A bathroom for the circumcision.  
A woman with a big buttock  
Carrying a weight I can’t struggle  
To lift and throw away  
Sat on my chest. Two other women  
Held my two arms backward  
And pressed them down while others  
Held my two legs down with resolute force.  
The woman who did the

Circumcision sat on my lower abdomen.  
Six of them held me down to do the  
Circumcision. I shouted madly, I bled and  
Fainted several times.  
It was the cruellest  
Breed of genital cutting (12).

Judging from this scenario, one would be tempted to ask the question of who carries out the ritual of genital cutting on the young girls, is it not the same women? It becomes clear that *Karena's Cross* also portrays intra-gender terrorism. This simply affirms the level of slavery these women have been subjected to. It speaks of lack of choice and voice. This is reminiscent of the negative practices in culture, which its beneficiaries have refused to abolish despite the several attempts made by Government and non-governmental agencies. Tied to the belief that the mutilated genitalia is what arouses sexual emotions and discontent in women and in an attempt to tame these ones, such harsh treatment is meted out whereas, their male counterparts with complete sexual libido goes on to marry as many women as they wish in the process of exploring their sexuality; a practice that has claimed the lives of several young girls who lack the power to bear its torture and brutality. This has as well left some infected with terminal diseases contracted through the process of genital mutilation. In the words of Ifijeh:

...of concern is that the law is not new in many states where laws were passed criminalising FGM/C several years ago, and FGM/C is still practiced openly in those states with enforcers of the law and even governmental officers looking the other way, as they do not want to be caught interfering with cultural and religious practices (19).

This has affected women on the area of marriage, on the realisation of the same men that such women who undergo the act of circumcision cannot meet the sexual demand of their spouses, a cultural condition that has multiplied the sorrow of victimised women.

While trying to comprehend the pains of circumcision, she is confronted with the issue of child marriage. According to Awogbade, child marriage “is a common practice in Nigeria among both Christians and Muslims, but notably with higher prevalence among the Hausa Muslims of Northern Nigeria” (3). In the case of *Karena* at the age of thirteen all strategies including rape is adopted to have her submit to the brutality of *Owei-ama*. She becomes an object of sexploitation. As *Karena* puts it:

**Karena:** ... the worst form of suffering is  
The one that has no known  
Time of cessation.  
The storm of  
Collective villainy  
Fell upon my virgin life at  
*Owei-ama* and frustrated it.



I became a helpless  
Puppet dancing to the string of destiny.  
I lived in constant fear, frustration,  
Humiliation and hardly remember  
My dream of life before marriage...  
Life become dark and frustrating (19-20).

This is the chief form of subjugation women are forced into in our society, the issue of rape floods the media on a daily basis. So, many young girls are suffering its trauma and pain as we speak. As portrayed by the playwright, *Karena's* rape speaks for the several forms of rape cases trivialised. Since the concern is on the issue of marriage as established by cultural laws, a man can have a woman raped and at worse marry her. A very crafty and unfavourable law, which lives her with no better choice:

**Karena:** ...from my circumcision I found myself in  
The village clinic, from the village clinic,  
I returned home to be married to a man  
Old enough to be my father.  
Love, pride  
And dignity of womanhood  
Collapse for the triumph of greed  
Empowered by culture (14).

As a point of fact, these teenage girls begin to live a false life because they have been entrapped in marriage brought upon them by the selfish passion of a group of people via culture. Void of mental, psychological and emotional preparedness. The future turns bleak, clouded with uncertainty and fear of the unknown. Overman submits that, “when a woman is deficient of the independent capacity to assert her own positive truths and values, she is unable to contribute her insights and experiences to the various fields of human knowledge...” (iv). All the women in *Karena's Cross* suffer this traumatic absurdity of subjugation and accept to live and die in it. They were mentally enslaved with the knowledge that their voices would never be heard in the history of existence with the collapse of their future and the triumph of greed and selfishness as *Karena* berates it as being “...empowered by culture” (19). She expresses her emotional as well as psychological displeasure over her marriage in the following lines:

**Karena:** My marital emotions were not propelled,  
They died but my human  
Emotions remained active.  
I became a full-time housewife  
After my father has collected dowry  
From emissaries sent to  
Him by my abductor husband.  
What came as a surprise to me

Was that I am an *Ayoro*,  
The latest bride in the  
Company of seven older wives (18).

Karena bears different crosses in the text showing the Africa woman's plight within her culture. If culture is our pride, can a girl child/woman who has passed through the fierceness of its practices still profess it? It is absolutely not possible. In the midst of this terror, the dreams of Karena remain fresh, unlike other women who completely surrender to the prevailing oppression of those obnoxious laws.

**Karena:** My story is a story of struggle  
Against the mortal flood of oppression;  
It is a story of vision and mission.  
A story in which I, a thirteen-year old girl  
Struggled through the storm to  
Develop and own a voice.  
I fought against a war of  
Inferiority because I was  
Never born to be inferior.  
I fought to illuminate my world  
Because I was not born to be in the dark...  
My world depicts a cross of  
Suffering and a cross of rejection,  
A culture-imposed suffering.  
Karena's cross is the cross  
Of all oppressed women (43).

Through the character of Karena, the playwright affirms women's stance against tension and repressive systems of government that suppress women in decision making process at all levels of society. From the analysis of Ben Binebai's *Karena's Cross*, we see women represented by the vocal female character, Karena, as people under finely tuned treat, thwarted and subjected to traumatic, emotional and psychological conditions, under the dictate of patriarchal slavery. The several ordeals of Karena reveal the terrorist tendencies that should be dislodged from cultural traditions. Starting from the inhuman cultural practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), to the case of rape to forcefully pull her into the marital circle at the age of thirteen and Karena laments over her predicament:

**Karena:** I vowed not to accept  
The forced marriage  
Despite the rape because it  
Was not inwardly driven.  
I cried in gruelling pain until  
I slept off.  
The next morning I was hungry

So the old women under the  
Pretext of being nice prepared me food.  
After eating I had no inner and  
Outward steer to resist the  
Marriage proposal anymore.  
My resistance died  
Through the ritual way.  
They used African magic on me.  
I was not better than a glove-puppet... (17).

Having entangled her in this cultural web, she is forced to accept her fate in marriage and suffered more at the death of her husband.

**Karena:** The day my husband's body was  
To be committed to mother earth,  
The allegation that I  
Killed him intensified.  
The elders of the family then resolved  
That to prove my innocence,  
I must drink the water with which my  
Husband's body was washed....  
It was hard choice in a hard circle.  
But I managed to drink the water.  
Everyone thought I would die but  
I survived... (26-27).

This cruel practice is still on in most African nations, including Nigeria. One would think that Karena's torment would end at the death of Daubri, her husband; but it continued in other forms. She is confronted with widow inheritance, being regarded as a property of the family:

**Karena:** On the day my husband's assets  
Were shared nothing was given to me.  
His new block building which  
He completed with the sweat of  
Our hard labour was taken  
By his elder brother.  
I was also shared like a property to  
This elder brother of  
His who was in union  
With his mother to accuse  
Me of killing Daubri.  
I lost my marital sovereignty  
And self-determination... (27).

The woman is treated like a baton passed on from one athlete to another in a relay race, and her chances to be a part of her rightful entitlement is dependent on denial of dignity. The dreams of a young girl are shattered living her with an identity that infringes more pain on her. She summarises her experiences in a few words:

**Karena:** My glow as a woman of  
Self-respect faded very  
Fast and died. I became an  
Object of ridicule,  
Powerless and voiceless,  
Emotionally traumatised  
By the brutalities,  
The criminalising campaign,  
Blackmail and rejection from  
My husband's family.  
As a widow I experienced  
Deprivation, subjugation  
And humiliation.  
I was avoided like a  
Plague and detested like  
The most horrible witch in the world... tragedy  
Blew every day and every minute.  
I experienced marriage in  
All its inglorious ways.  
I gained consciousness from the  
Drinking of the water with which my  
Husband's corpse was watched.  
My heart was filled  
With pain and hatred  
Towards those who abducted me (24).

In all the nations of the world where crisis is prominent, the terrorist tendencies experienced by the people over time, especially those in the minority can be considered as some of the major motivational factors that provoke revolt and other forms of violence proclivity. As portrayed by the dramatist's uncompromising stand, the salient issues raised in the play are aimed at restructuring cultural extremism and adds its voice to the struggle for women's liberation.

### **Conclusion**

Having considered the textual analysis of the selected text, the Owei-ama (male dominant) culture which is a symbolism of a typical African culture is unacceptable and

too sentimental in its methodology. It also lash out the limitation placed on the girl child's education, female genital mutilation, forceful as well as early marriage strongly empowered by culture and the mental, physical and psychological dislocation of womenfolk. *Karena's Cross* reveals the fact that men are out to dominate their world which is why women exploitation prevails. However, this could not have been achievable if not for the cultural affiliation. In view of the above, to curb female oppression and attain liberation from their male counterpart, particularly culturally implemented acts and traditions that only hold sway on women and have them reduced to a disadvantageous situation should first be abolished. Just as *Karena* gives a voice of liberation to all women in Owei-ama, women in Nigeria and generally in Africa can also displace the several institutions that hinder their existence and self-actualisation as the play advocates.

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