

Sexual Predators or Preys: Inter-Racial Sexual Relationships in Jude Dibia's Novels

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<http://dx.doi.org//10.4314/ujah.v17i1.1>

Abstract

Traditional gender role assignment perceives sexual predation as specifically male with the female as the prey while colonial studies usually interpret the West as predatory with Africa as its prey. Using the psychoanalytical concept of “othering”, this paper studies inter-racial sexual relations/relationships in Jude Dibia’s novels – Unbridled, Walking with Shadows, and Blackbird – to show that the role of prey or predator is not domiciled with any gender or race but in the individual. The definition of prey/predator is greatly influenced by immediate environment. Both men and women could be sexual preys and/or predators given their socio-economic standing, socio-cultural and religious positioning or beliefs/practices. Dibia in his novels shows how sexual behaviours, identities, and perceptions are defined and redefined depending on where the centre or margin is located at the point of definition.

Key words: *sexual predation, race, othering, and masculinity.*

Introduction

Predation generally referring to the strategizing, capture, killing and devouring of organisms by other organisms also metaphorically covers some human behaviours. Predation has systemized mechanisms and is a calculated process involving aggression. Sexual predation in humans has over time been associated with or taken to simply refer to child sexual abuse, rape or domestic violence but, so many other behaviours which are subtly aggressive also

qualify as sexual predation. Staik opines that the negative cultural understanding of masculinity wherein dominance is eroticized in sexual relations has led many men and women to believe in and build their lives around men adopting unhealthy behaviours and ideals such as:

*Sex is a weapon for personal gain to prove superiority via dominance (versus a key aspect of emotional intimacy in a couple's relationship).

*Primary goal is to 'win' by overpowering the will of another, to ensure they know 'their place' – and sex is a secondary goal.

*Main pleasure is derived from causing (emotional) pain to the other, i.e., tricking or manipulating them for own gratification.

*The other is seen as a weak or defective 'object' without feelings, thoughts, opinions, etc., of their own.

*Love is regarded as overall sex-focused, sex is equated with intimacy, and emotional-intimacy is tactically avoided.

*Women only respect men who dominate them, and respect is associated or equated with obedience (Staik).

The above list is a compilation of sexually predatory behaviours and ideals. But, while Staik sees these as basically emanating from men, Carroll shows that these behaviours are not gender specific. Women can exhibit the same unhealthy sexual behaviours as men and for the same reasons too. Again, given the evolution in sexual identities and the blurring of gender roles in recent times, pegging specific sexual behaviours on particular genders proves problematic.

A look at the presence of the West in African fiction over time has acquired the trend of writers presenting western characters as constituting avenues for either oppression or predation – a way of reflecting some of the down sides of

colonialism. With the exception of writers like Camara Laye who set out to rewrite the Western versus African colonial experience in his *Radiance of the King*, most African writers are seen in their works to present the suffering African at the mercy of a heartless West.

In his three novels written so far – *Walking with Shadows*, *Unbridled*, and *Blackbird* – Jude Dibia is concerned with sexuality and sexual relationships between and/or among individuals and groups. His efforts to ensure the sexual presence of white males in his novels and to pitch them against the black (both males and females) are remarkable. Dibia gives two angles to viewing the white male in his novels. Sometimes he is the prey; at other times, he is the predator; and in some occasions, he is both prey and predator or neither. His black counterparts are also given the same treatment, which goes to say that the role of prey or predator is not domiciled in any particular race.

Theoretical Framework

When Eagleton summarizes Jacques Lacan's angle to psychoanalysis as that which "permits us to explore the relations between the unconscious and human society" (173), the picture of social relations ordered by the workings of the mind is concretized. Lacan reinterprets Freudianism in terms of language – a predominantly social activity and in so doing, the unconscious becomes "a particular effect of language, a process of desire set in motion by difference" (Eagleton 173). This difference/otherness is occasioned through naming – language use and, John Storey adds, "the cultural repertoire we encounter in our everyday existence" (90). This goes to say that what is called the unconscious and the human behaviour stemming from it are informed by the environment

(society). Eagleton captures the human relationship with this otherness through the unconscious manifesting in actions thus:

...our unconscious desire is directed towards this Other, in the shape of some ultimately gratifying reality which we can never have; but it is also true for Lacan that our desire is in some way always *received* from the Other too. We desire what others--our parents, for instance--unconsciously desire for us; and desire can only happen because we are caught up in linguistic, sexual and social relations--the whole field of the 'Other'--which generate it (174).

In essence, the differences in humans creates in them a longing for or revulsion towards that which differentiates them. It is based on this understanding of the push-and-pull force of difference that communities are formed: likes/sameness attracts and maintains a bond which keeps "unlikes"/"unsameness" out, making them spectacles to be treated specially or handled separately. The bond creates a "we" and/versus "them/other" way of classification. This psychoanalytical concept of "othering" is utilized in teasing out the meanings of the frictions in the sexual relationships in the novels examined, especially those of inter-racial nature where what draws attention to the sexual relationship is the difference in the races of the characters.

Homosexuality and Predation in *Walking with Shadows*

The gay relationships between the blacks and whites in *Walking with Shadows* show that predatory practices are not fixed to any particular environment. Dibia is not subjective or biased in his views about homosexuality. On the larger scale, however, the West is presented as being more tolerant of homosexuality, hence, the gay protagonist, Adrian/Ebele

Njoko, is forced to relocate to London where he hopes to live the life that is free of sexual discrimination. Before this, the Nigerian society, both men and women, and the church form a formidable predatory force against him. Ebele suffers gay bashing, social alienation in his work place and rejection from his family. Although his family later begins to sympathize with him, he relocates: what he needs is not their sympathy but their understanding, acceptance and full integration into their lives.

While Ebele seeks healing by migrating to the West, Dibia does not give the impression that all is rosy with gay relationships there or with the ones between the blacks and whites in Nigeria. Ebele's relationship with Antonio, his Spanish lover in Nigeria, does not turn out well. Antonio betrays Ebele and leaves him broken hearted. To cure his broken heart, Ebele gets married and tries to get along with Ada, his wife and their daughter, Ego. Antonio gets reckless after he parts with Ebele, has multiple partners and sex without protection. He is HIV-positive and is slowly but surely dying by the end of the novel. The picture of Antonio does not subscribe to either prey or predator in the text, even when he is the one that breaks Ebele's heart. Relationships fall apart every day and since the text does not go into details on what transpired to make Antonio leave Ebele, it is best taken as a gay relationship gone sour. There is nothing to suggest that either Antonio or Ebele was using the other. Therefore, in their relationship, none is prey or predator. They had it rosy while the relationship lasted. That Ebele goes to see Antonio before leaving the country to offer him forgiveness for breaking his heart is an evidence of their quality time together. Antonio can also not be strictly classified as a predator in his other relationships with black men. His reason for multiple partners: "Too many beautiful black men, so little time" (Dibia 247), portrays him as reckless and not as calculating,

scheming or predatory. He is simply attracted to that which is different from him and goes after it with his eyes closed to the precautions he could have taken to safeguard his life. So, in the end, he pays for his recklessness and not for moving out of his “we” to the “other” circle. Ironically, being a Spanish in Nigeria questions his being a “we” and his Nigerian sex partners the “other”.

Dibia uses George and Johan to examine the opportunistic tendencies of some people who are or profess to be gay and who try to live out their dreams against all odds by moving from a country that is homophobic like Nigeria. George runs away from Nigeria with his German boyfriend, Johan. They get married in Germany and live happily for ten years. George’s mother dies and he is in Nigeria for her burial with complaints of being tired of Johan. He wants to get a new relationship with another foreigner because Johan is becoming too old for him. Suddenly, the fifteen years age difference means much to him only because he has used Johan to get out of the country, get German citizenship and a good job in Germany. The complaints he gives of being marginalized because of his colour sounds hollow since they only come up as an excuse for him to leave Johan. Suggestions from Abdul and Adrian to come back to the country are not welcome – he misses the Nigeria of his dreams where everything worked well and the citizens are contented and happy. He would rather stay in Germany (where he claims to suffer from racial discrimination/marginalization) and find a new lover/partner. It is obvious that Johan is the prey while George is the predator. Johan, like Antonio, is drawn into the relationship by George’s difference – his beautiful black body. Interestingly, George takes Johan to his own country to exploit him there and runs home to Nigeria to re-strategize on how to find the next prey. George is not like Clarence in Camara Laye’s

Radiance of the King whose role as the prey is enhanced by his strange African environment.

Unbridled: Migration as Panacea for Predation?

In *Unbridled*, the use of migratory trends in destabilizing the location of the predatory behaviour is seen in the protagonist's, Ngozi's, movements. Continuously raped by her father, Akadike Akachi, from when she is six years old, Ngozi has to be sent away to live with her uncle in Lagos. So, her first movement is from her village, Ezi, to the city of Lagos. At this level, the popularly held idea of a pristine rural life which is usually destroyed by the malevolent city upheld by writers like Obiechina, Palmer, Hassan, Jimoh, and Weinstein, proves untrue. Ngozi's life is already destroyed in the village before she even thinks about the city. She is not lured to the city of Lagos by its charms and bright lights like Jagua Nana in Cyprain Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* but comes there to escape the sexual horrors of the village. In Lagos, Ngozi develops a crush for Gerald Okoro, a rich boy in her neighbourhood. Unhappy with the diversion of attention from her to her brother, Tiffany (Gerald's sister) brings Ngozi's aunt to know of the sexual relationship between Ngozi and Gerald. Consequently, Ngozi is sent out of the house and gets to stay with Precious and Uloma by a stroke of luck. Dark memories from the village still haunt her and send her off to London to marry James.

In the Ngozi-Gerald relationship, it is difficult to define who is the prey and/or the predator. This is because Gerald uses Ngozi as a plaything, a sex pet to occupy his time when he is away from school and the class of girls he is used to while Ngozi enjoys being his pet. Ngozi is captivated by George's charms and awed by the very fact that the rich boy who is the dream of all the girls on the street singles her out for sexual attention. She is aware that theirs will never be the

fairy tale where Cinderella marries the prince but goes along without being pressurized into the relationship. The two of them arrange their secret meetings and look forward to them. In essence, she has no problems with being George's sex machine, so theirs is a relationship of mutual understanding. She says: "I have since come to realize that it was as much my choice what happened between us, as it was Gerald's pleasure. It was a dangerous game we were playing and I could see he relished it completely" (Dibia 140). This takes away the label of predator from George, although it can be argued that his social standing, his difference from Ngozi, gives him an oppressive powerful bargaining chip which Ngozi could not have resisted.

With James King, right from the prologue, a predator is presented. Ngozi/Erika King mistakes a passenger for James, her British husband, and the response this elicits from her is:

I found myself momentarily frozen as cold fear formed goose bumps across my arms and the back of my neck. JAMES, my head kept screaming. James, James, James. He had finally found me. He had come to take me back. His green eyes bore into me like red hot coal... (Dibia 12).

Given this introduction, expectations all through the novel are fixed on finding out what it is about James that chills Erika's blood. His role in the novel has been defined. His gentlemanly manners at the airport when he comes to receive Ngozi/Erika soon give way to the monster within. But, how monstrous is James really when we consider that both he and Ngozi lied to one another about their true identities while chatting online. Instead of twenty-two, Ngozi claims eighteen years old and James twenty-eight, instead of his twenty-two. James also had lied about his financial status and family. So, Ngozi, on

getting to London, has to deal with James' housemates: English-Jamaican Thomas and Nigerian-fortune-seeker-in-London Providence. These share his apartment in order to raise money for the maintenance of the apartment. Ngozi's desires for difference and dreams of a London with the streets of gold are shattered. Her reality is a British husband who is always high on drugs and alcohol and cheats on her too. She is simply his African trophy, a prize won for being a smart internet user. It is not enough that James beats her up and generally treats her badly after stealing all her money and confiscating her passport, Ngozi endures Thomas's exhibitionism and Providence's twisted sexual attraction. Her routine of tiptoeing around the house and hiding from the three men living in the house with her, rightly confers the status of predators on the three men. All three have sexual takes on her and use her as their field for measuring their masculinity. For James, the promise of a marriage certificate, with which he holds Ngozi captive, is his winning chip. For Thomas, it is the huge size of his penis which he loves to show off and which Providence describes as "the only black thing he inherited from his black father" (Dibia 96). Providence relies on his kinship with Ngozi, being a Nigerian.

Providence's reference to Thomas's penis as his only African endowment calls to mind myths of the virile, hyper-sexed African male and sexually loose female, notions strongly influencing the classification of non-white races as exotic when brought up in sexual discussions as are found in Agustin's, D'Emilio, DeMillo and Freedman's and Carroll's works. This is also the same myth Dibia draws on in *Walking with Shadows* when Antonio cannot seem to get enough of beautiful black men until he gets HIV. It is also noticed that Thomas treats his women differently based on the colour of their skins:

It was certainly better than watching Thomas bring in his women from time-to-time or having to endure the noise they produced while in his bedroom. It got to a point when I believed the rumpus they made was intentional, to get my attention. It had its patterns. With white girls he was more discreet, almost quiet. But when he came with a black woman or a woman who was mixed race like himself, there was an effort to make a show for me (Dibia 149).

Thomas utilizes racial difference in establishing his masculinity and in the fight for Ngozi's sexual attention.

In *Unbridled*, what is seen is a lady running from one predator (her black father) to another (a British James) and then from/to others (hybrid/mulatto Thomas and Nigerian Providence). With Ngozi/Erika King running to/from predators--black, white and mixed blood--Dibia makes it clear that any race can be predatory. Again, Erika's Ghanaian neighbour in London, Bessie, confirms with her relationships with her two husbands that predatory habits are not racial. Her first husband, Kwesi (Ghanaian), has abused her both psychologically and physically until she leaves him. She remarries to a white/Romanian, Nicolas, who treats her with love and respect.

Mechanisms of Sexual Predation in *Blackbird*

Blackbird partly shares the same kind of migratory trend in *Walking with Shadows*, only this time it is an American that is involved in the journeys. Edward Wood's presence in Nigeria is initiated by business and not the need for some sort of sexual asylum. Hence, his sexual involvements feature in the novel as part of the philandering life of a sexually overcharged male. His role fluctuates from

predator to prey all through the text showing that in his base elements, man (irrespective of race) is capable of either being predator or prey. In the end, however, when his predatory involvements backfire, he migrates back to his own country leaving a sorry mess behind.

Their differences (racial and financial) bring Edward and Nduesoh together. American, Edward is fascinated by Nduesoh's plain African looks and marries her. Nduesoh overlooks the generation gap between them because her family makes her feel she is fortunate to have seen somebody interested enough in her to ignore her plain looks and marry her. Nduesoh and her family see Edward as their ladder to social heights. In this regard, Edward is preyed upon for financial purposes. However, when he begins to encroach on Omoniyi's territory by taking a sexual interest in Maya, he becomes the predator and the cumulative effect of his actions destroys almost all that he holds dear--his wife (Nduesoh), Oasis Hotel which he manages and his stay in Nigeria. In the end, he has to leave the country since it no longer holds anything of joy for him.

Othoring works in multiples in the Nduesoh-Edward relationship which touches on so many other relationships in the novel. Nduesoh has lived under the anonymity that the lack of a pretty face bestows on women. Her marriage to Edward, according to her family, was her only chance of ever getting married considering her looks. Edward's money and white color confer on her a status she ordinarily would not have had in a place like Nigeria that is controlled by the othoring occasioned by racial difference. So when Edward's attention begins to get captured by beautiful black women, especially Maya, Nduesoh knows she cannot allow anybody to take Edward, her source of power and social relevance, away from her. She seeks vengeance and reaffirms her existence, at least to herself, by raping Maya's husband, a man

the text describes as beautiful. Nduesoh finds her raping of Omoniyi exhilarating, liberating and a lease to new life. Her satisfaction from the rape is multi-faceted: first, her victim is the husband of the woman Edward is trying to displace her with; second, he is handsome/beautiful and as such hers is the triumph of gaining power over the beauty which nature has denied her and for which she has suffered neglect from men (especially good looking men like her victim); third, the feeling of reversal of the traditional/patriarchal roles of who is in control of sexual acts confers on her “a true sense of freedom and control. And rapture” (Dibia 220). Omoniyi is attacked in his place of discharging his duties as a housekeeper by a woman who is socially and economically more powerful than he is. The fact that his penis betrays him by having an erection makes the rape more humiliating for him, especially as Nduesoh abandons him the moment she is satisfied while his erection is still in need of satiation. After the rape, he does not mean anything to Nduesoh and it becomes his obligation to ensure that Edward does not slip away from Nduesoh’s grip by his setting up structures to keep Maya on the leash. This sets off a chain of events that leads to several deaths and casualties in the text, including Nduesoh’s death. It is noteworthy that much of the feeling of worthlessness which Omoniyi feels from the rape arises from the reversal of roles in the act: he has been made by a woman to feel powerless and “as helpless as a woman being violated against her will...How unlike a man he felt in her arms” (Dibia 222). Omoniyi is clearly Nduesoh’s prey. His position here is heightened by his understanding and interpretation of masculinity as being a correlate of violence like Mekgwe observes in Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Fragments*. It is clear that Omoniyi does not react to his rape like the white lady whose rape opens the novel’s prologue. Hired by her black husband, Scorpion and his men come to this unnamed white woman’s

house to murder her and rid the husband of her presence. Her show of fear sexually excites Scorpion and he settles down with his men to rape her in turns before murdering her. While fear paralyses the white woman, it is shame that takes over Omoniyi.

Like Antonio and Johan, Edward is captivated by the black skin:

He loved black. He loved the feel and smell of the African skin. He refrained from using the word exotic to describe the beauty of it. Exotic sounded like a term he would use to describe a rare bird or flower. It also had the ring of old colonial condescension. He had no such notion of Africans; rather he was inexplicably drawn to them. He had been drawn to Nduesoh in this same manner...He could not control his weakness for African women and, like Emmanuel, the night porter, his libido was insatiable (Dibia 199-120).

Edward has money to back up his taste in black women and enjoys the attention his money gets him when women come running to him for what they believe he can offer them. So, his heightened interest and determination to get and conquer Maya is rooted not just in her skin but also in her refusal to run after him like the others. His predatory techniques with Maya include taking an interest in her while she sings at Segun's restaurant, *SìGun Restaurant*; hounding her even after she gives up the job at the club on Omoniyi's order to stay at home and take care of her sick son, Deji; giving her a job to sing in his own hotel; giving Omoniyi a job in Oasis Hotel; taking over Deji's hospital bills; and planning and obtaining international passports and travelling papers with which to take Maya and Deji abroad where she will be available to him alone. They gradually but surely destabilize

Maya's marriage and incur Nduesoh's wrath. Although Omoniyi's hard-headedness and misplaced male ego contribute their large quota to the crippling of his marriage, Edward's machinations serve as the distraction Maya falls back on in the face of Omoniyi's unreasonableness.

Conclusion

Othering/difference – racial, financial, cultural, and social – is seen to be a key factor in aligning the sexual relationships in *Walking with Shadows*, *Unbridled*, and *Blackbird*. Jude Dibia in developing his stories and characters first draw the attention of the reader to their apparent differences before going on to show that these differences are not primarily responsible for the characters positions as preys or predators. Dibia consistently shows in his novels through juxtaposition of the white men against the black that rigid definitions of sexual involvements/relationships are not possible.

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