

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AS A BANE OF WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT IN IGBA OGBOLE'S *MATILDA*

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Women's exploitation refers to any carefully planned and premeditated actions against the female gender on the grounds of sex. One of the most destructive forms of exploitation against women is sexual exploitation; it has two major motives—monetary gains and sexual pleasure. What is seen as just a short moment that divests women of complete control over their bodies, sexual exploitation (or violence) has multifaceted effects on women. Igba Ogole, in *Matilda*, portrays the developmental consequences sexual exploitation pose against women in Nigeria. Through three of his major female characters, Ogbole fictionalizes how the menace of sexual exploitation thwarts women's social and economic growth and development. This review, therefore, expounds on how much sexual exploitation affects women's development and the way around this gender-based crime.

Matilda is a bildungsroman of Ogbole's protagonist, Matilda, who begins her life not only as one of the most adored female descendants of Orokam but also as the star of the famous Queen of the Rosary Secondary School Gboko due to her sterling academic performance and next-to-none outstanding moral conduct. While swimming in the ecstasy of love with her heartthrob Ojonugba, Matilda is traumatized as the young man, overran by greed, lasciviousness, and sheer bestiality, rapes her and consequently impregnates her. This is sexual violence in its crudest manner. This aligns with Nnaemeka Abamara's (2015) assertion that “It (gender-based violence) involves coercion, compulsion, constraint, duress, force, pressure, strength, brutality, savagery, destructiveness, fighting, frenzy, blood thirstiness, murderousness, ferocity, fierceness and forcefulness (p.1). The effects of this display of male bestiality against women are psychological and physical, social and economic. For instance, Matilda's expulsion from the school and Ojonugba's denial of the pregnancy crashes her world, and shatters her dreams; but for the support and sponsorship from her aunt Omabonu and parents, she rises like the fire that was never quenched and becomes the owner of law firms.

Similarly, Ebere is another victim of sexual exploitation in the novel.

As the only daughter in a royal family of six, Ebere insists on premarital purity. But she finds herself in a dilemma—to keep her hymen unbroken or lose Odogwu as a consequence. However, as Ebere recounts, “. . . pushed on by the fervour of our shared love, I gave in to his intense advances and we consummated our love on the eve of his final departure from the town” (p. 206). Odogwu, whose marriage with another woman is unknown to Ebere, impregnates the latter and leaves her in the lurch in a hotel room where she discloses her pregnancy news to him. Ebere only discerns that Odogwu's planned exploitation and betrayal had been veiled in their romance when he roars at her for getting pregnant. She trembles in shock when she learns later from the hotel manager that Odogwu is “a happily married gentleman” and had left the country (p. 208). The effect of Odogwu's sexual exploitation of Ebere is the beginning of the end of her just-begun life. Like Matilda, Ebere's dreams of becoming a geologist only becomes wishful thoughts; she drops out of school to take care of her pregnant self; afterward, she ventures into commercial sex to earn a living until Matilda inspires her to complete her education and take up a decent life.

Also, Ene is caught in Lucas' web of sexual exploitation and betrayal—the philanderer impregnates her and runs away. Like Matilda and Ebere, she is compelled by the circumstances to put aside the pursuit of her dreams. Through the legal expertise of Matilda, Lucas is compelled to take care of Ene during and after the pregnancy period. It is important to emphasize that the sexual oppression in the novel is characteristic of the patriarchal oppression of women in our society. Rape is an effective weapon of gender oppression that has been used and passed down for generations. This resonates with the ideas of radical feminists who object to and oppose the sexual objectification of women, drawing attention to the social implications issues like rape and violence against women have done to society. Hooks (1984) asserts that patriarchy is a “trans-historical phenomenon” that is deeper than every other form of oppression and subordination (p. 64).

In *Matilda*, Ogbole portrays that many patriarchal practices contribute to clogging women's development. The attempted forced marriage Ebere runs away from is another patriarchal practice that inhibits women's growth; but because of the gender complicity against women in the society, she meets her Waterloo—Odogwu. This is why radical feminists question the role culture plays in invigorating and sustaining decimation against women (Hooks, 1984, p. 64). The patriarchal gender relationship is the basic and most fundamental cause of women's oppression. To underscore the effects of sexual exploitation on women's development, Ogbole's characters, realizing the hopelessness and helplessness of their lives, attempt to voluntarily exit the

stage of life. While Matilda takes poison, Ebere tears her body with a razor blade to die.

Ogbole's female characters are endowed with a common trait—female solidarity. In all the cases of sexual exploitation above, female relatives, friends, or even strangers come around to rescue the victims from the brink of death or loss of hope in life. Omabonu turns up for Matilda and Ene; Matilda rescues Ene from the claws of Lucas' devilry. Female solidarity, thus, recaptures the fading dreams of the women in the text, and Matilda becomes a law firm owner. This corroborates Onojobi's (2015) claim that “women's solidarity is critical for effective global framed activism and it is capable of combating male hegemony possibly bridging some of the divides between and among women” (p. 165).

References

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