

# A synoptic analysis of male chauvinism on women in *The Concubine, Efuru and On Black Sisters' Street*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper focuses on abuse meted on the female folks by themselves and their male counterparts using some selected novels. The study aims at examining the various forms and manifestations of abuse on African women and the socio-psychological implications on them. Data analysed in this work are elicited from *The Concubine, Efuru* and *On Black Sisters' Street*, respectively. After descriptive analysis, this paper reveals that abuse of women can be social, verbal and sexual. The study also shows that abuse of any kind affects the victims negatively. One of the significant effects of abuse is that it crushes the individual's self-esteem, thereby hampering her self-confidence and willpower. This psychological disposition does not in any way benefit both the victim or the larger society. The paper finally posits that abuse, therefore, should be done away with for a better and healthier society.

**Keywords:** Abuse, female folk, male folk, sexual abuse, social abuse, verbal abuse.

## INTRODUCTION

Literature is the mirror through which society can be appreciated. One can learn the sociology of the culture of a people through their literature. Taine (2010) asserts that literature is the product of time, race and milieu. As such, we find, for instance, the social upheavals of the time reflected in the writings of the period. This idea is particularly true of African literature, which has over time mirrored social changes in the society among others. Rushdie (2014) commends literature for giving a better version of reality better than official statements/documents which in most cases may cloud historical facts in any giving society. African literature, which has an undercurrent of didacticism, is an instrument through which people can be educated on the existing social contexts.

Precisely, the place of women in society, as well as the attitude of society to women, has variously been mirrored in various literature. Most literatures have shown that, despite their seemingly political and economic autonomy, African women could not be considered as having equal status with their male counterpart. Most African societies

have established a strong chauvinist attitude against women by promoting male superiority. Albert (2009) observes that the image of African women in literature has not, over the years, been detached from the traditional and religious roles assigned to them by their respective societies.

Many literary authors depict women in different forms, some (such as Adichie (2005) and Obidiebube (2015)) in a positive manner, while others (such as Adimora-Ezeigbo (2008) and Unigwe (2009)) do so unpleasantly. However, few writers like Akoma (1979) and Aidoo (1991) have slightly given women a new dimension. These portrayals can be seen in the roles assigned to the female characters and the language used by authors in describing them. In some cases, women are presented to reinforce the traditional stereotypes. The deep prejudices against these women are embedded in socio-cultural, political and economic societal structures and attitudes. However, it is essential to note that the image of the African woman as depicted in African literature is changing. Pre-colonial

literature veils the traditional African woman; and it can be seen that a transitional image during the colonial and postcolonial images reveals her true transformation.

Some treatment meted on women under the guise of custom can be termed abusive (Jones, 2001; Okita, 2001). Abuse is the improper usage or treatment of an entity. Abuse can come in many forms, such as physical, social, maltreatment, assault, violation, rape, unjust practices, crimes and other types of aggression. Hudson (1981) asserts that manipulators and abusers often control their victims with various tactics, including positive reinforcement such as praise, flattery, ingratiation, love bombing, smiles, gift and attention. Therefore, this study looks at the manifestations of various forms of abuse on women as seen in the purposively selected texts, *The Concubine* (CCB), *Efuru* (EF) and *On Black Sister's Street* (OBSS). This paper further employs the descriptive research design to account for the abusive language targeted at women in the selected novels.

## REVIEW OF RELATED STUDIES

Harmon (1996) conducted a qualitative study of the psychological abuse of women. In his study, Harmon explored women's experiences with ongoing psychological abuse from male partners with whom they were in short-term cohabiting relationships. From the findings, he divided psychological abuse into five categories: humiliation, degradation, intimidation, deprivation, objectification and distortion of emotions.

Nwagu (2001) researched the abusive language used in the Onitsha-Ado dialect of the Igbo language to show the manifestation of abuse as a social process, a societal norm and the effect it has on the abuser and the abused. The researcher adopted a descriptive method using interviews from which she discovered that abusive language could serve the purpose of insult, criticism, ridicule, attack, and defence to draw attention for correction, entertainment, for social and cultural recognition. The study noted that abusive language as a norm done consciously and unconsciously should not only be attributed to negativism but also that the positive aspect of it should be considered.

Kusumawati (2006) conducted a study on *abusive language in drama films*. In her study, she analyzed the abusive usage of language in drama films using a socio-pragmatic approach. She found that there were six referents of abusive language used in *Pretty woman*, *There is Something about Mary*, and *Titanic* films, which matched Hughes's available six varieties of abusive language. Moreover, the intentions of using abusive language in their contexts were, describing, expressing pleasure, informing, committing, commanding, requesting, warning, instructing, ordering, and re-commanding. She applied Hyme's SPEAKING theory to show annoyance, power, anger, derogation, surprise, intimacy and mocking.

Bunten (2011) researched the *educational impact of the use of abusive language and neglect in childhood*. In Bunten's research, he focuses on the academic life of the child and the behaviour, emotional and social impacts child maltreatment has on students. Bunten posited that using abusive language on children affects them in many ways, and the negative impacts could be life-long. Educators play an essential role in detecting and reporting abuse, as well as assisting students with overcoming the effects of abusive backgrounds. His research work further described the effects child maltreatment may have on students in the educational setting and recommended what educators should know about abuse and how they can help students who have been abused or neglected.

In summary, the above-reviewed works are related to the current research work because they are works on abuse. However, they differ from the present work because the current study focuses on women using different sets of texts.

## INSTANCES OF CHAUVINISM ON WOMEN IN *THE CONCUBINE*, *EFURU* AND *ON BLACK SISTERS' STREET*

### Excerpt 1: Image of women that stems from abuse

- a. I cannot speak in proverbs. You don't need to. Why not? You are a woman (CCB:68).
- b. Women are unlucky. They are denied many things. List them. They are uncountable. Look, we are not allowed to climb tree, we may not eat the meat of a kite; the gizzard of a bird is also forbidden (CCB:84).
- c. "Do you mean to say", he said between clenched teeth, "that this girl was never meant to get married? Under the circumstances, no. She was to die untouched by men?" "Well, she could be someone's concubine. Her sea-king husband can be persuaded to put up that after highly involved rites. But as a wife she is completely ruled out" (CCB:166).
- d. Put down the plantain, if you would be reasonable let's be friends. Only a foolish woman would try to struggle with a man (EF:68).

Excerpts 1(a-d) above show the images of women in the African society. These images have been conceived over a period of time. They are products of experience and observation. The excerpt presented above depicts women as just the way society sees them, without questioning the justice of the social system. When we subject the disposition of society to logical scrutiny, we will see that there is no justification for the relegated position given to women. For instance, as excerpt (1a) portrays, does it mean that a woman cannot decode proverbs; otherwise, why does society assume that a woman should not speak or be spoken to in proverbs; that proverb is the exclusive

right of men? These prejudices have long taken root in the societal worldview that going contrary to them sounds like sacrilege, as seen in the bewildering question, “She was to die untouched by men?” The question that begs for an answer is, does it mean that no woman is permitted to complete her journey on earth if men have not devoured her body? The point is that there is no justification for the social abuse that women go through in society. However, just like the prescriptive approach of traditional grammarians, the male folk has so prescribed and enforced the lowly position of their women counterparts. This is why Okachi’s husband has to shun her (women are not allowed to contribute), not because she has nothing good to say (see excerpt (2a) below).

### Excerpt 2: Verbal abuse on women

- a. ‘As if all women were fools’, Okachi retorted. ‘Well, many of you are’, her husband replied (CCB:39).
- b. You are certainly not saying that I should not get a second wife or that I don’t deserve a baby boy, are you.  
Amadioha forbid. How can I?  
Then shut up your mouth and stop behaving like a goat (CCB:56).
- c. ...you will make a very stupid wife. I am happy we shall soon get rid of you (CCB:98).
- d. They did not see the reason why Adizua should not marry another woman, since according to them; two men do not live together. To them, Efuru was a man since she could not reproduce (EF:24).
- e. ...then she heard Ogea whimpering at a corner. ‘You good for nothing, why are you crying?’ (EF:65).
- f. ...why don’t you allow me to finish before you answer, you goat (EF:80).
- g. ...you ignorant, foolish arid stupid girl. A goat sucked your breasts (EF:166).
- h. Useless girl. Ashawo. May a thousand fleas invade your pubic hairs (OBSS:70).
- i. ...useless goat, shameless whore, ashawo (OBSS:70).
- j. I am not your father, you stupid lying girl (OBSS:148).
- k. You crawl like lizard, *ngwere*, how do you expect to pass JAMB? Get out of my sight, *ka m fu uzọ*, let me see road (OBSS:147).
- l. ...answer me, you useless idiot. I see that you cannot talk anymore. You have gone dumb *abi?* (OBSS:200).

Excerpts 2(a-l) above showcase verbal abuse, as seen in the three texts. People who use abusive language do not mean well for the addressee. Therefore, they expect that their words will crush their target to pieces. This is why they look for the most dehumanising words they could think of at the time. These women are called several dehumanising names, ‘good for nothing, *ashawo* (prostitute), ‘fools’, ‘lizard’, ‘goats’ etc. Efuru was even called a ‘man’ because

she did not have a child. These women are cursed at will. The abusers ensure that they select soul-crushing words to drive home their intentions. Also, these abusers, because of their self-acclaimed superiority, have the impunity to defend and justify their actions. This can be seen in excerpt (2a) when Okachi challenged her husband when he shunned her and referred to women as fools. Her husband’s response shows that women are nothing since most are ‘fools’.

### Excerpt 3: Sexual abuse

- a. Women were sampled, auctioned as properties, sold and bought, with no respect for their body (OBSS:236).
- b. Dele said “...a woman’s body is a shop where sales take place. Her body is for the purpose of contracting transactions (OBSS:72).
- c. The man’s penis searched for a gap between her legs. Finding warmth, he sighed, spluttered sperm that trickled down her legs like mucus, inaugurating Sisi into her new profession. And she was baptized into it with tears, hot and livid, down her cheeks, salty in her mouth, feeling intense pain (OBSS:212-213).
- d. The women would be called into the room one at a time for the buyers to see and admire. They would all have numbers, for names were not important. Number three; ladies and gentlemen, number three is the type of woman white men like. Thin lips. He slapped her bare buttocks. (OBSS:278).
- e. And she would relax her muscles, let him in, and imagine that she was flying high above the room, looking down she saw a man who looked like her father and a girl who looked like her, when the pain made this difficult, she bit on her lower lip until it became numb (OBSS:114).
- f. *You be fine gal now. Abi, see your backside, kai who talk say na Jennifer Lopez get the finest nyash? Make dem come here, come see fine assets. As for the melons way you carry for chest, omo, how you no go fin work?* He fixed his eyes, beady and moist and greedy, on her breast (OBSS:39).

Excerpts 3(a-f) above show instances of sexual abuse, as seen in the text, *On Black Sisters’ Street*. In the text, Ama was severely and often abused by her father. Some other characters, like Sisi and Efe, were also sexually abused. The bodies of women were displayed and marketed as though they were mere commodities. This can be seen in excerpts 3(a-d) and (f). The sexual abuse that women go through stems from the notion of likening the woman’s body to a mere commodity. Moreover, when a woman accepts this notion, she goes against her will to satisfy the hankering of the opposite sex, as can be seen in excerpts (3c) and (e) above.

**Excerpt 4: Effects of verbal abuse on the victims**

- a. Yes, it was then that my lord and master came out with his knife. Kill me, I said to him. Women are nothing. Her husband was asleep when thieves came to the house. But I am only a woman, what can a woman do? (EF:178).
- b. The man's penis searched for a gap between her legs. Finding warmth, he sighed, spluttered sperm that trickled down her legs like mucus, inaugurating Sisi into her new profession. And she was baptized into it with tears, hot and livid, down her cheeks, salty in her mouth, feeling intense pain (OBSS:212-213).
- c. And she would relax her muscles, let him in, and imagine that she was flying high above the room, looking down she saw a man who looked like her father and a girl who looked like her, when the pain made this difficult, she bit on her lower lip until it became numb (OBSS:114).
- d. Put down the plantain, if you would be reasonable let's be friends. Only a foolish woman would try to struggle with a man. Abah! Abah! Abah ! I have you to be blamed for this! She wept bitterly (CCB:68).
- e. This is why am crying my Lord. It is. What else can it be? It is the way you keep talking of my children as if they are not yours. If they were boys you would regard them more as your children, I am sure (CCB:123).
- f. ...woman keep your mouth shut this instant. Are you drunk? Nwabata lowered her head and surprisingly enough kept quiet (EF:86).
- g. ...answer me, you useless idiot. I see that you cannot talk anymore. You have gone dumb *abi*? She lowered her head in shame (OBSS:200).

Excerpts 3(a-g) above show the sad state of the abused victims, as seen in the texts. Abuse of all sorts hurts the victims. These victims shed tears of pain. The pains they went through were not necessarily physical but more psychological, as seen in excerpt (4b-e). With their self-esteem crushed, these women became depressed and silenced; they lost their confidence and the willpower to put up any form of defence for what they believed in. All they could do was to shrink, swallow their view and willpower, and lower their heads in shame, as an excerpt (4f-g) shows. When the self-esteem of a woman or even a man is successfully trodden on, the person often becomes incapable and unable to handle his/her affairs without external influence. This has been a derogatory assault on the image of women.

Furthermore, abuse brings about subjugation and lowers self-esteem, making such a woman rather exist as mere docile and erotic accompaniments to the male. As excerpt (4a) shows, women often accept and place themselves on society's point of view that they are ordinary people who cannot take care of themselves. They lack the voice to articulate their dilemma and their point of view (see

excerpts 4(a), (c), (f) and (g)).

As mentioned earlier, abuse of women has brought about society seeing women as erotic accompaniments for men. This is why the woman's body is seen and treated like an erotic material or object. Seeing and treating women's bodies as ordinary commodities affect the victim in no small measure. In excerpts (4b) and (c), the victims, though depressed due to the sexual abuse they were going through, had to suppress the emotional pain they were going through to ensure that their 'clients' were pleased. They had to 'serve' the purpose they were 'bought', and have at the back of their minds that they are 'just' expected to accept the superiority of men (observe Madame comments in Excerpt 4d). These women could do nothing but resign to fate even when there was no justification for what they had to put up with.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

This study has shown that abuse on women folks can take the form of social (where the image/personality of the woman is relegated by society without any justification), sexual and verbal. It also shows that abuse of any form hurts the victim. This study posits that the target of abusers is the victim's self-esteem. The findings also show that abuse ultimately crushes the victim's self-esteem, making her feel less human. Some of the women who were abused became psychologically devastated. Suffice it to say here that there is a need to have a system where all oppressive institutions will be dismantled politically and socially for the good of everyone, both male and female, and have a society where the idea of collective responsibility will be borne. This is necessary because a psychologically devastated woman cannot contribute meaningfully to society. Abuse is never an acceptable way to relate with any individual, be it male or female; therefore, it should be avoided.

**CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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