

**CONTEXTUALIZING WOMEN PREDICAMENT IN JULIE OKOH'S *IN OUR OWN VOICES*  
AND DOYIN AGOURU *REFUGEES OF THE GREAT LAKES*.**

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BENIN CITY**

**APRIL, 2024.**

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**AN ESSAY TO BE SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND LITERATURE, FACULTY OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF BENIN, BENIN CITY .  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF BACHELOR OF ART (B A) DEGREE IN ENGLISH AND LITERATURE, UNIVERSITY OF BENIN.**

**APRIL, 2024.**

## CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that the project with the title: " Contextualizing Women Predicament in Julie Okoh's *In Our Own Voices* and Doyin Agouru *Refugees of the Great Lakes*, was undertaken by Precious Paul-Ubah Ugoma, of the Department of English and Literature, University Of Benin Under my supervision.

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**Prof. Emmanuel Babatunde Adeleke.**  
(Project Supervisor).

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**Date**

## **DEDICATION**

This project work is dedicated to God Almighty for making it possible for me to complete this phase of my academic journey and to my lovely parents and siblings for their constant prayers and support, God bless you.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

My foremost gratitude goes to the God Almighty who made this project work a success.

I specially want to thank my project supervisor Prof. Emmanuel Babatunde Adeleke for his advice, suggestions and special interest in the topic, thank you for your support and patience throughout this period.

I also want to appreciate my parents, Mr/ Mrs Paul-ubah, thank you for the prayers, love, care and money, God keep you in good health, wealth and peace and also to my wonderful siblings, Chioma Paul-Ubah and Treasure Paul-ubah for their constant support and love in time of need, you guys are the best and i love all.

My acknowledgement goes to the Head of Department of English and Literature, Prof. (Mrs) Okolocha, H. Oby, special thanks to Dr. Clement Odia, for his fatherly love and all the lecturers of the Department. Thanks for your support and encouragement.

Also to my beautiful friends Nwanzu Doris, Chijioke Believe, Anayinwa Elizabeth, Chima Stephanie and also Kavod Glory, Victoria and Debbie thank you all so much for the memories we have created and the continuous push to be better in my academics, we will continue to soar high. I also want to say a very big thank you to my amiable pastor, Pastor Sunday, for his unwavering love and support throughout this journey.

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## ABSTRACT

This essay reveals the challenges women face in Nigeria with specific reference to the events in Okoh's *In Our Own Voices and Doyin Agouru Refugees of the Great Lakes*. The main objective of this study is to assess the predicament of women who are faced with Domestic violence and commodification in Nigeria. This study is analyzed through the Use of primary research, drawing data from both plays (*In Our Own Voices* and *Refugees Of the Great Lakes*). Women rights are perpetually compromised and violated by the laws and cultures of human societies, making it exigent for women to cry out against socio-cultural practices militating against them. This essay adopts the feminist perspective which focuses on two major predicament women experiences: domestic violence and commodification of women. It is also based on the foregoing that the study recommends the need for the traditional societies in Nigeria to review their cultural values with the view to expunge traditions that infringe on human rights.

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Purpose of Study

This essay examines women predicament in Julie Okoh and Doyin Agouru's plays in order to investigate the context from which the playwrights present the challenges faced by women. It also sets out to study the interplay between themes and style in the plays as vital tools to unveiling meaning.

### 1.2 Scope of Study

Both Okoh and Agouru have several plays to their credit. Okoh, for example, is the author of the following plays: *In the Fullness of Time* (2000), *Who Can Fight the gods*(2002), *Aisha* (2005), *Edewede* (2006), *Closed Doors* (2007), *The Trials* (2008), *A Haunting Past* (2009), *Our Wife Forever* (2010), *Cry For Democracy* (2014), *Thorny path* ( 2018) and *In Our Own Voices* (2021). Agouru, on her part, has published two plays, namely, *Stolen Seeds* (2021) and *Refugees of the Great Lakes* (2019). This essay, covers Okoh's *In Our Own Voices* and Agouru's *Refugees of the Great Lake*. (Henceforth abbreviated as *Voices* and *Refugees* respectively). These two plays, have been chosen because women predicament occupies the dramatic imagination of the playwrights as well as form the main thematic preoccupation.

### 1.3 Research Methodology

The textual analytic method is employed to interpret the two plays. The primary texts are critically read to pay attention to the portrayal of women. Materials relating to issues of women are classified and other secondary texts are selected to substantiate the arrangement in the essay, especially the theoretical framework. Therefore, the qualitative research method has been used

because the essay makes use of empirical and evaluative statements in interpreting the chosen texts.

#### **1.4 Theoretical Background**

This essay applies the feminist theory in contextualizing women's predicament in the chosen plays. Feminism entails an agenda for justice and equality for women. The theory mainstreams women predicament. *Akin olaniyi* provides an evolutionary perspective for the theory when he claims that:

Feminist poetics predates the modern era. Evidence has it that plato, in *The Republic* (1979), denounces family/ Social configuration on the basis of sexual differential. It's modern usage, which was coined in the 1880s by Herbert Auclert, gathered momentum thereafter To demand for equality promised by the French Revolution. It thus, gained its worldwide acclaim In Europe and America, emerging as a programmed Renunciation of all impediments to equality and Liberation in the world. (45)

Feminism transcends modern discourse as it affixes it's introspective lens on women way back into time. Plato can be regarded as the precursor of feminism judging by Olaniyi 's view. His denunciation of "family/ social configuration" of life stems from appeal to sexuality and differences. The platonic perspective seems to anchor feminism on a they that focuses on establishing differences between male and female; mennd women, boy and girl child. Olaniyi avers that Herbert Auclert is responsible for coining the term, feminism, which gives impetus to

its usage . Affirming the role of the French Revolution, Olaniyi argues that the quest for equality especially for women. In modern time, both in Europe and America, feminism seeks to abrogate all impediments to equality and liberation of women.

Emmanuel Babatunde Adeleke, quoting Marilyn French, explains this:

Feminism is the only serious, coherent and universal  
Philosophical that offers an alternative to patriarchal  
Thinking and structure... Feminist believe that women  
Are human beings, that the two sexes are at (at least)  
Equal in all significant ways and that this equality must  
Be publicly recognized. (94-95)

Feminism is considered a philosophy, thus placing it within the realm of a thought or which can be achieved from the perspective thinking or mental cognition (reasoning). Also, it hopes to offer an alternative to the dominant patriarchal thought and structures. For this reason, feminism is antithetical to patriarchy. Beyond that, it strives to project ideals of equality between the two sexes. Feminist ideology preaches parity and opening of spaces for the recognition of that equality. Hence, feminism expresses the desire to uproot patriarchal powers and enunciate equality, liberation and justice for women.

Muhammad Alkali and Kehinde John Olorunshola, quoting Peter Barry, posits that "earlier women writers like Mary Austell and Mary Wollstonecraft considered the patriarchal maltreatment of women as evil and therefore, started using their literature to fight for increased education and equality for the women in their society"(170). Main challenge that feminism was created to confront is patriarchal maltreatment of women who have been denied rights to education and income. These writers use their literary works to chart a new direction for women

on the need to acquire education and financial liberation as avenues for choice, identity and power.

Recognizing the need for feminism in Africa, Alkali and Olorunshola explain that the advent of feminism in Africa in the 1980s was met with hostile rejection because it was perceived to conflict with "the historical and cultural experiences of the African communities"(170-171). However, African feminists argue that feminism should not be misconstrued to mean anti-men, rather a movement conceived to "demand for change for the African women without the guidance from the white women" (171). Grace Eche Okereke quoting Helen Chukwuma describes feminism as:

A rejection of inferiority and a striving for recognition.

It seems to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual and contributing human being. Feminism is a

Reaction to such stereotypes of women which deny them

A positive identity. (582).

Feminism, according to Chukwuma entails the polarity between rejection and recognition or acceptance. While it rejects the toga of inferiority, it seeks to embrace recognition of the dignity and labour of women. It seeks to impose a certain sense of awareness about women as a vital part of society. Also, feminism rejects stereotypical portrayal of women as a burden and projects the image of women as an asset to society. For the feminists, it is a noble priority for them to project positive image of women through their literary works. It is therefore wrong to see feminism anti-men. If anything, it helps to build a healthy society for all.

## 1.5 Review of Related Scholarship

The plays of Okoh and Agouru have attracted several critical responses and they are reviewed in this section. Responding to Okoh's plays, Eziwho Emenike Azunwo examines domestic violence in contemporary Nigerian drama. According to the scholar:

*Okoh's In Our Own Voices* is an eye opener against  
The high level of domestic violence endured by women  
In Nigeria. In order to defend the position that the issue  
Of domestic violence goes beyond cultures and ethnic  
Boundaries in Nigeria , Okoh draws her characters from  
Tribes that make up Nigeria.(405)

Azunwo's focus on domestic violence appears to capture the egregious phenomenon with an attempt at justifying the playwrights technique of its presentation. According to him, Okoh's pan-Nigerian characterisation technique is meant to buttress the fact that domestic violence is endemic to Nigeria. Although domestic violence occupies the thought of Azunwo, the essay fails to depict it as one of the key predicament of Women. Nkiri Doris Onyemachi explores the construction of feminist ideals in play of Julie Okoh. According to Onyemachi:

*In Our Own Voices* is all about dismantling cultural biases  
That oppress the female gender. Eight women from different  
States in Nigeria, tagged Woman I to VIII, get together for  
Their stories to be heard directly in order to challenge prior  
Narratives about women presented by their male counterparts.  
(76).

The central argument of Onyemachi is that Okoh's play seeks to unbundle cultural stereotypes that have hindered women from expressing their freedom. To contextualize the point, the scholar shows that Okoh's employment of eight women who have been drawn from eight different parts of the country, is meant to affirm the need for change and cultural diversity. For this reason, Okoh has subverted the male hegemonic discourse which portrays women as subservient to men. Edward Egbo Imo explores men as victims of feminist biases. Imo's intention is to query feminism:

It is stating the obvious that Okoh's plays portray the image  
Of men from undiluted patriarchal perspective where the  
Male characters feature more as antagonists with villainous  
Tendencies. This trend runs from her earlier works to her  
Later plays(60).

Imo identifies a key element in Okoh's feminist inclination through the depiction of male characters as villains and women as heroes. Through the portrayal of women as victims of patriarchal dominance, the playwright rallies the audience to protect the rights of women and invariably calls for change. No matter how one sees it, men will always be victims of feminist conscious writings. John Ebimobowei Yesibo examines Julie Okoh's plays as tilting towards a feminist theatre in Nigeria. He uses *Closed Doors* as a case study. According to this scholar, "*Closed Doors* lays bare to vortex of mistreatments of women in the hands of men. The play is a blueprint for a true feminist theatre "(23). There seems to be a thread of feminist idealism running through Okoh's poems. By depicting the pain of "mistreatments" endured and suffered by women, the playwright mainstreams the feminist implies that resonate through the texts.

Agouru's plays have attracted few scholarly attention. Akuko Ayomide while examining the themes of *Stolen Seeds*, focuses on a woman as "victims of infertility in marriage, adultery and deception"(5). By extension, Agouru also in *Refugees of the Great Lake* treats themes of which underscore women predicament.

This essay thus far received focus on diverse issues contained in the plays of Okoh and Agouru. From their perspectives it is clear that none has explored the predicament of women from the angle of domestic violence and commodification of women. The effect of this is that there are inadequate and misleading interpretations of their plays. This leaves a gap in Scholarship which has necessitated this essay.

### **1.6 Thesis Statement**

Julie Okoh's *In Our Own Voices* and Doyin Agouru's in *Refugees of the Great Lake* envision women predicament through their portrayal as victims of domestic violence and commodification.

## CHAPTER TWO

### DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The major challenges that affects Women, leading to psychological trauma, verbal oppression and physical attack, is domestic violence. This chapter explores how both Okoh and Agouru in their plays: *Voices* and *Refugees* engage the subject of domestic violence by focusing on three aspects of the violence, namely: psychological torture, verbal abuse and physical abuse. We shall begin with the first.

#### 2.1 Psychological Torture

In cases of domestic violence, women are the prime victims and as such, they often suffer psychological torture in the hands of their spouses. Mark Tsagas, quoting wootton, defines domestic violence as: Any incident of threatening behavior, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, verbal, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been intimate partners or intimately related within a family or domestic setting, regardless of gender or sexuality (108). Psychological torture relates specifically to the effect that such violence has in the mind of the victim. The Oxford Dictionary defines 'Torture' as the act of causing somebody severe pain in order to punish them or make them say or do something. Psychological torture is the intentional infliction of severe mental pain, suffering or anguish on a person using various techniques such as; isolation, humiliation and manipulation. Women are considered particularly vulnerable to psychological torture due to their gender-based roles, societal expectations and historical cultural norms. This we find evidently in *Voices*, and *Refugees*.

Okoh uses *Woman i* to show how ethnic groups like the Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa, see wife beating as a sign of love and other domestic violence as a tool to discipline women which

they believe is a normal thing to do. We can evidently see this in the excerpt below, when Woman 1 decides to report her husband to his parents:

WOMAN 1: To my great dismay, his father averred among  
all the ethnic groups in this country: Yoruba, Igbo  
And Hausa. Wife beating is regarded as a tool  
That a husband uses to chastise his wife and  
Discipline her. I mean wife beating is socially  
Accepted everywhere...wife beating is viewed  
As a sign of love. What? Sign of love! How can  
That be, " If not beaten, our wives feel that they  
Are not loved enough."

Some of them even encourage it deliberately (Okoh 10).

From the above excerpt, Okoh satirises how women in our community are ensnared in thinking that violence against them is a sign of love rather than the other way round, meaning when we describe what love really is, violence is one thing that cannot be included. The irony of this is that true love respects boundaries, promotes safety and fosters mutual growth. Violence on the other hand, is never a sign of love. It is manipulative, controlling and it creates a climate of fear and intimidation making the victims sometimes feel responsible for the actions of the abuser. There is no excuse for domestic violence, regardless of cultural norms or personal beliefs. Wife beating is one of the many dimensions of gender issues that threatens social freedom of women and increases mental and health burdens among victims. It also indirectly affects their children, family members and the society at large. Otufale( 2013), submits that wife battery is as a result of the socio-cultural belief system prevalent in relationships between man and woman, where the

men are socialized into believing that they are entitled to be superior to the women and should be at the apex of decision making in marriage, while the women are to be subordinated to the point of their detriment. To achieve this, husbands are willing to control and coerce their wives by a variety of means to maintain their rights, authorities and positions in the marriage.

Okoh reveals how these certain cultures make women accept their fate and start believing that wife battery is actually a normal way of life. From the excerpt below, we find Woman I accepting this fact:

WOMAN I: Since I was made to believe that he loved me  
And that the bruises on my body and the awful things  
He was saying to me were all signs of love  
I decided to hide my plight behind confidence and success  
I continued to pretend that we were a very happy couple...  
While I suffered in silence (Okoh 10).

Woman I became psychologically affected, this was seen through her thoughts and actions instead of speaking out she remained silent and was made to believe that all the abuses received from her spouse was as a result of "love." In order to avoid re-living the pain of the abuses, she choose to remain silent. This shows how most women who go through the same experience remain silent instead of speaking out. This silence takes away their ability to communicate, defend themselves or resolve conflicts. This loss of control, reinforces the abuser's power and the victims feelings of helplessness. Some of this victims go as far as isolating themselves in order to erase their voices and experiences, this can be incredibly damaging to ones self-esteem and mental well-being. All this, Okoh reveals through Woman I.

We find from the text that Woman I's mother-in-law through culture has also come to believe that wife battery is actually a normal way of life. We see how she rebuked Woman I from going to the police: "Educated woman! Are you no longer a Tiv woman (Okoh 13).

This statement shows that the Tiv woman even from her childhood has been brought up to believe that domestic violence is a normal way of living amongst them. Research has it that most abusive men grew up in an abusive household, so they don't know how to verbally communicate with people, most especially the woman gender without putting her (wife) down. Okoh satirises against this culture and belief system which has made most women who are victims of domestic violence believe that violently abusing them is a sign of love. They are made to believe that as a woman it is their duty to subjugate to such abuse.

In the play; *Refugees*, there is a specific address to women being victims of psychological torture. Agouru recreates the outcome of war and allows the readers to think for themselves as the women whose husbands and children were massacred. We observe the psychological torture as Agouru uses some of the characters to illustrate it:

FLORENTYNA: i agree, but Angie needs help with Robina.

urgent help, we need to know what tortures

Her so much that she refuses to speak. She has

Been through alot ,we know, but Aju just casually said

she is running mad. That is not good for her at all.

ANGIE: Thank you. It has made my heart ache especially

Because of the way her husband and children were massacred.

(She shakes her head in sorrow with her hand folded in front

Or her). I will ask my husband to talk to Boma(Agouru 18).

From the excerpt above excerpt above, the word "urgent help" implies that victims who suffer psychological trauma in the society should be attended to immediately in order to avoid the effects and pains that comes with it. Robina in her case, in already going through this psychological torture, she shows some symptoms of it which includes, flashbacks, nightmares and numbness. This is why Florentyna tells Angie that Robina needs immediate attention or else it could result to something worse. Agouru reveals from the excerpt, how Robina refuses to speak which is one of the effect of psychological torture which she experiences through the war. Robina is plagued with horrific dreams, these dreams torture her to the extent she becomes silent and isolates herself from people. Robina chooses to remain silent to avoid bringing up hurtful memories and sensations. Most trauma survivors are highly resilient and develop appropriate coping techniques, including social supports, to deal with the aftermath and effects of trauma. Robina's numbling is evident by her limited range of emotions associated with interpersonal interactions and her inability to associate any emotion with her history of abuse. Agouru makes use of non-verbal cues to illustrate how Robina situation, affected her loved ones . We find this action evident from the conversation above. Angie who is Robina's mother is worried about her daughter's situation and does this action as a sense to relive her worries and also communicate to Florentyna that she agrees on getting the urgent help her daughter needs. The flashbacks which happens to Robina, which is as a result of psychological torture, affects her greatly and she said to be" running mad."

This just only proves what Agouru satirizes against the effects of war on women. Women are faced with the worst experience of war,this effect of war is shown through the character of Robina.

RIOJA: Thank you. Our mother, my daughter, Robina has been  
Plagued with horrific dreams. She wakes up screaming  
At night, arousing the camp to the extent that the leaders,  
The general populace imply that she is suffering from a  
Mental disorder. I thought it was a psychological effect  
Of the war in Kigali. Her husband and two children were  
Killed in her presence and she was gang raped.(Agouru,19).

From the above excerpt, Agouru reveals Robina's tragic experience and also the camp leaders misperception about the situation of Robina. Rioja's opinion of Robina is correct, she is suffering from the psychological effect of the war in Kigali. In her presence, she witnessed both her husband and children killed and was also gang raped by them. Out of this painful experiences she suffers greatly from the effects caused by these actions. This aroused the camp leaders and the general populace to imply that she is suffering from a "mental disorder" which ironically is true. Agouru tries to illustrate the negative effects of war and what it does most especially to the women. Women who are victims of war are left to experience the harsh nature of it which includes, sexual abuse from men and other negative aspects. Many women are raped and it doesn't matter the class of humans they are, these men just take advantage of the opportunity. War has always been a traumatizing event for those who experience it; it leaves indelible marks on the psyche of its victim especially, women. Women face different forms of abuse in war situations which ranges from sexual exploitation and injustice especially from soldiers. They have always been on the receiving end of most wars due to their gender which makes them vulnerable. Their vulnerability makes them susceptible to war situations due to the role they play in the society.

From the play, we find out that Robina's "mental disorder" is actually caused by the killing of her husband and children and also being a victim of rape. She experiences the aftermath of war, which is traumatizing and affects her who is a survivor psychologically.

## **2.2 Verbal Assault**

According to Amelia Peck, a licensed marriage and family therapist "verbal abuse" can be any way a partner uses their language to exert control in the relationship. In Nigeria, we find out that most women are victims of Verbal abuse and it is seen in different marriages today. The men believe that when they verbally abuse their spouses, they are disciplining or controlling them, but instead these abuses inflict physical harm to the women in various ways and the impact can be life-long. Verbal abuse is evident in the constant use of foul and abusive language on Woman I by her husband.

WOMAN I: if per chance, I failed due to price fluctuation, to buy  
Everything I had listed, he would call me foul names:  
"Liar, cheat, the sly tortoise, wicked woman." Sometimes,  
To avoid his insult, I evaded demanding money from him,  
Not even for his monthly contribution to the family upkeep  
Even at that, he would still complain saying: ' you dunce,  
You idiot, you" yeye" woman!'

From the above excerpt Okoh reveals how men who abuse their wives verbally, find it as a way of maintaining power and control over them in the relationship. Woman I husband verbally assault her by calling her derogatory names (liar, sly tortoise and cheat) and feels she is dishonest. For this reason, he implies that women cannot be trusted as well as they are dangerous and evil.

These men who verbally victimize their spouse, find it very difficult to communicate with them without using demeaning words. These men have no regard whatsoever for their spouses or women in general. Verbal abuse strips one of his/her self-esteem and confidence. Woman I's husband uses derogatory language to undermine his wife self-esteem. In society today, men who verbally abuse their spouses believe that they control and dominate their partner. This verbal abuse can lead to accusations, blame-shifting which becomes a routine part of communication, leading the victim to question their own sanity. From this excerpt, even when Woman I tries to avoid his insult by not demanding money from him, he found a way to belittle her verbally. A lot of women are victims of this circumstance, they go through anxiety and depression as they feel trapped and hopeless in their situations. This effect has largely affected these women who are victims of Verbal abuse with their relationship with people.

### **2.3 Physical Abuse**

Another form of abuse in which women are victimized is through physical abuse. Physical abuse is deliberately hurting or injuring an individual/s. This could include hitting, smacking and lots more. We see how Okoh uses the character of Woman I to illustrate this hurtful act. Woman I narrates the height of her experience of domestic violence by the hands of her husband in subsequent monologues where she portrays how the husband graduates from verbal abuse to physical abuse:

WOMAN I: One day, he returned home from work, while I was  
Still in the kitchen cooking his favorite dish: pounded yam  
And "genger" soup with bush meat. I quickly ran to the fridge  
To fetch him a glass of cold water. Casting a fleeting glance  
At the empty dining table, he stared at my face and growled:

"Where is my food?" Before I could say anything, he landed a hot slap on my face. "Phiam!" The glass of water escaped my grip, shattered on the floor. The water spilled all over me. (Okoh 8).

Woman I's narrative above is a testimony of domestic violence through physical assault. It reveals how most men take advantage of their masculinity to brutalize their spouses over issues that would have been settled amicably through dialogue. It is revealed from this excerpt that he treats her in a dehumanizing manner. Many abusive men believe that women are inferior, they believe that men are meant to dominate and control women. Typically, abusive men deny that the abuse is happening or they minimize it. They may blame their partner for the abuse, saying, "You made me do this. Just as we find in the case of Woman I, her husband sees her as inferior so why should he give her an opportunity to speak? He felt that was the best way to handle the situation instead of amicably settling the issue. We also find out from the excerpt below how he didn't consider the presence of his children and went ahead to hit his wife.

WOMAN I: Why must I return from work and wait for you  
To cook? Answer "phiam!" Have you been out  
Frolicking with one of your bosses? Answer me!  
"Phiam!" He pushed me against the wall and gave  
Me several punches. I slumped to evade the piercing  
punches. Then he kicked me and dragged me on  
the hard floor. In my stupor, I could hear the children  
Crying and begging: "Daddy, please now, leave mummy  
Alone! He only left me alone, when he was tired of punching  
Me ....(Okoh 8).

As a matter of fact, one can hardly see any justification for Woman i husband's expression of anger except that that he wants to demonstrate the usual patriarchal ego that men are superior to women. The latter is portrayed by the playwright as a failure both in the context of a husband and a father. Not even the presence of his children could stop him from punching his wife, he obviously belongs to the class of Nigerian men who lumps their wives and children as inferior beings especially the girl children. Most women who go through this kind of abuse, sometimes have this dangerous misconception by dismissing the violent behavior and thinking its an anger problem. From the excerpt we find how Woman I's husband went to the extent of accusing his wife of flirting with her bosses. Many women who are victims of this abuse respond to this behavior in fear and confusion, leading them to believe they can't do anything about their situation. Women are always considered weak, vulnerable and in a position to be exploited, making most abusive men see this as an opportunity to do whatever they like. They see women as weaker vessels that should be subjugated and silenced if need be and sometimes society stands in as an amplifier of this. The role of women in the development of any country cannot be overemphasized. Women play significant roles in the upbringing of children and in the maintenance of family harmony, which in turn reflects on society. In society today, women are forced to stay in abusive relationships and are not free from violence. Due to deep-rooted values and culture, women do not prefer to adopt the option of separation. They also fear the consequences of reporting violence and declaring an unwillingness to subject themselves to the shame of being identified as battered women. Some women may believe that they deserve the beatings because of some wrong action on their part, other women refrain from speaking about the abuse because they fear that their partner will further harm them in reprisal for revealing family secrets or they may be ashamed of their situation.

Okoh uses Woman i to further capture the plight of women who experience patriarchal oppression. A good example is seen in the excerpt below:

WOMAN I: I decided to file a report with the police  
Hoping that they would put a restraining  
Order on him. But the police never took  
Any action. Wife beating is a family affair,  
They averred (Okoh 13).

The excerpt above reveals the playwright's satirical punches directed at the police who are presented above as collaborators in the cycle of oppression that women experience on daily basis in Nigerian society and by extension in African society. Also, the speaker explains that she suffers battery in the hands of her husband and files a complaint at the nearest police station in order to secure a restraining order against her husband. To her surprise, the police calls it domestic violence: "a family affair." This means they cannot interfere, this shows how the police by their utterance indirectly, support violence against women. The issue of women as victims of these predicaments mentioned above, is a serious one as it undermines the human rights and well-being of women at a deep level. It is a complex social problem that requires a comprehensive approach, tackling not just the physical and legal aspects but a cultural mindset shift, towards the acceptance of women as full beings, deserving of respect, dignity and equality. It is crucial to dismantle the forces that perpetuate gender-based violence, structural inequality and limit women's choices and self-expression to bring true and sustainable equality. The pitiable state of Woman I is compounded by the fact that the Nigerian society does not provide the necessary checks and balances that would protect the fundamental human rights of women. Woman I runs to the police for protection against domestic violence meted on her by her

husband but rather than offer her the protection she desires; the police prefer to treat the issue with trivial attention by distancing themselves in the case with the sentiment that “wife beating is a family affair.” Through the disappointing sentiment launched by the police (a supposed law enforcement agency), Woman I is forced to the point of resigning to fate. To add salt to injury, her husband’s family always do not see anything wrong in what their son, her husband does. Her mother-in-law (a fellow woman) prefers to threaten her further amidst her trauma rather than sympathize with her situation on hearing that she went to report to the police. Unfortunately, her mother-in-law who could not prevail on her son to stop battering his wife, stands out in defense of her son’s domestic violence on his wife. She goes further to threaten Woman I thus:

"Why are you involving the police in our family affair? Don't we have kindred and family –heads to arbitrate in dispute within our lineage? Educated woman! Are you no longer a Tiv woman? Where is your home training? Anyway, you are wasting your time. If the case ever makes it to court, it will remain there stagnant. Bet me! ... (Okoh, 13).

It is the consistent battering she receives by the hands of her husband coupled with the cultural restrictions that forbids her to discuss her marital challenges outside her husband’s lineage that compels Woman I to endure the consistent violence in her marriage to the point that gets deformed by her husband through the pouring of acid on her body. Her husband’s reason for pouring her acid is to deform her so that no other man would find her attractive anymore. The narrative of Woman I is not just pathetic but highly provoking as it bothers largely on lawlessness and outright disregard of the women’s human rights in a country that is a signatory to various human rights charters including the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have been able to examine some of the predicament women go through , one of which is domestic violence. Using both plays *Voices* and *Refugees* to illustrate this predicament. We looked at women as victims of psychological torture, verbal and physical abuse.

## CHAPTER THREE

### COMMODIFICATION OF WOMEN

The term 'commodification of women,' refers to the process of treating women bodies, sexuality, and reproductive capacities as commodities that can be bought, sold and exploited for profit or personal gain. This concept is closely related to objectification, where women are viewed as objects, rather than human beings with agency and autonomy. Kopytoff(1986), defines commodification as the process of the transformation of a human being, or more specifically, of a woman into a commodity. Thus, a woman is transformed into a commodity when she becomes a unit under someone else's control. This chapter explores how both Okoh and Agouru in their plays: *Voices* and *Refugees*, engage the subject of commodification of women by focusing on the various ways in which it can manifest, namely: Sexual exploitation, Forced marriage and Discrimination against women. we shall begin with sexual exploitation.

#### 3.1 Sexual Exploitation

Sexual exploitation involves a person profiting from the use of another person's body in a sexual manner, in order to benefit (financially or otherwise). In general, the perpetrator of sexual exploitation, takes advantage of their victims vulnerable or dependent state, including addictions to drugs and alcohol. According to the *American Psychological Association*, 'sexual exploitation' refers to the abuse of a person's sexuality for the benefit of another, often manipulative, or force. Okoh tires to give a vivid display of the plight of women who are victims of sexual exploitation, through the character of Woman Vi, who is also known as (Tolu). Woman Vi in the play, is explored by the playwright to display how sexual exploitation has the ability to change a woman's life for the worst. Okoh uses this character to represent some set of women, who experience sexual abuse at very young age in our society and in this process, these women's

dreams and purpose are dashed and destroyed, leaving them depressed and emotionally damaged.

We can see an example from the assertion below:

WOMAN VI: Rape! Worst of all incestuous rape!

How destructive is it on a child?.

It wrecked on me a series of long

Term emotional damages. I had

Problem relating to my family.(Okoh 66).

Here, Okoh reveals to us, how being sexually exploited can affect women who are victims of such act negatively. She reveals how it can destroy a woman's dream and make her isolate herself from the society. From this excerpt above, Woman Vi had to go through series of long term emotional damage, which is one of the effect of being sexually exploited or abused, at a very young age. She became dissatisfied with everything, women who are victims of sexual exploitation, find it difficult to relate with anyone including family members just as we see in the case of Woman Vi. In time, these women develop trust issues and have difficulty in maintaining a healthy relationship or lifestyle. They completely loose touch with reality, making them engage in self-destructive behaviors or have suicidal thoughts. We find this evidently in the case of Woman Vi from the excerpt below:

WOMAN VI: How many times did I run away from home?

How many times did I attempt committing suicide?

How many times did I inflict wounds on my body?

One time I cut myself really bad.

It was deep I nearly bled to death...

I suffered frustrated and disappointment (Okoh, 66).

Still looking at the predicament of Women Vi, Okoh reveals through the above excerpt the pain and trauma Woman Vi experiences. These women who go through this experiences, leave with the trauma of sexual exploitation, which leads them to self harm and suicidal thoughts, as they struggle to cope with the emotional pain and shame. Woman Vi experiences anxiety and depression, which affected her mental health. She lost interest in everything and was no longer confident in herself, which makes it difficult for her to form any healthy relationship. Okoh reveals through Woman Vi, how these victims isolate and withdraw from friends and family to cope with their trauma. Some of them, struggle with their education as the trauma affects their concentration and ability to function, which is evidently seen in the case of Woman Vi: "sometimes, i would tear my books or my clothes. Moreover, I began to have learning problems. My teachers complained to my parents. This is as a result of the disconnection from their emotions and thoughts, they employ self- destructive behaviors as coping mechanisms. Just as we find in Woman Vi case, she couldn't think properly, she went as far as joining a criminal gang just so she could get back at the society and her parents. Here, we see Okoh's ability to capture the mind of her readers towards the plight of women who are victims of sexual exploitation. Through Woman Vi experience in the play, the readers have some knowledge about how rape has destroyed a lot of lives (women ), as they live with a long term emotional damages which leads these women into isolation, death and other abominable effect of rape and other sexual exploitation. The playwright, shows us how Woman Vi is exposed to the physical and mental torture associated with rape.

Okoh, through satire gives a pictorial a description of these sexual exploiters who gives empty threat to ignorant children, encouraging them not to speak out. She uses the character of

Femi, popularly called "uncle Femi" by Woman Vi (Tolu) to illustrate this. We find this from the excerpt below :

FEMI: Don't tell anyone  
Don't tell a soul,  
If you do I will kill you!  
Yep, yep! I will kill you!  
That is what they always say  
Psh- sh-sh-sh -sh-sh! (Okoh 54).

Okoh reveals from the excerpt above, how these perpetrators can have a range of feelings and motivations, they lack empathy and understanding of victims experiences. Femi in the play, felt a sense of entitlement and privilege, which he had over Woman Vi. He even went as far to threaten her life and that of her mother's if she speaks out, he knew he had the upper hand , besides she was just a small girl who didn't have any choice but to do as she was told. The playwright tries to bring to light, a description of how some of these sexual exploiters behave, and how manipulative they can get in order to satisfy themselves. These men who exploit women and children sexually, see these victims as objects that would satisfy them. They don't care who they are or if it is a child(girl) as long as they are able to subdue them and achieve their purpose. Out of fear, Tolu (Woman Vi) decides to conceal her traumatic experience and in the process, she becomes used to her sensual experience with Uncle Femi. The playwright tries to show us the power in our voices, and that if only Woman Vi was aware of it and had used it against Femi earlier on, she would not have suffered sexual abuse for so long. This was why Femi was able to have his way, the fact that she was ignorant and naive. Okoh tries to tell us that ,this evil does

are afraid of our voices, that is why they threaten those who are ignorant to the truth in the power of their voices.

The play *Voices* presents a dramatical effect that enables us to see the homes where these victims of sexual exploitation comes from, an example is seen in the play, where Woman Vi gives some description of her childhood experiences, she sates that:

WOMAN VI: When I was growing up, my parents  
We're hardly at home. They left me  
With Aduke, our housemaid.  
If they were at home, they spent most  
Of the time, quarrelling and fighting with  
Each other. Yep, yep, yep. (Okoh 56).

The above excerpt shows a situation of a child's neglect, through satire, Okoh explains how many homes today are in jeopardy because of parental negligence and dispute within the family which opens door for predators to come in and take over their children's life. It is obvious from the above excerpt that Woman Vi parents, were never around or available to properly raise their child. This situation created the atmosphere for which Woman Vi was sexually exploited. Uncle Femi takes advantage of the consistent absence of her parents and abuses her sexually in the guise of taking care of her. Children who are neglected, most especially the girl child, can have severe and long-lasting consequences on their physical, emotional and psychological well-being. Which gradually leads to psychological and emotional trauma, including low self-esteem and other attachment disorders. Okoh strongly advises against parents who neglect their children, letting them know that if a child is neglected, it makes it easier for perpetrators to target them, because they are not present to supervise and monitor the child. Woman Vi, wasn't given a

proper education on sex education and what harm it does when sexually exploited, this makes her vulnerable and easy to manipulate by Femi. Due to parental negligence and the dispute between Woman Vi parents, she couldn't communicate with them most especially with how Femi threatened to take the life of her and her mother's. They did not create an atmosphere in which she could report the incident to them. This made her feel lonely and isolated to speak out.

Okoh also uses this same character, to teach mothers to educate their daughters about good moral upbringing and to stop leaving their daughters in the hands of strangers, just like Woman Vi, where she is left alone with a maid and her uncle who ends up molesting her. Leaving children with strangers goes a long way in influencing a child's life negatively. We can see this assertion in the text, where Woman Vi mother decides to leave her with Uncle Femi, who has already molested her, the speaker states:

WOMAN VI: Have you noticed anything strange about your  
Daughter's behavior anytime she's with Femi?  
She's always excited even when he is not around,  
her face lights up when talking about him. My dad  
Asked me some banal questions. I remained silent...  
"Since when did you start to take orders from Femi?"  
" Ever since you allowed him to be taking care of me.  
And he has been doing that assignment very, very well.  
Wow ooh! Ha-ha-ha-ha!"  
"Why are you two looking surprised?....  
"Tolu is that you speaking?"inquired my dad.(Okoh59).

We can see from the above excerpt, how Okoh illustrates what neglect and lack of attention to children can cause them to adopt an inappropriate behavior. Through the behavior of Woman Vi, we are able to tell how children who are neglected, behave in a certain inappropriate way, and how this behavior is reflected through their way of communicating. Children adopt inappropriate behaviors as coping mechanisms or as a result of lack of guidance and support. Because of these pent-up emotions and frustration resulting from negligence, they become aggressive and portray a rebellious attitude just like Woman Vi, from the excerpt we can see how she replies to her parents, proving how she has been badly influenced, making her parents question her behavior. What began as parental negligence, grew into full psychological imbalance and moral decay on the part of Vi. Okoh tries to encourage parents to always give their children good moral upbringing, by giving them talks on sex education without reservation, rather than leave those duties for strangers, in order to avoid them from engaging in risky behaviors like; substance abuse, reckless sexual encounters or criminal activities due to lack of supervision and boundaries. We can see that even after Woman Vi's parents found out about their daughter's rape situation, which happened as a result of their own neglect towards Woman Vi, their actions are surprising. Instead of reporting to the police and in the process fighting against sexual exploitation, they decide to keep it a secret because of some social stigmatization and shame. How ironic! They think they are protecting their daughter from shame and stigmatization, but they couldn't even protect her from being abused both from Femi and herself. Okoh throws satirical punches directed at parents who keep the issue on rape a secret, out of their fear of what society may think. Just like Woman Vi's parents, instead of being worried about their daughter's mental state, they were busy worrying about their social status.

Okoh also throws this satirical punches towards the executioners of the law who are another primary factor that indirectly encourage sexual exploiters to exploit more women, we can see this from the following excerpt below:

WOMAN VI: The police demanded for money to enable them Carry out investigation. When the money was not forth coming, they stalled the investigation. They averred that allegation of child rape was Increasingly daily in the country. They cited many Cases from across the country: in cross River State, At okuku, chijioke, 24 years old....in Ogun state, at Idiroko, Abiodun Ojo, 38years old, was alleged to have Defiled a 6years old girl...(Okoh 62\_63).

In the above extract, Okoh mirrors how the police in our society has allowed corruption to involve their mode if operation. Without money they won't excute justice, they do not feel empathy towards the plight of women, they see their predicament as a means of enriching their pockets, which indirectly encourage the act of sexual exploitation. From this excerpt above, the police are truly aware of the increasing rate of sexual abuse, but have no intentions of fighting it, rather they extort from the families of the victims. Okoh uses this satire to enable her readers see how Rape incidents occurs daily in every corner of the country, but yet, no culprit is prosecuted as expected. look at the case of Femi, he was only given "five strokes of the cain and set free". because the culprit are not adequately punished and apprehended by the police, the rate of sexual abuse increases and these culprits are indirectly encouraged by the police to perpetrate their act. Our society exacts moral rectitude and dignity from women, but the society do nothing

to protect these values in women. How many rapist have been convicted in this country since the enactment of the law against minors? How many cases are even brought to the court? All these is because violence against women are not taken seriously in this country." Rape incidence occurs daily in every corner of the country," yet no culprit is prosecuted as expected even when found guilty. Just as we find in the play, after Femi was given a very lenient punishment, he was happily married with four children and enjoyed the high esteem in the society. Nobody remembers that he was once a rapist neither did they care whether he was still a rapist. But for Woman Vi she was forever scarred, people always remembered and pointed fingers at her by saying "that's the little girl, victim of incest!". It was not until she got help that she was able to gradually heal which took alot of process and time. We also see from the play that it affected her adulthood, she wasn't able to get married or have children of her own. "Today, I am an object of scorn, a social pariah!"

Furthermore, Okoh through the use of satire, questions the sanity of the so-called prosecutor of the law, which we see from the statement below:

WOMAN VI: During the criminal trial, the prosecutor  
Insinuated that I consented to the rape.  
My father burst out, " She was only 5 years  
Old and he was 25. How could she have consented  
Or not consented?" (Okoh 64).

Okoh mocks the so called law prosecutors who bends the law to suit themselves. The playwright tries to show us how these law enforcers pervert justice as a result of corruption. It is unreasonable for a 5years old to consent to rape; who would ever consent to being raped? Here, through satire questions law executioners who perverse justice and encourage more criminality,

leaving children and women to be exposed to danger. Okoh also tries to advise parents to always give their children talk on sex education without reservation, if only Woman Vi had an idea about such thing as sex education, maybe she wouldn't have fallen prey to sexual exploiters like Uncle Femi in the play.

In the play *Refugees*, the character of Robina suffers the effect of being a victim of rape because of the harsh effect of war. She was sexually exploited by soldiers who took advantage of this opportunity and sexually abused her. We find in the play how this particular incident psychologically affected Robina who was tormented by the fact that she hadn't just lost her husband and children but also was gang raped.

RIOJA: I thought it was the psychological effect of the war

In Kigali. Her husband and two children were killed

In her presence and she was gang raped.(Agouru 19)

Agouru tries to present the harsh nature of war and how it affects women and children most especially. War has always been a traumatizing event for those who experience it; it leaves indelible marks on the psyche of its victim especially, women. Women face different forms of abuse in war situations which ranges from sexual exploitation and injustice especially from soldiers. They have always been on the receiving end of most wars due to their gender which makes them vulnerable. Their vulnerability makes them susceptible to war situations due to the role they play in the society. Many women are forcefully slept with, and abused by these men. Doyin tries to illustrate that women are faced with even more difficulties as they battle with rapes and unwanted pregnancy. We see how Robina from the play goes through emotional trauma which led to her instability and communication with others, The play posits that war affects mostly women and children in a very negative way which leaves haunting images and

trauma in their psyche over a long period of time. There is a vivid presentation of the horrors of war on the women which makes them traumatized. This affects their health and also violates their human right as reflected in the play, just as we find in Robina case. In all, Agouru tries to illustrate that War, ends in futility and should be discouraged at all cost.

### **3.2 Forced Marriage**

The term forced marriage has been differently defined by academics and institutions. For example, Tew (2012) defines it “as marriage into which one party is coerced to enter without full and free consent, including through threats or other threats or other psychological means”(p. 18). Similarly, the French Parliament defines it as “the situation in which a person is deprived of the freedom either to marry or to remain single, or to choose their spouse”. It is a form of commodification of women, because it involves treating women as commodities or goods that can be sold, bought, exchanged for economic, social or political gain. In *Voices*, the characters of Woman ii and Woman iii are used to illustrate this predicament of women being objectified.

WOMAN II: We hereby present to you some souvenirs:

the best of our harvest from our farm

The best domestic fowl from our poultry

And because you are a very special guest,

We added the best maiden dancer in our state.

The people applauded saying in one voice:

"What a befitting gift for an August visitor!"

Woman II's experience bother on the inhuman treatment meted on women in Nigeria by conceiving them as mere commodities to be bought by men for a price. The narration from Woman II clearly locates her as a native of the eastern part of Nigeria. She is a victim of her own

artistry as a dancer. As a way of community service, she was part of the cultural troupe stationed to dance at the village square as a way of receiving an august visitor to her community. After a commendable performance as the lead dancer in the community dance troupe, Woman II is lumped up alongside other items to be presented as reception gift to the August visitor who happens to be the President of the country. The narration above portrays the level of inhuman treatment and debasement meted on the women for no reason except that they belong to the female sex. The reward Woman II gets for volunteering to be part of community service and for being good at what she does is to be lumped up as a gift item for an August visitor whom she has never come in contact with. Without seeking her consent, Woman II's community whisk her with other items like a commodity for her special visitor. In order to justify the fact that the conspiracy against women is largely societal, the August visitor (Mr. President) readily accepts Woman II the same way he accepts the other gift items. First, he rises up, smiles at Woman III broadly and then declares "all the gifts are accepted. Thank you!"(Okoh, 23). The President's patriarchal ego is evident in his acceptance of Woman II as one of the gift items offered him by the community. It therefore becomes scary to note that the President of the country who should lead by example in the protection of the women's human rights is the very person abusing such rights in public.

Okoh also illustrates how Woman II is forced into marriage without her will and consent. We see this from the assertion below:

WOMAN II: from there, we all travelled to the Head Quarters,

There i became the fourth wife of our august visitor.

Mr. President. In my husband's luxurious Sunny

Mansion, Robed in expensive velvet and lace materials

While awaiting my old husband's call  
Like a spare tire under the booth of a car,  
I spend my daily life in a lonely cold room  
Brooding silently over my alienation.

The patriarchy also subjugates women by viewing them as objects and commodities. Fathers sell their daughters for a dowry, and pimps sell their prostitutes for a profit. Just we find in the case of Woman II she was sold as gift to their august visitor. She was forced against her will to marry someone she doesn't even know, total stranger. Women who are forced into marriage, are not given the freedom to make their own decisions and choices, including the right to refuse marriage or choose their own partner. From the above excerpt, Woman II on a daily basis is left in a room doing nothing just awaiting to get a call from her husband, Okoh tries to reveal that women like Woman II, are restricted from doing anything without the permission of their partner, they are not given opportunities to make on their own. Forced marriage, perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes, which reinforces patriarchal power structures and violates women rights . It reduces women to their economic, reproductive and domestic value, rather than recognizing their inherent worth and dignity as individuals. This is what Okoh tries to illustrate through the character of Woman II. Okoh uses satire to show how many women in Nigeria society especially in the Eastern part, go through dehumanizing experience and how they are treated as domestic goods with zero thoughts on their own dignity.

Okoh also uses the character of Woman III to illustrate the same stretch of commodification which is noted in the narrative of Woman III where she laments her pitiable condition as a victim of teenage pregnancy. At eleven Woman III was forcefully married off to Alhaji Musa- a man old enough to be her grandfather. The reason for the forced marriage was to

enable her serve as her father's collateral for the debt owed to Alhaji Musa. First, she was tricked into moving into Alhaji Musa's house as a house help for Musa's wife who is heavily pregnant but there in the house, Alhaji Musa takes advantage of her innocence and begins to abuse her sexually. Woman III gets pregnant in the process and then the real complication sets in. Woman III narrates:

WOMAN III: One day, I was having unusual pains in my stomach

I informed my co-wife, and she went to fetch the birth attendant.

The old woman spread a mat on the floor and asked me to

lie down on it. She felt my stomach and said my uterus was

Hopefully, very soon, the baby would come out. She rubbed some herbs

on my stomach and on my waist. She opened my legs, looked into vagina

and murmured: "It seems there is something preventing The baby from

descending, despite strong uterine contractions. But don't panic," she said,

"these things do happen quite often. It will come down.Let's wait." We

waited. She was not sure. But the position of the baby was certainly

abnormal. She then said we should pray to Allah for the baby to correct its

position by itself... (Okoh, 29).

The scenario above clearly portrays the level of torture and violence which women in the remote part of Northern Nigeria undergo. First, a teenager at eleven is already betrothed to an old man in her grandfather's age bracket. The old man shamelessly goes ahead to abuse her sexually to the point of impregnating her without considering any biological rebound. Even in her pregnant state, she lacks the basic health care that would guarantee safe delivery. The old man responsible for the pregnancy cares less about the state of the health of the little girl he has

forced into his household as a wife. Woman III is therefore left with the only option of being delivered by an inexperienced native birth attendant. Expectedly, the delivery process gets complicated and so emergency sets in but nothing tangible is done to save the mother and the child. The need to rush to the community health centre is quickly suggested by her co-wife but nothing still could be done at the moment because the old man (the man of the house) is not on ground to approve the decision. Woman III captures the moment thus:

WOMAN III: After some time, my co-wife suggested they  
take me to the Health Center in the next  
Community. The old lady replied, “Mama Halima, you  
want to put me in trouble? You know very well  
that in this our community A woman cannot take  
such decision. That’s the man’s duty. Besides,  
women’s movements are strictly under male control.  
. So, I say let’s wait.” “For how ong are we going to wait?” “  
As long as it takes your husband to return(Okoh 30).

From the above excerpt, we see the accumulated delay in the labour process due to some unguarded and irrational patriarchal traditions complicates Woman III’s pregnancy to the dangerous extent of losing the baby while also contracting the dreaded Vagina Vesico Fistula (VVF) as her pelvic is not mature enough to host pregnancy. The complications of VVF also includes the offensive smell from the vagina as a result of some rot and decay. In her state, she meets all kinds of stigmatization and abandonment even by the very man that put her in that condition. We see how Woman III goes through these horrible experiences, she was often faced with social stigma and shame. Okoh satirises against the social and cultural norms of the Hausa

culture and how it can negatively affect the lives of these women who are victims of forced marriages. Okoh reveals through *Woman III*, how women are objectified and forced into marriage, through a complex web of societal expectations, economic pressures and cultural traditions. They only see women as commodities valued for their reproductive and domestic capabilities. From a young age, girls are socialized to prioritize marriage and child bearing over education and personal aspiration. Okoh advises that most of these cultural norms should be abolished as it is not benefiting to the women or girl child. Their patriarchal structure perpetuates gender-based violence and coercion, making it difficult for women to resist forced marriage. Most of these women who refuse marriage or attempt to leave their husbands, are often subjugated to physical and emotional abuse. Women in this culture, lack access to education and economic opportunities, it limits their ability to make informed choices about their life, just as we find in *Woman III* case. She states: " I dreamt of becoming a woman of importance, some day, she lacked educational background, which made her vulnerable to forced marriage and exploitation.

### **3.3 Discrimination Against Women**

Discrimination against women also known as Gender discrimination, is the unfair or unjust treatment of women based on their gender. It is a complex and deeply ingrained issue that affects women of all ages, races and backgrounds. Discrimination against women can take many forms, including social, economic, political and cultural discrimination. Discrimination occurs when a woman is treated negatively or unequally based on their gender. It has to do with reversing women's human rights and freedoms in any aspects of their lives. We find this assertion evident in both plays: *Voices* and *Refugees*, Both playwrights employ various techniques to bring to light the discrimination women experiences. Looking at the play *Voices*,

Okoh brings into play the character of Woman V, she is a product of the Igbo background where women are commonly held accountable for the death of their husbands regardless of the circumstances surrounding the death. Not minding that she is bereaved and so needs heart - warming consolation, the kinsmen of Woman V's deceased husband subject her to series of inhuman treatments all in the name of widowhood practice Upon receiving the news of the demise of their son, the family of Woman V's husband summon her to the family compound in the community and then compel her to undergo series of oaths in order to prove her innocence in her husband's death. Not even the explanation from Woman V that her husband died of ghastly motor accident could convince her late husband's kinsmen that she has no hand in her husband's death. Woman V's narrative say it all:

WOMAN V: They claimed they were not satisfied with my explanation... I knew about the circumstances of his death through police reports, based on eyewitness They insisted that I must take an oath to prove my innocence. They led me to the room where they laid his corpse on a bier they scrubbed his body, squeezed the water into a bowl and gave it to me to drink saying that if I die During the one year mourning period, that would confirm me guilty of his murder, which is an abomination...(Okoh,48).

The most painful inhumane treatment meted on Woman V is the fact that the late husband's family do not consider the trauma which a woman undergoes in the loss of her

breadwinner. They deliberately refuse to acknowledge the fact that every ideal marriage is anchored on love and so it is always a traumatic experience for any spouse to cope each time he or she loses a partner. The well-being of their daughter –in-law or sister-in-law means nothing compared to the death of their son and brother. It is also more painful to note that in the same culture the same dose of torture is never meted on the man who loses his wife. It becomes clearer that the Igbo culture on widowhood practice is one of the manifestations of violence unleashed on the woman just to subjugate her into acceptance that she is the inferior of the men folk. In the same Igbo culture, torturing the woman does not only end in accusing her of being responsible for her husband's death but goes to the extent of compelling her to mourn her husband in the most miserable of ways:

WOMAN V: Soon after putting my husband in the grave,  
I was put into widowhood. The Umuada,  
Daughters of the clan Led me to an open  
compound, without any privacy. Surrounded only  
by the Umuada, I was stripped naked.  
I was not allowed to go to anywhere during  
the first 40 days of confinement. Neither  
was I allowed to touch with my hands  
or any Object nor any part of my body.  
for at this period, I was regarded to be  
unclean... (Okoh, 49).

It is interesting to note that the Umuadas who execute the humiliating treatment on Woman V in the guise of widowhood practice are her fellow women. One begins to wonder if the same-

sex feelings does not run in their veins. The deep involvement of the Umuadas in the humiliation of their fellow women clearly demonstrates the fact that the maltreatment and oppression of women in most African societies draw motivation from patriarchal traditions that reduce women to mere commodities and properties acquired by men. Woman V's crime was nothing except that she lost her husband. Apart from the Torture from the Umuadas, she also loses all her household properties that she acquired side by side with her husband to the husband's family because she refuses to be inherited by one of her deceased husband's siblings. Women who go through this cultural discrimination, face discrimination based on their gender roles or expectations or maybe subjugated to harmful traditional practices, as we see in the case of Woman V. Another practice is the forced eviction of widows from their homes and land, leaving them without shelter or livelihood. This is often justified by cultural or religious norms that prioritize the rights of male relatives over those of women. Widows may be forced to live on the streets, in poverty, and without access to basic necessities like food, water, and healthcare. Dehumanizing widowhood practices against women are a gross violation of human rights and dignity. These practices perpetuate gender-based discrimination, violence, and abuse, leaving women vulnerable and powerless. Okoh tries to reveal that these discrimination are not just personal experiences but are built into the fabric of society.

We also find this discriminatory act in the play *Refugees*, it depicts a society where women are prevented from participating in society on an equal footing with men. This can be seen from the excerpt below:

ANGIE: Our men usually meet and deliberate over these  
Issues. I wonder why they haven't been meeting  
Over these new developments.

NYATU: You are right Angie, but we dare not teach them  
What to do, lest they see us as being confrontational.  
Our sole responsibility is to focus on surviving in  
This camp..(Agouru, 17).

The conversation between the two characters, implies that women are not permitted in the social gathering of men to deliberate on issues as women are seen as weak, emotional and less capable than men. In Nigeria, women are seen as objects that can be used by men, just the way it pleases them in society. They are seen as tools for producing children and maintaining the house. Women's duty they say, is in the kitchen and bedrooms, so they are restricted from participating in politics and other state affairs. The Nigerian patriarchal society prioritizes men's authority and dominance, often marginalizing women's voices and agency. Most women face barriers in accessing quality education, particularly in rural areas, limiting their future opportunities. Coupled with the high rates of domestic violence, commodification, and other forms of gender-based violence, further marginalizing them. Most of these women face barriers in accessing healthcare, particularly reproductive healthcare due to cultural and religious restrictions. Just as we in the case of Woman III. These factors perpetuate discrimination against women, limiting women's potential and contributions to society. These discriminations affect them to the extent that the ability for some women to express themselves freely, are limited. With this, women may feel the need to tone down their assertives or hide their true feelings to avoid being seen as 'Confrontational', which leads to the feelings of frustration, marginalization and discrimination.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have been able to analyze the commodification of women in the Nigerian plays : *Voices* and *Refugees*. We looked at the various ways in which women are

objectified which includes: sexual exploitation, forced marriage and discrimination against women. We also established above that as long as women are seen as objects, their freedom remains an illusion.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion

This essay has successfully examined in Julie Okoh's *In Our Own Voices* and Doyin Agouru *Refugees of the Great Lakes*. It reveals the predicament women experiences in Nigeria. The plays demonstrates the harsh realities of the Nigerian women in Home and in the society. Both plays reveals the issue of domestic violence in Nigeria, which entails: the psychological, verbal and physical torture meted on women. It also examines how women are treated as commodities; sexual exploitation, forced marriages and discrimination against women. Furthermore, it examines how these African women are oppressed, exploited and discriminated. It reveals how they are deprived of privileges the men benefits from the systematic abuser and injustice directed towards women in Nigeria society.

Okoh and Agouru presents to us in both plays, the predicaments of the Nigerian women. In the course of the study, it is observed that most women across the cultures and religion in Nigeria, suffer one form of domestic violence or the other. It also reveals how the characters of Woman I and Robina go through psychology trauma, most especially the character of Woman I undergoes series of physical and verbal abuse by the man she calls her husband. This chapter also reveals how the harsh realities of war, are suffered mostly by women and children. We see this through the character of Robina, who lost both her husband and two children, with the addition of being gang raped by these same soldiers(men). While Okoh reveals these predicaments through various characters, Agouru also reveals the experiences described as the aftermath of war, which is traumatizing and affects it affects the survivors psychologically. She reveals in this chapter the high level of domestic violence endured by women in Nigeria.

The last chapter, focuses on how women as victims of commodification, which includes: forced marriage, sexual exploitation and Discrimination against women. We find in both of these plays, how sexual exploitation has the ability to change a woman's life in a rather negative way. From chapter three of this essay, we can see how Okoh reveals some primary factors that can cause a girl child to be open to the danger of sexual abuse. Some of which are: child neglect, irresponsible parents, the executioners of the law, lack of strict punishment for such evil act of rape. We also see how women are forced into marriages without their consent, being treated like mere objects . This chapter also examines how women are not treated with the same equal rights as men, how women are not allowed to give their opinions on important matters. The issue of women as victims of these predicaments mentioned above, is a serious one as it undermines the human rights and well-being of women at a deep level. It is a complex social problem that requires a comprehensive approach, tackling not just the physical and legal aspects but a cultural mindset shift towards the acceptance is women as full beings, deserving of respect, dignity and equality. It is crucial to dismantle the forces that perpetuate gender-based violence, structural inequality, and limit women's choices and self-expression to bring true and sustainable equality.

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