

SEXUAL SLAVERY IN NIGERIA: A REFLECTION ON EKANEM IKPEME'S
HURTING IN THE INSIDE

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Abstract: The question of male dominance and the consequent oppression of the female folk by the male folk predate written history. In this paper, we have tried to examine the manipulative and exploitative tendencies of adult males over female children and the negative effects of this on the psyche of the victims in their daily interactions with their peers and other adults in their respective families in particular and the society at large. Using the feminist theory in Ekanem Ikpeme's *Hurting in the Inside* as a template, the paper explores the survival strategy adopted by a female child to surmount the obstacles on her way to self esteem, self-fulfillment, self-assertion and self-actualization in a patriarchal society that is programmed to devalue her worth.

Keywords: Sexual exploitation, patriarchal society, African feminism, Efik-speaking community

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Introduction

Female child sexual exploitation is a universal phenomenon. This paper uses the work of an author from the Efik-speaking community of Calabar-Nigeria, to explore the subject of sexual slavery. Ekanem Ikpeme's *Hurting in the Inside* is located in Efik land in south-south Nigeria as a representational setting. The origin of the Efik people has generated so much controversy among historians, as different versions of their origin have emerged. Monday Noah in *Old Calabar: The City State and the Europeans 1800-1885* is of the opinion that "the Efik are Ibibio by origin" (8). Hugh Goldie in *Calabar and its Mission* argues that "The Efik people, as they call themselves, have, according to their traditions, come out of Ibibio, a territory which extends from the Cross River to Ibu on the Niger" (12). Aye in *The Efik People* disagrees with the above arguments. He rather posits that "the origin of the Efik people points to the Orient" (vii). He contends that the conclusion that the Efik were of Ibo or Ibibio origin is hasty, but affirms that "the Efik ancestors had, during

those years of their sojourn, been hosted by both the Ibo and the Ibibio in their countries at one time or another” (vi). Okon Uya in “Old Calabar Studies: An Overview” concludes that “The controversy has remained largely unresolved and compounded by the clear intrusion of political considerations into what should primarily be a scholarly issue” (203).

However, this paper is not concerned about the origin of the Efik people, its rather about their oppressiveness. Noah cites Etubom Ekpenyong Efiok Asama Ekpenyong Efiok Eyo Honesty VIII’s account of the oppressive nature of the Efiks thus: “There, a great misunderstanding arose between the Ibibios and the Eburutus as a result of which the Ibibios nicknamed them “Efik” meaning “oppressors”. The Efiks then migrated to Ikpa Ene, an Island on the Cross River, where they left relics that are still extant”(qtd in *Old Calabar*, Noah 6). Noah also notes that the name Efik (oppressor) was given to an oppressive King Offiong who was tyrannical. That the Efiks alongside with other communities are descendants of King Offiong from Akwa Akpa. He posits:

So also are the Efik who continued to answer to that contemptuous title once borne by the great ancestor even after they had crossed to the other side of the river while their kin in the mainland had long dropped it as a sad reminder of King Offiong’s tyranny (10).

The above buttresses the fact that the Efik people are oppressive and exploitative in nature, hence their migration from one location to another. In their attempts to oppress their host communities, they were sent away.

E. U. Aye in *The Efik People* notes that “Slavery, like the witch cult, is the oldest of human institutions” (203). The Efik-speaking community, like other tribes in the pre-colonial era were used to having slaves around them. Therefore, the idea of enslaving a weaker person was prevalent. Aye argues that “slavery was thought of as something inevitable” (204). He also posits that “The Efik social structure was strictly patriarchal” (199) and patriarchy is a system that thrives on the domination of women—old and young. Since slavery was a common experience, even among the freeborn, some of them were enslaved, especially the young and poor. Aye notes that “Efik society was stratified: there were the rich and the poor members of the nobility or freeborn” (204). Usually, women and children are the poor ones who are exploited, especially sexually. Any offence committed against a child amounts to child abuse, children have been abused severally by adults because of their vulnerability. Female children, like their adult female counterparts are daily battered, abused and exploited by their fathers, uncles and brothers. The need to end female subjugation and domination by men has given rise to feminist theory, which advocates that women (adult and children) should rise up, resist and fight against male domination, exploitation, manipulation and oppression in all its ramifications. In *The Identity of Self*, Helen Chukwuma defines feminism as:

A rejection of inferiority and a striving for recognition. It seeks to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual and contributing human being. Feminism is a reaction to such stereotypes which deny them a positive identity. (ix)

In *Accents in the African Novel*, Chukwuma argues that “the success of feminism is predicated on the women’s strength and moral courage to be individual, to assert themselves” (89). Feminism therefore is an advocacy for the survival of women in a male dominated society.

Sexual Exploitation of the Female Child

The “OAU Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child” describes a child to mean “every human being below the age of 18 years” (83). Article XVI of the same Charter declares that:

State parties to the present Charter shall take specific legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of torture inhuman or degrading treatment and especially physical or mental injury or abuse, neglect or maltreatment including sexual abuse, while in the care of a parent, legal guardian or school authority or any other person who has the care of the child. (88)

In Ekanem Ikpeme’s *Hurting in the Inside*, the central child character is exploited sexually by her uncle. Oku, Abasianwan’s uncle exploits her sexually and threatens to kill her if she tells anybody. This exploitation and abuse begins at the age of 13, when the victim is so young and naïve. For fear of being killed, she keeps silent for two years. On her fifteen birthday however, she exposes him and nobody in the family believes her story. She runs away from home and wouldn’t come back until fifteen years later as an adult who has grown from ignorance to knowledge and from naivety to experience. She returns to her home to her roots at the death of Etinyin, her beloved grandfather. Oku feels threatened by her presence and devises other means to eliminate her permanently. He orders his political thug: “No mistakes. Get rid of her. You know the rules. Find out what she wants, give it to her if it is not a problem and see that she does not come back”(17).

Amorous Oku takes advantage of young and naïve Abasianwan’s self-assertion that she wants to be knowledgeable above her peers and defiles her. She innocently states:

I want to learn things that are hard, complicated and take lots of work..., work in school is so simple and easy to understand. That’s why I read ahead of the class like my mum had taught me (23).

Oku rapes his thirteen-year old niece Abasianwan in the garden at night.

“He suddenly drew her close and hugged her tightly.... He turned her sideways and with one hand clutched her buttocks and forced her to her knee. She became scared and screamed, but she was too far away from the house” (24).

He rapes her and threatens to kill her if she tells anyone in the family. In *Crimes, Defenses & Sentences*, Akinbiyi notes that:

Rape is unlawful sexual intercourse with a female without her consent. It is the act of sexual intercourse committed by a man with a woman not his wife and without her consent, committed when the woman’s resistance is overcome by force or fear, or under other prohibitive conditions (145).

Oku's wickedness and beastly behaviour against his niece constitutes violence against women and child abuse. It falls under the sexual violence against women. Grace Etuk in *Violence against Women* argues that:

Sexual forms of violence against women are usually aimed at exploiting women sexually, and they constitute about the most damaging forms of violence women face apart from the effect they leave on the health and general well-being of women, sexual forms of violence against women are more damaging because their victims feel ashamed and devalued, and as such they hardly discuss their experiences, making it difficult for the problem to be solved. (12-13).

Oku does not stop at sexually harassing little Abasianwan, but he turns her into his sexual slave to the extent that, if he goes to her room for his sexual escapades and she is not there, he threatens to beat her up. The narrator tells us that:

School had started and Babi had to rush through her homework because her uncle Oku would show up right after dinner. She hated the way he scolded her if she was not in her room when he called. He even threatened to beat her if she missed their meeting (290).

He turns this innocent girl into his sex toy which he manipulates as he pleases. Any woman who experiences sexual exploitation is like a slave who suffers under his master and who could batter him, use him for forced labour. The master could even choose to either sell or kill the slave. Florence Orabueze recognizes this fact when she states in *Society, Women and Literature in Africa* that the woman is a sex toy in the manipulative hand of her oppressor. "She is sexually defiled, raped, abused, assaulted and battered". (33)

Abasianwan's experience in *Hurting in the Inside* is akin to the experiences of Firdaus in Nawal El Sadaawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, where her uncle defiles her sexually as a young girl. This buttresses the point that sexual slavery of women is a universal problem.

Dave Imbua in *Slavery, Slave Trade and the African Diaspora* argues that "slavery is exploitation, that is, someone exploits the labour of another person for his own benefit" (2). Abasianwan is sexually enslaved by uncle Oku for two years. She suffers from this sexual abuse because she lost her mother to death. She laments the absence of her mother which has given Oku the opportunity to exploit and enslave her sexually. "She longed for her mother" (32). Abiola Odejide in *The Abused Child Motif* argues that "the abused child motif is characterized by three main features: separation, suffering and vindication. The child is separated from a loving mother, usually by the latter's death" (151).

Oku's bestiality, moral decadence and oppressive tendencies are exhibited as he interferes with the intellectual growth of Abasianwan. He prevents her from attending her school magazine editorial board's meeting in order to be in her room waiting for her oppressor to come and devour her. He tells her:

I am not about to change my plans just to accommodate you. I would rather you resigned for now, tell them to change their meeting from Wednesday, he said and closed the door behind him. He did not want any arguments from Babi (35).

Oku's inordinate desire for power and wealth deepens his belief in the myth in Onock clan that, a man can get magical powers if he goes to bed with his children. Ikpeme in *Hurting in the Inside* explains that:

It was believed amongst peasants of Onock Clan that a parent can get into bed with their children for magical powers to be passed from one member of the family to another by incest. Etinyin just couldn't understand this madness, like he called it. This was a myth that his people practiced. (5)

In traditional African setting, a brother to one's father is regarded as a father; because, in the absence of one's biological father, the uncle stands in the gap. Oku violates this sacred familial affinity by raping his little niece for whom he is supposed to be a father. Grace Etuk defines rape as "the forceful engagement of someone in sexual intercourse. It is the use of force or the threat of it to engage someone in sexual intercourse". (62) She also describes rape as an anti-social behaviour which is not peculiar to any society (62), but can be found in every human society because of the myth attached to the body of a virgin. Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* notes that:

A virgin body has the freshness of secret springs, the morning sheen of an unopened flower, the orient lustre of a pearl on which the sun has never shone. Grotto, temple, sanctuary, secret garden-man, like the child, is fascinated by enclosed and shadowy places not yet animated by any consciousness, which await to be given a soul; what he alone is to take and to penetrate seems to be in truth created by him (186).

This explains why Oku was so devastated when Abasianwan ran away from home because his sexual slave has chosen to free herself. Oku's attitude towards his little niece conforms with Helen Haste's argument in *The Sexual Metaphor* thus:

Even traditional female discourse does a great deal more than passively reflect the male definition of females as belonging in private space. The female version of the idea that privacy protects, excludes the outside world, and especially male intrusion, but whereas male discourse defines the female inner self as erotic and to be protected (or violated), and female discourse has never accepted this fully (81).

These assumptions make Oku to violate Abasianwan at a very tender age because he tells her "you were not a child; you wanted it" (148), while the little girl was dying inside. Young Abasianwan realizes the double standards lived by adults who admonish children to always speak the truth no matter the situation, but they live a lie. When she exposes the atrocities of uncle Oku to them, nobody believes her, rather, they attribute it to the many stories she has been reading in her story books. "Abasianwan could not believe that any adult could lie so much about what they had done". (38) Her surprise is as a result of Oku's denial and the crocodile tears he sheds. The havoc Oku has committed in her life is not considered grievous, rather, what matters to them is how to avoid a scandal and protect the "good name of the family" from public ridicule. They tell her "none of us wants a scandal. It would hurt us all, the family and the company too. We will keep it quiet and work it out" (40). Their social status is more paramount to them than the psychological trauma

the little girl is going through. Class consciousness comes into play and this affirms Oku's earlier assertion that even if Abasianwan raises an alarm, nobody will believe her.

Consequences of Sexual Exploitation

The consequences of sexual exploitation on the female child are the psychological trauma the girl child faces and how this affects her relationship with her family and the larger society. Abasianwan, who used to be a lively, vivacious child, now withdraws from every member of the family. She locks herself in her room and weeps every day. "The following day was her grandfather's birthday and everyone was expected to be there. She couldn't walk properly to the bathroom and so couldn't get to her grandpa's house" (25). Her sudden change of attitude baffles members of the family but nobody has the moral courage to inquire from her what the problem is. This raises the question of lack of parental care on the part of parents and guardians. Parents and guardians are too busy with daily economic chores so the welfare and upbringing of children is neglected. Eme, her aunt wonders:

How can this child change to extremes within a weekend? How can aughty talkative Abasianwan become so withdrawn? Eme was really worried about her niece but couldn't place her hand on the problem (28).

The psychological trauma Abasianwan goes through makes her resolve never to love anyone in her life. This is so because uncle Oku has demonstrated to her a wrong impression about love. She notes:

Love is a joke, if people did what her uncle was doing to her, to people they love. Even her father did not love her. He was never there when she needed him most... she knew now that she would never love anyone. She would never get married either (30).

The trauma affects her relationship and behaviour in school. She is no longer active in class as she is previously known for.

She was distracted most times and was not working as hard as she used to.... She even stopped answering questions in class, which got her teachers really worried. They were worried about her sudden drastic change (30).

Although the adults are worried about her sudden change in behaviour, nobody bothers to find out from her what the problem is. The sexual exploitation, slavery and harassment Abasianwan suffers from uncle Oku and the lack of parental care and understanding she gets from other members of the Effiong's dynasty stifles her normal development. She degenerates into a recluse who lives in bitterness even in the midst of so many family members.

Oku's carnal knowledge of young Abasianwan at the age of thirteen years because of her naivety and innocence attracts some punishment for him from his family. Etinyin's family is renowned for its uprightness in the society as he contributes meaningfully towards the social, economic and educational development of his community. In the absence of his wife, he single-handedly raised his children to conform to the norms of the society, but like it is said that "in every twelve there is a

Judas". Oku, his last son turns himself into a devil incarnate and defies the socialization process his father had inculcated in him. However, he suffers the consequences of his defiance. Bernice Ezeilo in "Igbo Women & Socio-Economic Change" argues that:

Every society has its agents of socialization...these agents include the family (both nuclear and extended), the neighbourhood, the school, peers, social organizations, the church, communities, and the government. Socialization aims at rearing an individual whose behaviour conforms to the norms of the society. Every culture has techniques for strengthening the tendency to behave in a desired manner and for weakening the tendency to behave deviantly. The techniques include reward and punishment as well as modeling. When the behaviour deviates from expectation, the individual involved on the deviant behaviour is punished physically or by withdrawal of love, ridicule, labels, laws and ostracism (17-18).

This explains why Etinyin Efiog, in order to continue to maintain the good name he has made over the years, ostracizes Oku from his family for deviating from the societal norms, with all his rights and privileges as a son withdrawn. Initially, Oku thought he could survive without his family, but when Etinyin dies and mature Abasianwan returns home, he is made to relinquish all his life savings to the Etinyin's conglomerate which is willed to Abasianwan.

Survival Strategies of the Sexually Exploited Female Child

Abasianwan emerges a feminist, because she refuses to continue to suffer subjugation and oppression from her so-called uncle. She revolts on her fifteen birthday and refuses to continue to subject herself again to sexual slavery and harassment. She tells herself. "I am going to die if I don't do something". (35) Her feminist instinct comes to the fore when she acts immediately. Chukwuma notes that feminism is "a fight for rights, for human dignity; importantly, it is a fight for recognition, for a place in the sun" (44). Tonia Umoren in *Portraits of Womanhood* corroborates this as she notes that "feminism is a worldwide cultural activity poised for the liberation of women from the bottle neck of tradition with a view to improving on their subordinate status in the society" (3).

In order for Abasianwan to restore her self-identity which has been devalued by Oku, she decides to leave in order to search for her real self. Elechi Amadi in *Ethics in Nigerian Culture* argues that "All a woman has to do is to avoid men who ill-treat her as much as possible. Institutionalized sexual discrimination is a far more serious matter, for it makes women second-class citizens, and this is what feminists are fighting against" (72). Chukwuma also argues that "the quest therefore throws up to the surface the whole issue and concept of womanhood, marriage, motherhood, the ideally fulfilled woman" (106).

Abasianwan moves away from adults who live a double-standard life, away from people who want to stunt her future and prevent her from attaining self-fulfillment, self-esteem, self-actualization and self-realization. She moves away to a new and fresh environment where she can have a breath of fresh air. Like Amaka in Nwapa's *One is Enough*, she moves from an environment that cages her individuality to a free

environment where she gains experience in Maiduguri. Although the movement is not a smooth ride to success, she strives hard in a strange land to succeed. Chukwuma notes that “on the physical side, this involves a distancing, afar removed to a new place which makes its own demands and sets its own standards (84). But Abasianwan surmounts all the obstacles and achieves success in the end.

In order to escape from the dangerous hands of her wicked uncle, who has hired a “private detective to find his niece...to kill her for destroying him” (49), she decides to change her identity. She engages in strenuous exercises to change her physical looks as well as cutting her hair. She also drops her real name and goes by her mother’s maiden name Koko-Eka Ekpe. To also fortify herself physically for any challenge, she joins the Junior Karate Class in the Maiduguri hostel. “She trained in martial arts for self-defence”. (53) After her graduation, she is made an instructor because she came top of the class. She moulds her life to contradict the portraiture of women by male authors as enunciated by Umoren in *Portrait* that a woman is, “a man’s concubine, a personified ‘other object’ that must be possessed, a slave, an invidious source of man’s alienation, a source of sexual gratification and an embossment of man’s valour” (v). Rather, she prepares herself to challenge any man who tries to trample on her rights as a human being again.

As an instructor, her leadership qualities and potentials come to the fore. She advises other youths in the hostel on the need to work hard and be focused. “She talked about the need for good education, about setting realistic goals, about staying off drugs and having self-confidence”. (57). She lives by example. After advising the youths, she goes back to school to actualize her dreams in life because she knows that education is an equalizer. Education will equalize her with uncle Oku. Egbung and Okereke in “Education as an Equalizer” argue that “The educational advancement of the woman helps her to contribute to the economic development of her society, and also liberates her from the oppressive tendencies of the man” (51).

Abasianwan is liberated from the sexual slavery which uncle Oku had subjected her to. “Her mates were not surprised, when she left them shortly after and went back to school”. (57) She becomes a role model for other youths because after her talk with them, some of them returned to their homes.

To sustain her in a strange land, Abasianwan gets a job in a restaurant, enrolls herself in an extra-mural class where she studies to prepare herself for a university education. She knows that she can only gain her total freedom from all kinds of slavery through education. Okereke in “Education as a Colonial Heritage” argues that:

Formal western education, a colonial heritage, has been a positive liberating force for Nigerian women. It has equipped them for self-definition by raising their consciousness to their subjugation by a male-dominated society. Through the concomitant economic independence, education has also equipped women with resources for survival in the face of the treacheries of life (133).

Abasianwan comes out of school as a trained divorce lawyer. She returns to the Effiong’s family to claim what rightly belongs to her, as her grandfather has willed

everything in Amethyst and 3E's company to her. 3E's stands for the name of Abasianwan's grandfather, Etinyin Efiom Ekeng Effiong. He named the Construction Company he built in his youthful days after himself. When Etinyin became older, he built Amethyst, a holiday resort and became its Chairman. Ikpeme tells us: "Etinyin had made his children Directors of 3E's Construction Company. His drive was not there anymore in the company – since he directed and continued as Chairman of AMETHYST" (11). Expectedly, Abasianwan's presence at Etinyin's funeral threatens uncle Oku's safety, and he orders his political thug to kill her. But armed with education, experience and physical growth and status, Abasianwan resolves never to run away from home again. "I didn't know I could fight to keep what was mine. It was time to try. I have to control what happens to me from now on". (80) Noah notes that "the Efik structured a different inheritance formula by which female children were entitled to part of the father's possessions" (20). Abasianwan rejects the victim position, and assumes the position of a family head. Her presence frightens uncle Oku. Since she is the one who suffered the injustices in the past, she resolves to break the chain. Patricia Aburdene and John Naisbitt in *Megatrends for Women* observe that:

Though they are victims of domestic violence, rape, poverty, poor housing—or none at all—women are rejecting the victim role in favour of a more powerful assertion of activism. Indeed, the first to reach out to those who suffer child abuse, battering or rape are its former victims (266).

Abasianwan practices as a divorce lawyer in order to protect the rights of women who have been battered, bastardized in marriage, because she was a victim of male domination. The refined, firebrand lawyer comes back to take her rightful place in the family and this threatens uncle Oku who tries to stop her from coming home, but the knowledge and experience she has gained equips her to fight back. She states:

I have stopped running away from my family because of you. My being there has broken the ice. I am back in the family to stay, and you can do nothing about it. If you love yourself, just stay away from me. That is the last time that I will warn you (91).

Instead of being intimidated by uncle Oku, Abasianwan now Koko-Eka Ekpe reverses the situation by utilizing her legal power to seek redress. For the first time, she tells her father Edet, her childhood experiences with uncle Oku, and all Oku's gimmicks to run down the family business. Now as the family lawyer, Abasianwan directs uncle Oku:

"I am now the company lawyer. You are paying 3E's six hundred million naira for your duplicity. That should pay off the loan and interest and some money for a takeoff (149)".

The once little Abasianwan who was being oppressed, exploited and manipulated sexually by uncle Oku now issues orders to him because education has equipped and embolden her. Oku has no option but to comply, and in a press conference, it is reported that "Mayor Oku Efiom Effiong is giving his entire fortune to save his family; six hundred million naira to keep one of his family's companies from going bankrupt"(149).

Abasianwan emerges victorious as she overcomes her childhood psychological trauma and decides to marry. She finally finds true love in Prof. Etim with whom she shares her childhood experiences. "She had at last buried the ghost in her life. She was now ready to start living". (150). This buttresses the point that African feminism is not necessarily antagonistic to men, but rather can accommodate men in marriage. Chukwuma states that "African feminism unlike western feminism does not proffer a life ever without men" (90).

Conclusion

This paper examines the injustices experiences by a female child in the hands of an adult male, using an Efik community as a microcosm of the larger society. The female child had faced sexual exploitation which enslaved her to the whims and caprices of the adult male. Feminism empowered the female child to devise survival strategies; firstly, by leaving her family to acquire education and secondly, by returning to the family she had left as a result of sexual enslavement and exploitation. She grew from an oppressed person to a successful adult; from a naïve child to a professional adult, from a school drop-out to a renowned lawyer, from a homeless child to a proud owner of a business empire and the head of the Etinyin's business conglomerate.

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