Prejudice Nation: Hypersexualization and Abuse in Jude Dibia’s Unbridled

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Abstract

With the global #Metoo movement yet to arrive in Nigeria, Jude Dibia’s Unbridled reflects an emblematic moment for the underrepresented to occupy their stories and make their voices heard. The study analyzes patriarchy’s complicated relationship with the Nigerian girl child, significantly reviewing the inherent prejudices in patriarchy’s power hierarchies and how radical narratives explore taboo topics like incest and sexual violence. Contextualizing the concepts of hypersexualization and implicit bias to put in perspective how women, expected to be the gatekeepers of sex, are forced to navigate competing allegiances while remaining submissive and voiceless, the article probes the struggles of sexual victims and how hierarchies in a patriarchal society exacerbate their affliction through a culture of silence. Arguing that Dibia’s Unbridled confronts the narrative of silence in Nigerian fiction, the article explores ways the author empowers gender by challenging social values and traditional gender roles, underscoring gender dynamics and the problematic nature of prevalent bias against the feminine gender in Nigeria.

Keywords

prejudice, hypersexualization, sexuality, incest, patriarchy, religion

Introduction

There is an intense scene in Jude Dibia’s (2005a, p. 162) Unbridled when Bessie, Erika’s Ghanaian friend, pleads with her to break from the clutches of abusive men whose unbridled ambition is unquestionably to destroy women. She remonstrates with Erika avowing, “women are life and we have to seek out life.” Dibia’s artful dialogue between both women captures the emotional essence of the most vulnerable gender in Nigeria’s misogynistic space and cues the way sexual violence is trivialized in that society. hooks (2001) notes that abused female children have been taught that love can coexist with abuse, in essence framing a “brutal culture where men are taught to worry more about sexual satisfaction and performance” (p. 176). From infancy to adulthood, Nigerian women across ethno-religious spheres continue being exploited, damaged, and destroyed by perverted love. Clementine Ford (2018) observes that while girls are broadly expected to be “the gatekeepers of sex, in charge of prevention and ‘warding off’ the advances of their supposedly single-minded male peers, boys are generally fed an ideology that positions their pursuit of sexuality as something that defines their masculinity” (n.p.). Ifeyinwa G. Okolo (2016) asserts that Dibia “shows how sexual behaviours, identities, and perceptions are defined and redefined depending on where the centre or margin is located at the point of definition” (p. 1). Unbridled reflects an emblematic moment for the oppressed that have refused to remain statistics. Ikhide Ikheloa (2007) surmises that “Dibia pulls hard at the masks and unearths Man’s hypocrisy” (n.p.). Dibia centers sensitive issues, otherwise ignored as private, that matter to Nigerian women.

Chris Dunton in the preface to Unbridled observes that in “Unbridled . . . Dibia weaves present and past time narratives together, so that the one continually illuminates the other” (Dibia, 2005a). Dibia’s progress narrative underscores how the cultural obsession to make women comply with a hypersexualized traditional image fuels social pressure and tolerance of an abusive male gaze. It is a familiar construct in Nigeria’s cultural flow that remains unyielding, sustained by complex religious and traditional structures of identity and social permissiveness—a certain sense of entitlement to unfettered sexual access. Enson (2017) argues that the bombardment of sexualized imagery or acts on young women begins a process of internalization that is both gradual and insidious. Okolo echoes Staik’s opinion that “the negative

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cultural understanding of masculinity wherein dominance is eroticized in such sexual relationships portrayed in Dibia’s novel, has led many men and women to believe in and build their lives around men adopting unhealthy behaviours and ideals” (I. G. Okolo, 2016, p. 2). The novel unravels the emancipation of Ngozi Akachi from incest and sexual molestation laying bare the implicit bias against women in Nigeria and the deficit of trust between the government and the governed.

Recently, there has been a spike in news reports of abused minors and women opening up to past violations. The global #Metoo movement, a pivotal moment when patriarchy’s abuse of power has increasingly been held accountable, is yet to arrive in Nigeria. With the recent public outrage greeting the brutal rape-murder of the young University of Benin, Nigeria, undergraduate lady, Uwaila Omozuwa, it appeared such traumatic incidents in Nigeria would finally be confronted and a cultural turning point marked. Omozuwa’s tragic case, although shocking, is predictable in light of Nigeria’s long history replete with such incidents. Reflecting on Nigeria’s intractable nature as a suffocating conservative space, Jude Dibia (2005a) in his novel, Unbridled, metaphorically depicts Ezi, Ngozi (Erika) the protagonist’s birthplace as a place where life “remained almost the same as it was in my childhood—static, resisting ferociously any outside influence of modernity” (p. 225). Punch (2020) writes that Women at Risk Foundation’s 2018 report revealed that statistics at its disposal show more than 10,000 girls raped in Nigeria daily (Punch, 2020). Women in socially conservative Nigeria have so far avoided speaking out, fearing backlash or stigmatization. Unfortunately, a legacy of sexual abuse has been a part of Nigeria’s history and a reality for many Nigerian women. Marcotte (2016) condemns this type of toxic masculinity for its fear of anything feminine. In analyzing patriarchy’s complicated relationship with the Nigerian girl child, Jude Dibia’s Unbridled confronts the inherent ignorance in a suffocating culture by innovatively analyzing the omission of facts in patriarchy’s power politics while establishing radical narratives that articulate taboo topics of incest and sexual violence. Jumoke Verissimo (2016) points out that “Dibia succeeded in creating Sex as a character giving force to themes like Adultery, Childbearing; Rape, Conception, Fornication, Homosexuality, Masturbation, and Incest which are taking an entirely new dimension in the fray of modern moral liberation” (n.p.). Dibia’s piece epitomizes the social activist bent of conscientious Nigerian artists whose contemporary dramatic plots reflect new aesthetics re-centring women and other marginalized characters. His narrative’s thematic preoccupation with parental abuse and domestic violence discloses how suppressed trauma bears grave repercussions for personal and social identity and contributes to pushing women out of the public space.

At a time the world is clamoring for equal opportunities for men and women, “We Shouldn’t Give Women Much Opportunity” (2018, n.p.) reports a Nigerian federal lawmaker, Mr. Muhammed Kazaure, warning against giving women “too much opportunity.” As the #Metoo movement gathers momentum globally and predatory men in power positions are increasingly called out by abused women, Nigeria with its culture of silence appears left behind. Unbridled’s interrogation of the craveness of traditional masculinity taps into this global trend and stridently aligns the need to implant something into Nigeria’s cultural fabric—a need to sow a seed rejecting a misogynistic past. In recent times, gender-based violence has spiked with toxic masculinity’s role as the traditional type of manhood more evident as provocateur. Kubuitsile (2008, n.p.) is worried about Dibia’s gender as a voice for this movement noting that “many have commented on the authenticity of Ngozi’s female voice coming from a male writer,” although she accepts that “Dibia seems to have a unique insight into the female psyche.” Samuel Davis (2018) is however concerned with “the continuum of the development of the protagonists’ personalities as they are tossed around and tampered with by different characters with which they come in contact, as well as events” (n.p.). Sexual abuse is about power, and in Nigeria, the right to say no remains a luxury for most women. Dibia’s initiative seeks to activate the powerful voices of women erstwhile suppressed in an exhaustive patriarchal space to challenge unflattering cultural assumptions of females as one dimensional.

Unbridled tells the story of patriarchy’s complicated relationship with the girl child. It is a story of plausible characters, about the sensitive issue of incest, sexual abuse, and the traumatic scars left on the girl child. The novel advocates emancipation of its female protagonist, Erika also known as Ngozi, abused from childhood by her father and later in London by her White husband, James. The plot symbolizes many untold crises that have become part of a national disaster and, through coalescence of the geographical settings of the novel, Dibia describes a neo-colonialist vision of Nigeria whose national consciousness and social conditions remain misogynistic and repressive. As the protagonist, Ngozi, laments in the novel,

“I just hate this country”, I said. “What will you do about it”\? Uloma asked . . . “One day, I would leave this God-forsaken place”. I said. “And where would you go”\? Uloma asked. “London.” I said. “I used to live next to this girl who always travelled to London for holiday. She showed me pictures of gardens and red double-decker buses and Trafalgar Square”. (p. 74)

Nwabueze (2017) explains that “the novel touches on questions of postcolonial Black African culture successfully excising new sexuality from itself” (p. 5). He wonders whether such narrative is doomed by its own dynamism that enables it to absorb fresh experiences, including elements of other cultures, which a powerful segment of the citizenry considers useful. Kubuitsile (2008, n.p.) informs that increasingly seeking to confound these sexist stereotypes, writers,
like Dibia, present women in their bare state without labels. In its visceral portrayal of sexual abuse *Unbridled* interrogates the cultural assumption that a woman ought to sublimate her sexuality and remain voiceless in the conversation regarding how her body is appropriated by men. Arguing for women’s rights to empowerment and sexual consent, *Unbridled* reflects the experience of being human and reinforces society’s need to empathize with the marginalized. In pushing our society’s long history of abuse closer to the light, Dibia calls attention to Nigeria’s degenerating gender space, thereby lionizing victims who resist abuse and demand dignity.

### On Pernicious Stereotypes

In Nigeria, just as elsewhere globally, narratives and ethical considerations of social issues are most often framed from authorial viewpoints of gender, class, religion, and ethnicity and an ethical grasp of what the flow of culture ought to be. The reticulation of these social concerns through the fictional process is most often dependent on the writer’s understanding of social value and human behavior in that geographical space. More than 98% of Nigeria’s population claim adherence to one faith-based group or the other (Christianity and Islam) with their attendant claims of morality and ethical behavior. These claims do not always translate to a highly ethical society as evinced from Nigerian’s ranking on the global corruption perception index. Collins refers to the various intersections of social inequality as the “matrix of domination” or the “vectors of oppression and privilege that serve as oppressive measures towards women and change the experience of living as a woman in society” (Ritzer & Stepinisky, 2013, p. 204). In a conservationist space where women are conceived as inferior to the male gender, the female gender has been conveniently depicted both in the real and in the fictional world as a mindless utilitarian vehicle whose fate is to dance to the eternal tune of the patriarchal puppeteer. The Canadian Women’s Health Network (2012) points out that hypersexualization of young girls, also known as early sexualization, implies the depiction of girls as sexual objects—an inappropriate imposition of products or ideas on girls to make them view themselves as sexually mature. Such stereotypes have become discriminatory, pernicious, and tolerant of sexual harassment. In the novel, Ngozi’s (Erika) practice of weaponizing sex with James for relaxation purposes is a fundamental aspect of her fragility. This complex is further complicated by her sexual tryst with her Nigerian neighbor, Providence, as a reward for his care. As she observes, “something about his Nigerianness reflected a quality of home, a nostalgic sense of care and empathy” (p. 67). Ngozi reveals how she opted for a name change while chatting with James: “Erika was the name we both agreed on over the internet . . .” (p. 9). The need for growth and development is what essentially drives her name change and rejection of a patriarchal label and its cultural kin: religion. Religion has offered an increasingly restrictive space for individual development and consistently supports a traditional conservative philosophy that is largely misogynistic.

Gender discrimination manifests in several guises, all sanctioned by religious bodies under the dogma of “submitting to one’s father and husband.” P. H. Collins (1986) echoes Brittan and Maynard’s submission that “domination always involves the objectification of the dominated; all forms of oppression imply the devaluation of the subjectivity of the oppressed” (p. 18). When agitations of gender empowerment and equality eventually arise, they are most often countered with a propaganda exploiting fear of a crisis of faith and collapse of society. Dibia (2009) observes that “culturally, we carry in our heads a notion of the female: what a woman looks like and what a woman sounds like. (And the same is true of the male.) Of course such wonderful definitions—stereotypes—are man-made” (n.p.). Over time in Nigeria, the folk motif of the rebellious daughter or wife became an entrenched part of popular culture and any time marginalized women spoke out there has been sexist alarum at so called “feminists” in need of clipped wings. This chauvinist bent has manifested in subtle social sanctions against women and sometimes outright expulsion from the community. Nigeria’s Minister of Women Affairs and Social Development, Dame Pauline Tallen most recently reported an estimated two million Nigerian women and girls sexually assaulted annually (Punch, 2020).

A turning point has been reached in Nigeria’s social history as young Nigerian writers confront the cultural silence toward incest, rape, and other forms of sexual abuse against women. Through their art, they have analyzed shifting cultural altitudes and set a template encouraging inclusive attitudes and respect for the other sex. First- and second-generation writers like Chinua Achebe, J.P. Clark, Elechi Amadi, and so on allotted traditional roles to their female characters, but younger writers in this social media–driven age have sought to drive new agenda by making their female characters resist continued assault of their basic human rights. These explicit descriptions of sex by young Nigerian writers are seriously decried by writers like Nnolim, Ososifan, and Adimora-Ezigbo (Nwabueze, 2017, p. 6) who are classified by Nnolim as belonging to the fleshy school. Ososifan, however, concedes that the young writers have achieved much not minding the ecstasies of the libido in their novels that have an undercurrent of criticism beneath the love theme. He states that this discussion is “sometimes very acerbic in fact of the sorry political situation caused by irresponsible and corrupt leadership. And hence, side by side with the erotic moments are vivid pictures of the grim and squalid situations of the populace” (Ososifan, 2009, p. 45). Walter P. Collins (2010) states that “unlike the frustrating effort of their predecessors to straddle cultural and ideological imperatives and the creative impulse, the new voices are basking in the warm glow of worldwide approbation as they attempt to rewrite the African story” (p. xiv).
Jude Dibia and other young Nigerian writers work from a vibrant postcolonial narrative that interrogates taboo topics and trauma. W. P. Collins (2010) notes that

by adopting a redemptive strategy these novelists analyze the memories of our social consciousness and through creative agency confront the marginalized’s conflicted spatial identity and the recurring and changing aspects of African life in a globally connected world at the dawn of a new century. (p. xiii)

Dibia has declared an uncommon penchant to operate outside the gender box by highlighting the ways personal histories and memories influence gender behavior. By creating a female protagonist, Ngozi (Erika), whose personal relationship with the man in her life is built upon subservience to the patriarchal needs of sexual exploitation, Dibia interrogates the important question of identity and self-emancipation. The novel explores the complexity of patriarchal abuse and how negative sexual experiences of its female characters affect their sense of cultural displacement and imperil their social development. Dibia explores the traumatic life of Ngozi, a desperate Nigerian immigrant, fleeing the horrors of an abusive family to England buoyed by the false hope of internet romance with a White man, James King. Ngozi, now known as Erika, due to James’s linguistic unease with her native name, discovers after a period that her condition has deteriorated albeit her new status as Mrs. Erika King. Faced with the prospect of continued slavery in a new land and hallucinations of her past in Nigeria, Erika takes up the mission of forming new allies in her quest for true freedom.

Dibia’s Unbridled navigates competing allegiances and explores the cultural notion that dutiful daughters or wives should remain submissive, long suffering, and voiceless. In challenging the centers of power in Nigeria, Dibia’s novel avails the reader a vivid detail of the personal stories of the victims of forbidden relationship and the women scarred inside and out. Nagesh Rao (2004) contends that “the world of the postcolonial novel is itself a radically fractured space where different social groups contend for power and control, both of their world and of the narrative itself” (n.p.). Dibia succeeds in creating a mental picture of sex—a concretized presence giving breath to sexual themes like adultery, rape, fornication, masturbation, and incest that litter our environment but are underreported especially at the family level. On the premise that sex is about power, Dibia weaponizes the marginalized female body and questions social phenomenon, erstwhile muted by conservative writers. His strategy subverts cultural conventions and compels society to acknowledge pervasive acts going on daily in many Nigerian homes, thereby coming to terms with the tinted lens through which gender is viewed. Simon Gikandi (1987) states that “the problem with control, whether secular or spiritual, is that it assumes there is some consensus on what is acceptable and what is undesired” (p. 166). A teenage village girl, Ngozi Akachi, suffers various abuses at the hands of her family members and is sent to Lagos to reside with an uncle whose wife subjects her to further physical abuse. Ngozi’s feelings of anger and insecurity affect her development of a positive sex image due to her lack of justice assaulted by audacious male abusers. Her future appears doomed until she forms a friendship with Tiffany Okoro, a hairdresser, who takes her under her wings until she departs for England to hook up with James, her online lover. She finally finds her voice in that distant land after more abuses. Erika, the semantically transformed Ngozi, exhibits courage by leaving James who has trampled on her dreams by lying about being “as comfortable as they come” (p. 17). However, she appears undig-nified in her elopement with Providence, her Nigerian lover in the United Kingdom, revealing a penchant to seek validation from the male gender. The dilemma of the Nigerian girl child is lucidly captured in the novel when Providence’s mother prays for God to punish her expectant co-wife with a female child.

Although the novel is a creative fantasy of the author’s reality, it is a narrative that bears striking resemblance to the stories of incest and sexual torture coming out in increasing numbers recently in the media. Ngozi’s despondency reflects the traumatic attitude of Nigeria women forced into unwarranted sexual assaults as she recalls, “I could hear voices again . . . voices of suppressed memories” (Dibia, 2005a, p. 4). The major theme in Unbridled is Nigeria’s insensitivity to the psychological destruction of the girl child by the powerful overbearing male parent. Onyijen (2014) remarks that “abuse of power as evident in physical violence is also the artistic concern of Jude Dibia in Unbridled” (p. 78). Dibia in his fictional world reveals James as a White man who dramatizes violence in his domestic space. As a narrative that invites us to consider sexuality and emasculation from the perspective of those celebrating liberation and self-identity, Dibia holds up a mirror to patriarchy and its mode of articulating social ethics. Culturally, in Nigeria, as the child grows up, he or she acquires a semiotic education of the gender process. The child also acquires a social knowledge of acts deemed transgressive, antisocial, and subversive to that social code. Ode Ogede (2011) argues that “society’s failure to accommodate difference harmoniously is an irrefutable sign of arrogance” (p. 130). The child is taught about cultural practice as a way of life but is not enlightened about the man-made nature of those behavioral modes.

Authority figures most often use tools at their disposal, religion inclusive, to extend the policy of exclusion to the detriment of women. Unbridled highlights this ignorance at the core of our national culture—a situation worsened under decades of military rule with its straitjacketed approach. Ngozi’s brother Nnamdi, who ought to protect her, fails to exhibit the filial emotions of love and empathy when her father repeatedly violates her body. Even when he is confronted by Ngozi years later, he hides his inaction behind the cultural excuse that “it is not a woman’s place to complain about her father” (p. 151). Dibia uses Nnamdi’s
character to highlight Nigerians’ withdrawing attitude toward complicit sensitive issues they would rather not address. In capturing Nigeria’s history of girl child sex abuse, Unbridled highlights the fears, tears, and desperation of the young Nigerian woman and how her traumatic past still affect her in a foreign clime. The author also highlights some women’s complicity in allowing patriarchal-free reign. Ngozi’s mother is well aware of Ngozi’s abuse at the hands of her husband yet she pretends to be unaware. Ngozi’s aunt has her own notion of discipline and submission as she commands Ngozi’s two male cousins to restrain her while she administered pepper to her genitals as punishment for her perceived waywardness:

She got me and ordered me to lie on my back and spread my legs . . . and felt her finger slip inside me to examine me. It felt wriggly and foreign as being violated again, in my second home. I then heard her cry out “Ngozi . . . Ngozi . . . Ngozi!” She grabbed the jar of pepper, opened it and stuck her fingers into it. I watched in pure horror . . . She stuck her peppered thumb in me. (p. 100)

Dibia also highlights the paradox of ignorance when Tiffany, Ngozi’s savior, while expressing her hatred for her mother espouses a yearning for her own father’s approval. This authorial concern also corresponds with Dibia’s (2005b) Walking With Shadows in the scene where Adrian voices a similar need for validation from his father. It is also evident in Erika’s desire for both James’s and Gerald’s approval. Dibia heightens our sense of the Nigerian society as a space where the voices of traumatized memories are further inhibited. It is noteworthy that Erika realizes the need to confront this social malaise when she finally gains her voice in London and returns home for her father’s burial. The allure to frame home as a warm welcoming place is germane to Erika’s bid for closure. In a moment of doubt that pulls her back to the reality of Nigeria, she wonders, “maybe London was too much of an ambition” (pp. 74–75). In this sense, Dibia poses an oedipal paradigm that fleeing unresolved issues is not the solution to tackling weighty problems. This ideation manifests when Erika realizes that what is best for her, that is, James, might be bad for her in the long term.

Religion and Unsafe Constructs

In Michel Foucault’s (1998) approach to sexuality, he links power to knowledge, which, he submits, is socially constructed. He challenges the idea that power is wielded by people or groups by way of “epidemic” or “sovereign” acts of domination or coercion, seeing it instead as dispersed and pervasive. Nigerian writers of each generation have evolved from the social condition of the period they find themselves in. According to Foucault (1991), in Discipline and Punish, through fixing of meaning and compartmentalizing thought and reasoning, discourses create epistemic reality and become a means of judging normality. Power is constituted in conservative societies like Nigeria through accepted forms of knowledge, social values, and religious beliefs. The religious dogma in Nigeria, as an informal enforcer of masculinity, demands complete adherence to articles of faith and transmutes this instruction to different facets of secular life influenced by the family chain (Gaudio, 2014). Doctrinal approaches also generate binary oppositions that exploit fear and the threat of negative change in traditional family values inadvertently sustaining marginalization. Terry Kupers (2005) contrasts positive traits of masculinity that foster pride and provision of social aids with toxic masculinity that refers to “the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia and wanton violence” (pp. 713–724). Kupers identifies such sexist ideology as a measure that counts culture as a valuable ally in justifying violence against the marginalized. This hegemonic masculinity misrepresents sex and provokes greater reticence toward sexual abuse. This manner of allocating social identity most often empowers the male gaze while conveniently victimizing vulnerable bodies. Dibia interrogates critical human rights occasioned by our unique social contract by highlighting the noninclusive nature of the Nigerian society. Ogede (2011) finds Dibia’s narrative interesting because “it is not just giving visibility to an erstwhile silent group but offering a plethora of counteracting images and representations of marginalized people in different spheres of life and situations” (p. 203).

In Nigeria, living one’s life is a performance according to social expectations and values, and status is an important evaluation yardstick. The politics of female hypersexualization according to Ratajowski (2016, n.p.) suggests that explicit sexuality and feminism are not mutually exclusive ideals. Explicating Erika’s strength of character in her search for a space in the intersection of private, family, and public life, Dibia’s narrative highlights the psychological issues and provokes greater reticence toward sexual abuse. This allows that “in the national construction of sexual identity certain sex relationships and gender roles were depicted as alien and colonist practices. This picture of Africa became a carefully cultivated worldview to escape from uncomfortable facts that challenge our world view” (p. 78). Unbridled carries a powerful message for women on a rolling journey through life like Erika, urging them to come out from the shadows and make their voices heard. Lorde (2015) outlines the importance of intersectionality as she acknowledges that different prejudices are inherently linked. As an interpreter of the Nigerian experience, Dibia interrogates the essential meaning of family and its relationship to the larger society. Highlighting the pervasive uses of religion as a patriarchal tool to exploit and repress dissent, Dibia uses this strategy comparatively to underscore the disparity between conservative Nigeria and a more liberal global community. Ogede (2011) observes that
Creativity is a revitalising act of realignment; so to be of lasting value, a new text alters its precursor(s) in crucial ways . . . so it can fully assert its particular defining qualities. Often a new text’s causes are better served by mounting a guerilla-type insurgency against orthodoxy as it explodes its way into existence . . . Whatever the writer’s primary inspirational tool kit, to give itself, any claim to uniqueness, the maturing writers’ work has therefore to break out of the purely routine realm. (p. 203)

The world of norms is carefully nurtured as the girl child is born into it, socialized into its processes, and comes to accept them as inalienable truths. This is evident in Erika’s mother’s complicit silence. Judith Butler (2005) asserts that norms do not have structured static position; “rather, norms are always produced socially and they remain variable, contingent. The norm only persists as norm to the extent that it is acted out in social practice” (Butler, 2005, p. 46). The irony is that incest is not vehemently condemned in the fiction; rather, what is of concern to her family is Ngozi’s exposure of her father’s incestuous act. It is a taboo to question her place in society until when in London she transforms in name to Erika and defies her assigned gender role. Dibia (2005a) interchanges the Nigerian society with Ezi, Ngozi’s village, a place she described, upon her return from London for her father’s funeral, as a place where life “remained almost the same as it was in my childhood: static, resisting ferociously any outside influence of modernity” (p. 225). As a pointer to the stated aims of religion in Nigeria, the church’s response whenever such reported abuse cases get to the priest is to de-emphasize the scandalous act, refuse to inform law enforcement officials, instead urging the affected parties to pray for divine intervention. Gikandi (1987) reflects on the function of the African novel as an instrument of understanding the individual and sociocultural levels. He surmises that “in this respect, literary form is more than a mute vehicle for mime- sis; it has a logic of its own” (p. x).

Dibia’s Unbridled reflects on pertinent themes of identity, sexual abuse, subhuman immigrant conditions, misogyny, and slavery. The novel analyzes the female bonds established by Erika with Tiffany and Bessie, the Ghanaians, while exploring their abusive relationships with males. Dibia adopts binaries to highlight the past and his hopeful future dreams. The novelist contends with how toxic masculinity, as embodied by James, and Ngozi’s father, could be challenged in a hostile space where popular culture, religion, and tradition normalizes unhealthy forms of male dominance, violence, patriarchy, and rape culture. Ngozi is the protagonist’s Nigerian name that represents her past, whereas Erika is her new name in a new space, England, where she hopes to find redemption. To her chagrin James, her White husband like her Nigerian father is abusive and both men remain manipulative, violent individuals not minding their disparate cultures. One could view Erika’s father from the lens of a dysfunctional upbringing, caught up in a society whose ethical existence is facing a constant barrage. Erika’s father has a fragile self-image that he misconstrues as power. He is a man bereft of tenderness, lacking compassion, sense of responsibility, and the basic attributes of humanity. Providence, on the contrary, is gentle with women and treats them with respect and compassion, having grown up in Nigeria under the positive wings of his uncle whose early influences in Providence’s life uplifted him. The key moments that define Erika’s self-empowerment, that is, when she left Nigeria for better chances abroad, when she left James for Newcastle with Providence to start afresh, her decision to delay marriage with Providence, and return to Nigeria for her father’s burial to confront the ghosts of her past, are all germane to the conversation Dibia desires Nigerian society to have.

Social Experience and False Notions

There is a patriarchal notion imbibed by most Nigerians: the idea that father knows best and remains unquestionable for all his actions. This belief system, predicated on traditional conservatism, has in most cases led to the abuse of moral authority as illustrated by Mr. Akachi’s sexual perversion. As a creative piece occupying space between art and social environment, Unbridled reveals the way parental abuse has eaten deep into the fabric of a largely sexist society. Erika’s family tries to sustain the myth of a normal family by sending the incestuous victim away to their extended family in Lagos to prevent exposure of the Akachi family name to social ridicule. Bessie, Erika’s Ghanaian neighbor, stresses the plight of women and children within the traditional family unit when she declares that society expects women to be fluid. Men do not change, Bessie believes, especially not for women who ought to adjust to suit men. The deeper issue confronted in the novel is the failure of accountability at the family level and a false picture of family painted by Ngozi’s father and James. The novel advances new notions of family: single mother type, made up of strangers (Tiffany and Uloma), and a stronger female bonding that was absent in Ngozi and her mother’s relationship.

Sexism in the novel is reflected in the manner Nnamdi, Ngozi’s brother, uses Igbo language, to taunt her about her low status in the society. On a mission to forcefully return Erika to her abusive aunt’s house, Nnamdi derides her: “I na emevo anj! Can’t you see you are embarrassing the family” (p. 133). Nnamdi’s statement mocks Erika’s submissive gender attribute as he is not interested in Erika’s defense having been ejected from their aunt’s house. He is equally unappreciative of Tiffany’s and Uloma’s assistance in sheltering Ngozi. Nnamdi is overtly anxious about his enforcement role as the patriarchal representative of his pedophilic father. Providence and Thomas also loosely use the term woman to address Erika; a linguistic attitude she believes emanates from their fear that mere pronunciation of her name confers her cultural presence and equality. Her new name, Erika, is empowering and therapeutic for her as she bids to escape the
clutches of patriarchy. She is in proper shock at how James treats her as property once she arrives in London, forcefully kissing and caressing her butt at will in public to show dominance. Erika’s need for love and acceptance is conflicted as her inferior status on the social ladder is made more pronounced by her inability to get Whites to correctly pronounce her indigenous name. As James’s manipulation and exploitation become overbearing, simultaneously Erika’s need for acceptance and respect also peaks and Erika resists this new trauma and elopes with Providence to Newcastle to start her self-empowerment phase proper. There is promise of a hopeful future with Providence, but Erika has become wiser and mindful of her need to define the terms of engagement.

Erika’s female friends, Tiffany and Uloma, have also been victims of abuse at the hands of society and bear scars. Dibia makes these women superheroes in their own rights through their intervention in Ngozi’s case when Nnamdi forcefully attempts to take her back. Ngozi’s posse is united in questioning Nnamdi’s moral authority as a patriarchal surrogate by keeping Ngozi in perpetual bondage as Uloma retorts, “Ngozi is going nowhere with you” (p. 135). Female emancipation in Nigeria does not only recommend changing laws to empower women (there are already enough extant laws) but changing cultural attitudes to those laws. It is this attitudinal threat of violence that Erika notices also lurks beneath James’s supposedly calm demeanor.

When Erika, at the beginning of Dibia’s novel, declares, “I have finally found my voice” (p. 1), she suggests a realistic break, an escape from the bondage of a patriarchal gulag. Ezi is a cultural cage that utilizes all weapons at its disposal to dominate, and in Unbridled, Dibia shows his reader the emancipation of Ngozi from the grip of incest and sexual violence. It is the type of toxic environment wherein patriarchy defines the essence of womanhood that Dibia highlights through the predatory characters of James and Mr. Akachi. This sexism is glaring in James’s declaration: of “looking to settle down with an African Queen” (p. 7). Ngozi comes alive when she experiences with Providence the sort of sexual intimacy she has craved all her life. With Providence, Ngozi finally enjoys love making as a liberating and invigorating act that fulfills her romantic craving. Freed from the performative shackles to which she was bound by James and her father, she reaches an emotional threshold with Providence that is sensually enriching and bereft of any violence. Bessie, Erika’s female neighbor who has resided in England for a long time yet holds firm to the potency of Ghanaian juju, supports James’s spousal rights to control Erika, stating, “Maybe he believes that you are his slave then? . . . He married you, didn’t he? He believes he has saved you and wants you to accept that you owe him eternally” (Dibia, 2005a, p. 159). Although Erika disagrees with Bessie’s argument on marital rights, she evidently displays a weakness for men who exercise some control over her and derives some validation when these men satiate their needs through her. It appears the Freudian ghosts of Ngozi (her past) are omnipresent and still influence the role she desires her liberated alter ego (Erika) to play.

**Conclusion**

Femi Osofisan (2001) avers that social habits, whether casual or formal, the rituals of communal etiquette or of official protocol; the improvisational tactics of traditional pedagogy, such as folk tales and drama, the routine gestures of the religious or political establishment—all these, and so on, secrete their own message, which they gradually inject into the growing child. (p. 3)

Dibia highlights the home as an important domestic realm that is sadly an unsafe space for women. Barring Providence, all the men who have been intimately involved with Erika leave her with a rough experience. James, her White husband, is the most disappointing in a foreign land she fancies herself to have as her route to emancipation. After her intimate connection with Providence, who showed promise as a caring lover, Erika is more tactful in her sexual liaisons, being more demanding of her due respect. At this point, she has come to terms with her identity and the benefits of self-emancipation. Dibia is empathetic in handling the strengths and fragility of females existing in a judicial system prevalently biased against women and running on traditional family values undermining their rights. The study concludes that repressive social norms need humanist intervention to ensure equitable alignment of women’s rights and social practice. Simon Gikandi (1987) asserts that while a community may express its identity through its mythologies, it is also true that individuals may often find themselves locked into a struggle with their community as to the meaning of such myths and their implications for personal conduct. (p. 165)

Although there have been half-hearted attempts to situate the menace of sex abuse and harassment against women in Nigeria in public discourse, such measures have only revolved around the center tables of closeted conferences or road marches where feminist activists carrying placards chanted empowering songs while media cameras filmed. Beyond the time slot paid for such publicity, further marginalization accounts do not make the national news. It is a narrative that understates the challenges denuding Nigeria’s social fabric and perpetuating prejudice.

Mary S. C. Okolo (2007) believes “the basic question of social coordination in Africa is how to build a society where people can freely realize their potential to achieve this. There’s need to examine the process, institutions and agency that make up our political life” (p. 136). The issue of sexual abuse of the girl child bears grave cultural and aesthetic significances for our national literature and praxis. The national attitude of silence toward, supposedly “private,” issues...
affects the trajectory of human rights and emasculates the victim’s sense of identity. In Unbridled, Dibia reveals the sort of desired sex that is consensual and empathic, portraying this ideal through Uloma, who Ngozi stayed with in Lagos after fleeing her uncle’s house. Uloma has “make-up” sex with her boyfriend in their shared apartment, and as Ngozi recalls, “I could still hear the muffled tears mixed with sighs of heated passion” (p. 65). In an increasingly agenda-driven age, redemptive novels like Unbridled have carved out advocacy paths by tagging systems of institutional complicity. Significantly, Erika’s father is never made to face the law because he is part of the same corrupt system perpetuating abuse, injustice, and trivializing sexual violence. In focusing on victims of sexual abuse, and advancing the need for engagement with a dynamic culture adaptive to emergent realities, Dibia stresses how ignorant cultural attitudes destroy communal cohesion rather than promote such value.

We are at a critical point in Nigeria’s history as women in the face of globalization become more empowered, break out from their passive mould, and make their voices heard. There is pressing need to uproot sexism in Nigeria and replace it with something healthy and humanizing. Everyone needs to participate in this conversation for social change. Men need to be part of the solution not the problem by being more empathic toward women just as Providence recognized Ngozi’s predicament and intervened. Enson (2017) recommends awareness training and teaching on gender identity, equality, and disseminating information about the sexualization and objectification of women. Dibia’s Unbridled captures the inner struggles of sexual victims and the need for society to support them more. As can be gleaned from Tiffany’s and Uloma’s intervention in the novel, every Nigerian is responsible for a healthy social environment where sexual violence and abuse remain unacceptable. Further critical engagements are needed in this area to ensure oppression never wins this race. The need to maintain public awareness of modes of gender abuse for possible social intervention is paramount. It is never wrong to do the right thing.

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