‘Could the Subaltern Speak?’ Patriarchy and Gender-Based Violence in Ben Okri’s Dangerous Love

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Cover Page Footnote
See, for example, the teaching of The Holy Scriptures (Bible). In Ephesians 5:22-24, it is written: “22-Wives, obey your husbands as you obey the Lord. 23- The husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church people. The church is his body and he saved it. 24 -Wives should obey their husbands in everything, just as the church people obey Christ”. Dangerous Love (1996) is a rewrite of Ben Okri’s The Landscape Within (1981). For him he felt the necessity to rewrite it because “in its spirit and essence I sensed that it was incomplete. [...] I had wanted to write a novel which celebrated the small details of life as well as the great, the inner as well as the outer. [...] The many things I wanted to accomplish were too ambitious for my craft at the time. Dangerous Love is the fruit of much restlessness. I hope that I have, at last, managed to free its spirit (1996: 325).
‘COULD THE SUBALTERN SPEAK?’ PATRIARCHY AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN BEN OKRI’S DANGEROUS LOVE

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Abstract

In a patriarchal society, women are, on the most part, the least representative in socio-political and economic spheres. They are frequently considered as second-class citizens, and live in the shadow of their male counterparts. They are portrayed as commodities, objects that satisfy men’s needs while being used as sex toys, cooks, servants, housewives and housemaids. They face various forms of violence and abuse as far as they are seen as sub-humans. In a society trapped in a web of traditional, cultural and religious beliefs, women’s plights and sufferings are often overlooked and ignored. By utilizing a feminist lens, the violation of women’s basic rights is explored in Ben Okri’s Dangerous Love (1996). The issues of domestic violence, traditional marriage, sexual abuse, poverty and discrimination are tackled.

Key Words: Violence, Gender, Patriarchy, Forced Marriage, Human Rights.

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**Introduction**

In a patriarchal society, women are either voiceless or their opinions are not taken into account in socio-political and economic decision making. They are invisible and dominated by their male counterparts. They can interiorise/internalise the rules that govern their society and might even accept their status as inferior to men. However, what some women ignore is that phallocentric (male-dominated) systems are socially constructed and may be deconstructed, reinvented or changed to others that consider women’s aspirations. This means that patriarchy is rooted in cultural, traditional and religious beliefs\(^1\) that are passed down from generation to generation. Patriarchy is a sociological and cultural ingredient that perpetuates women’s exploitation and oppression. Hence, gender-based violence, which finds its origins in systems of gender inequity, takes various forms: discrimination, forced marriage, sexual abuse, female genital mutilation, humiliation, subordination, and submission. This paper, based on a radical feminism approach, explores the relationships between patriarchy and gender-based violence in Ben Okri’s *Dangerous Love* (1996) and several other African novels. Moreover, it seeks to point out how patriarchy, with the connivance and the complicity of women, perpetuates gender-based violence. Furthermore, women’s resistance and subversion against patriarchy is also discussed.

**Contextual Background of the Novel**

*Dangerous Love* (1996) is a rewrite of Ben Okri’s novel *The Landscape Within* (1981). He describes why he felt it necessary to rewrite his novel:

> In 1981, I published a novel called *The Landscape Within*. *Dangerous Love* has its origins in that novel. That early work, its story, its characters and themes, the Nigeria that it depicted, was very close to me then and has continued to haunt and trouble me through the years, because in its spirit and essence I sensed that it was incomplete. […] I had wanted to write a novel which celebrated the small details of life as well as the great, the inner as well as the outer. […] The many things I wanted to accomplish were too ambitious for my craft at the

\(^1\) See, for example, the teaching of the Bible. In Ephesians 5:22–24, it is written: “Wives, obey your husbands as you obey the Lord. The husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church people. The church is his body and he saved it. Wives should obey their husbands in everything, just as the church people obey Christ.”
time. Dangerous Love is the fruit of much restlessness. I hope that I have, at last, managed to free its spirit.²

Dangerous Love is a doomed love story between the two main protagonists, Ifeyiwa and Omovo. This dangerous love that grows between them from which the title is taken, is an impossible love in the sense that the beautiful Ifeyiwa is married against her will to Takpo. The novel, set in Nigeria in the seventies, is replete with the aftermath and the memories of Nigerian civil war (1967-1970). It is also the season of anomaly (to use Wole Soyinka’s word) when the country is undermined by corruption, violence, military dictatorship and socio-political problems. It is worth mentioning that the novel is set in the post-colonial era when people are torn between the past and the present and where ordinary people live in abject poverty.

Theoretical Concepts

Radical Feminism

Radical feminism argues that patriarchy is the root of the social domination and oppression of women by men. Hence, in order to promote gender equality, radical feminism aims at dismantling and eliminating patriarchy.³ Furthermore, radical feminists posit that gender-based violence or violence against women is directly related to patriarchy.⁴ Men’s supremacy, which is embedded in patriarchy, manifests itself through violence against women (domestic violence, rape, forced marriage and battery). In addition, radical feminists advocate for the appropriation of women to have control over their bodies and their sexuality.⁵

Patriarchy

It is impossible to provide a general definition of patriarchy which will be accepted by all. Yet, the definition given by hooks seems to be adequate for our analysis. According to her, “Patriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the

⁵ See, for example, Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex.
right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence.” In addition, some feminist theorists define patriarchy as a system of oppression or a system whereby men control women’s sexuality and reproductive functions.

**Culture**

There is no clear-cut and complete definition of the term of “culture” because it covers a variety of meanings inspired by different approaches in different fields including literary studies, politics, anthropology, the arts, and social sciences. In 1952, the American anthropologists, Kroeber and Kluckhohn, critically reviewed concepts and definitions of culture, and compiled a list of 164 different definitions. Apte summarizes the difficulties of coining a definition of “culture” as follows:

> Despite a century of efforts to define culture adequately, there was in the early 1990s [and still today] no agreement among anthropologists regarding its nature. Much of the difficulty in understanding the concept, characteristic and definition of culture stem from the different usages of the term as it was increasingly employed in the nineteenth century.

In spite of these difficulties to “define culture adequately,” the analysis in this paper, will be based on two definitions. Mead writes that “Culture means […] the whole complex of traditional behavior which has been developed by the human race and is successively learned by each generation.” And for Helen Spencer-Oatey, “culture is a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioural conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence (but do not determine) each member’s behaviour and his/her interpretations of the ‘meaning’ of other people’s behaviour.” In the light of these definitions, we notice that culture permeates all aspects of everyday life (marriage, education, religion, male-female relationship and status) and that

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there is an intrinsic link between patriarchy and culture (patriarchy and culture are inextricably interwoven).

**Patriarchy and Gender Based Violence**

Gender-based violence stems from a patriarchal system which is based on male supremacy. Women, considered as “subaltern(s)”, are oppressed and assigned a secondary role in society. Men and boys are considered to be the heads of the family and the breadwinners, whereas women and girls are predominantly associated with the household chores and have a child-bearing role. In fact, “[...] the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant.” This discrimination and marginalisation based on gender constitutes the violation of women’s basic rights and the denial of human status to women. Far from being limited to a private sphere, violence against women permeates all the spheres of society (the workplace, the street, the public sphere, etc.). Moreover, gender-based violence is institutionalised and nurtured by religious and cultural institutions. Because women and girls have no power in a male dominated society, the decisions concerning them are taken without their consent. In the novel under study, Ifeyiwa, one of the main protagonists, is subject to various forms of violence such as forced marriage, domestic violence, rape and sexual abuse.

**Forced Marriage**

In Ben Okri’s *Dangerous Love* (1996), the socio-political system that holds patriarchy in great esteem is at work and the weight of its tradition becomes a burden for the novel’s women. They are considered to be inferior to men and all decisions concerning the former are made by the latter without their consent. The children, especially female children, are seen as the property of the family and, more importantly, the property of the father or the guardian/tutor. Hence, the male patriarch can do whatever he wants with “his” female children when it comes, for instance, to marriage.

This expression of patriarchy is experienced by Ifeyiwa, the beautiful heroine of the novel, who is married against her will to an older man, Takpo. This forced marriage is arranged by her family, but especially by her father, and without her consent. It is worth

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13 In my analysis, I use ‘subaltern’ to refer to oppressed and dominated subjects, here women. In her essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1988), Gayatri C. Spivak asks: “Can the subaltern (as woman) speak?” She adds that “the subaltern as female cannot be heard or read” (308). She concludes that “the subaltern cannot speak” (308).
mentioning that in some patriarchal societies, a girl can say nothing concerning her marriage. The husband is imposed on her and she must accept it. The novel states: “The dowry was paid and almost all other arrangements had been finalized before Ifeyiwa knew what was happening. Without any choice in the matter the marriage was forced on her.”15 The decision of Ifeyiwa’s father cannot be challenged and the children are the first victims of patriarchal violence. Most of the time, this common form of patriarchal violence begins with and occurs within a patriarchal family in which no dialogue is possible.

Ifeyiwa’s plight is common to many girls who are forced into marriage. For example, in Amma Darko’s Beyond the Horizon (1995), Mara, the main protagonist, has no choice but to marry a man her father has chosen for her. And it is her mother who told her the so-called ‘good news:’ “Your father has found a husband for you,’ she gasped,’ a good man!’ […] All I did was grin helplessly because I clearly remembered the same good news as this that mother had given my older sister two years before. Found, too, by my father. And my sister was now a wreck.”16

It is clear from these two examples, that the women’s basic human rights are violated and the women are at the mercy of their male relatives. They cannot make their own decisions because they live in a patriarchal system. Their body and their intimacy do not belong to them. They do not have control over their body; they are dispossessed and deprived of their humanity. This gender based-violence is deeply rooted in a society controlled by men who use their power to oppress women. Men think that that they are superior to women and that they should maintain or propound their dominance.

Because the husband is chosen by the father, who is the head of the family, he often lays more emphasis on the amount of the dowry or the bride price he may receive than the behaviour or the character of the bridegroom. It is, for instance, the case of Mara’s father who “had a different formula for choosing or accepting husbands for his daughters, which took more into consideration the number of cows coming as the bride price than the character of the man.”17 In Dangerous Love (1996), Takpo, Ifeyiwa’s husband, during a discussion asks: “Do you know how much I paid on that girl’s head, eh? If you sell all your things you can’t

15 Okri, Dangerous Love, 79.
17 Darko, 4.
pay her bride price”\textsuperscript{18} or “your people asked a lot of money for you – I paid. I had an expensive wedding for you in the village.”\textsuperscript{19}

In fact, both Ifeyiwa and Mara become commodities, objects given away in exchange for money and material things: “[I] was given away to this man [Akobi] who paid two white cows, four healthy goats, four lengths of cloths, beads, gold jewellery and two bottles of London Dry Gin to my family, and took me off as his wife.[…]”\textsuperscript{20} After marriage, each woman belongs to their husband and is compared to mere pieces of private property. They are dehumanized and become a sort of merchandise. In a patriarchal system, women are considered as commodities rather than human beings.

\textit{Domestic Violence}

After the marriage, as the husband thinks that he has bought a wife, the latter is treated worse than a slave. She is abused, battered, sexually assaulted, exploited, and humiliated. When Ifeyiwa is brought to the city by her husband, she finds it very difficult, if not impossible to adjust to her new life. She is trapped in wedlock, sharing nothing with her husband except receiving orders and obeying him. Far from being Takpo’s wife, she becomes his servant and his possession. She does all the house chores (cooking, cleaning, fetching water) alone and has not even time to eat: “After a hard day cooking the food, cleaning the room, washing his dirty clothes and his old-fashioned khaki underpants, fetching water three times a day for his baths, splitting firewood, sweeping the corridor, going to the market, she was barely able to snatch time to eat.”\textsuperscript{21}

Takpo’s intention is clear when the omniscient narrator informs the reader that he is not really looking for a wife but rather a “young girl who would take care of him in his old age.”\textsuperscript{22} Thus, from the beginning, the marital relationship between Ifeyiwa and Takpo is not based on mutual love or even respect so it is not surprising that the marriage turns into nightmare. Ifeyiwa is subject to various forms of domestic violence. She is repeatedly beaten up. In addition, Ifeyiwa cannot go out without her husband’s permission:

‘Ifi, where have you been?’

\textsuperscript{18} Okri, \textit{Dangerous Love}, 271.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, 233.
\textsuperscript{20} Darko, 3.
\textsuperscript{21} Okri, \textit{Dangerous Love}, 81.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 79.
Words failed her. She braced herself.
‘Where have you been?’
‘I went to see my friend, Mary.
[…]
‘If you go on like this I will send you back to your wretched people! I will send you back to your miserable family. When you foolish village girls have small education dat’s you behave, eh?’

His anger overflowed. He lashed out with the belt and caught her on the neck. She screamed, jumped sideways, and crashed into the cupboard of food. He lashed at her again. He tore the shoulders of her yellow dress. He went on whipping her till she grabbed the belt, rushed to the door, and ran out into the wet night with her clothes in tatters.

‘Run! Run! Outside if you like! You will sleep outside tonight’ he shouted. […]
She slept like a lost child that had cried itself to sleep […] the whole night […] on the cement platform.23

She is also obliged to execute contradictory orders: ‘Ifeyiwa, is my water ready?’ […] Her husband came back and said: ‘Ifi! Ifi! There is another rat in the trap, you hear? When you’ve finished go and remove it before it starts to smell. After that I want you to go to the shop and take care of things till I arrive, you hear?24. And Ifeyiwa cannot but be disoriented by Takpo’s attitude and behavior. She does not understand anymore what to do or what her husband wants from her. Ifeyiwa’s confusion is rendered by herself through a first-person narrator:

I began to clean up the whole house. I swept away the cobwebs, cleaned the corners, broke down insects’ nests on our ceiling, and drove out all the wall geckoes and lizards. He came into the house and saw me cleaning and he was angry that I did not go to the shop when he came home to eat. And he beat me again. Omovo, what does it all mean? Did I do wrong?25

The novel is replete with Ifeyiwa’s mishandling, mistreatment and physical abuse. The reader is overwhelmed by the recurrence of violence that Ifeyiwa undergoes: “he beats me again” is often repeated. In addition to physical violence, Ifeyiwa must face psychological violence and humiliation. More often, out of jealousy and lack of self-confidence, Takpo “without explanation, tear[s] down her underpants and feel her roughly to ascertain whether she was

23 Okri, Dangerous Love, 138-140
24 Ibid, 88-89.
25 Okri, Dangerous Love, 18. (Italics added)
On the whole, Takpo threatens to send her back to her wretched and miserable family. Not only is Ifeyiwa not respected as a human being, but her family is also insulted and denigrated. For Takpo, Ifeyiwa’s family accepted his offer to marry their daughter because of the money that was at stake. This situation puts Ifeyiwa in a subordinate and submissive role since their marriage is based solely on the agreement between Takpo and Ifeyiwa’s family.

In fact, the awkwardness of this marriage is highlighted by the portrayal of each character. Ifeyiwa is described as young beautiful girl:

Her [Ifeyiwa] face was lean, pretty, a clear coffee-brown. Her eyebrows were neat black lines. She has small firm lips and a fine nose. But it was her eyes that moved things in him [Omovo]. There were intelligent and hopeful. They had mysterious depths to them.27

While Takpo is depicted as an ugly and revolting old man:

He [Takpo] had a small head, severe eyes, a large elastic mouth, and browned teeth. He was quite tall, and stooped, and he had long arms. […] All morning he masticated his chewing stick and spat the mangled fibres all over the house. He has no style. He was incredibly hairy. […] His temper was unpredictable. And he was a very jealous man.28

By contrasting the two characters, Ben Okri sheds light on and unveils the problem of this cohabitation. It is not surprising that Ifeyiwa refuses to have sexual intercourse with her husband. Although he tries to beg and bribe her, Ifeyiwa cannot give in because she finds him repulsive: “For over a month she totally resisted being touched by him. He talked sweetly to her. He begged her. He even tried bribing her with offers of money and gifts. But her revulsion was uncontrolled.”29 When he fails to make Ifeyiwa change her mind, he becomes angry and he does not hesitate to brutalise, batter, and starve her. Moreover, psychological oppression and coercion are used by Takpo to force her to have sexual relation with him:

Sometimes, at night he went around naked and forced her to look at his erection. She never forgot the first time she saw him naked. The size of him terrified her […]. She ran, screaming, out of the room. One day, before she could escape, he caught her, pinned her down, struggle over her, and suddenly slumped over her, cursing and spent. The stuff from him was smeared

26 Ibid, 229-230.
29 Ibid, 80.
over her stomach and on her torn dress. She rolled out from under him, tied on a wrapper, and went and threw up in the backyard.30

Sexual harassment and emotional abuse are some of Takpo’s strategies to force Ifeyiwa into having sex against her will. As far as the previous strategies fail, he opts for a demoniac solution to deal with her. One day, he profits by a moment of the inattention of Ifeyiwa to drop “two Madras tablets”31 in her drink and rape her:

She [Ifeyiwa] felt groggy. Drowsiness overcame her. And she could not summon the energy or will to resist him when he took off her pants and climbed on her. She tried to fight him off, but her limbs were heavy and she moved as if she submerged beneath oil. She felt the blurred form of her husband struggling over her. […] Then she felt him as he penetrated her, plunging, ripping her open. She felt her blood drip down her. She started to cry. But he stopped. She held her breath. He got off her, opened a bottle of Vaseline, came back, and spread open her legs. After applying the Vaseline he struggled over her again, and penetrated roughly. She felt the tear of her flesh, and she cried out. She bled profusely. She cried all through the crudity of his movements. He didn’t enjoy the act. When he got off her, and got dressed, he stunned her with a slap on her face.32

Drugged, beaten and sexually assaulted, Ifeyiwa is a victim of domestic violence committed in the anonymity of the marital home. Through Ifeyiwa’s predicament, Ben Okri condemns the violation of women’s basic human rights in general and particularly in Nigeria and in Africa. The trauma of rape is devastating throughout women’s and girls’ lives and must be condemned altogether. Hence, sexual abuse, rape and violence within conjugal relations must not be viewed as an individual problem, but rather as a societal one. As Ampofo puts it, “Society […] needs to view rape not so much as an act of violence against an individual woman, but as a violent repudiation of the female in the crudest assertion of the maleness.”33

Often, domestic violence which occurs in a patriarchal system is overlooked and not regarded as unusual. And women believe that physical violence or punishment from their husbands and partners is justifiable: “The problem that arises is that not all types of force are considered as violent especially if they can be described as justifiable, e.g. beating of wives, children and maid servants as a form of punishment; physical measures used by law

30 Ibid, 81.
31 Ibid, 82.
32 Ibid, 82.
enforcement agencies; or customary practices including widowhood rites and female circumcision."

What sometimes hinders the divorce processes in a patriarchal system is that the dowry should be paid back by the bride’s family if the victim wants to put an end to the marriage. In the case of Ifeyiwa, she has lost her father, and she hopes that her “dowry might be of use to her mother” to take care of the family. Hence, it is impossible for Ifeyiwa’s family to pay back the dowry to enable her to free herself from this wedlock. It is also the case of Mara, in Amma Darko’s Beyond the Horizon (1995), when she says: “not only would I not be welcomed back into the family, but father would never be able to afford to refund my dowry, much of it he’d already squandered.” Ifeyiwa and Mara find themselves in vulnerable situations in which they are at the mercy of their husband.

Besides, Ifeyiwa is not working for pay outside the home and depends financially on her husband. Takpo does not allow her to hold a job or go to school. To forbid Ifeyiwa to work is a way to oppress, control and subordinate her. She lacks social and economic power in the sense that the marriage locks her into a system which denies her autonomy and well-being. She becomes a housewife and depends entirely on her husband. In fact, women’s roles in a patriarchal society typically only revolve around the household and family.

After her sexual assault, Ifeyiwa gets sick. During this period, she ponders over her life and the list she makes about her suffering since she joins her husband is unbearable. She summarizes all of the violence and suffering she has endured as follows:

Lying face up on the mat, she asked herself what were the realities of her life. She made a mental list: fevers, bad food, overwork, a total absence of freedom, her domination by her husband, unrealized dreams and desires, never enough rest, no play, no dancing or music, no association with people her own age, an unending series of household drudgeries, an unending list of new rules and edicts from her husband to be endured, a repression of the justices, the youthfulness bursting in her, attrition, exhaustion, a lifetime of pretending, of being humble, of holding back her abilities, and a hundred other things. Her list made her dizzy, wearied her.

34 Ampofo, 103.
35 Okri, Dangerous Love, 80.
36 Darko, 9.
37 Okri, Dangerous Love, 251.
Seeing the disorder of her life and the litany of violence she endures, Ifeyiwa cannot but bitterly regret her compromise, her acceptance to comply with the tradition and the patriarchal system: “she saw fully how her initial compromise had betrayed her. She should never have accepted in the first place. She might now be living her real life. […] Then she became angry that she had allowed herself to be so cheated of living.”\textsuperscript{38} And she realizes that “her act of compromise had forever caged her buoyant spirit. […] she had taken the step. And every step after that became another foot forward into a landscape of losses.”\textsuperscript{39} She finally finds out that there is no way out and that she has forfeited her life. This conclusion makes her burden unbearable.

However, the only moment of joy Ifeyiwa has in the ghetto is the time she spends with Omovo, the young painter. Between them a pure but a dangerous love is born. This impossible love nonetheless remains the unique space of freedom which enables her to escape momentarily from the sordid reality of the ghetto, the ghetto where the landscape of losses pervades everything. The secret and dangerous love that grows between them cannot be accepted, hence the frustration of Ifeyiwa:

She felt angry at the feeling that in a better world, a different one, a love story would have been possible between her and Omovo. \textit{But the age had thwarted them and she had been married off against her will and without her knowledge and only after she had accepted did she meet the only person she would rather have married. She wished, for a moment, that she remained a village girl, that she had never been exposed to books, to school, to films and popular records, to the desires and yearnings that the society wouldn’t allow her to fulfill. \textit{Things would have been simpler}. But – there he was and here she was, in darkness, with love between them and the whole world separating them.}\textsuperscript{40}

In this passage the dichotomy between the western culture and the traditional one is spotlighted. Ifeyiwa, thanks to her school education is exposed to another way of thinking and living. But at the same time, she lives in a society that values patriarchy. She is torn between two cultures and finds it very difficult to adjust to either.

Omovo himself has his own demon to fight. His family falls apart because of repeated domestic violence. Violence within the family arises when Omov’s father decides to marry another woman and take a second wife. Psychological and physical abuse are not spared to

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, 253.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 80.
\textsuperscript{40} Okri, \textit{Dangerous Love}, 252. (Italics added)
oppress Omovo’s mother: “Omovo’s father took to physically throwing his mother out of the house. She slept in front of the house, with her children huddled to her, with her possessions scattered all around her.”

The domestic violence that occurs within the family is conveyed through Omovo’s reminiscence:

Memories of childhood invaded him. He remembered being locked up in a room with his brothers while his parents quarrelled. Chairs were being thrown about, glasses were broken. Cruel words were shouted and endlessly repeated. He remembered one night in particular. His parents had been quarrelling bitterly while a storm raged outside. That night Omovo lay wide awake listening to the fury of the storm and the destructive passion of his parents, feeling the immediacy of doom. His mother howled. A door was banged shut.

The domestic violence Omovo’s mother experiences consequently causes her death.

Polygamy is another phenomenon within male-dominant societies. Men try to show the power of their masculinity by possessing several wives. The principle of polygamy itself that allows a man to marry several women fosters gender inequality in the sense that a woman cannot have several husbands. Polygamy, patriarchy and women’s objectification and oppression are the subject matter of African women writers such as Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa. In Buchi Emecheta’s *The Bride Price* (1967) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), the themes of forced marriage, traditional marriage, women and girls’ subordination and motherhood are singled out. If in *The Bride Price*, Aku-nya, the protagonist, escapes the marriage arranged by her stepfather, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Agbadi, Nnu Ego’s father, forces her to marry the man he chooses for her: “Nu Ego, my pet child, you know I have been making preliminary arrangements for you to go to another?” and he goes on to add: “I will choose husbands for my girls. They are too young to know their own minds.”

It is clear that Nnu Ego and her sisters have no control over their marriages or say about the men their father chooses for them. In Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* (1966) and *Idu* (1970), the women protagonists Efuru and Idu are under pressure because they cannot play the role the patriarchal society assigns to them: to conceive and be mothers. It is worth mentioning that the patriarchal system denounced by these Nigerian women writers in

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41 Ibid, 274.
42 Ibid, 272.
44 Emecheta, 237.
the 1970s was not a remote and outdated one but a contemporary plight of Nigerian women of that decade.

Ben Okri, through Ifeyiwa’s troubles, denounces and attacks the tyranny of the patriarchal system and the gendered violence it espouses, including sexual objectification, discrimination, forced marriage and domestic violence. Beyond her predicament, the violent violation of women’s basic rights is laid bare in the novel. It is clear that women’s complicity with the system sustains and maintains male domination because of their inability to successfully challenge it.

**Women as Their Own Victimizers**

Women themselves play a role in sustaining patriarchal systems through their passivity, inaction and, more importantly, their resignation to or complicity in perpetuating the system by encouraging daughters or sisters to accept their fate within it. And according to Gay Wilentz: “women too often uphold practices that proscribe their choices and rights as women.”

Ifeyiwa’s mother, in *Dangerous Love* (1996), urges her to accept her marriage in spite of the will of her daughter to run away or kill herself:

> She ran away from home, but she was caught and brought back before she reached the village boundary. She made attempts at poisoning herself. [...] Her mother had urged her on, saying that life would take care of its own. [...] Ifeyiwa had succumbed to the marriage with Takpo in the hope that the elder women of the village were right. They had said that with time she would learn to live with him, and might even grow to love him.

The elder women of the village and Ifeyiwa’s mother are the guardians of the tradition and the culture that perpetuates and sustains patriarchy. Therefore, this phallocentric system persists because women are simultaneously victims and accomplices. Most of the time, women are other women’s victimizers. As Naana Banyia Horne rightly puts it, “gender oppression persists because of the support some women lend to the victimization of other women.” In addition, senior women internalize the rules that govern the patriarchal system and hope in their turn to be in the position to dominate the younger women:

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46 Okri, *Dangerous Love*, 80.
Woman's life cycle in the patriarchally extended family is such that the deprivation and hardship she experiences as a young bride is eventually superseded by the control and authority she will have over her own subservient daughters-in-law. The cyclical nature of women's power in the household and their anticipation of inheriting the authority of senior women encourages a thorough internalization of this form of patriarchy by the women themselves. In classic patriarchy, subordination to men is offset by the control older women attain over younger women.\(^48\)

The perpetuation of patriarchy also depends on the women who educate their children according to ‘father rule’ and who themselves pass it down to next generation. In so doing, the female children do not have any inspiring female models to follow in rejecting this system. Ifeyiwa regrets not having someone around her who might guide her: “it saddened her that, apart from her mother and the uninspiring teachers at school, she had met no other woman to look up to, who could have guided her. Then she became angry that she had allowed herself to be so cheated of living.”\(^49\) And according to Monica Bungaro, “the mother’s victimisation not only humiliates the mother, it mutilates the daughter who has no valid gender model to cling onto.”\(^50\) Moreover, “women’s inability to challenge patriarchal forms of repression results in their children being forced to pay for their mother’s mistakes.”\(^51\) Furthermore, most of the victims are not aware of their abused status and/or do not complain because they are afraid of retaliation not only from her husband but also from her family. As marital status takes precedent over individual wishes, victims are not willing to ask for divorce. Nevertheless, on the individual level women take action to fight against patriarchy.

**Women’s Resistance against Patriarchy**

In *Dangerous Love* (1996), Ifeyiwa, on an individual level, tries to resist against patriarchy as epitomized by Takpo. She finds him as a darkness, a natural enemy, “an ancient, unyielding force that stood between her and her destiny, as an incubus who kept pressing her down, hiding her books, trying to make her illiterate, trying to make her like all the other women around.”\(^52\) As a result, she decides to free herself from her husband if she wants to save her


\(^{51}\) Bungaro, 33.

\(^{52}\) Okri, *Dangerous Love*, 253.
life. The dichotomy between her dreams and her real life in the ghetto where she lives in a ‘hell-hole’ makes her sufferings excruciating painful. She does not want to become like the elderly women of the ghetto whose physical appearance is decaying. They seem to age so quickly and look much older than they actually are. They are described as ‘flabby-breasted, weary, absent-minded, [and] servile.’”

Beyond the decrepit body of the elderly women who “bore many children and struggled to feed and clothe them,” Ben Okri points out the fate patriarchy has in stock for women: misery, suffering and death. For Ifeyiwa, her husband is a “natural enemy whose domination she would have to free from if she was going to have a chance to live.” Unfortunately, Ifeyiwa will not succeed in redeeming her life. She is mysteriously killed on her way back to her village. In a word, women are sacrificed at the altar of the phallocentric system. Ifeyiwa’s death cannot be seen as a failure to fight against phallocracy but rather an attempt of women to free themselves from servile subjugation and domination.

Conclusion

This analysis bluntly points out the weight of tradition and culture which maintain women in a bondage under the yoke of men. It also shows the linkages between gender-based violence and patriarchy and how women themselves contribute to maintaining men’s domination. If, in general, patriarchal systems can count on women’s silence and complicity, on the individual level some women denounce this violence and make their voices heard. This is the case of Ifeyiwa. Moreover, this paper suggests that the children’s education into female or male roles is very important in order to break the mechanism of reproduction of women’s oppression since “most common forms of patriarchal violence are those that take place in the home between patriarchal parents and children. The point of such violence is usually to reinforce a dominator model, in which the authority figure is deemed ruler over those without power and given the right to maintain that rule through practices of subjugation.” Domestic violence and the subsequent deaths it causes must be considered as a crime against humanity. More importantly, female children are the first victims of patriarchal parents. This continues later

53 Ibid, 86.
54 Ibid, 86.
55 Ibid, 253.
from brutal and violent husbands. Therefore, patriarchal culture must be eradicated in order to end gender-based violence or violence against women.
Bibliography


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