

The aftermath of women's oppression, subjugation and emancipation in the patriarchal society of Ben Binebai's *Karina's Cross*

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Abstract

Drama often captures the complexities of liberation struggles, particularly women's emancipation from patriarchal oppression. This paper examines the aftermath of women's emancipation, focusing on its societal impact as explored in Ben Binebai's *Karena's Cross*. The study investigates women's experiences of oppression, subjugation, and subsequent liberation within the framework of patriarchal Nigerian and African cultures. Employing qualitative methodologies rooted in literary and sociological analysis, it interprets *Karena's Cross* as a primary source and integrates historical perspectives to contextualise the findings. The research reveals that challenging patriarchal norms empowers individuals and fosters communal progress by promoting education, equality, and social enlightenment. However, the path to emancipation is fraught with entrenched cultural practices, economic inequalities, and systemic injustices that perpetuate gender-based violence and discrimination. The study underscores that addressing these barriers requires individual resilience and systemic accountability, including challenging harmful traditions, bridging gender-based economic disparities, and prosecuting acts of discrimination. Moreover, the findings highlight that the success of any struggle against oppression extends beyond individual victories, benefiting society by encouraging a shift toward justice and equity. The paper concludes that women's emancipation can potentially dismantle oppressive structures, reshape cultural narratives, and catalyse societal development. However, these outcomes are contingent upon sustained advocacy and the active dismantling of patriarchal systems. By interrogating the transformative impact of women's liberation, this study contributes to the discourse on gender equality and the role of drama as a vehicle for social change in Africa.

Keywords: Women's Emancipation, Patriarchy, Cultural Transformation, Gender-based Violence

Introduction

One of the most prevalent forms of women's subjugation and oppression in Nigeria and Africa is gender-based violence. Gender refers to socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and attributes that a particular society considers appropriate for men and women. These roles are learned through socialisation and are reinforced by cultural norms and institutions. Women's subjugation and oppression refer to the systematic discrimination, marginalisation, and mistreatment of women based on gender. One of the most critical factors contributing to women's subjugation and oppression in Nigeria and West Africa is the patriarchal nature of many societies in the region. In these societies, women are often seen as inferior to men and are expected to fulfil traditional roles such as wife and mother. These subjugations and oppression are principally to restrict women's freedom and limit their ability to participate fully in society. They are manifested in multiple spheres of existence, including social, economic, political, and cultural, which include but are not limited to, inequality, lack of access to education, domestic violence, rape, not allowing the girl child to marry her choice of husband, female genital mutilation, and child marriages. Oppression and subjugation, in any form manifested, put the victims under physical, psychological, and emotional torment, sometimes leading to tragic consequences.

Johnson notes that oppression arises from an environment characterised by existing institutions of dominance and subordination, as well as established ideologies that discriminate between superiority and inferiority. The concept of oppression refers to social forces that push down on people, limiting their ability to pursue a good life (39). Charlton, on the other hand, states that "oppression occurs when individuals are systematically subjected to political, economic, cultural, or social degradation because they belong to a social group" (8). The victim of oppression could be an individual, a group or an entire community; there is no limit to whom or what becomes a victim of oppression. However, within the limits of this study, the human victim is regarded as the oppressed. In the Social Work Dictionary, Barker explains that the oppressed are placed under severe restrictions, "devalued, exploited, and deprived of privileges by individual or group which has more power" (2003).

In many African societies, the forces of oppression flourish without interruption within social structures founded on patriarchy. Patriarchy is a social system in which men possess primary power and control over women. It operates through various mechanisms, including cultural norms, legal frameworks, institutional structures, and individual behaviours, upholding and sustaining male dominance and superiority. The mechanisms, especially cultural norms, play a significant role in perpetuating patriarchy by prescribing specific behaviours and attributes for men and women. These norms often reinforce traditional gender stereotypes, such as the notion that men should be strong, assertive, and competitive while women should be nurturing, submissive, and focused on domestic responsibilities. Patriarchy justifies the marginalisation of women in education, the economy, the labour market, politics, business, family, domestic matters, and inheritance. The oppression of women through the instrument of patriarchy has attracted cases of resistance, targeted at emancipating the victim and causing a reform. This rebellion against patriarchal dominance by addressing the oppression and subjugation of the female gender emerged from the feminist movement, which advocates social, political, economic, and intellectual equality between women and men. The feminist movement, known as feminism, tends to change society, especially how women are treated. Ibeku's definition of feminism, as cited by Houndjo and Allagbe, states that:

[...] feminism is women-oriented and concentrates on issues that concern women. It is a literary movement that tends to change society, especially in how

women are treated; it tries to discourage discrimination and humiliation of women; it focuses its attention on the emancipation of women. Much emphasis has been placed on feminism and its stand in the African novel (20).

Feminism literarily centres on the need for equality and a level playing ground for men and women in all areas of life. Ihekweeme and Obah stated, "Feminist opinion in literature is centred on the need for a level playing ground between the genders and women's empowerment in all life... Marxist Feminists see the collective struggle as a tool to fight for women's rights and enhance relations where they are being dehumanised" (292).

Despite efforts to promote gender equality and challenge patriarchal norms, the reality remains that women are often expected to fulfil traditional roles within the household, such as cooking, cleaning, and raising children. These expectations are further reinforced by societal attitudes and beliefs, which view women as objects to be possessed and controlled by men. This mindset can manifest in various forms of gender-based violence and discrimination, which continue to plague the African continent. One of the most significant aspects of patriarchy in Nigeria and Africa is the notion that women are expected to be submissive and silent, with their opinions and desires being secondary to those of men. This attitude stems from the belief that women's primary purpose is to serve men and fulfil their needs rather than being independent and self-sufficient individuals with their aspirations and goals. Chukwuma, in his article "The Legacy of Women Empowerment in Nigeria", lends credence to this when he notes that;

Men naturally do not participate in domestic chores, such as cooking, rearing children, and the rest. These are considered to be the exclusive preserve of the women, who traditionally are meant to be housewives, but this does not in any way exclude them from the farm work, which is the source of income and feeding for the African man. Men are grouped as strong, courageous, self-confident, and able to withstand external attack or aggression on the family, while the women, whom the bible calls the weaker sex, are seen and considered to be the opposite of what the men are (289).

The oppression of women has had a profound and detrimental impact on societies across the world. This form of oppression has led to significant harm, not only for women themselves but also for the overall fabric of society. Women have been historically treated as enslaved people and have been considered morally, socially, and intellectually inferior by men. This has resulted in a lack of sensitivity towards the needs and rights of women. Women need to be treated with love, respect, trust, consideration, and insight due to their crucial roles in the home and society. In Nigerian culture, there is a famous saying, "Men are the head while the women are the neck." this proverb highlights the interdependence between men and women in the household. The head cannot function without the neck, and vice versa. This implies that the success and well-being of the family unit rely on the cooperation and collaboration between both partners. In this way, the saying serves as a reminder of the importance of mutual respect and understanding between men and women and the need for open communication and support within the family and society. Aina, in his view on the domination and subjugation of women, as cited in Chukwuma, posits that "It is a system of social stratification and differentiation based on sex, which provides material advantages to males while simultaneously placing severe constraints on the roles and activities of females. There are clearly defined sex roles, while various taboos ensure conformity with specified gender roles" (289-290).

One of the veritable instruments employed by feminist theorists in advocating for women's emancipation has been drama. The fact that drama has been an essential weapon for the feminist struggle to restore women's rights dates to the days of Classical Greece. Several Greek plays can be interpreted as defending women's

rights, although it is essential to note that the concept of women's rights as understood today did not exist in ancient Greece. Nonetheless, these plays feature strong female characters who challenge societal norms and assert their agency. One is Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (411BC), which focuses on women who unite to end the Peloponnesian War by withholding sex from their husbands until they make peace. The play highlights female solidarity, intelligence, and the power of women's sexuality. Another is Euripides' *Medea* (431BC), which portrays the revenge of Medea, a woman who is betrayed by her husband, Jason. Medea challenges traditional gender roles and exposes society's mistreatment of women. She takes control of her fate, defying expectations and gaining agency. Sophocles' *Antigone* (442-441BC), which revolves around Antigone's defiance of King Creon's order not to bury her brother Polyneices, is also an example. Antigone places her familial duty above the king's decree, emphasising her determination and sense of justice. While the play does not explicitly address women's rights, Antigone's actions challenge male authority. Euripides's *Trojan Women* (415BC) can also be considered within this context. Set after the fall of Troy, this play explores the suffering of the women who become enslaved after the war. It portrays women's emotional depth and resilience amidst the horrors of war, shedding light on the plight of female victims. While these plays may not overtly defend women's rights in the modern sense, they provide glimpses of women's strength, bravery, and challenges in ancient Greece.

The feminist movement in Nigeria is diverse, and countless plays explore various aspects of gender equality and women's rights. The following examples show the range of feminist plays produced in Nigeria. J.P. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* (1991) stands out. This play explores the struggles of a group of women in a Niger Delta village who challenge the authority of men over them and demand to enjoy an equal portion of the economic benefits of the community. They collectively assert the principle of non-discrimination and proclaim that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and right and that everyone is entitled to all rights without any distinction as to sex. Also prominent with a solid feminist presence is Julie Okoh, who, through her *Edewede* (2015) and *In the Fullness of Time* (2000), fights against female circumcision, patriarchy, and female oppression. Okoh's interest in the two plays is in defining the place of the African woman in her family and society at large in a patriarchal society where the men determine the tenets of existence.

In Africa, particularly Nigeria, tribal communities controlled by the will and authority of men are known to regulate how women participate in public affairs and how they relate with other members of the community. Women in some of these male-dominated societies are entangled with diverse restrictions and subjected to the dictates of ancient cultural prohibitions constructed by men to perpetuate their inferior status. Dramatists have reflected, in several ways, how women suffer different forms of oppression in such patriarchally established societies where men wield a voice of finality in all matters. Each isolated case of oppression is treated as either a social, political, or cultural phenomenon that ends in a glorious victory, endless suffering, or a sad consequence of death, depending on the underlying circumstances and the approach the victim deploys to confront the oppression. Despite the many dimensions of thought the subject has attracted, critics and theatre scholars still need to unveil how the aftermath of oppression-inspired conflicts benefits society sufficiently. The literature needs to be more comprehensive in the discourse on how the outcome of any case of women's subjugation destroys or advances a given society. This work examines the transformations a character's emancipation or destruction brings upon society, as envisioned in *Karena's Cross*. In addition, the study pursues the following objectives: 1. to identify the type of oppression experienced by the victim in the play; 2. to examine the people's cultural worldview and how it influences the traditions; 3. to appraise the author's view of patriarchy, women's subjugation, and approaches to freedom; and 4. to examine the extent of the reception given to the new order.

Methodology

The qualitative study focuses on interpreting phenomena that relate to or involve quality. There are several types of qualitative research, but in this study, the literary/analytical and historical paradigms were adopted as methodologies. Obah, citing Ukala, explains that:

Literary methodology, also called Analytical methodology, focuses on written and printed library and archival sources, especially books, journals, theses, reports, and literary works such as plays, novels, and poems. Data are collected from these and analysed with the research questions and objectives (9-10).

This methodology is suitable because the study deals with a literary piece. This play is the primary source used to examine the causes and effects of women's subjugation and oppression in Nigeria and Africa in general. Writing on the historical methodology, Obah further cites Ukala asserting that:

This entails investigating documented sources, such as books, journals, reports, films, video and audio tapes, archival material, archaeological excavations, artefacts (such as carvings, drawings, sculptures, paintings, and textile prints), and oral sources. The function of this methodology is to trace the beginnings and development of people, institutions, and things (10).

According to Whitney, cited by Osuagwu, "Historical Research interprets past trends of attitude, event and fact". (162) This is in line with Nwabueze's opinion, which is that "Historical Research involves the description of past events or facts written in the spirit of critical inquiry" (55). This methodology is relevant to the study because documented sources like journals and books are used to gain insight into what critics and scholars have written about the subject under study. The consequences of women's subjugation and oppression in West Africa are far-reaching and devastating, affecting not only women and girls but also their families, communities, and the entire nation. This work, therefore, interrogates women's oppression and subjugation and the aftermath in traditional African society, using Ben Binebai's *Karena's Cross* (2022) as the basis for the analysis.

Women's Oppression and Subjugation in *Karena's Cross*

Karena's Cross is a monodrama by Ben Binebai, first published in 2018. The latest edition, published in 2022, will be used in this work. Karena, a thirteen-year-old girl, finds herself living in a society where women are subjected to systematic oppression and subjugation. This patriarchal society, dominated by males, leaves little room for women to express their thoughts, opinions, or desires. Karena's life is deeply affected by the constraints and expectations placed upon her as a female in this environment. This is reaffirmed in Karena's statement when she said that:

Karena: Yes! I was born and brought up
In a village called Owei-ama,
Into a polygamous family
A village in which law was culture,
Culture was law and the makers
And custodians of culture
And law was the men.
It is a village where women
Lived at the mercy of men.
Many women could not go

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To school because it was believed
In Owei-ama culture that
Women were possessions of men. (21)

Karena's experiences within a patriarchal society are portrayed as gender roles which are strictly defined, and women are expected to adhere to societal expectations. One of the challenges Karena and other women face in the village is the pressure to conform to traditional gender roles. This often means that women are expected to prioritise their family's needs and the care of their children over their ambitions and desires. As a result, women feel trapped in a cycle of domestic duties and child-rearing, with little opportunity for self-actualisation or career advancement. As Karena navigates through this oppressive environment, she encounters numerous challenges and obstacles. Through her narration, she shares the experiences of the women in the village of Owei-ama and the hardships they face in their daily lives.

Karena: It was a village in which men freely
And physically inflict injuries
On the body of women for little mistakes;
A village where men were the only
Lords and voices of the land.
It was such a village in which women
Only go into marriage;
Where women were culturally
Prepared to take care of
The husband and the children.
While they toiled all day
In the rain and in the sun sweating
To produce food on the table, men
Only sat to taste and reject food not
Palatable and even mercilessly
Beat up their wives for
Cooking an unsavoury food.
The woman who appreciates
Western education and makes any
Attempt to give it a trial is handed
Over to the gods for punishment.
When men beat the drum of doom
Its dancers are the women. (22)

It is in line with the above that Odi asserts that:

Over the ages, the African woman has been subdued by male dominance in virtually all aspects of her life. In traditional African societies, there is no easy space for the voice of the African woman, either as a young and single girl or as a married woman. This is because her views and opinions on what is best for her, her family, and her society are subject to male control (118).

Karena's father, Nemughan, explains the custom of circumcising the girl child or woman, which is often referred to as female genital mutilation (FGM) or female circumcision. According to him, "... As our customs demand, you will soon be circumcised. We shall celebrate your circumcision ceremony to make some money for the family, and you will after that be given out in marriage "(23). The girl child is seen as a money-making machine for the family and cannot think about actualising her dreams.

Karena: Father, what about my education?
I am just thirteen; how can I
Get married at this age when

I know nothing about men?

Karena as Nemughan: Your education is not important.
All your sisters were given out
In marriage less than thirteen years
They are in their husbands' houses
Taking care of their husbands and children

Karena: Father, why do you want me
To sacrifice my education for marriage?

Karena as Nemughan: You women are empty possessions
Training you is a waste of money and time.
When you get married, no one
Will know you are still my daughter.
My name will be lost. So, why must
I waste my money training you?

Karena: Father, what you are telling
Me now makes me bleed,
I don't think I can obey you.
I am not interested.*
I want to complete my school.
I want to become a woman of substance.

Karena as Nemughan: What insolence?
What nonsense? Karena!
A deaf ear is followed by death.
An ear that listens
Is followed by blessings.
Don't invite the bite of a
Snake with your stubbornness.
Karena, you cannot light fire
Without inhaling its smoke
I am the head of this house.
What I want and what I say are
What matter, and which is final.
Prepare your body and mind for
The circumcision and marriage. (23-24)

Karena's refusal to be circumcised means nothing because her father has decreed it, and there is nothing anyone can do to change the decision. Karena expresses her frustrations thus: "My father has decreed it, and my mother cannot help. My sisters have all passed through this tortuous tunnel. The world of Owei-ama was insensitive ... a land of conspiracy against women's education" (25). Ekpochi-Olise, citing El Sadaawe, assert that "This damaging inhuman cultural practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) is fortified by economic, social, moral and ideological factors as a result of the patriarchal mentality to dominate women and consolidate the patriarchal image of women as sex objects (95).

To actualise her dreams of acquiring a formal education, Karena tries to escape from the Owei-ama community one faithful evening after her father had gone "to a nearby village to pay the dowry of his new wife" (26) but was unsuccessful as she was captured and brought back to the village by her father's security guards. When her father returned and found out that she tried to escape, he merely laughed aloud and said to her, "... As a father, I am wiser than you... I am happy you did not escape successfully. Since education is what you want, I won't give out in marriage again... Get prepared to go back to school in three days" (27). Karena is happy to hear that her

father has decided to let her go back to school, but this is not to be, as it was just a ploy to keep her around until he carries out his plans of getting her circumcised. On the day that she was to go back to school, some women came to their house singing and dancing, and when she enquired what the occasion was, her father told her that it was her circumcision. He does not want her "To get pregnant in school" because he believes that "The circumcision will deactivate the sexual urge in Karena and prevent her from promiscuity" (29). She was then taken into the bathroom by the older woman and was circumcised. She narrates her ordeals, "A woman with big buttocks ...sat on my chest. Two other women held my two hands backwards and pressed them down. The woman who did the circumcision sat on my lower abdomen... I shouted madly. I bled and fainted many times. It was the cruellest breed of genital cutting ..." (29). The aftermath of the circumcision was a two-week admission to the hospital to save her life as a result of the excessive bleeding. Three out of the four other girls in her age grade died because of the complications arising from their circumcision (30). To compound the issues for Karena, she is prepared to be married to an old man as soon as she is discharged from the hospital. She captures it as "from circumcision I found myself in the village clinic..., I returned home to be married to a man old enough to be my father. Love, pride and dignity of womanhood collapse for the triumph of greed empowered by culture (31).

The patriarchal society in the play is characterised by a set of rigid rules and expectations that dictate the roles and responsibilities of women. These societal norms often lead to the marginalisation and oppression of women, limiting their opportunities for personal growth and self-expression. Karena's experiences highlight women's difficulties when attempting to break free from these constraints and challenge the status quo. On the day that Karena is supposed to be married, she escapes a second time "in search for freedom" (32), only to be kidnapped by three men and raped by their leader while the others watched in excitement. And that was how, according to Karena, "I lost my virginity... and bled like a castrated bull... I sustained injuries and dislocations, mental, physical, and psychological dislocations from the rape (33). Although Karena resolved not to marry the man that raped her, some "African spiritual power" (34) was used on her through the food that was given to her, and she lost the strength to resist, and that was how she ended up marrying Daubri, the man that raped her and became his 8th wife.

Karena: I became a full-time housewife
 After my father had collected a dowry
 From emissaries sent to
 Him by my abductor husband.
 What came as a surprise to me
 Was that I was an *Ayoro*
 The latest bride in the
 Company of seven older wives.
 I was forced into a polygamous home.
 A home where the husband is the Lord
 And wives, voiceless creatures...
 It was such a home where I was abused
 As a child, as a woman and
 As a wife and as marital colleague.
 My life was a voluminous book of tragedy
 Every day was a page of that book
 That punished my soul...
 I became a helpless
 Puppet dancing to the strings of destiny.
 I lived in constant fear, frustration
 Humiliation and hardly remembered
 My dream of life before marriage (35-37).

Evwierhoma, a foremost feminist, writes about the playtext: "*Karena's Cross* is a monodrama drenched in many themes about women of all ages, classes, and other social categories. It also has references to the different forms of domination women face in society, or specifically, the burden the girl child faces in underdeveloped nations" (Karena...vi).

Another significant issue faced by women in the play is the prevalence of gender-based violence and abuse. The patriarchal society often perpetuates a culture of violence against women, with little to no accountability for the perpetrators. This further limits women's freedom and autonomy as they must navigate a world of potential threats and dangers. Karena narrates one such occasion where her husband, Daubri, physically abused her. Ekwierhoma notes that "the deep monodrama focuses on concerns that are not confined to the Niger Delta Region, but any community in which there is injustice and inequitable treatment meted out to its girl child or female folk" (vi). She further notes that in "Karena's environment, resources, be they human, material, or spiritual, are exploited to benefit the male folk. There too, the few privileged males enjoy these resources to the cost of the many, subjugated individuals, especially women" (Karena's...vi).

Karena: I didn't mean to offend you my lovely husband
 (She kneels down to beg Daubri)
 Daubri opened his wide palms and slapped
 Me thunderously. I was punched,
 Brutally headed and brushed down
 With ferocious and electrocuting kicks...
 I was beaten mercilessly with
 Demonic detestation.
 I groaned and fainted.
 Neither my mother in-law nor people living
 Around us came to my rescue.
 I became a punching bag
 In the marital ring of Daubri.
 The whole world was in a state
 Of scornful silence. (39)

According to Odi, "*Karena's Cross* chronicles the cultural practices that strengthen female subordination. These practices include Child Marriage, Marriage by abduction, Marriage by Inheritance, Boy Child Preference, Female Genital Mutilation, Isolating Women in Menstrual Sheds, Obnoxious Widowhood Rites, and Commercial Sexual Exploitation" (123). Menstruation is often enveloped by cultural taboos and stigmas in some societies, and this results in the stigmatisation of women who are menstruating. This stigmatisation is a result of the people's perception or cultures that see menstruation as impure, and this gives rise to restrictions on women's participation in various activities, including their marital duties when menstruating. In the case of the people of Owei-ama, Karena was forced to sleep outside the house during her menstrual flow, which almost led to her being raped a second time. She narrates her experience,

Karena: ... One disgusting and
 Dangerous experience
 I had was that each time
 I had my menstrual shed...
 I was regarded as unclean,
 Forbidden from cooking for my husband,
 Forbidden from staying anywhere near him
 And asked to sleep outside
 My husband's house...
 Where I was exposed to constant cold

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And terrors of the night.
 One fateful night when I was sleeping
 A strange hand touched me...
 I realised that
 I was about to be raped by two men.
 I shouted so they ran away while
 I ran into my husband's abode
 Instead of sympathising with me
 I was accused of pretence
 That it was a calculated attempt
 To despoil the tradition of
 Observing the monthly flow
 Outside my husband's abode.
 So I was asked to do
 The ritual of cleansing
 The desecrated house... (37-38)

After her husband's death, she was accused of killing him and then forced to drink the water used to wash his dead body to prove her innocence. This not only violated Karena's dignity but also caused her severe emotional and psychological trauma. Such practices perpetuate the cycle of dehumanisation and suffering as experienced by widows in some cultural contexts to which Owei-ama belongs. To prove my innocence, Karena narrates, "I must drink the water with which my husband's body was washed... that was another challenging moment of my life... to reject the barbaric demand of the elders would mean I killed my husband... it was a hard choice in a hard circle, but I managed to drink the water" (42-43). In addition to drinking water from her deceased husband's body, Karena was not given any share of his property despite having built it together with him. Instead, she was forced to marry her late husband's elder brother, who, along with his mother, accused Karena of killing her son. To Odi, "these cultural practices still hold sway in many traditional African settings, and they are dangerous because they infringe on the dignity and humanity of women on the continent. As with Karena's Cross, the exposition of these practices through the dramatic medium is a valiant effort to give voice to the African woman" (123).

Karena: ...On the day my husband's asset
 Were shared nothing was given to me.
 His new block building which
 He completed with the sweat of
 Our hard labour was taken
 By his elder brother.
 I was also shared like a property to
 This elder brother of
 His who was in union
 With his mother to accuse
 Me of killing Daubri.
 I lost my marital sovereignty
 And self-determination
 My glow as a woman of
 Self-respect fades very
 Fast and did. I became an
 Object of ridicule,
 Powerless and voiceless,
 Emotionally traumatised...
 As a widow I experienced
 Deprivation, subjugation
 And humiliation...
 I rejected the family decision
 To marry me over to

My husband's elder brother.
 I am a woman of dreams
 Dreams can light my world
 So I was not in a hurry to run away.
 The hen that has children does not run fast. (43-45).

A series of hardships and struggles marked Karena's life. Following the passing of her husband and all that she had been through, she found herself grappling with grief and uncertainty. However, amidst this challenging period, a glimmer of hope emerged when her late husband's sister, Timi-Ebi, arrived in the village from the city. She extended a helping hand to Karena, offering to bring her to Benin for a respite period and pledged support for her educational pursuits once the necessary funds were secured. Timi-Ebi says, "As soon as my finances improve, I will ensure you complete your education" (47). This offer represented a pivotal moment in Karena's journey, presenting a ray of hope amid her trials.

Karena: O my in-law, you have just
 Mentioned the burning desire in my heart.
 You talk as if you can read my mind.
 You are a godsend.
 I can't wait to go to Benin with you
 My life has been a well written
 Drama of sorrow and tribulation
 I must leave Owei-ama and
 Keep the dark clouds of the past behind me...
 The stars have also approved of it.
 So, I went with my sister-in-law to Benin. (47)

Karena believed that her life was finally heading in the right direction. However, her world was shattered when she discovered that her husband's sister was an international sex contractor who trafficked girls to Italy for sexual exploitation. Karena made the difficult decision to escape on the day that Karena's husband's sister was preparing to send her and five other girls to Italy. She hid in a nearby supermarket, waiting until the plane took off before stepping out of her hiding place, crying and in fear. On that very day, Karena crossed paths with Dr. Daniels, who had just arrived at the supermarket. Seeing her distress, he approached her and asked why she was crying. Initially hesitant to trust anyone, Karena eventually shared her story with Dr. Daniels, who was moved by her plight. After listening to Karena's heartbreaking story, Dr. Daniels offered her his support and assistance. He took her in, providing her with a safe place to stay and the emotional support she needed to begin healing from her traumatic experiences. Dr. Daniels encouraged Karena to pursue her education, and together, they worked towards her goals. Eventually, they married, with Dr. Daniels vowing to stand by her side and support her throughout her journey. With Dr. Daniels' support, Karena could attend school to pursue her dream and finally become a lawyer.

Women's Emancipation in Karena's Cross

Throughout the play, Karena encounters various challenges and obstacles as she navigates through this oppressive environment. She faces societal disapproval, discrimination, and even physical violence for her attempts to break free from traditional gender roles. Despite these setbacks, Karena's resilience and determination to challenge the patriarchal system did not waver.

Karena: I was determined to fight against
 Owei-ama culture even with
 The last strength in me believing that
 The cruel barriers of life would be cut down

For me to realise my dreams (26)

Karena fought for liberation because she believed that "...the wounds inflicted by opposing dreams are deep and delicate. And when dreams run away from the reaches of human desire, life becomes dark and frustrating "(37). Odi, citing Oby H. Okolocha and Sophia I. Akhuemokhan, hold that "Women's human rights are perpetually compromised and violated by the laws and cultures of human societies, making it exigent for women to cry out against socio-cultural practices militating against them (118)

Karena: ... life is full of many kinds of storms:

Storms of doom, storms of glory

Storms of failure,

Storms of success

And many more.

Each of these storms

Runs along the coast of human destiny.

My life was like a desert displaced by

Evil forests, but my personal

Irrepressible desires manifested as

The magic cutlass with which

I cleared the forest of evil trees

To grow in their stead

My pillars of destiny. (49)

The play highlights the struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society, where gender roles are strictly defined and enforced. Through Karena's experiences and narration, the play brings attention to women's daily challenges and the importance of standing up against societal norms perpetuating oppression and marginalisation, which benefits Karena and society. Odi summarises the lessons in Karena's cross as she avers that "the dramatic piece identifies with even as it speaks to and for all women who are subsumed under male authority and ways. It is also a response to marginalisation, a dissent to obligatory silence, and an expression of the need to create a new African woman recognised, respected and accepted in the continental space (123-124).

Karena: The Owei-ama culture

Left a deadly blow on me

It truncated my educational aspiration

It turned my father against me,

Made my mother wordless;

Gave men the power to beat me,

To rape me, forced me into an

Unholy marriage ...

Packaged me as a prostitute

For exportation abroad....

It was such a loathsome culture which

Underdeveloped women for generations-

A culture manipulated by male dominance,

A tradition in which women's right and dignity

Got constantly abused. A barbaric culture

Which needed a storm to uproot

From the face of the earth.

I have taken so much of its tempest

And now I am determined to take

The tempest of my

Own creation to Owei-ama.(49-50)

Despite facing numerous challenges, Karena persevered and continued to strive for change. Her fortunes turned when she met and married Dr. Daniels, who provided unwavering support. With his help, Karena found fulfilment in both her career and marriage.

Karena: I now work in a famous legal chamber
And have given birth to two lovely
Children, a boy and a girl-
Daniel and Karena junior.
My husband came into my life
Like a virtuous prince and made
Me feel complete. I met a man,
Whose love for me was deep,
His gentle words snapped my heart-
Like a spark of light and illuminated my soul. (53)

Dr Daniels was invited to give a sensitisation talk in a village about the dangers of female circumcision. He asked his wife, Karena, to accompany him without knowing that it was the village of Owei-ama, Karena's village. Dr. Daniels introduced his wife, Mrs. Karena Nemughan Daniels, as Barrister when they arrived. Karena's father was shocked to see that the pretty young lady was his daughter and that his name was not lost, as he had previously believed that there was no point in training the girl child because she would answer another man's name once married.

Karena as Nemughan: Karena!
My daughter is this you?
Is this your husband?
A medical doctor
And you are a lawyer.
Despite all that I did to you
You still mention my name
In public gatherings like this
Before your husband's name?
Oh Nemughan!
So this is possible? A girl-child
Can bear her father's name
In her husband's house? (55)

Amid challenges and difficulties, we must remain resolute in pursuing justice and righteousness. Despite encountering opposition, it is essential to stand firm in our convictions, just as Karena exemplified. By doing so, we can achieve victory, and even those who opposed us will come to appreciate the accomplishments we have attained

Karena as Nemughan: My little daughter has taught Owei-ama
A big lesson. We have been wasting
The destiny of the girl-child from
Generation to generation.
This is incredible!
My daughter, Karena, is
The first lawyer of this village!
This calls for celebration
But I am sad for
What I did to you.
Forgive me
I pronounce this day
As a father and the Amananaowei
Of Owei-ama that there shall be no more
Disempowerment and marginalisation

Augustina Ashionye-Obah Obamwonyi

Of any girl child again.
 Owei-ama! The wind has changed,
 Karena and her husband
 Have set the new track. We
 All must fly along that path
 Rise up, woman, woman, woman
 And claim your place
 As mother of Africa
 The mother of everyman
 You are mother of all. (55-56)

In times of adversity, it is crucial to maintain perseverance and determination. Trials and tribulations are inevitable, but how we respond to them matters. Refusing to give up in the face of challenges demonstrates our commitment to what is right and just. This unwavering resolve can lead to triumph and garner respect from those who initially opposed us. Karena's unwavering determination is a powerful example of resilience in adversity. Her steadfast commitment, despite facing opposition, led to her triumph. Her story underscores the significance of perseverance and staying true to one's convictions, even when confronted with daunting obstacles.

Karena: Histories are not made and told
 Without human experiences.
 Stars do not shine
 Without great achievements.
 No song is sung without its lyrics.
 When a king's palace burns down,
 The re-built palace
 Becomes more beautiful.
 You have heard my story.
 The story of women disempowerment,
 Marginalisation and oppression.
 But do you just sit there and allow
 Culture and law instituted by
 Men and women destroy you?
 Disadvantage is not disability.
 It is only socially constructed.
 I realised my strength when
 I was thrown into the hot pool of water.
 Hope does not kill;
 I struggled to live to get
 What I wanted despite the obstacles.
 The tide will turn if women
 Stand in opposition to it
 My father and my former husband's cruelty
 Taught me wisdom and
 Offered me great strength.
 I refused to be defined by the narrow
 Sensitivity of Owei-ama about women...
 My story is a story of struggle
 Against the mortal flood of oppression;
 It is a story of vision and mission
 A story in which I, a thirteen- year-old girl,
 Struggled through the storm to
 Develop and own a voice.
 I fought against a war of
 Inferiority because I was
 Never born to be inferior
 I fought to illuminate my world

Because I was not born to be in the dark.
 I have come to realise that failing to
 Fight for what you want is
 The worst form of suicide
 And self destruction.
 Patience puts a golden crown on the head...
 Let's rise and stand and fight
 Women!
 Let's wake up
 Let's stand up
 And fight for our right. (56-58)

Karena's resilience is an example for women and individuals seeking to overcome opposition and achieve victory. By emulating her resilience, women and individuals can draw inspiration from her ability to persevere in adversity. This can empower them to navigate challenges, benefiting not just them but also society.

Conclusion

Karena's Cross exposes the psychological impact of living in an oppressive society, the constant subjugation, humiliation and devaluation and its effect on Karena's mental well-being. It delves into her emotional journey as she grapples with frustration, anger, and despair. It also sheds light on the resilience and determination required to maintain hope and strive for a better future and highlights the importance of resistance, emancipation, and empowerment.

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