

A Critical Discourse of Girl-Child Marriage/Slavery in Selected Nigerian Film

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Abstract

Until recent past, girl-child slavery/marriage, guided by unscrupulous African culture, has posed as major practice in the Nigerian state in the 21st Century. This cankerworm, manifesting through early marriage, money marriage, commercial sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, and other forms of abuses on the women folk, weakens women participation in economic, political, religious, and social development, thus, increases the issues of pain, suffering, sickness, and death of the people and underdevelopment to the Nigerian 5state as portrayed in Stephanie Linus *Dry*. *Dry* is a 21st century film that interrogates girl-child marriage/slavery, money marriage, discrimination, deprivation and inequality against the women. Amongst the major findings is that girl-child marriage/slavery has provided impetus for dramatic and argumentative representations by critics and dramatist over the years, yet, the menace is highly prevalent in the Nigerian state in the 21st century, mostly in the Northern regions. The study therefore aims at interrogating the cause and effects of girl-child marriage/slavery in the Nigerian state in the 21st century. To achieve this, Radical Feminism Theory and Content Analytical Methodology are used as guide. More so, the study recommends that any culture, tradition, or norm that is responsible that for girl-child marriage/slavery in the Nigerian space should be abolished for equity and development to be ascertained.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse, Girl-child, Marriage/Slavery, Nigerian Film*

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Background to the Study

Girl-child slavery, manifesting through forced marriage, money marriage, commercial sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, and other forms of abuses against the women folk is of recent time plaguing the nations of the world. Girl-child marriage and slavery are areas of human experience that are highly complex and which evoke powerful and contradictory feelings amongst those attempting to understand them. Girl-child Slavery itself is something we like to consign to the dark period of colonial history, but it is still, uncomfortably, with us. Today it takes on a broader and more clandestine range of relationships that are less characteristic of the slave trading of previous centuries. Ordinary people are alarmed to discover that they may be implicated in slavery by becoming part of a commercial chain which exploits the bonded labour of children in the carpet industry; or by buying chocolate produced from cocoa worked by enslaved labourers in West Africa (Susanne and Rachel, 2002).

One aspect of modern slavery which elicits particular revulsion according to Susanne and Rachel is the trafficking of women, girls, and boys into the sex industry, and this is one of the issues upon which many of the contributors here focus. Susanne and Rachel further noted that “this raises the issue of gender discrimination and oppression, and the ways in which gendered power converges with poverty to drive or lure women and girls into situations where they are subjected to extreme forms of violence”. It also raises questions about women's agency and empowerment, and tests the hypocrisies of moral judgments and double standards in relation to women's and men's sexuality and identity (Susanne and Rachel, 2002).

Africa's history is intimately connected with female slavery and molestation through child marriage and money marriage. Child marriage is the marriage of a child who is less than 18 years, before the girl is physically, physiologically, and psychologically ready to shoulder the responsibilities of marriage and child bearing (Afolabi and Abatan, 2014). It ultimately violates the rights of the girl child to be free from all forms of discrimination, inhuman and degrading treatment, and slavery.

Child marriage according to Rangita (2007), violates a panoply of interconnected rights, including, the right to equality on grounds of sex and age, the right to marry and found a family, the right to life, the right to the highest attainable standard of health, the right to education and development and the right to be free from slavery that are guaranteed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Consent to Marriage, Minimum Age for Marriage and Registration of Marriages and the Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery”.

The human rights according to Rangita (2007), guarantees legitimize strong penalties for violations of laws and policies preventing child marriage. Locating child marriage as a human rights violation also helps to raise it as a grave public concern rather than a private matter between families. The human rights agenda helps to view child marriage through the lenses of

both civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights covenants. It is against this backdrop that UNICEF (2012) in their study on “child marriage” in Africa observed that child marriage can have devastating consequences for individual girls and their individual children. Typically, it cuts short or ends a girl's education, compromises her reproductive rights, sexual health, future employment and earnings, and perpetuates personal and community poverty (UNICEF, 2012). Globally, UNICEF avers that more than one in four girls are married as children – before the age of 18. In East and Southern Africa according to UNICEF, the share is 36 per cent, and 10 per cent of girls in the region are married by age 15.

Succumbing to this claim and creating more clarification to the above statement, Anju (2010) avers that “forced child marriage is a life-changing reality for many of the world's girls”. In child marriages, girls are usually not given a chance to give their consent (Susanne, 2010). This is instead given by their parents. Some as young as 8 or 9 according to Anju are forced to trade their childhoods for a life that can be defined by isolation, violence and illness. This according to Anju is a practice rooted more in tradition than religious custom, and one that spans the globe, from Asia to Africa to the Americas. The number of girls who are married as children according to Anju is astounding.

Anju further noted, quoting UNICEF (2007) that “in 2007, more than 60 million girls aged 20-24 worldwide had married before their 18th birthday”. Against this backdrop, Anju insisted that “if current trends continue, an additional 100 million girls – or 25,000-30,000 girls every day -- will become child brides over the next decade”. Next, Anju also noted that “while boys are subjected to early marriage, most child marriages involve girls”. For instance, in Mali according to Anju, the ratio of girl's ages 15-19 who were married as children compared to boys, is 72 to one, and in El Salvador it is six to one. To this, Anju averred that “an ICRW review shows that rates of child marriage are highest in parts of Africa, and in South Asia, where one-half to three-fourths of girls are married before age 18. Niger, Mali and Chad to Anju have the highest rates of forced child marriage in the world, ranging from 71 percent to 77 percent”

But because of the large populations of countries such as India and Bangladesh, Anju (2010), avers that “the greatest number of child brides lives in South Asia, where 46 percent of all marriages take place before the girl is 18. Meanwhile, there is sometimes large variation of rates of child marriage within countries. For instance, some Indian states according to Anju, such as Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, have high rates of forced child marriage, while other states such as Kerala have lower rates. In Ethiopia, Anju asserts that “national rates hover close to 50 percent, but the state of Amhara has a rate of more than 80 percent”. For these reasons, investments aimed at eradicating child marriage should target both countries with high rates of child marriage as well as hotspots within countries with high rates (Anju, 2010; Accilien, 2008).

A typical example is a country like Nigeria, particularly the Northern Nigeria (Hausa – Fulani dominated). Afolabi and Abanta (2014) avers that the Northern region allowed early marriage of the girl-child. While quoting Erulkar and Bello (2007), Afolabi and Abanta avers that the basis for acceptance of early marriages in the Northern region is to preserve the values of

virginity, fears about marital sexual activity, to reduce promiscuity of the girl-child, and other socio-cultural and religious norms.

However, due to the ignorant and selfish nature, more often than not, they according to Afolabi and Abanta (2014) forget the effects it has on the girl child as well as their community development. It is therefore to interrogate the cause and effects of girl child marriage in Stephanie Linus's *Dry* that forms the thrust of this study. To achieve this, Radical Feminism Theory and Content and Analytical Methodology are employed

Main Causes of Girl Child Marriage in Nigeria

Child marriage/slavery continues to be a reality for many of the world's girls because of a variety of factors. These factors according to Anju (2010) include poverty, lack of education and job opportunities, insecurity in the face of war and conflict, and the force of custom and tradition. For poverty, many poor families according to Anju marry their daughter at an early age, which is a strategy for economic survival; it means one less person to feed, clothe and educate. On limited education and economic options, little or no schooling strongly correlates with being married at a young age.

Conversely, attending school and having higher levels of education according to Anju (2010), protect girls from the possibility of early marriage. In many countries, educating girls often is less of a priority than educating boys. When a woman's most important role is considered to be that of a wife, mother and homemaker, schooling girls and preparing them for the jobs may be given short shrift.

Extensively, on insecurity in the face of conflict, Familusi, (2012), noted that “when families live in unsafe regions, parents may genuinely believe that marrying their daughters is the best way to protect them from danger”. More so, parents are under pressure to marry off their daughters as early as possible in an effort to prevent her from becoming sexually active before marriage; a woman who does so brings dishonor to her family and community.

Effects of Girl-Child Marriage/Slavery on the Girl Child

The consequences of child marriage according to Anju (2010) are devastating and often determine a life's trajectory. Girls who marry young according to Anju are at a higher risk of dying during childbirth, having their child die before its first birthday, contracting AIDS and becoming a victim of domestic violence. The dangerous effects of early pregnancy and childbirth are widely accepted to include increased risk of dying, and increased risk of premature labour and severe complications during delivery (Susanne, 2002; Olatunbosun, 2015).

Pregnancy-related deaths are the leading cause of mortality for 15-19-year-old girls (married or unmarried) worldwide. Those under age 15 are five times more likely to die than women in their twenties (Susanne, 2002, quoting UNICEF, 2001). According to the Egyptian Ministry of Social affairs, the mortality rate of adolescent mothers is 60 per cent higher than that of mothers over 24 (Sussanne, 2010, quoting Tilgay and Sarhan, 2001). Child marriage is also

linked to a high degree of wife abandonment, which leaves girls in a vulnerable situation. Married children may be exposed to community exclusion and/or physical threats. They run the risk of the so-called 'honour killing'.

Rights denied by Girl Child Marriage or Early Marriage in Nigeria

Early marriage of girls according to Ranjita (2007), undermines a number of rights guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These deniers include the following:

1. The right to education.
2. The right to be protected from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or Abuse, including sexual abuse (Article 19) and from all forms of sexual exploitation.
3. The right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health.
4. The right to educational and vocational information and guidance.
5. The right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas.
6. The right to rest and leisure, and to participate freely in cultural life.
7. The right to not be separated from their parents against their will.
8. The right to protection against all forms of exploitation affecting any aspect of the Child's welfare.

Radical Feminism Theory

Radical feminism theory is the breeding ground for many of the ideas arising from feminism. Radical feminism was the cutting edge of feminist theory from approximately 1967-1975, and it is no longer as universally accepted as it was, thus it no longer serves to solely define the term, "feminism". On the same note, radical feminism is the origin of patriarchy and the subordination of women therein, as seen by radical feminists to rest in male aggression and control of women's sexuality (Philip, 1987, quoted by Jelena, 2017).

This explains how men are inherently more aggressive than women, who, because of their relative size disadvantages and dependency on men during child bearing years, are easy to dominate and control. This group of feminists views the oppression of women as the most fundamental form of oppression, one that cuts across boundaries of race, culture, and economic class; a movement intent on social change, change of rather revolutionary proportion (Jelena, 2017). Radical feminism according to Philip is a feminist theory course that starts from the idea of conflict between the sexes as a fundamental conflict, and oppression against women as a direct implication of patriarchy. This theory according to Julie rests on the assumption that all social system contains specific forms of interactive constraints; they do not have to cause repression.

Conclusively, and considering the fact that the study aims at interrogating the cause and effects of girl-child marriage and slavery in the Nigerian state in the 21st century, it therefore employs the radical feminism theory. This is so because the radical feminism theory questions why women must adopt certain roles based on their biology, just as it questions why men adopt certain other roles based on gender. On the other hand, it tends to draw lines between biological-determined behaviour and cultural-determined behaviour in order to free both men and women as much as possible from their previous narrow gender roles.

Methodology

This research work employed the case study and content analysis research approaches of qualitative research method. It involves explaining the issue, describing, analyzing and interpreting data the analysis of the cause and effect of girl child slavery as portrayed in Stephanie Linus *Dry*. It is qualitative because it deals with the analysis of this film by a notable Nigerian film maker and descriptive because it involves the use of ideas to describe and analyze the cause and effects of girl child slavery in the film. To achieve this, the study employed the primary and secondary sources. The primary source is the play text and the researchers' ideas concerning the cause and effects of girl child slavery in the Nigerian society, while the secondary source includes materials from the institutional publications, articles, journals, text books, internets, research materials, amongst others.

Summary of Dry

The prevalent nature of girl-child marriage/slavery in the Nigerian society in the recent time that has affected the girl child on many fronts envisaged the production of *Dry*, directed by Stephanie Linus. This draconian issue of which *Dry* interrogates, ultimately presents itself as cankerworm that has ridiculed the identity of girl child in the Nigerian society. *Dry* is a propagandist work but a beautifully stitched story about humanity. Notably, *Dry* is a 2014 Nigerian drama film directed by Stephanie Linus and starring Stephanie Okereke, Liz Benson, McNamara, Darwin and Paul Sambo. On 20th July 2013, a teaser trailer for the film was released, in response to the Child marriage controversy ongoing in Nigeria at the time.

The film's theme focuses on Vesicovaginal fistula condition and underage marriage among young women in the Nigerian society, mostly in the Northern region. It subsequently tells the story of a thirteen-year-old girl, Halima (Zubaida, Ibrahim and Fagge), a brilliant and promising girl, whose poor uneducated parents marry her off to Sani (Tijjani and Faraga 2017), a 60-year-old man, who constantly, beats, enslaves, starves and rape her. He deprives her of education and association with her peers.

Halima gets pregnant and suffers Vesicovaginal Fistula (VVF), after child delivery; she's consequently abandoned by her husband and discriminated against in the society. Zara (Stephanie Okereke), a UK medical doctor who also suffered a horrific childhood in the same region, observing the level of health related deaths, caused by child delivery, decided to come back to Nigerian. Zara assisted in curing Halima, who she later understood was her lost daughter that was sold out to Halima's fostered parents. She assisted and took her back as her daughter. Zara also saved other young women under such circumstance. The film ends when Zara succeeded convincing the state governor and other dignitaries of the film society into agreeing to put a stop to the persistent of Child marriage and slavery in the society.

***Dry* and theme of Girl-Child Slavery/Marriage in Nigeria**

From the study, it is pertinent to state that the thematic thrust and subject matters, Character Delineation, and the general setting of Stephanie Linus's *Dry* are microcosm of the macrocosm in the Nigerian state. It is so because the film wholesomely mirrors the issue of early child marriage/slavery, money marriage, commercial sexual exploitation, domestic

servitude, and other forms of abuses on the girl child. This poses as threat because it prevents the girl child from engaging in economic cum political obligations which promotes massive development of the Nigerian society.

On the thematic thrust and subject matters, the film discuss the burning issues of rape, child marriage, obstetric fistula and the societal stigma that comes with it in the society of the film. In the Nigerian society, these issues portrayed in the film are prevalent most especially in the Northern region where issue of girl child marriage and slavery is enshrined in their religion, culture, norm, value system, and tradition.

Girls in their tender age in this region are considered ripped from the age of nine (9), thus suitors as old as seventy (70) and above are welcomed. The girl child has no control or say due to fear of some fundamental parental issues. Due to these oblivious issues, the girl-child is pragmatically subjected to slavery and constant rape. They are often neglected and made to undergo heinous shores which are ultimately attributed to the masculine gender. Most often, the child-wife is subjected into prostitution, by which the financial proceed is distinctively given to her husband who at this time, is her master and lord. The girl-child's rights and privileges are continually abused, denied, and ironically discriminated from her immediate society.

Next, the characters in the film and their delineations are direct representatives of some personages in the Nigerian society. For instance, character of Halima, played by Zubaida Ibrahim Fagge, obviously represents the girl-child in the Nigerian society whom is unequivocally a victim of girl-child marriage and slavery. She represents those girls whose parents sold them out to men who are old enough to pass the age of their grandfathers. These girls, unlike Halima, suffers so many kinds of maltreatments to their death, while few, like Halima are rescued and cared for. Those rescued from such slavery still find it difficult to meet up with their peers in the society.

More so, character of Sani Mother, played by Rekiya Ibrahim Atta, represents the parents in the Nigerian society who gives out their girl child for marriage to men old enough to be their fathers. Often times, the reasons for their decisions may be to overcome the stench of poverty in their family. It may as well be as a result of cultural and religious reasons, or as a way of upsetting debts or to raise money for their son's bride price payment. This is caused as a result of the prevalent unemployment and poverty issues in the Nigerian state in the 21st century.

Next are characters such as Zara, played by Stephanie Okereke, Dr Brown, played by William Mc Namara and Dr Alex played by Shaw. Most importantly, Zara, Dr Alex and Dr Brown represents the Nigerian girl-child activists who craves to stop the issue of early marriage and girl slavery in the Nigerian state. Like Zara, Dr Alex and Dr Brown who faced humiliation, assault, pain and suffering while trying to salvage the issue, must girl child activists in the Nigerian society die before attaining the change that they craves for.

Extensively, characters of Speaker, played by Olu Jacobs and Honourable Musa, played by Hakeem Hassan represents the Nigerian politicians in their splinter groups. Unlike Speaker

and Honourable Musa whose delineation represents few upright politicians in the Nigerian society that painstakingly propagates uprightness and positive change, most Nigerian politicians, as corrupt as they are, prefers marrying girls at their tender age. The reason may be to fulfil their ritualistic purposes or to satisfy their sexual urge in detriment of the girl-child.

Conclusively, the general setting of the film depicts the Nigerian society in all ramifications, mostly when the economic, political, social, and religious system of the state are at the benchmark and the state is near breakdown of law and order. A period where corruption, nepotism, tribalism, divide and rule system are practiced; visibly in all administrative, political and religious strata. A period where terrorism, manifesting through acts of kidnapping, politically motivated assassinations, lethal car bombing, armed robbery, thuggery, human trafficking and slavery, prostitution, drug trafficking and other heinous acts which creates pain, suffering and death of the people and subsequently threatens the existence of the nation as a sovereign and democratic state. A time when girl-child is seen as a veritable mechanism of making money. A time when girl-child is sold out to men old enough to be their grand-fathers because of the high money that they paid.

For example, the film was produced as at the time when "Child marriage controversy in Nigeria" was at a peak; when the senate was unable to remove a clause of the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria which states that "any woman that is married in Nigeria is of full age" due to shortage of votes from members of senate. This however was misconstrued by the general public as a bill for underage marriage, which drew a lot of media attention at the time. Apart from this misconstruing exposition, the film was produced to tackle the heinous issue of early child marriage and child slavery most especially in the Northern region of the state where this issue has become their way of life; where deaths recorded as a result of high rate of Vesicovaginalfiscula and other early child delivery related issues.

Conclusion

From the study, it is established that girl child slavery, manifesting in the form of money marriage, early marriage, commercial sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, and other forms of abuses on the women folk, has malicious effects on the girl child and the Nigerian state in the 21st century. The malicious issues as cankerworms, ranges from sexual, and psychological abuse and violence, deprivation and torture, the forced use of substances, manipulation, economic exploitation, and abusive working and living conditions, topost-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, alienation, disorientation, aggression and difficulty concentrating.

This is subsequently caused due to an increase in the level of poverty, hunger, fear, and unemployment in the Nigerian state in the 21st century, due to corruption, nepotism, favouritism, divide and rule system and the clandestine, greed. It gargantuan nature of this menace result to early pain, trauma and death of the girl child. These forensic effects of girl child marriage pragmatically affects productive attribute of the girl child to her society which ultimately affects the Nigerian front-economically, politically, socially and otherwise.

Recommendation

The study establishes that the effect of early girl child marriage on the girl child and the Nigerian society are massive. To this, the following recommends are drafted:

1. Every culture, norms, or tradition that promotes girl-child slavery/marriage in the Nigerian space should be abolished for equity and development to be ascertained.
2. Law enforcing agency should be established to monitor and tackle all cases of girl-child slavery/marriage in the Nigerian state. Anyone found guilty of this malicious act should be made to face the law.
3. Poverty eradication machineries, such as loans, grants, employment opportunities, social welfares, entrepreneurial skills, and adequate education should be made easily assessable as that would help curb girl-child marriage/slavery in the Nigerian society.
4. It is also imperative to provide strong support system like scholarship to keep girls in school. The teachers should be adequately taken care of to support the girl-child.
5. There should be active community awareness on the negative impacts of girl-child marriage on the girl child, the family, and the society at large. This would ultimately help in eradicating girl-child marriage/slavery in the Nigerian society.
6. The health sector should be encouraged financially and materially to tackle medical issues that girl-child marriage/slavery creates.

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