The Role of Women in the Subjugation of Women: The Old Women in Julie Okoh’s Selected Plays

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Abstract
Crimes against women are of many facets and are carried out by both sexes. Patriarchy finds accomplices in the older generation of women who are too willing as custodians of culture to protect that which is entrusted in their care. As custodians of culture, they strive to protect the very customs that one would expect them to oppose as women. Cultural practices such as widowhood rites and female circumcision are spear-headed by women even when women almost all over the world are kicking against such practices. Julie Okoh’s three plays—Edewede, In the Fullness of Time, and Our Wife Forever—highlight the negative role played by the older women in the realization of the female emancipation. Instead of embracing change, they fight to maintain the status quo and rather accept whatever situation that befalls them as fate. The character ‘Ebikere’ in Julie Okoh’s Edewede represents the attitude of the older generation of women to female emancipation. This paper looks at the role of women in the subjugation of women using ‘Ebikere’ and other references to aged women in Julie Okoh’s plays. The character, Ebikere, is an irony on the feminist ideology. Instead of fighting patriarchal suppressions of womanhood, the old women are used by the society to sustain patriarchal ideology. To achieve the female dream, the women should look inward to tackle the problem.

Introduction
The issue of women subjugation in our society has been a recurring problem. This subjugation manifests in several ways and is carried out by both sexes who are members of the same society. Throughout the history of women emancipation, culture has always been presented as a barrier in the realization of the goals of its tenets. Culture itself is the totality of the way of life of a people in a given society. Women as members of society play the role of being the custodians of culture. Saddled with this responsibility, they strive to protect and uphold that which culture itself has entrusted on their care. Even when some aspects of such culture threaten the essence of their being, they hold firmly to it, ironically to be relevant in their communities. To maintain the status quo, culture finds accomplices in the aged women in different communities who serve as progenitors, and the daughters (Umu-ada) who are the voice of the women. While carrying out these roles, they inadvertently become objects used by patriarchy to maintain eternal hold over women emancipation. Women are made to go through horrifying experiences by their fellow women to be judged as worthy members of society. For such women (the aged and the women group), they are performing their roles for the benefit of their society which include women as members. Ironically, such traditions they strive to enforce are the very ones which perpetually erode and dehumanize the women. Why then do women complain of subjugation when they themselves are the vessels that carry out these oppressions on themselves? Sigmund Freud’s position seems to buttress this point. Freud notes: “to those of you who are women this will not apply- you are yourselves the problem” (qtd. in Dobie 97). Consequently, patriarchy under the guise of culture and tradition provided the women with rope to hang themselves by entrusting in their care that which they ought to fight with their last blood.

As patriarchal society, our culture stipulates and conditions the inhabitants with acceptable norms and practices for one to belong as member. According to Allan Jonson in The Gender Knot: Unraveling our Patriarchal Legacy, “patriarchy societies are male-identified in that core cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable, or normal are associated with how we think about men and masculinity” (1997:6) Thus, under the guise of custom and tradition, patriarchy sets the standard of behaviours and practices, and demands compliance among the members of society. In the words of Teresa Njoku, in “Patriarchy, Gender and the Early Plays of Tess Onwueme” “...the male provides the social
norms (standards of behaviour) and mores (fixed moral customs and standards of a group). The male dominates while the female submits. (2004:227). Consequently, cultural practices such as female genital mutilation (female circumcision) and widowhood rites which exclusively concern women, and other issues relating to them are handled by women. One would reason then that the fact that women are directly involved will make it easier for women in terms of eradicating these cultural practices that are harmful and dehumanizing to them. But the reverse is the case. Julie Okoh’s Edewede and In the Fullness of Time among other themes seem to propose that women look inward to harness such opportunities provided by culture and tradition to resolve the women issues, especially where women are the determining forces.

The Plays
The play Edewede is an eponymous play meaning “the dawn of a new day”. It derives its title from the name of the lead character, “Edewede” or “Wede” in short form. The plot is arranged into nine segments each bearing a title that reflects the actions or the theme that preoccupies the actions of the segment In Edewede, Julie Okoh uses a progressive plot of cause and effect from the crisis (which is the beginning) to the reconciliation (which is the resolution of the play). However, flashback technique is also a part of the plot which helps to fuel the dramatic actions of the play. The play centers on the issue of female genital mutilation and the struggle to eradicate it. Set in a remote village, otoedo land of the Essan tribe, the setting represents a traditional African society struggling with the influence of Western civilization. Ebikere is scheming to have her grand-daughter, Oseme circumcised, while Edewede is bent on preventing it having lost a sister and a daughter through infections as a result of circumcision. Ordia, Edewede’s husband and Ebikere’s only son is torn between his love for his immediate family represented in wife and daughter and that of his mother representing his tradition. Initially, the love for tradition and culture seems to take the upper hand, when he accepted to publicly renounce his wife. But towards the end of the play Ordia reasoned with the elders by narrating his personal experiences and dream. He asks:

Ordia …my people come to think about it. Of what use of circumcision to us today? Does it in any way, threaten our manhood? Those in town have done away with it. Why can’t we do the same here? (61)

Majority of the elders saw circumcision as an ancient tradition whose validity is worth looking into. They reasoned that circumcision has lost its value and no one can prevent the necessary change as presented in the following scene.

Adawan:…we are all prisoners of fear. Why are we afraid of change? Can any one evade what is?
Fourth elder: No, we can only make attempt.
Adawan: Mere illusion
Fourth Elder: Mere futility (61)

Further in the scene, the fourth elder concludes by saying-

Fourth elder: Tendency to resist change is a common trait in man. But sooner or latter, change will come despite all resistance. (62)

However, it is the solidarity of the women in the dilemma and the glimpse of hope they experienced that broke the resistance of the men. Though the men and the old women publicly renounced Edewede, this action somehow gives the younger women the urge to fight following enlightenment given by Mama Nurse. Mama Nurse explains the dangers they expose themselves to by agreeing to circumcision.

Mama Nurse: In this society, many young girls have lost their lives because of circumcision. Many women are suffering from different types of diseases because of
circumcision: Tetanus, urinary infections V.V.F., HIV/AIDS are all dangerous afflictions contacted through circumcision.

…Women! Do you know exact reason they make you go through it? Do you know what Harm you do to yourselves by agreeing to do it? (36)

She explains further the real reason for female genital mutilation.

Mama Nurse: I am aware that the custodians of our customs and traditions claim that your peanut is the source of confusion and impurity. So, they carve it out of its pod to prevent you from having impure thoughts… Evil thoughts dwell not in the bottom but in the mind. Circumcision neither encourages nor discourages lust. (37)

Understanding the true nature and consequences of circumcision, the women resolve to fight and abolish the act. They propose that the initiation ceremony for young girls can still hold but without circumcision which is normally the grande finale of the initiation rite.

_In The Fullness of Time_ (2000) also deals with the issues of women subjugation and circumcision, a call for women to stand up for themselves and improve their lot. The play is divided into two movements with a prologue and an epilogue. The play presents Ofure who is enmeshed in a psychological trauma caused by her husband. The details of her traumatic experience are presented through flashback which makes up movements one and two. The setting of the play is in a nursing home which may be seen as a convalescent home. Here, the playwright insists through the characters ‘Erialia’ and ‘Esele’ that women should not accept conditions simply because they find themselves in it. Thus,

Erialia:…In this society women often pass through horrible conditions.
Esele: Yet they accept their lot without complaining.
Erialia: So it appears. But do you know why?
Esele: They don’t realize that there’s something wrong with their condition that’s why. (19)

Rather, they should reject such cultural practices that are harmful to their health and wellbeing. On this note, Erialia narrates her encounter with a mother of a victim of circumcision.

Esele: Yes. According to our cultural tradition, women are not supposed to ask question. So, they accept everything they are told as the only truth.
Erialia: Oh yes. Those women are ill equipped for life.
Esele: As a result they suffer from dreadful injustice and violence.
Erialia:… this morning, I missed the physiotherapy session because I was battling with death.
Esele: What killed her?
Erialia: Circumcision.
Esele: Hear that! On the eve of the twenty-first century, young women still die from circumcision in our society.
Erialia:..Do you know what the mother said when asked why she allowed her daughter to undergo such inhuman treatment?
Esele: Yes, I do. They usually reply, “According to our culture a girl should be circumcised before puberty…”(20)

However, patriarchy’s insistence on subjugating the women folk always refers to the biblical account of the fall of man. Okoh recreated the story of Adam and Eve in the play through the characters, Audu and Ewanlen. After the flashback, Audu’s position seems to portray the stance of patriarchy today.
Audu: Yes. And now, you want to turn the world upside down some more. Oh no! You will not succeed this time. Man has learnt to be more vigilant. He must protect the social order of things, including the customs and traditions. (44)

In Our Wife Forever (2010), Julie Okoh discusses yet another burning issue of women subjugation. The preoccupation of the text is centered on widowhood practices such as dispossession and wife inheritance. The actions in the play are set in six phases with an opening prologue which supplies the background information of the lead character, ‘Victoria’. All actions in the play are set in Victoria’s living room. The play presents Victoria’s ordeals in the hands of her husband’s family especially, ‘Thomas’ who is bent on inheriting everything belonging to his late brother; including Victoria herself. Thomas addresses the issue thus:

Thomas:...You are still our wife, living under our roof... (31)
Further in the play, on noticing Victoria’s attire, he exclaims thus:
Thomas: Ah! See this woman – oh! Are those not Hector’s clothes on you?
Victoria: Certainly, they are.
Thomas: You were supposed to have handed over all his clothes to the family.
...why are they still in your possession? Hey-hey-hey-hey! What won’t one see these days in this country? Women now wear men’s clothes, even the clothes of their dead husband.
Unbelievable! People will hear this. (31-32).

Thomas employs everything at his disposal including blackmail and attempted rape to make sure he achieves his aim. His argument is that so long as Victoria continues to answer the husband’s name, she will be under his control. Yet, Victoria’s proposed option to change to her maiden name is met with yet another bottle-neck created by culture as exemplified by Thomas. Thomas reminds Victoria that she will have to play back her bride price with interest if she to change back to her maiden name.

Thomas: Don’t forget to include the interest and inflation variations. You were married for about twelve years. If that money was invested in some business, it would have accrued to millions of Naira by now. (37)

When Victoria expresses her inability to pay back the bride price, Thomas was quickly to answer thus:

Thomas: The choice is yours. Besides, in case you have forgotten, let me remind you. According to our custom, when a widow decides to remarry, she forfeits every entitlement of her late husband’s property. (37)

According to the culture which Thomas holds on to, Victoria has no business living in Hector’s house once she has refused to marry the brother. So, Hector’s family asked Victoria, Hector’s wife to move out of their brother’s house. Patriarchy does not believe in women owning property. Even when a woman acquires property, it has to be her husband’s. On this note, Thomas asks thus:

Thomas: Did I just hear you say your house? (...) Hi-ho-ho-ho! Since when have women in this country started to own houses?
Victoria: This is my house. I suffered to build it. It is mine.
Thomas: Whether you suffered or not, we are not aware. All we know is that this is Hector’s house.....

The three plays criticize the roles of the old women in the emancipation of women. In Edewed, Okoh created a character Ebikere who embodies all the characteristics of the old women in patriarchal society.
In the other two plays, *In the Fullness of Time* and *Our Wife Forever*, she also made references to the negative roles played by the old women in the subjugation of women. The playwright uses such characters like Etusi and Victoria respectively to denounce such actions by women.

**The Role of the Old Women in Julie Okoh’s Selected plays**

In the play *Edewede*, (2006) Julie Okoh reiterates the role of the aged women in the struggle for emancipation of women. Their position seems to negate the general idea of woman actualization. Having lived all their lives within the patriarchal block, they see things through the eyes of men. Hence, they oppose any act that threatens the preconceived notions of womanhood in society. These groups of women are the ones usually used by society to force woman to submission. They are the ones referred to as custodians of culture in different societies. Ironically this may be the group Marbel Evweierhoma refers to as being always involved in systems of rulership and decision making. (83) On the same note, Maria Rosa while reporting on Ghanaian women, notes thus: “Before taking a decision, the community always consults an elderly woman… she is really the final decisive factor in all the activities of the man as well as the arbiter good and evil for the entire community”. (68).

Being at the hem of affairs, these women are used to perpetuate the inequality of sexes. Unconsciously, they uphold whatever patriarchy stands for. On this note, Teresa Nzoku asserts that, “the male is at the centre of the culture and he is always projected positively.” (227) In upholding patriarchy, the aged women tend to fulfill Jonson’s notion that patriarchal societies are “male-identified”.

*In the Fullness of Time* (1994), ale comments on the role of the aged women in societies regarding matters of womanhood. Through “Etusi” a character in the play, Okoh notes how these groups of women are used against their sex. Etusi is Audu’s housekeeper who also witnessed his previous marriage with Etemini. In referring to the aged women, Etusi notes thus:

…You know some ears are deaf to music, especially those women in this community. The older they get, the more they become deaf to natural music, even to their body music (48)

The play also treats the issue of female genital mutilation and the subjugation of women in our society. Through “Esele” another character in the play, the playwright forays into culture and what it stipulates for the women.

Esele:… You know, according to our culture
Ofure:… Culture?
Esele: Yest. According to our cultural traditions,
Women are not supposed to ask question.
So, they accept everything they are told as the only truth.
Eriala: Oh yes. Those women are ill equipped for life.
Esele: As a result they suffer from dreadful injustice and violence. (19-20)

Eriala brings up the issue of circumcision while Esele sums up in the frequent answer that is always proffered.

Esele:… They usually reply, “According to our culture a girl should be circumcised before puberty. The nuts are out on her chest. So I had her circumcised. Have I done anything wrong?”
Ofure: …”According to culture…” (20)

Etusi questions why the women should accept that which destroys their being especially in their older age. Like Wede in *Edewede*, Etusi attached the older generation of women who carry out the act of oppression on women in the name of circumcision.
Etusi: There is no culture that is static. The old gives way to the new. But obsessed with the old, you strive to lock out the new. Then what happens? Knife!... The pain inflicted by that wicked knife on my body. Damned knife! Their instrument for pleasure and domination! We were many, we were tender, we were spry, fallen down on our knees before that knife, by the fierce eyes and tongue of the custodians of our culture. And while we groaned on the ground with pain, silently, they gloated over the prospect of their future exploit. (82)

The “custodians of our culture” in the above dialogue refers to the aged women who plan and execute the act of circumcision. They know when a girl child is ripe for circumcision, and in their different families, they enforce compliance to maintain that instituted by patriarchy.

This is clearly evident in Ebikere’s role in Edewede. With the antecedent of Izenegbu’s death behind her mind, she tries to convince Oseme to partake in the initiation ceremony which will culminate in circumcision. To Ebikere, the initiation ceremony and circumcision are important in a woman’s life.

Ebikere: Both of them are landmarks in the life of a woman. The initiation ceremonies are the period of transition from girlhood to womanhood. My child, listen very carefully. The peanut is very delicate. It is the source of confusion, impurity and imperfection. (...) So during the initiation ceremony, it is carved out of its pod. And the girls are taught about the taboos of our land. They are fortified for their future roles of wives and mothers. (5)

By referring to the peanut as “imperfect” in the anatomy of a woman, Ebikere, speaking like a man is questioning why an object that resembles a man’s phallus should be found in a woman. She goes further to take the ideological stand of patriarchy thus:

Ebikere …A well brought up woman should know her place and respect her limits… you don’t even know that you are only a wife in this house. And such, your place is in the kitchen. (7)

By this stance, Ebikere representing the old women, is calling for women to remain tied in the stereotype created by society at their own detriment.

Furthermore, Okoh’s recent play Our Wife Forever (2010) comments on the role the aged women play in patriarchal society. Though the issue treated in this play is different from female genital mutilation, it still centers on the dehumanizing practices against women in a patriarchal society. Victoria is made to go through horrible experiences in the name of widowhood rites. Felix, though a man could not believe the experiences narrated by Victoria.

Felix: somehow I’m inclined to believe that the stories told about them are exaggerated. (20)

Believe it or not, these horrible acts are carried out on women by their fellow women.

Victoria: I didn’t really mind shaving my hair. Though, I could hardly control the tears that were streaming down my face, some women made it their duty to see that I cried at dawn every day.

Felix: why?

Victoria: To let the villagers know that I was sorrowful. (21)
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In patriarchal society, once a man dies his widow becomes a suspect. So she has to swear an oath to exonerate herself from the death of her husband. The oath taking rite comes in different forms depending on individual communities. In the community represented in Our Wife Forever, this involves drinking the bath water used in cleansing the corpse. This is an extreme form of dehumanization. Why will any woman kill her husband? The playwright asks this question through Victoria:

Victoria: How could I have caused his kidney failure? For what benefit! On the contrary, I have lost so much since his demise: I have been the one suffering. Why would I want to inflict all these pains on myself? Is it that I hate myself so much? (24)

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that after a woman has gone through exonerating herself from the death of her husband, the next ordeal after the mourning period will be the issue of wife inheritance. The males in the family will start to scramble for the same woman accused earlier of killing their brother. The woman becomes a “game” to be hunted by men according to ‘Thomas’ a character in the play. (28) However, in all the processes of widowhood rite, it is the aged women that are in close contact with the widow and makes sure that she complies with demand of tradition and culture. Contrary to Rosa’s assertion earlier noted, Okoh believes that the old women are mere instrument in the hands of culture. Though they sit at the council where decisions are made, they do not actually participate in the decision making.

Thomas: ..The council of elders has invited you for a dialogue on many occasions. But each time, you’ve refused to answer their call.
Victoria: I will not.
Thomas: Why won’t you?
Victoria: That council is made up of men. And they are all biased against women.
Thomas: There are women among them.
Victoria: Those old women, do they participate in the discussion? All they do is to concur with the men in whatever they decide, then later, they ensure that the female members of the community comply unfailing to the decisions. By doing so they serve as an agent of oppression on their fellow female folk. (52)

Victoria’s dialogue clearly states what Okoh has been saying all along: that in patriarchal society, the aged women are used as agents of oppression against their fellow women, and this has been the crux of this essay.

Critical Perspectives
The three plays, Edewede, In the Fullness of Time, and Our Wife Forever focus on cultural practices against women while drawing attention to issues of female genital mutilation and its effects, widowhood rite and inheritance, and female servitude. In the three plays, the playwright attacks the custodians of culture and tradition masquerading in the old women to maintain a perpetual hold on women’s right of existence. This she does through such character as Edewede, Etusi, Eriala, and Victoria. The character “Eriala” a nurse appeared in Okoh’s two plays – In the Fullness of Time (2000) and Edewede (2006). In these plays Eriala has been the tool of enlightenment and inspiration in each of the community. Her message is clear: women should not under-value themselves by leaving the men to think for them especially in matters that concern their well being.

Eriala: No matter how crippled you are, you can still improve your condition. Go on, prove to all that you are worth more than is accorded you. (In the Fullness….23)
Eriala: …..You see yourself as a cripple, incapable of doing anything for yourselves. So, you wait for others to think for you, show you what to do and how to live. Are you really a cripple?….. (Edewede, 20)
She provides succour to the oppressed women in her nursing home in both plays, giving them reason to live and fight that which threatens their lives. Eriala’s advice spurred Edewede to fight circumcision, and for Ofure, the recipe to regain herself.

However, the fight for emancipation by women always puts them in conflict with the custodians of culture and tradition. Such women are seen as unnatural and every available instrument is employed to bring them to order. Toril Moi notes thus:

> Patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain social standards of feminity on all biological women, in order precisely to make us believe that the chosen standards for “feminity” are natural. Thus a woman who refuses to conform can be labeled both unfeminine and unnatural (209.)

This is evident in the case of Edewede who is labeled “a stubborn goat” by Ebikere, (7) and Victoria whose refusal to accept Thomas as her husband is described as “stubbornness” by Thomas, her late husband’s brother. (57) In all, the three plays are characterized by steadfastness, resistance and obstinacy which helped the female characters to achieve their goals. They are able to sustain the fight against culture and tradition.

On the other hand, the custodians of culture and traditions that affect women seem not to be happy about the turn of events. This is evident in the actions of the women as presented by the playwright in the reconciliation scene in Edewede. (67) The old women of the village arrive carrying their stools to sit in the council of men, but just as Victoria said in Our Wife Forever, they said nothing. When the king places a ban on circumcision, the old women only show disapproval. Ebikere is used in Edewede to represent the old women of the community. The playwright describes her action at the end of the play thus: “as if rooted to a spot, EBIKERE stares at a distance. EDEWEDE and ORDIA dance towards her. She picks up her stool, walk out of the arena calmly”. (67) The attitude of the old women in Okoh’s plays is summarized by Chidi Ikonne thus, “a society where men get away with inhuman oppression of the women, often with the connivance and/or concurrence of older women” (Our Wife…7)

**Conclusion**

The actions of Ebikere representing the old women of the community in Edewede, the references to the position of the old women in In the Fullness of Time, and Our Wife Forever are ironies on feminist ideology which is fighting for female emancipation. From the three texts under study, Julie Okoh speaks on the role of the old women in matters concerning womanhood. She identified how patriarchy has been using women against their fellow women and calls for the younger women who are at the receiving end to stand up and challenge these customs in order to liberate them. Through one of the characters “Edewede”, she asks the younger women to take up the fight against circumcision.

Edewede: Our mothers practiced circumcision because they knew nothing about anything except for laws and taboos imposed on them to stop them from thinking for themselves. So that from childhood, they learn to be shy, silent and docile until they see themselves as objects for men’s pleasure. They got so accustomed to this condition that they see any deviation from it as a crime. But today, light has chased away darkness and women must change with time… Is circumcision good or bad? Since women are the ones who carry all the burdens of circumcision isn’t it right for them to decide whether to keep it or throw it away? (35)

The answers to these questions can be provided by women if only those used by patriarchy can look inward to search for solutions to women’s problems. The enlightenment and inspiration provided by Eriala to Edewede (Edewede), and Esele (In the Fullness of Time) to the younger generation of women can assist in dismantling patriarchal block if only the older women will realize the sufferings of women
under patriarchy. By so doing, they will see the evil of female subjugation and kick against such practices as female circumcision, widowhood rites (dispossession and wife inheritance), and female servitude.

In Nigeria today, the church has been able to exert so much influence on circumcision and the widowhood rites, but the cases of dispossession are still rampant. Okoh through the character, ‘Victoria’ suggests that women should persevere and fight for themselves. There are many options for women who may find themselves in Victoria’s situation. The law is there to assist and protect them from any form of oppression. Moreover, the old women in Julie Okoh’s plays may be likened to the women in sensitive positions in the country who pretend to be fighting for the womenfolk while they are actually manipulated by their male counterpart. For this reason, women should retreat and enlighten more women in the fight for women emancipation.

Work Cited
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