

FEMALE PORTRAYAL IN *WHAT IF.....* BY LINDA JUMMAI MUSTAPHA AS IMPEDIMENT TO INCLUSIVITY NATION BUILDING

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Executive Summary

Domestic violence is a wicked act against any family member. It could be emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, and it is now one of the major issues of contemporary societal concerns. This paper analyzes domestic violence as an acute and severe issue that hinders women's full support in nation-building and homebuilding. It is obvious that in spite of legal repercussions and awareness being created by the government to curb domestic violence, a lot of people avoid reporting incidents of violence, especially at home, probably due to fear of divorce or separation. Using domestic violence and feminism in Bell Hook's theory and qualitative content analysis as the researcher's method of analysis, the researcher arrives at the conclusion that, as much as men are victims of domestic violence, women's percentage is higher, and it is a major barrier between women and nation-building as most affected women are usually always imbalanced to think straight. This paper concludes that it is in the interest of women to speak out to avoid such a lag in nation-building.

Keywords: domestic violence, emotional, physical, divorce, nation-building.

Introduction

Domestic violence creates toxic environments at home. It is unsafe; it creates an everlasting psychological and, most times, physical impact on victims who are most often helpless. This destabilizes homes, which, in actuality, are supposed to be the safest place for people. Homes are important places in a child's life because they are the first environment a child experiences. It is part of the larger society; as a unit in society and a child's first encounter, it is supposed to be a comfort zone for any child. Ekeke and Dorgu support the above when they write that the home as a traditional nuclear family is the smallest unit and microcosm of the larger society (2). Home is any child's first school; home therefore has the child's greatest percentage of behavior, effervescent personality, physical, and moral development. Joshua Jeong et al. are of the view that parents lay important foundations for their children; these important

foundations include spiritual, moral, and psychological (1). UNICEF writes that as many as 35 to 40 percent of battered women commit suicide in America due to domestic violence, while Joshua Jeong et al. (2) are of the view that 30 percent of women experience physical or emotional violence from their partners. However, some organizations, like (FIDA) the Federation International De Abogadas (International Federation of Women Lawyers), (GEM) the Gender Equality Movement, (NCWS) the National Council of Women's Society, (WIN) the Women in Nigeria, and (FOMWAN) the Federation of Muslim Women's Association of Nigeria, under the aegis of the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, aim to promote equality, development, and advancement of all persons, especially women in Africa. These associations were formed to improve female emancipation and empowerment. This issue also attracts the attention of African female writers who have tried, according to Nwankwo, "to re-write the women back into positivity after the unwholesome portraiture they received at the hands of the early male writers" (172). These prolific female writers needed to create a space whereby their voices could be heard and their desires made known to the world through their persuasive writing.

The Importance of a spouse in a family cannot be overemphasized, but according to Ilika, Okonkwo, and Adogu, some spouses are abused in their marriages; it could be mental (emotional) abuse, communication abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, or financial abuse (7). Leizl F. Arantes and Casinillo are of the view that intimate partner violence cuts across nations, religions, and all classes of people and involves battering and beating (18). These abuses negatively affect families because they can lead to intimidation, man's inhumanity to man, verbal abuse, divorce, separation, battered husbands or wives, depression, prostitution, murder, imprisonment, stalking, and social misfits. It is obvious that in a patriarchal society, men control women and determine the tone of society. Akachi Adimora-Ezigbo is right when she writes that:

In most patriarchal societies, it is men who control or determine the way women should look. If men prefer fat women in a particular culture, every woman in that culture would aspire to be fat. If thinness is preferred, the mania would swing to thin. In the traditional past, many Nigerian communities preferred their women to be plump, robust, and strong. In some parts of Eastern Nigeria, for instance, young women were isolated in "fattening rooms," where they did no work except to eat. At the end of the puberty rites, they become plump, soft-skinned, and ready to be married off. It is assumed that in this condition, they will please their husbands and bear numerous children. There has been a change, however, in ideas about beauty and femininity within the last decade. Most men prefer their women to be slender. Fatness is regarded as a disadvantage, probably because of its health problems. Thinness for females has become fashionable, and most women are keen weight-watchers (8–10).

Women suffer to please their men in every patriarchal society, but it is disheartening to notice that they are mistreated after all the suffering. Some men are violent. Olu-Fumilayo, Adedibu, and Adnifan are right when they write that a violent person can hardly become non-violent. This class of people tends to disorganize families once they find themselves as parts of this smallest unit. Due to violence and social misfits, the women affected are far from offering their best in society. Feminists try so hard to fight domestic violence and change people's perceptions of women. This paper looks at domestic violence as a barrier to women's achievements. Most women in the text do not achieve anything in their families apart from bearing children because they are mistreated by their spouses.

Bell Hook's Theory

Bell Hooks was born in 1952 and died in 2021. She was an American activist. She wrote on gender, class, and race. In 1984, she introduced her theory in her book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Hooks does not only fight for equality between men and women; she also fights to end women's oppression and other forms of exploitation. Feminists emphasize violence against women, especially domestic violence. Hooks writes that domestic violence can occur in different ways, but in any form it occurs, it is totally unacceptable, and trying to differentiate them may only cause more harm and worsen the situation. She is of the view that violence is caused by male dominance, white supremacy, and people thinking that violence is the cure for their low self-esteem. She goes ahead to let us know that parental education should be encouraged and promoted, as these parents are the ones who train these children, thereby making it possible for them to transfer the sexiest culture to their children. Hooks, in her book *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate politics* invites all to a theory of feminism that is rooted in common sense and one's wealth of experience. Her theory appeals to all those committed to equality and justice because many patriarchal societies are frustrating women's efforts for gender equality. Her theory further analyzes serious issues such as violence, race, rights, and class facing women. Hers is a clarion call to women to be free from every form of violence, injustice, and intimidation. She is clamoring for a feminism free from diverse barriers and urges women to demand a better society where there will be no racist or patriarchal culture. Believing that feminism touches all lives, she asks readers to see feminism from a new perspective and see that it is indeed for everybody. To her, feminism is not only about women's rights—about women gaining equal rights with men—but that females should not be portrayed as weaker vessels to enable them to contribute meaningfully to nation-building.

Hooks, in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, sees feminism as a way to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. (10) She is against the fact that men

are generally expected to dominate women and use violence if they must maintain patriarchy (12). Bell Hooks feminist theory is of the view that feminism is for everybody, and so everybody must be involved in the feminist movement, making it practical to demolish patriarchal values. In this way, a better society and future are assured.

History of gender-based violence

Canning Kathleen, in her book *Gender History in Practice: Historical Perspective in Bodies*, writes that gender-based violence is complex and is rooted in many factors, such as cultural and societal. Lerner Gerda goes ahead to explain that the patriarchal society that emerged after the Middle Ages solidified the discrimination between men and women, making women more submissive, quiet, and stereotyped. During the Industrial Revolution, women were confined to house chores, and men became breadwinners. These made society more patriarchal, as women were hidden in their homes (56). They were heard, not seen, and this increased the abuse, especially domestic abuse of women by men.

Religion, colonization, and imperialism contributed immensely in those days. Some religious texts encourage the subjugation of women, as verses in the texts allow women to be mistreated. During colonization, indigenous cultures were disrupted, and western patriarchal values were introduced. According to Koss et al, women were relegated to the background and seen as objects. They are of the view that the early societies, like ancient Greece and Rome, started with patriarchal norms and values, and then the Middle Ages brought in Christianity, which equally promoted patriarchal values. They connect gender-based violence with racism, homophobia, and classism. They go ahead and blame colonization and imperialism, as they are of the view that they introduced new forms of violence.

Gender-based violence in the context of the text under study

Gender-based violence affects all genders, ages, and backgrounds. It includes physical, emotional, and sexual abuse and perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes and power imbalances. Amos Mama suffers emotional stress so much that she bursts out, ‘... Oh blast my soul, I saw hell! Those days, I silently mourned. Each day, I thought and thought and thought’ (4). She is not a happy married woman. She warns her friend not to marry because there are many ugly experiences in marriage. She says, ‘Should I now tell you not to marry because I had a bad experience, or should I warn you of many disappointments that you will come to experience as you become somebody’s wife’ (5). Her husband does not beat her often, but the psychological stress she undergoes is such that she cannot bear it. UNICEF supports this when it writes that ‘Emotional torture and living under terror are more serious and unbearable than physical torture in

domestic violence' (24). It goes on to conclude that it therefore makes psychological violence a more qualitative study, as it defies quantification. Her husband cheats on her by saying that he does not take care of her and her two sons; instead, he enjoys spending time with his mistress and other prostitutes. 'He especially loved prostitutes, and if there is a new prostitute in town, my husband would be the first person to 'taste' her.' (11). She sold her valuables to treat her husband when he was sick. The husband had AIDS but did not tell her. She sleeps in the hospital instead of having his mistress take care of him, and she sells her valuables to pay the hospital bills; if not, she will be labeled a bad woman even when people around her know that her husband is not treating her well. She laments to a friend: 'I recall how my husband, who had abandoned me for another woman, fell seriously ill, and instead of his mistress, it was I (moneyless from two long years of not being given upkeep) who had to take care of him when he was admitted to the hospital. I had to sell all my valuable items so that I could pay up the enormous medical bill that... (7). She regrets her marriage and advises her friend not to marry because her experiences are bad. She complains, 'Should I now tell you not to marry because I had a bad experience, or should I warn you of many disappointments... that you will come to experience once you become somebody's wife?' (5). She contacted her husband about AIDS without knowing until he was at the point of death. He died, and she got sick for some time before she later died, leaving three children who later dropped out of school. Kapoor explains this better in his write-up, 'Domestic Violence Against Women and Girls', when he writes that Khan, the former director of UNICEF, is of the view that women and children are the most affected because they are not safe at home, where they are supposed to be very safe. He goes ahead to explain that the home, which was supposed to be the safest place for them, is now a home of horror. Mama Amos later dies of domestic violence and the AIDS she contracted from her husband, terminating her contribution to her family and society at large. Thus, the struggles against patriarchal oppression should be continuous and sweetened with a pinch of radical salt' (Chiluwa 105).

Osinachi Nwachukwu, a famous gospel singer, faced domestic violence. It was reported by Punch newspaper (2022) after her death that the husband beat her even before their children, and she never reported because she wanted the world to see her as a virtuous woman and probably a religious woman. In the same vein, Mama Amos' father in the text under study, usually beats the mother, calling her all sorts of names and she never reported to anyone. He sees her as being good in bed only, and then, when pregnant, she becomes more useless by sitting around waiting for her husband to take care of them. 'Women are just a waste,' he said one day while beating my mother with a belt. 'What you all know is to open your legs as wide as you can to let a man climb you... (14). Violence is not the best option; rather, people will seek dialogue. Binta, another character in the text, complains that in the northern part where she lives, they believe that women are nothing, as most of them just want to live, have babies,

and stay with a man that can feed them. She laments, 'But we in this part of the world just want to survive. I just want to live, have babies, and stay with a man that can feed me' (57). These men or husbands are usually chosen by their parents, so it could be a man without conscience or a man who does not love the girl betrothed to him but must have concluded within him to enslave the girl. She goes ahead to say, 'What will I do with a degree if I still have to go back to my village and marry a man that has been chosen for me since the time I was born?' (57). Northern society does not expect girls to be well educated, as they will end up in their husbands' kitchen and play their gender roles well. In other words, this society looks down on women, and the sharp discrimination between boys and girls is obvious.

Segun, an abusive husband in the text, beats his wife, injures her, and humiliates her whenever she does not pay their landlord, even when he knows that the woman does not work, so where does he expect the money to come from? Hear her say, 'For a few years now, my abusive husband had not been paying the house rent... whenever Mama Lati asked for house rent, he would tell her to see me. Knowing that I would be beaten terribly if I didn't settle Mama Lati, the beatings, injuries, and humiliation I would have to endure were already making me feel lost' (105–106). Unfortunately, poverty contributes to Segun's wickedness; he turns himself into a social misfit. These physical abuses are definitely followed by derogatory words, which make the woman doubt herself and feel ashamed of herself. UNICEF is right when they write in 'Domestic Violence Against Women and Girls' that '... physical violence is usually accompanied by psychological abuse and in many cases by sexual assault' (4). Segun uses derogatory words about the wife and, at one time, used a kitchen knife to try killing her. '... my dinner will be garnished with lots of derogatory words. My husband made life so miserable for me. The day he used the kitchen knife on me was the day I got a wake-up call to leave my abusive husband' (108). Some married men rape their wives, and one wonders what type of marriage some women indulge themselves in. Koss P. Mary, Lor Heise, and Russo Nancy Felipe writes that rape, which is part of domestic violence, is a serious issue that affects women psychologically and socially and affects their reproductive health (15). In the text under study, Segun rapes his wife, and she finds herself in the hospital most of the time. Mrs. Segun Ojoba is violently raped by her husband, who threatens to kill her if she refuses. It all started in the morning, when Mrs. Segun wanted to go to work. Segun demanded sex, but the wife responded that they had enough at night and was almost late for work. Segun immediately brought a kitchen knife and pushed her onto the bed.

When I was set to shout, Segun slashed my wrists. Instantly, blood started gushing out. I will have my way, or else I will kill you right here. I was violently raped that morning. My vagina was the worst injured. It was bloody. It was painful. It was humiliating to feel such pain. I could not go to the hospital, for I was ashamed to tell the doctor that I was raped by my husband (110–111).

Another man, Anaruwa, maltreats his wife to the extent that the woman has a mental problem. He chains her up and locks her up in the house. Hear him say, 'Do you know that Binta (my wife) is now chained and locked up in my house? I screwed the bitch to madness. (154). He rapes his wife every day after beating her until she becomes unconscious. He brags again, 'I tied her up, and every day I raped her until she became unconscious. ... As months went by, she grew to the stupid state she is in now' (155). To agree that domestic violence is a serious issue, Noughani and Mohtashami state that domestic violence causes serious physical assaults on women and nearly one-third of all female homicides (80). Domestic violence makes women unstable, and so they cannot, in any form, contribute meaningfully to any society. It is unfortunate that men use all kinds of tactics, like intimidation, and the rest of them subdue their women, believing that women are weaker vessels and so have nothing to contribute at home and in nation-building.

On the other hand, few women contribute to domestic violence because they may nag and use derogatory words on their husbands, and the men will be tempted to shut their wives up. This, of course, most often results in domestic violence. Very few women are strong and can beat their husbands. Though this is insignificant, unfortunately, according to Sandeep et al., most people do not report domestic violence to avoid social stigma, fear of being referred to as a 'woman' (78), or fear that he may not be believed by the authority and the case may turn against him. This, according to Paul O. Dienne, makes such cases rare (333). Ali Shahrestani supports the above view when he writes that domestic violence against men is underreported and many intimate partner violence victims have ignored this aspect of violence, probably in the bid to protect women more and support feminism (1). Ezenwa-Ohaeto summarizes it all when she supports equal and fair treatment for all genders, especially women, and brings out other aspects of equality. She writes, 'Treating everyone equally is not the only aspect of equality; it also involves acknowledging and addressing the various needs and experiences of individuals and groups, as well as striving to remove bias, discrimination, and structural obstacles that keep people from realizing their full potentials' (65).

Causes of domestic violence

Causes of violence include low self-esteem, as seen in *What if...* and Osinachi Nwachkwu's case. Other causes are denial of fundamental rights, drug abuse, health consequences (as seen in *What if...*), early marriage, choice of spouses by parents, and women's inability to speak out. According to Meta AI, there is no single cause of domestic violence but rather a combination of factors that contribute to its occurrence. Some of the most common causes include:

- Patriarchal culture and gender roles: Societal expectations and gender roles can perpetuate male dominance and entitlement, leading to a sense of ownership and control over one's partner.
- Power imbalance: Domestic violence is often about exerting power and control over another person. Abusers may use tactics like isolation, manipulation, and intimidation to maintain control.
- Trauma and mental health: Unresolved trauma, mental health issues, and substance abuse can contribute to aggressive behavior and an increased risk of domestic violence.
- Lack of empathy and accountability: Abusers may struggle with empathy and taking responsibility for their actions, leading them to blame their partner or justify their behavior.
- Social and economic factors: Poverty, unemployment, and economic dependence can increase stress and create an environment conducive to domestic violence.
- Childhood experiences: Witnessing or experiencing domestic violence in childhood can increase the likelihood of perpetuating or being victimized by domestic violence in adulthood.
- Substance abuse: Alcohol and drug abuse can contribute to aggressive behavior and increase the risk of domestic violence.
- Lack of education and resources: Limited access to education, employment opportunities, and support services can exacerbate the risk of domestic violence.
- Cultural and religious beliefs: Certain cultural and religious beliefs may perpetuate gender stereotypes and condone violence against women.
- Historical and systemic factors: Systemic issues like racism, sexism, and colonialism can perpetuate violence and discrimination against marginalized communities (2024).

Conclusion

Women are portrayed in the novel *What If...* as objects or furniture used to decorate a house. They are not allowed to air their opinions; most of them got married at an early age, and these husbands were chosen by their parents. Incidentally, these husbands do not care for them and so beat them up at any little provocation. The work shows that the mistreatment women suffer at home suppresses them; some of them become mentally unstable, some have physical wounds, and others die silently. Such oppression, victimization, and violence set women back and stop them from partaking in national issues and discussions. Some who are naturally intelligent are not educated because of patriarchal society, and the few educated ones are suppressed by their husbands, who may have low self-esteem. Women are therefore advised to be aware of

domestic violence and its disadvantages and report such cases. People, especially women and girls, should speak out once they are being mistreated at home. If such wickedness, exploitation, and oppression are tolerated, we may not have had some powerful women who, in a real sense, contributed meaningfully and still contribute their quota to nation-building. More people should become feminists, and awareness should be created in the media.

To prevent gender-based violence in the present and future, one must understand the history of gender-based violence because the root causes need to be addressed. Furthermore, a comprehensive, total approach such as creating awareness in the media should be used to challenge patriarchy. One may seek help from a trusted friend, family member, or human rights organization, and then the power structure should be checked. These and more should be done to promote inclusiveness, intersectionality, respect, equality, and a permanent solution for a better society. This better society will give women equal rights and help to checkmate violence against women reasonably, so women can comfortably be fully part of the society they find themselves in.

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