

Dehumanized Innocence: The Exploitation of the Girl-Child in Julie Okoh's *Closed Doors*

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Abstract

This researcher interrogate the dehumanization of teenage females in Julie Okoh's Closed Doors drawing on the framework of radical feminist literary Theory. The play presents a harrowing exploration of how patriarchal structures operate within the private and public spheres to suppress, exploit and silence young girls. Through an analysis of character relationships, dialogue and narrative structure. This study uncovers how male dominance, institutional complicity and cultural silence contribute to the erosion of female gender capacity to act and identity. Radical feminism which identifies patriarchy as the root of women's oppression, provides an evaluation angle to understand the mechanisms of power, control and gender-based violence depicted in the text. This researcher argues that Julie Okoh's portrayal of adolescent female suffering is not only a criticism of male authority but also a call to destroy the systematic norms that legitimize and normalize such abuse. By connecting the narrative to established feminist ideologies and concerns, this study reveals the urgent need to confront and collapse the deepseated creeds that allow the dehumanization of young girls to persist. This paper demonstrates that Closed Doors stands as both a literary act of defiance and an articulation of silenced experiences of the female gender. This analysis is rooted in qualitative methods with a focus on content analysis.

125

Keywords: *dehumanization, radical feminism, patriarchy, violence, silence.*

Introduction

Julie Okoh's *Closed Doors* serves as a significant representation of Nigerian feminist drama, portraying adolescent girls as symbols of violated innocence caught in the grip of patriarchal domination. The play illustrates the experiences of young female characters who face involuntary pregnancy, sexual victimization and abuse, coerced abortion and societal rejection—thereby exposing the entrenched oppression and degradation of the female gender.

Rooted in intersection of literary interpretation and sociological inquiry, *Closed Doors* distinguished itself through its emphasis on adolescence as a pivotal arena for gender inequality. The teenage girls—whose innocence becomes a burden—are deliberately muted and objectified, exploited and abandoned by male figures operating within institutions ostensibly designed to protect them. Their suffering is far from incidental, it functions a deliberate criticism of oppressive systems that suppress female expression and autonomy.

This researcher will explore how Julie Okoh show adolescent female characters as diminished individuals, stripped of selfassertion and subjected to ongoing challenges to their identity and freedom. *Closed Doors* amplifies the voices of the oppressed as John Ebimobwei Yeseibo (2018:4) contend the play serves, “an expose on the vulnerability of women as a result of unbridled

126

patriarchal arrogance”. This fragility is intensified in the adolescent female characters, whose naivety makes them especially vulnerable to betrayal by family members, societal structures and institutional systems.

Theoretical Framework

Radical feminism, a core branch of second-wave feminist ideology identifies the root causes of woman’s oppression in patriarchal domination perpetuated through cultural and historical systems. Teenage girls in *Closed Doors* exist as a particularly vulnerable intersection of age and gender. Radical feminism compels us to see their experiences as shaped not only by male control but also by cultural expectations of purity, obedience and silence. For instance, forced abortions inflicted on underage girls are mechanism of body policing – a radical feminist concern that extends male power symbolism to teenage bodies. Kate Millett (1970) seminal work on Radical feminism remains central to Radical feminist literary criticism, arguing that male supremacy is socially constructed and sustained through cultural and societal entanglement. Within the Nigerian and African context, radical feminism exposes how patriarchal traditions and socio-cultural norms dehumanize women and girls particularly through literature that reflects and reinforces their subjugation.

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In *Closed Doors*, Julie Okoh portrays the profound vulnerability of adolescent girls within a patriarchal Nigerian context where

sexual violence and structural injustice steadily erode their personhood:

TRACY: I wanted to behave like my fellow schoolmates and I got trapped in the process. But I couldn't go all the way like them to abort the child because of the fear of God my mother planted in me from childhood. "thou shall not kill nor tell lies She always told me these are the golden commandments of God. God knows that I have always respected these always. My past relationship with men was based on genuine love as ordained by God for man and woman. It's just that my credulity brought me to this low estate (61).

The play draws attention to rape, pedophilia, forced termination of pregnancy and betrayal within family structures, depicting them as products of deep-seated institutionalized oppression that erodes the personal agency and identity of young women:

BOLA: My God! What experiences?

BELEMA: ugly experiences indeed!

EKI: Well, that's the story of my life. Bola, how did you get into the maze? Tell her too.

BOLA: Well, my story is not too different from yours.

EKI: were you raped too? (31).

In his (2018: 9-24) analysis, John Ebimobowei Yeseibo positions *Closed Doors* within the tradition of Nigerian feminist theatre,

observing that Julie Okoh engages with critical aspects of the “woman question” such as pedophilia, sexual violence female genital mutilation, coerced abortion and unreciprocated love while emphasizing the emotional and psychological turmoil experienced by marginalized women stifled by patriarchal dominance:

BELEMA: When I was growing up I used to pray for a happy home with my husband and children. I never dreamt one day that I would find myself in this situation life is a joker. Suddenly, we see all our plans, our hopes and dreams washed down the drain before our very eyes. We remain helpless, with pangs of pain crushing our heart. Just because of rash decisions and a brief moment of careless pleasure (27).

By highlighting teenage characters like Bola who is forced into abortion after rape and Amina coerced into silence by family disdain, Julie Okoh paints a harrowing portrait of structural violence that extends beyond the bedroom into schools, homes and workplaces. The oppression of women is a recurring concern in African feminist theory. As Margaret Fafa Ntusi (2019: 136) observes, interesting forms of gender and societal inequality intensify the vulnerability and marginalization experienced by African women, “vulnerable and susceptible to subjugation and various forms of exploitation” including sexual violation which silences women and curtails their potential, is identified in this framework as a deliberate means of patriarchal enforcement. It sustains gender hierarchies that erode women’s dignity and

autonomy, an ideological struggle central to Julie Okoh's *Closed Doors*.

According to African ethico-feminist arguments like those presented by Ademola Fayemi (2009: 23:), exploitative practices rooted in both economic deprivation and sexual subjugation including commercial sex work, forced migration and sexual assault, constitute overlapping dimensions of entrenched structural oppression:

BELEMA: Mother of a fatherless baby!

Forever through out my life, people will look at me with that eye. Who can bear that stigma? (26).

BOLA: Public opinion, does it really matter?

The most important thing is to be able to fend for the baby? (26).

BELEMA: It matters a lot. Imagine the humiliation and rejection! Just because of one silly mistake, one is treated like an outcast every where. Suddenly, one is longer a human being, but a butt of scorn. I can't see myself in that situation. Oh, I am tired. I feel like giving up (26).

As this study demonstrates, patriarchal dominance in African societies perpetuates the conditions for sexual violence by embedding it within frameworks of economic vulnerability, legal insufficiency and normative victim-blaming.

In *Closed Doors*, Julie Okoh intensifies this discourse by portraying he layered trauma of sexual exploitation compounded

by institutional betrayal through societal victim-blaming and legal frameworks that trivialize rape as a domestic issue instead of recognizing it as a criminal act:

AMINA: I no wan make dem flog me for public as dey flog Bariya. So, before my belle comot, I don run go far, far (28).

BELEMA: Who is Bariya? (28).

EKI: Oh, Bariya Ibrahim Magazu! She was a girl of thirteen found pregnant and brought before the Sharia Court of Zamfara State. Although she said that three men forced her to have sex with them on different occasions, she was sentenced to be publicly flogged 100 strokes of the cane for premarital sex (28).

BELEMA: What happened to the men? (28)

EKI: The court found them innocent.

The girl was to be flogged another 80 strokes for what the court described as false allegations against the three men (28).

BELEMA: Injustice! How did she became pregnant? This is sheer injustice! (28):

EKI: That happened in the year 2000.

Amina Lawal them Saifiya Hussaini also suffered the same injustice in 2001 and 2002 respectively (28).

By foregrounding teenage victim-survivors, Julie Okoh engages a radical feminist critique of patriarchal culture, rejecting

reductive representations of adolescent girls as passive and dependent. Instead, she lays bare their systemic vulnerability within male-dominated institutions that commodify, silence and control female bodies. This study examines how Julie Okoh's *Closed Doors* depicts the erosion of female innocence through both sexual exploitation and systemic oppression, analyzing her use of theatrical techniques such as unfiltered dialogue, metaphorical entrapment and intersecting character trajectories that expose and challenge patriarchal injustice:

BELEMA: How can? He told me he loved me. Foolish me, I believed him completely. It was only I got pregnant that I discovered that he had played the same game on many other girls in the school (25)

BELEMA: During the school vacation, I told them that I was going to spend some time with my relations in Port Harcourt. From there I landed here. My plan was to have an abortion then go back home before schools resume. On arriving here, they talked me into this adoption of a thing. But now that the baby has gathered full life in me, I feel like keeping it. I am confused (26).

EKI: In this country, every kind of marriage arrangement is possible. The casual attitude of our legal system towards marital infidelity usually favours promiscuity among men in high places. Believing that the freshness of young girls will help to revamp their sapping sexual verve, they switch from skirt to skirt, littering everywhere with unwanted teenage pregnancies (50).

Drawing on Nigerian and broader African feminist thought, including gender studies, performance theory and feminist ethical frameworks, this researcher contends that Julie Okoh's portrayal of adolescent girls enact a radical redefinition of innocence: not and a condition of helplessness but as a platform for articulating trauma and asserting claims to justice.

Julie Okoh's *Closed Doors* does not in any way promote or justify the perceived misconduct of teenage girls; rather, it seeks to illuminate the complex realities faced by the female gender:

EKI (To Tracy): Young girl! What's the matter with you? Why do you carry yourself as if you carry the burden of the whole world on your shoulder?

You think your problem is worse than that of any of us? Do you know how I became what I am today? Do you care to know? Hunh! Whether you like it or not, I will tell you. You need to understand that you are not the only one with ugly experiences. When my father died, my uncles tool all his properties including four house. We moved into a one-room apartment. Like was hard on us. I am the first out of eight children. My mother couldn't cope with feeding and paying school fees. Worst of all, one of my brothers died because we couldn't buy for him the prescribed medicine. When the second one was sick, in had to look for a way to help my mother. I went to look for a part time cleaning job in a hotel but ended up sleeping with men. One day, I was arrested. While in the cell, I was raped several times by the policemen on duty. Whom should I tell? Who will listen to

me? Is it the police of the magistrate? Hunh! Waste of time!
Yet I have survived. Haven't I? (31).

The above story line reflects how much each character's identity is gradually dismantled by ongoing psychological and physical violation such as child molestation, forced intimacy, sexual assault and emotional treachery highlighting the widespread objectification and degradation of the female gender.

This phenomenon echoes Lois Openheim's concept of developmental trauma, wherein the emerging selfhood of adolescent is submerged by external aggression, resulting in deep psychological ruptures that manifest theatrically. For instance, Belema's silence following her sexual assault signifies the brutal seizure of both her voice and personal humanity.

Julie Okoh presents a firm and unequivocal denunciation of the oppressive norms and degrading traditions entrenched in African societies that marginalize and silence female gender. Through *Closed Doors*, the playwright becomes a vocal advocate for women, drawing attention to the widespread dehumanization faced by African women, teenagers and girl-children.

Julie Okoh's *Closed Doors* is a compelling dramatization of the silent anguish endured by teenage girls in a society that often fails to see them as full human beings. Through its layered narrative and poignant character development, the play unveils the multifaceted experiences of young females who are subjected to emotional psychological and sexual violations often behind the "close doors" of family and community life. The title itself becomes a metaphor not only for the physical spaces where abuse occurs but also for the societal silences, cultural norms and

institutional failures that conspire to conceal and perpetuate their suffering.

Moreover, *Closed Doors* urges a reevaluation of the roles played by family, tradition and authority in shaping the fate of the girl-child. Julie Okoh does not simply expose injustice against the female gender, she calls for transformation of the female gender. Her play emphasizes the urgency of creating spaces where young girls are heard, protected and empowered to reclaim their agency. It is not enough to sympathize with their plight, *Closed Doors* insists on a moral and social reckoning.

Conclusion

This researcher has critically explored how Julie Okoh deconstructs the myth of youthful innocence and repositions it within a context of systemic vulnerability and social neglect. The teenage female is not merely a symbol of purity lost, but a person whose identity is routinely denied in the face of patriarchal expectations, economic hardships and cultural complicity. The playwright challenges the readers and audiences to confront, collapse and destroy uncomfortable truths: that silence the female gender often serves a complicity and that societal redemption demands acknowledging the humanity of the most vulnerable members of the society.

In essence, *Closed Doors* transcends its dramatic structure to function as a form of social advocacy. It draws attention to how easily innocence can be dehumanized when power is abused and voices are silenced. As such, *Closed Doors* remains a vital literary text for conversations around gender, youth and justice in African

societies and beyond. It invites readers, audiences, scholars and the society to imagine a world where the doors are not just opened but torn down to allow truth, healing and dignity to prevail.

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