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Gender Violence in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

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Gender violence is described as the most prevalent human-right violation in the world. Of the varied ways in which sex discrimination manifests itself across the globe, such violence is exceptionally dehumanizing, pervasive and oppressive. Gender-based violence not only causes pain and suffering but also devastates families, undermines workplace productivity, diminishes national competitiveness, and stalls development. Human rights are universal, inalienable, indivisible, interconnected and interdependent. Every individual, irrespective of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or status, is entitled to the respect, protection, exercise and enjoyment of all the fundamental human rights and freedoms. In every community in the world there are people who have been affected by acts of brutality. Gender-based violence is, itself a human rights violation.

The novel, '*No Longer at Ease*', projects the educated woman's inability to emancipate the traditional background in which she is nurtured. Women's subjugation in the novel is always present in the form of silent servitude. So, *No Longer at Ease* is a powerful feministic expression of the growth, development, career and conflicts of a woman in male dominated society. It focuses woman's efforts, inhibitions, tensions, anxiety and agony. Achebe has tried to thrash out viable solutions to women's problems and responses to situations in the fast changing social scenario for their comfortable living.

Chinua Achebe occupies a prominent place among his contemporary novelists. His novels help us to see the intricacies of the life of woman as mother, wife, daughter, lover and victim of circumstances. They show how the woman is unable to resist what is traditional and patriarchal norms of her society. His women characters try to be assertive and preserve their identity not only as women but also as human beings. Clara in *No Longer at Ease*, is educated, urban middleclass woman suffering in a male dominated and tradition-bound society. She suffers violence not only be physical but also psychological. Many women characters of Achebe face this psychological violence. Women are ill-treated by the male characters. Their problems, and plights, yearnings and foibles, exploitation and disillusionment, inner conflict and quest for identity. Therefore, need to be talked of and should be addressed. A thorough reading of Chinua Achebe's novels reveals that writer is intelligent, articulate and relatively free from prejudices regarding gender. He is highly sensitive to the issues involving women. He seems to be greatly concerned about the plight and problems, frustrations and disappointments of women. His narratives bear the stamp of authenticity as genuine documents on and about women.

The present paper deals with the pathetic condition of woman owing to gender violence in *No Longer at Ease*. Women are constantly discriminated on the basis of their appearance, work and descent. In this novel, the main protagonist, Obi Okonkwo, falls in love with an outcaste girl (osu). Obi first meets Clara at a dance in England. She is so beautiful that he feels awkward

around her and continuously steps on her toes; she doesn't dance with him again. Then, by coincidence, they both take the same boat home from England to Nigeria. As a nurse, Clara goes around administering medicine to seasick patients, and she seems like an angel to Obi. He quickly initiates a relationship. Clara is a practical girl. She is educated in the Western tradition and lives a modern lifestyle.

In Africa such caste men are considered untouchable. Clara tells Obi that she cannot marry him because she is an *osu*, an outcast. Obi decides to ignore this and go against what most of his fellow countrymen believe to be a major transgression of custom, and he decides he will marry her anyway. He informs this to his parents. His parents tell him he must not marry Clara because she is an *osu*. In fact, Obi's dying mother gives him an ultimatum. She tells him that if he insists on marrying Clara, he must wait until she is dead because if he marries Clara while she is alive, she will kill herself.

Obi knowing all these comes to Lagos and tells Clara everything that transpired. Clara becomes angry and breaks off the engagement, afterwards hinting at the fact that she was pregnant. Obi arranges an abortion but he does not have the money and needs to borrow it. Complications arise out of the operation, and Clara is hospitalized, after which she refuses to see Obi. This indifference represents the plight of women in the given social structure. It attempts to scrutinize the portrayed gender roles that impose social norms, expectations and traditions on the grounds of gender and show Clara's submissive revolt against the constant psychological pressure of male superiority and social conventions. It is submissive because finally she accepts the traditional principle of silence and surrender believing that life has always to be made possible. Achebe shows his artistic brilliance in portraying Clara. This unlocks the complex human relationships wherein women's arduous lives are exposed threadbare with the writer's insightful meanings. This paper focuses Clara's inner turmoil and trauma as she seeks to create her own unique identity in the society. She struggles to get solace as most of her questions remain unanswered. Some other characters -- Bissi, Joseph's new girlfriend, Miss Elsie Mark, and Hannah, Obi's mother are also abused or faced gender violence in the society.

Obi's father believes that the caste 'osu' comes under the forbidden group in the Nigerian society, and has no good position in the society. They are considered a disease in the society. His father says,

Osu is like leprosy in the minds of our people. I beg of you, my son, not to bring the mark of shame and of leprosy into your family. If you do, your children and your children's children unto the third and fourth generations will curse your memory. It is not for myself I speak; my days are few. You will bring sorrow on your head and on the heads of your children. Who will marry your daughters? Whose daughters will your sons marry? Think for that, my son. We are Christians but we cannot marry our own daughters. (p, 107).

Thus, both Obi's father and mother do not support their son and discriminate among social classes. Discriminations and violence are not only on the opposite gender but also in same gender. Women are not tortured by males only but women also dominate other women.

To marry an *osu* is one of the worst taboos in Igbo culture. Obi may have believed that, as Christians, his parents would be more flexible, but he failed to take into account how deeply immersed they were in their own culture. When Obi finds that she is pregnant, he is worried. His frustrations, his awareness of the problem his recognition of the crisis in his life and his efforts at resolutions are noticed. The novel, thus, is a bitter commentary on love and marriage which have lost their original sanctity and compatibility and are reduced to the level of a disguise or mock. Obi used to enjoy a greater economic and social status .But now he becomes the victim of the situation which brings frustration to him. This hurts his male ego and he develops inferiority complex. But unknowingly he is also harsh to Clara. When Clara conforms that she is pregnant. He has doubt over Clara's pregnancy. He says: "...*how do I know that I am responsible? I make sure that I take every possible precaution.*"(p,115)

Obi is very confused. He is in dilemma. He goes to his friend Joseph to discuss Clara's pregnancy and abortion. Obi decides that Clara needs to have an abortion.

Clara sinks into a deep depression. She feels rejected and abandoned when Obi arranges for the abortion rather than marrying her. She doesn't forgive him for it. When the doctor suggests that they get married instead, Clara says angrily:

'I don't want to marry him, 'What's wrong with him? He seems a nice young man to me.' 'I say I won't marry him. Isn't that enough?' she almost screamed, and rushed out of the room. Obi went quietly after her and they drove off. No single word passed between them...(p,115-116)

In the beginning doctor refuses to do abortion: *'I am sorry, my dear young man,' he said, 'but I cannot help you. What you are asking me to do is a criminal offence for which I could go to jail and lose my license. But apart from that I have my reputation to safeguard.* (115) But immediately doctor's behavior is changed .For the sake of money he gets ready todo it. He tells Obi:

However, I shall do it for you if you are prepared to pay my fee. Thirty pounds. To be paid before I do anything. No cheques. Raw cash. What say you?' Obi asked if he wouldn't take anything less than thirty pounds. 'I'm sorry, but my price is fixed. It is a very minor operation, but it is a crime. We are all criminals, you know. I'm taking a big risk. Go and think about it and come back tomorrow at two, with the money.' He rubbed his hands together in a way that struck Obi as particularly sinister... The doctor counted his wad of notes carefully, folded it and put it in his pocket. 'Come back at five o'clock,' he told Obi, dismissing him. (116-118)

When next morning Obi wantsto see her, the doctor says; "But she does not want to see you". This situation shows the male superiority of both these characters.

Unfortunately, the abortion goes bad and Clara spends weeks in the hospital recovering. Clara's condition becomes very serious in the hospital. She suffers. Exploitation and abuse in this wayoccur because of disparity of power. The male and the female do not negotiate or make decisions on an equal basis. Exploitation and abuse take the form of physical and psychological force, becomes a means of coercion (threats, inducements, deception or extortion) with the aim

of gaining sexual or other favours in exchange for services. Here in the novel we see Elsie Mark, For getting a scholarship for her further studies, she has to fulfill the desire of the people on the Board .who passes the scholarship. Elsie narrates the pathetic condition of the girls: *'Last year,' she said suddenly , 'none of the girls in our school who got Grade One was given a scholarship. 'Perhaps they did not impress the Board.' 'It wasn't that .It was because they did not see the members at home.' 'So you intend to see the members?' "Yes"* (p,72-73)This shows that sexual harassment and other forms of harassment are serious forms of discrimination across the world, and they undermine the dignity of women. Men negate gender equality which has significant implications. So,gender violence in the workplace should be prohibited.

But Obi's friend, Joseph's response to the issue is unfortunate. He asks Obi, how do you know she did not go to bed with the board members? "She probably did".

The novel also highlights the gender discrimination by parents towards their own daughters. Achebe effectively exposes the patriarchal setup of our society. Parent's craving for a male child is common. As victim of her father's ill-treatment, Miss Mark struggles a lot to lead her life .She tells Obi *" Our father spent all his money on our brother. He went to read Medicine but failed his exams. He switched over to Engineering and failed again. He was in England for twelve years.'*(73). On the other hand, she wants to study but nobody wants to pay for that. Her father pays money only for his sons. She is helpless and so ready to do anything to get a scholarship: *"Please, Mr Okonkwo , you must help me. I'll do whatever you ask.'* She avoided his eyes. *Her voice was a little unsteady, and Obi thought he saw hint of tears in her yes."*(73)

Miss Mark is not only a victim of gender discrimination. She is also humiliated by Clara. Clara shows her superiority. She does not reply Mark in a proper way when Mark introduces her before Clara:

'Hello, Clara. 'This is Miss Mark.' *'How do you do?'* she said stiffly, with a slight nod of the head. She did not offer her hand. *'How did you like the soup?'* she asked Obi. *'I' m afraid I prepared it in a hurry.'* In those two short sentences she sought to establish one or two facts for the benefit of the strange girl. First , by her sophisticated un-Nigerian accent she showed that she was a been -to .You could tell a been- to not only by her phonetics, but by her walk- quick ,short steps instead of the normal leisurely gait. In company of her less fortunate sisters she always found an excuse for saying: *'When I was in England...'* Secondly , her proprietary air seemed to tell the girl: *' you had better try elsewhere.'*(74)

Clara further speaks in an ironic tone: *'I' m sorry I came at such an awkward time"* (p,74).Obi does not like the way she talks to Miss Mark and says, *"Don't be ridiculous. What do you mean awkward time?"*(p,74)

Gender discrimination is also linked to racial prejudices in this novel. When Obi and his friend, Joseph, go to one of his girlfriend's house, her parents forbid her from meeting these African people.We have another example of gender discrimination when Obi and Clara come to Christopher's house. When they come Christopher is engaged with his second girlfriend, Bissi. Everyone makes a plan to go to dance. But Bissi wants to go for movie. Nobody takes interest in

her words .Christopher also speaks furiously to Bissi . He speaks in English when he listens to his girlfriend saying in Igbo that she likes to go to movie:

What are you people doing this evening? Make we go dance somewhere? Obi tried to make excuses, but Clara cut him short. They would go , she said. 'Na film I wan' go,' said Bisi. 'Look here, Bisi, we are not interested in what you want to do. It's for Obi and me to decided. This na Africa, you know.'(87)

The novel also depicts the plight of an educated urban middle class woman, Hannah, caught in the web of events after her marriage. In her anxiety to play the role of an ideal wife and mother she suppresses her individuality and becomes merely a puppet. Achebe writes:

She [Hannah] was a very devout woman, but Obi used to wonder whether, left to herself, she would not have preferred telling her children the folk stories that her mother had told her. In fact, she used to tell her eldest daughters stories. But that was before Obi was born. She stopped because her husband forbade her to do so. "We are not heathens," he had said. "Stores like that are not for the people of the Church." And Hannah had stopped telling her children folk stories. She was loyal to her husband and to her new faith. Her mother had joined the Church with her children after her husband's death. Hannah had already grown up when they ceased to be "people of nothing" and joined the "people of the Church." Such was the confidence of the early Christians that they called the others "the people of nothing" or sometimes, when they felt more charitable, "the people of the world." (46)

To conclude, Clara reveals deep insight into the plight of Nigerian women, who feel smothered and restricted in a tradition-bound, male-dominated society. Achebe delineates his women characters in the light of their hopes, fears, aspirations and frustrations. They are aware of their strengths and limitations, but find themselves thwarted by the opposition and pressure from a society conditioned overwhelmingly by the patriarchal mind-set. Clara highlights the inferior position and the subsequent degradation of women in the male-dominated society. Man is a master and woman is a slave.

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