

**CONFLICT SITUATIONS AND THE USE OF
SEXUALITY AS A WEAPON OF WAR IN
ISIDORE OKPEWHO'S *THE LAST DUTY***

BY

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Abstract

This paper looks at the effects of sexual violence on the moral, psychological and emotional well – being of the woman in one hand and as a weapon of war on the other hand. The study employs critical analytical method in its analysis of the text; *The Last Duty* by Isidore Okpewho. The theoretical framework used in the study is the sociological theory of the poststructuralist school which encourages inter-disciplinary in literary and critical study. The study concludes that sexual violence is not just used as a weapon of war but as a means of discouraging women from asserting their rights and obtaining their rightful recognition in the male chauvinistic society.

Key words: Sexuality, Violence, Weapon, WAR, Conflict

Introduction

The use of sexual violence in conflict is an effective war strategy because of pre-existing socio-cultural dynamics that attach concepts of honour, shame and sexuality to women's bodies in peacetime as pointed out by Maria Olujic, (Olujic 1998: 31-32). What makes rape and sexual violence such an effective weapon of war? How does it become so deadly in its consequences for the victims, and so beneficial for the perpetrators? If we define sexual violence in strategic terms, as a weapon of war, we have to turn to the definition of 'weapon' itself. 'Weapon' is a tool designed to inflict hurt and damage upon the adversary. In order to be effective, it needs to exploit the vulnerabilities of the target, be them physical, psychological or structural, and have long-lasting effects, rendering the target even more vulnerable, and, hence, prone to further abuse that would result in its defeat.

This view is supported by Cynthia Enloe, who writes:

If military strategists (and their civilian allies and superiors) imagine that women provide the backbone of the enemy's culture, if they define women chiefly as breeders, if they define women as men's property and as the symbols of men honour, if they imagine that residential communities rely on women's work – if any or all these beliefs about society's proper gendered

division of labour are held by war-waging policy makers – they will be tempted to devise an overall military operation that includes their male soldiers' sexual assault on women (Enloe 2000: 134).

Rape on the other hand, refers to sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual penetration, committed by a perpetrator against a victim without his or her consent. This is an unlawful sexual activity and usually sexual intercourse carried out forcibly or under threat of injury against the will usually of a female or with a person who is beneath a certain age or incapable of valid consent because of mental illness, mental deficiency, intoxication, unconsciousness or deception. Violence is the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage or destroy. Sexuality concerns the sexual habits and desires of a person. Therefore, sexual violence is the act of forcing a person to engage in sexual activity and especially intercourse with the aim of injuring, abusing, damaging or destroying the person. War or Conflict as it concerns sexual violence, is a state of armed violent struggle between states, nations or groups. It is also a lack of agreement or harmony. Then as it pertains to battle, is an earnest effort for superiority or victory over another.

Further support to this paper can be found in testimonies of men and women of the Democratic Republic of Congo, who point out the significance of local customs in creating an environment that

makes sexual violence a viable war strategy. In Congolese society, in which ‘women are generally perceived as the core of the community, as they are the caregivers, child-bearers, nurturers, and workers for the community’, sexual violence has a double impact (Meger 2010: 130). It is a physical as well as a symbolic attack on that community, which becomes polluted through violation of sexual integrity of women and girls. In patriarchal societies, such violation is equal to ‘social murder’, as the victims are perceived as ‘spoiled goods’ and rejected by their families and communities. Such communication serves the ultimate goal of splitting communities through infliction of shame and humiliation on their members. In the long run, sexual violence might effectively inhibit the ability of a given community to reproduce itself, thus it is equal to its extermination, which might play an important role in the agenda of armed groups seeking to exert total control over a disputed territory.

There is no doubt that much work has been done on Isidore Okpewho’s *The Last Duty*. These studies treat variants of topics such as civil war experience, superiority struggle, male – female dominance, language use such as syntactic features, stylistic features etc. A cursory look at Esther Robert, Robert E.E., Udofot, I.M. and Eustace Palmer’s works will immediately justify the above view. This present study yet discovers a gap that has not been covered, hence the proposition of the topic “Sexual Violence as a

Weapon of War in Okpewho Isidore's *The Last Duty*". This becomes imperative in view of the fact that none of the above mentioned scholars has studied or looked at this novel in this direction.

The study asserts the relevance in that it is a valuable contribution to the discourse on African fiction and gender on a broader scale. It is a useful contribution to the already existing valuable studies carried out by scholars on this particular novel; *The Last Duty* by Isidore Okpewho. Students of African fiction especially civil war novel and feminism will find this study relevant and dependable.

The theory employed in this study is sociological theory of the poststructuralist school which provides us with different perspectives with which to view our social world. In micro sociology, another level of sociological analysis is concerned with the social psychological dynamics of individuals interacting in small groups.

Our choice of this theory is informed by the argument put forward by Eva Corredor who observes rightly that the mixing of literature and society continues to be viewed as a scandal by some literary purists. According to him, for others, such as Fredric Jameson, sociocritical literary theory which operates within an all-encompassing cultural framework is the ultimate horizon of all literary inquiry.

The methods adopted in this study are critical analytical approach through the theoretical lens of sociological theory of the poststructuralist school. Data relevant for the analysis is drawn from the primary text *The Last Duty* by Isidore Okpewho. Other secondary sources are also to be consulted to enable the researcher to develop a background to this study.

Many studies have been carried out on Okpewho's *The Last Duty*. In *Syntactic Features in Okpewho's "The Last Duty" and Nwapa's "Never Again"*, Esther Robert observes that "Okpewho preferred hypotactic sentence style which in feminists' stylistics is interpreted as a male phenomenon of patriarchy and dominance" (81). This observation according to her, agrees with the gender voice about what feminists' stylistics advocate. According to her, the novel communicates the Nigerian civil war experiences of 1966-1970. The novel is viewed not just as literary genre but as discourse type with particular emphasis on linguistic stylistics.

Eustace Palmer rightly observes that "*The Last Duty* presents the physical devastation and suffering caused by the war, but its real emphasis is on the havoc caused to human relationships and, in particular, the mental, physical, and emotional torture to which women were exposed" (12). According to him, the distinguishing aspect of the novel's artistry is the deft manipulation of language and point of view. He points out that

what is refreshing about Okpewho's use of the technique is his devising a unique style for each of these characters/narrators.

Our concern in this study however is the discourse of sexual violence as the weapon of war, as exemplified in this novel. To this end, Uduk quoted in Robert observes that "... the speech of one sex may be judged a prestigious though the same evaluation criteria may be applied when considering the other" (82).

Lakoff claims that women are denied access to the 'powerful' style that characterizes; not only the male" linguistic creativity but also the male's authority. In a similar manner, Cameron in Ukut indicates that gender specific linguistic differences lead to gender-specific conversational strategies. O 'Barr and Atkin argue that speech differences between women and men can be accounted for in terms of dominance, power and status relations.

Analysis of the Text

The Last Duty gives fictitious historical records of the experiment of the people of the Delta region during the Nigerian Civil War between 1967 and 1970. Using what he calls 'collective evidence mode' characterized by disjointed band episodic segments, Okpewho presents graphical details of the effects of the civil war on the people of this region.

The war in the novel begins far even earlier before the Nigeria – Biafra war was declared. This focus in this study is the enmity between two successful rubber merchants – Toje Onovwakpo and Mukoro Oshevire. It is noted that the two Simbian rebels were already in control of the town before the federal troop came to save the people of Urukpe from their grip. They had forced the people to obey them. With the presence of the federal troop led by Major Ali, the people can now heave a sigh of relief. Before this time, Chief Toje Onovwakpo had been the only prominent rubber merchant in the town. With the coming of Mukoro Oshevire, things have now changed. Unlike Toje, who sometimes adulterates the quality of his latex and inflates the price, Oshevire is more honest in his dealings. For this reason, Oshevire draws more customers than Toje. Not quite long, Oshevire becomes the leader in the rubber business. This sudden subjugation of the prominent position in the rubber business by Oshevire does not go down well with Toje who later devises a sinister means for the elimination of his rival.

With the arrival of the federal troop, Toje now has the opportunity to vent his anger on competitors. Naturally, when the federal troop comes, those who are either in support of the rebel or come from the rebel side flee the town for fear of being tried. However, Oshevire remains in the town despite the fact that his wife is a Simbian.

Sexual Violence in the Novel

After Oshevire's arrest and subsequent incarceration, Toje extends his rivalry with him to his wife Aku. He makes sexual advances to Aku severally. The absence of Oshevire becomes an opportunity to test his manhood and that of Odibo. Toje abuses Odibo's manhood in Aku's presence and since he does not feel that Odibo has any manhood worth talking about, he cannot see that Odibo has any right or that it would occur to him, to look at a woman's body; as far as he is concerned, Odibo is little better than a eunuch. The major turning point in relation between the two men comes after Odibo's successful mating with Aku, something that Toje, the "complete" man, had failed to achieve. This sexual escapade is indeed without the consent of Aku but in a situation like this, she has no choice. This can be seen in her initial resolve to keep herself for her husband. Hear her:

For I think too that I must stay on to prove that I have faith in my man, that if they are truly going to do anything drastic to him in the end, his wife has a duty to live through it all.... I am constantly reminded of my duty to love and cherish the memory of a man to whom that much attention is due (65).

Another case of sexual violence is found when a private soldier who finds his superior on top of his girl in bed. He considers his manhood assaulted,

and kills the sergeant. Rather appropriately, he only succeeds in getting the upper hand over the sergeant by kicking at the latter's testicles; that is where he thinks his manhood resides and where he considers him to be most vulnerable. There is also the lorry driver who does not want to do anything against the dictates of his manhood. For most of these people, manhood is closely associated with male pride or male sexual power. The analysis has focused so far on the socio-cultural dynamics of gender and traditional roles attached to being male/female in patriarchal societies, and thus accentuated the symbolic meaning of sexual violence targeting women and girls as community pillars. However, socio-cultural context has also a strong potential to explain the inversion of victim-perpetrator roles, i.e. the situation when males become victims, and women the perpetrators of sexual violence. Since masculinity is traditionally associated with power and domination, and femininity with submissiveness (hence victimhood), 'to rape a man or to sexually violate him is to assert a status of power and aggression, a model of "masculinity", to the perpetrator and to emasculate, feminize or "homosexualise" the victim' (Solangon & Patel 427). For males, the consequences of being a victim of sexual abuse are far-reaching and include social rejection and marginalization. For perpetrators (be them males or females), sexual violence, apart from helping to further strategic interests, might also serve to

preserve or promote their status in the hierarchy of a military group (Cohen, Gerecke, Wood.).

The rapes of more than 20,000 women during the war in former Yugoslavia brought rape to the fore as a war crime and the issue emerged as a serious agenda item of the international community. During the Rwandan genocide, an estimated 250,000 to 500,000 women were raped. Today, in the Democratic Republic of Congo the frequency and concentration of rape and other sexual violence as a weapon of war is described as the worst worldwide. Communities struggle with the consequences of sexual violence during war even decades into time of peace.

Drawing on examples from war and post-war countries, the article could address questions such as: What is the impact of sexual violence not only on victims but on wider community? What are the long-term effects of sexual violence during wartime? What can be done to address those long-term effects and how can the traumas inflicted on women, families and communities be overcome? What needs to be done a local, national and international level to end and prevent the use of rape as a combat strategy? Why does sexual violence in the context of war and conflict receive so little media attention?

Contemporary conflicts, often portrayed as ‘new wars’, are characterised by high levels of violence and inconceivable cruelty predominantly targeting innocent civilians (Kaldor, 34). Among many

forms of violence, sexual violence has in recent years become a central focus of both academic study and journalistic writing. The prevalence of sexual violence in armed conflicts, and its systematic and widespread use against civilian populations, led many scholars to formulate a new concept that underscores the strategic use of sexual violence as a ‘weapon of war’. This framework focuses on exploring how sexual violence becomes a viable part of the military strategy directly employed by armed groups to achieve political and military objectives, as in the case of ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia or Rwanda. But how can this theory be applied to wars that lack clearly defined political and military goals, such as those that seem to be motivated by greed rather than grievance?

This paper will argue that, in order to apply the concept of the strategic use of sexual violence to contemporary wars, the analysis has to shift its focus. Instead of asking about the effectiveness of sexual violence in pursuing *military agenda*, one has to study how sexual violence is employed to further interests of armed groups, including their *economic interests*. Secondly, the prevalence of sexual violence will be explained as a product of a specific socio-cultural context that renders sexual violence as an extremely effective weapon of war in particular settings. In other words, this essay will bridge the gap between competing theories of sexual violence that ascribe its prevalence to

different factors such as gender inequalities, cultural beliefs, social norms, etc.

The Second World War was a period which witnessed struggles for the definition of appropriate feminine identities and behavior. However, of these are myths and silences surrounding women's contribution to the war, the heroic myths of the War are male. Women's own accounts show how they consciously negotiated their lives through that fractured gendered time and space. War conditions threatened existing gendered social relations and so, throughout the war, 'woman' was the target of regulation and surveillance. Women's presence in the public spheres of industry, the services and other masculine spaces led to their sexuality becoming a contentious issue. Women's morals were increasingly related to British male morale. How far have the disruptions of war time challenge perceptions of feminine behavior remain controversial. Gender relations, feminine identity and the discourses constructing sexuality could have been threatened as the gendered nature of the public and private spheres and time and space were thrown into relief during the war. Suffice to say that to conquer the disadvantages of being a woman “Whatever you do, however much you are armed and in command now, you are still a woman”, Debbie in (Emecheta, 79), sets about to fight this feminist crusade. Debbie was enrolled into the Federal Nigerian Army, in order to be used as a sexual ploy. Vera deliberately searches for a

heroine in *The Stone Virgins* by the reversal of roles between African women and men. The African women's memories of pain and anger and their desire for total freedom make the novel (narrative) to be a subversion of the ZAPU official mythological version of the war. Among others are Chinua Achebe and Flora Nwapa's short stories, *Girls at War* and *Wives at War* offering a few memorable cameos of the war?

While women's rights groups and others working to end sexual violence are under no illusions that the resolution is a panacea, most agree that it is a much-needed step in the right direction. In Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, the protagonist, Lysistrata gathered the women of Athens at Acropolis in order to stop the Peloponnesian war through the use of sex strike. In this case, the women used the sex strike (positively) to achieve an aim. They believe that by noting that "rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or a constitutive act with respect to genocide," the resolution will strike a blow at the culture of impunity that surrounds sexual violence in conflict zones and allows rapists to walk without fear of punishment.

Indeed, the resolution stresses the need for "... the exclusion of sexual violence crimes from amnesty provisions in the context of conflict resolution processes," calls upon member states to comply with their obligations to prosecute those responsible for such crimes, and emphasizes the

importance of ending impunity for such acts. Ultimately, however, the effectiveness of UN Resolution 1820 in reducing sexual violence and bringing its perpetrators to book will have to be gauged in places such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)—arguably the epicenter of sexual violence against women today—as well as Liberia and the Darfur region of Sudan.

Local health centres in the DRC's South Kivu province estimate that 40 women are raped in the region every day. In Liberia, which is slowly recovering after a 13-year civil war, a government survey in 10 countries in 2005-2006 showed that 92 per cent of the 1,600 women interviewed had experienced sexual violence, including rape. These numbers probably err on the low side because women fear the retaliation and social ignominy that reporting a rape could bring. In Darfur, says the NGO Human Rights Watch, women and girls live under the constant threat of rape by Sudanese Government soldiers, members of the Government-backed Janjaweed militia, rebels and ex-rebels. Warring groups use rape as a weapon because it destroys communities totally, says Major-General Patrick Cammaert, former commander of UN peacekeeping forces in the eastern Congo. "You destroy communities. You punish the men, and you punish the women, doing it in front of the men." Adds Cammaert: "It has probably become more dangerous to be a woman than a soldier in armed conflict."

Is rape really a matter for the United Nations? The Security Council has answered that question with a resounding yes by voting unanimously for a resolution describing rape as a tactic of war and a threat to international security. But perhaps the more important question is: Will the resolution give teeth to efforts to stem sexual violence against women in conflict situations? In the resolution, passed 19 June, the Security Council noted that “women and girls are particularly targeted by the use of sexual violence, including as a tactic of war to humiliate, dominate, instill fear in, disperse and/or forcibly relocate civilian members of a community or ethnic group.” The resolution demanded the “immediate and complete cessation by all parties to armed conflict of all acts of sexual violence against civilians.”

Rape has been a dishonorable camp follower of war for as long as armies have marched into battle. In the 20th century, perceptions of rape in war have moved from something that is inevitable when men are deprived of female companionship for prolonged periods to an actual tactic in conflict. The lasting psychological harm that rape inflicts on its victims has also been recognized: Rape is always torture, says Manfred Nowak, Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. The Croatian author Slavenka Drakulic, who has written extensively about war crimes in the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s, and whose latest book is on the war crimes trials in The Hague, says the

Security Council resolution is historic. “Finally, sexual violence is recognized as a weapon, and can be punished,” she says, adding: “We know now, as we knew even before the passage of this resolution, that rape is a kind of slow murder.”

Sexual Violence as a ‘Weapon of War’

There is little, if any, doubt that sexual violence constitutes ‘a coherent, coordinated, logical, and brutally effective means of prosecuting warfare’ (Gottschall, 131). It is coherent in a way that it targets its victims, either selectively or indiscriminately, causing maximum damage in targeted communities through their exposure to most atrocious practices, e.g. gang rape, forced incest, sexual mutilation, etc. Regardless of the situations where the highest structures of military command give its soldiers explicit orders to commit rape, even in the absence of such instructions, testimonies of the survivors point out that the perpetrators seem to have planned the raid in advance and acted in a coordinated manner at the crime scene (Maedl, 142).

Sexual violence, as other forms of conflict-related violence, is logical because it exploits local economic, social and cultural context in pursuit of strategic advantage by one military group over the other(s). Finally, it is very effective in producing concrete strategic results at a relatively low price. The fact that it is cheap and easily available, and at the same time it has a crushing and long-lasting effect on targeted populations, renders it an

appealing tool of warfare, especially in conflict zones where the military actors do not have access to technologically advanced, expensive weaponry. Additionally, its efficiency lies in multiple functions of sexual violence in addressing and fulfilling physiological, psychological and social needs at individual and collective level. In other words, apart from achieving strategic goals in a military campaign, the use of sexual violence can bring additional benefits for its perpetrators, e.g. strengthen internal cohesion of units, boost group morale, serve as a prize ('spoils of war') for underpaid soldiers, release sexual, and psychological tension heightened in combat.

There are various strategic outcomes of using sexual violence as a tool of war. According to Cheryl Bernard, it can: facilitate ethnic cleansing by making people flee their homes; demoralise the adversary; signal the intention to break up the society; inflict trauma and psychological damage on the opponent; provide psychological benefits to the perpetrators; and inflict a blow against a collective enemy if the attacked group has a high symbolic value (Bernard, 35-39).

Moreover, the strategic functions of sexual violence are closely interlinked with the features of the conflict itself. In ethnic wars, which often turn into genocidal wars, rape and other forms of sexual violence often become 'central technique in the technology of genocide', as we have seen in the case of Yugoslavia, Rwanda, or, most recently,

Darfur (Cohen, 7). It causes a mass exodus of ethnic populations from disputed territories, ensures that displaced people will not return to their homes in the future, and serves to mark women of opposing ethnicity as ‘sexually contaminated’ (Cohen, 7).

However, not all civil wars can be classified as ethnic conflicts. In fact, the multitude of actors and agendas fuelling contemporary conflicts makes it often impossible to clearly label them as political, ideological, economic, social, ethnic, or religious wars. Many scholars in recent years have turned their attention towards studying economic motivations as main drivers of contemporary civil wars (Collier & Hoeffler 2000; Agbonifo 2004; Ballentine & Nitzschke 2003; Berdal & Malone 2000; Bodea & Elbadawi 2007). When exploring links between war economy and intensity of violence, Jeremy Weinstein theorises that in ‘opportunistic rebellions’, which attract more rent-seeking individuals than politically committed activists, indiscriminate violence is used against civilians to gain access to areas rich in lootable resources such as gold, diamonds, minerals, and timber (Weinstein, 205-209). As could be seen in Izuka’s *Travail of the BlackGold*, apart from the environmental degradation in this novel, there is the persistence conflict between the militants and the oil producing company. Ibaraye fought a good fight though most of the women were used as sex tool and indulged in prostitution in order to survive. Rape and sexual violence in this case

might have a direct purpose of clearing out resource-rich areas for illegal exploitation, or it might serve to terrorize, pacify and demoralize local populations to make them more complacent and hence, prevent them from obstructing illegal economic activities of military groups.

Furthermore, since sexual violence has become highly publicized, it might be used as a strategy of diversion in a way it arrests public attention, which focuses solely on the problem of sexual abuse. Such strategy of disinformation might actually help in obscuring illegal economic activities taking place concurrently, and thus prevent international community from undertaking actions aimed at disruption of these illegal activities. Though there is not enough evidence in support of this thesis, a glimpse at the map of contemporary conflicts reveals that some of the major civil wars associated with illegal extraction of lootable resources (DRC, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, CAR) have also witnessed widespread sexual abuses. The existence and nature of the links between illegal extraction of resources and sexual violence have not been fully determined. Nonetheless, it is an interesting area for future study that might shed more light on the dynamics of 'opportunistic wars'.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this paper focuses on the conceptualization of sexual violence as a weapon of war, i.e. how it is employed by military parties to the conflict to further their strategic interests as

witnessed Okpewho's *The Last Duty*. The main assumption of this essay is that, contrary to popular opinion expressed by many contemporary scholars, who deem the concept of sexual violence 'weaponisation' valid when its use is systematic, widespread, and helps to achieve *military objectives of warfare*, e.g. elimination of enemy defined in terms of opposing ethnicity, the nature of contemporary armed conflicts calls for a more comprehensive approach towards sexual violence. Due to the fact that many of the contemporary civil wars are characterised by variety of factors, with 'greed' being a chief motivation in the so called 'opportunistic wars', sexual violence should be understood as a means towards achieving *strategic interests* of particular groups, be them political, military, ideological or economic. For instance, the analysis of the conflict in the DRC sheds more light on how sexual violence can be used instrumentally to break up communities, rendering them more vulnerable and thus enabling the military groups to cease control of the territory. The fact that the control of the territory is equal to the control of the revenue from the illegal exploitation of natural resources is a factor that needs additional consideration.

However, the conflict dynamics in the DRC, and the way in which sexual violence fits into its landscape, though might serve as a point of reference in studying strategic use of sexual violence, do not produce a universal model that could be applied across different case studies.

Nonetheless, one of the main findings of this paper underscores the importance of socio-cultural context in explaining why in some war settings sexual violence becomes such an effective weapon of war. Hence, sexual violence, though barbaric, heinous and atrocious, is employed when its use makes strategic sense, i.e. is capable of inflicting maximum damage at a low cost and high pay-off. This is what makes it such a deadly efficient tool of warfare.

The study concludes that in addition to presenting the horrors of war and the exploitation particularly sexual exploitation of females, that is a dominant characteristics of the troubled times, there is also the point of view of the brusque soldier, putting across the male point of view in a male – oriented society, where sympathy goes to the cuckolded husband as seen in the text.

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