

PROTEST AND POST-COLONIAL RESISTANCE AS RECLAIMING AGENCY IN BEN BINEBAI'S KARENA'S CROSS

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Abstract

Ben Binebai's Karena's Cross, a one-woman play, shows a young girl, Karena, fighting to take control of her life against unfair traditions and colonial legacies in an African village. The problem is that existing research on African drama often ignores the unique power of monodrama. Most studies focus on plays with many characters or general feminist themes, leaving a gap in understanding how mono drama, like Karena's Cross, amplify marginalized women's voices and challenge patriarchal and post-colonial oppression. This study fills this void by examining how the monodrama's single-voice format protests gender injustice and colonial legacies, offering a fresh perspective on African feminist drama. The aim of this study is to show how the play empowers women to reclaim their strength through protest and resistance. The study's objectives include examining Karena's struggles, highlighting the play's critique of patriarchy, and connecting it to post-colonial issues. Using a qualitative literary method, it analyzes the play's text to understand its themes and messages. The study adopts Binebai's dislocation theory which sees oppression as a force that knocks people out of balance, and argues that protest can help push back the harm of oppression to restore dignity and identity. Dislocation theory is a perfect framework for this study, since the play's heroine, faces cultural, physical, and emotional dislocations but uses her resilience to fight back. The study's findings reveal that Karena's journey; from facing forced marriage and genital mutilation to becoming a lawyer, shows her reclaiming her life, making the play a strong protest against unfair systems. Karena's Cross uses its mono drama format to give women a voice and challenge colonial legacies. This study contributes to African monodrama, by projecting how it can be a powerful tool for women's empowerment and cultural resistance, thus illuminating monodrama's role in African feminist theatre.

Key words: Protest; Post-colonial Resistance; Reclaiming Agency; Monodrama; Dislocation

Introduction

Ben Binebai's *Karena's Cross* is a one-woman play that tells the story of a young girl fighting to take control of her life in a world that tries to keep her down. Written as a monodrama, a play/drama where a single actor plays all the roles, the play uses the story of Karena, a teenage girl from the fictional Owei-ama village, to speak out against the ill-treatment of women and the lasting effects of colonialism in Africa. In the play, Karena lives in a place where men make all the rules, and women, especially young girls, have little say in what happens to them. The play is an agency (reclaiming agency), this means having the power to choose your own path, like deciding what you want to do with your life or who you want to be despite been lost or stolen. For Karena, this means pushing against a culture that tries to force her into things she doesn't want, like early marriage or harmful traditions. The "protest" part of the title means that the play is a loud shout against things that are wrong in society. Binebai in his *Dislocation of the Dislocating*, states that:

Protest drama by its very tradition in Africa and within the context and content of this study underscores drama of correction, negotiation, elimination of bottle necks and unhealthy cultures, anti-cultural activities, of anger against bad leadership. It is also about fighting against inequality, the struggle for identity and nationalism, cultural preservation, colonial

and endo-colonial disengagement, economic exploitation, cultural and political oppression and the clamour for voice and agency (5).

A protest drama doesn't just tell a story for fun, it calls out problems and demands change. Akporherhe Friday and Udi Oghenerioborue quoting Embu, defines Protest drama "as the drama or theatre that is motivated by issues and policies in the society that alienate, dehumanise, exploit and suppress the masses politically, socially, economically as well as culturally" (27). In *Karena's Cross*, Binebai uses Karena's experiences to point out how women in her village are treated unfairly, like being forced into marriages or hurt by traditions that favour men. The play acts like a megaphone, making sure everyone hears about these injustices. No wonder Mabel Ewvwerhoma in her foreword to the play says that shows the "burden the girl child faces" in places where men hold all the power (7). Protest is a way to make people think and feel, pushing them to see what's wrong and maybe do something about it. By putting Karena's pain and strength on stage, Binebai is protesting against a system that keeps women down, making the play a call to action for fairness and equality. In support of this view, Binebai further avers that Protest drama aims at change; it gets involved in resistance. It is enacted to draw sympathies, to educate a people, and to pass messages across from the weak and voiceless people against oppression and victimization. Dramas of ideological protest also fall within this category (5),

on the other hand, "Post-colonial resistance". First, Aimé Césaire, in Encyclopedia Britannica defined Post-colonialism:

As the historical period or state of affairs representing the aftermath of Western colonialism; the term can also be used to describe the concurrent project to reclaim and rethink the history and agency of people subordinated under various forms of imperialism. Post-colonialism signals a possible future of overcoming colonialism, yet new forms of domination or subordination can come in the wake of such changes, including new forms of global empire (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/postcolonialism>).

Given further clarity to post colonialism, Bilal Ahmed Dar, in his work *Post-Colonial Literature: A definitive and Analytical study*, opines that:

Postcolonial Literature in theoretical parlance is defined as the literature that belongs to the countries that have gone through the bitter and biting phase of European Colonialism. To be more precise and direct, Postcolonial Literature is the literature written in the Third World Countries like Africa, Somalia, South America, and erstwhile colonized spaces based on the theme of subjugation and resistance (34).

"Post-colonial resistance" is about fighting the leftover effects of colonialism, which was when European countries controlled African lands and people. Even after African countries became independent, many old colonial ideas stuck around, like the belief that some people are better than others or that men should always be in charge. David Jefferess argues that simply seeing resistance as acts of opposition or subversion, as many critics do, does not fully capture its meaning. He finds that current writings on the topic offer a different way to understand postcolonial politics. By closely examining the ideas of Mohandas Gandhi and South Africa's reconciliation efforts, his book *Postcolonial Resistance: Culture, Libration and Transportation*, aims to reshape how resistance is viewed, linking it more clearly to the real economic and social problems caused by colonial rule. Jefferess draws from postcolonial novels, literary studies, historical accounts, and cultural theory to show that resistance and reconciliation depend on changing both the people who were colonized and the very nature of colonial power itself. This new approach changes how we think about resistance, violence, and freedom after colonialism and encourages future research to rethink old ideas about political power and how it can be challenged (1).

The monodrama style of *Karena's Cross* makes these ideas even stronger. Since Karena is the only actor, she tells her own story and even plays the people who try to control her, like her father or husband. This choice shows her taking charge of her own voice, which ties directly to reclaiming

agency. It's also a form of protest because it puts a woman's story front and center, refusing to let her be silenced. Nishat Awan points out that having one woman play all these roles gives the play a "dramatic force" that makes its message hit harder. In his words, "Whilst I have not had the pleasure of seeing this play performed, I can imagine the dramatic force of a single female actor playing both Karena and her many oppressors" (9). The mono format also connects to post-colonial resistance by letting an African woman tell her own story, instead of letting others speak for her, which is what often happened during colonial times.

Karena's story reflects real issues faced by women in many African communities, such as forcing teenage girls into early marriage, genital mutilation, drinking of water used to bath a deceased husband's body, etc. Frantz Fanon says post-colonial societies need to create new identities to move past colonial harm (178), and Karena's journey is a step toward that new identity; one where women are valued and free to choose their own paths. The title of this study captures this by linking Karena's personal fight to a larger battle against unfair systems. It's about a girl who refuses to let her life be controlled by others, a story that yells out against wrongs like unfair treatment of women, and a fight against the lasting scars of colonialism. The play uses Karena's voice to show that even one person can make a difference by standing up for what's right. By calling attention to these issues, Binebai's work becomes a powerful tool for change, encouraging people to think about fairness, equality, and the strength it takes to fight for your own life.

Theoretical Framework

Ben Binebai's dislocation theory, as outlined in his work *Dislocation of the Dislocating: Towards a Protest Drama Thinking in Post-colonial Africa*, provides a powerful lens for understanding the struggles of marginalized people, especially women, in African societies shaped by colonial and patriarchal forces. This theory uses the idea of "dislocation" to describe how oppression uproots individuals from their sense of self and place. In simple terms, the theory sees oppression as a force that knocks people out of balance, like a bone pushed out of its socket, and argues that protest drama can help push back against this harm to restore dignity and identity. Binebai avers that:

Dislocation when applied beyond its scientific signification has cultural, political, literary, religious economic and psychological implications; the experience of dislocation paralyzes a functioning system. It may be the human anatomical system or the conventional virtues of a society. At the level of the human body and soul diseases and accidents, spiritual crimes and curses could be deciphered as agents of dislocation. At the societal levels, political, cultural and economic terrorism, marginalisation and oppression present themselves lucidly as agents of social dislocation. Dislocation is an unbalancing presence in both human body and society when it is applied negatively and it also functions as a health stabilizing force and a force for social balance when appropriated in a positive sense (9).

The dislocation theory starts with the idea that certain forces, like colonialism, patriarchy, or harmful traditions, act like a hard shove that throws people's lives out of place. Binebai describes dislocation as "the displacement of a body part" in a biological sense, but he extends it to mean the way society can uproot people's identity, freedom, or sense of belonging (13). This was the case when colonial rulers took over African lands, they disrupted local cultures, languages, and ways of life, leaving people feeling lost. Similarly, in many African communities, women are pushed out of place by rules that favour men. These dislocations hurt not just the body but also the mind and spirit, making people feel like they don't belong in their own lives.

Binebai's theory says that protest drama helps "dislocate the dislocating" (14), to fight back against harmful forces by telling stories that expose the pain and show how people can stand up to reclaim their place. Binebai states that:

The application of this theory to theatre practice and dramatic writing is based on the fact that the playwright is seen as a literary physician that makes the diagnosis of his sick society

and uses the physical stage as a clinic of examination and eradication of the ailment. The playwright is the literary physician who presents a health check history of his society and sometimes showing how the sickness came about and proffers solution to the sickness which has dislocated his society. The playwright uses artistic shafts of light to produce images of dislocation, the protest force against it, onto the legitimate stage (9-10).

In the play, Karena faces one dislocation after another but keeps pushing to take back control. Therefore, the significance of using the dislocation theory to study *Karena's Cross* lies in how it helps us understand the play's message in a clear and powerful way. First, it gives us a simple way to see how Karena's struggles aren't just personal but part of a bigger problem affecting many African women. The theory connects her pain to historical forces like colonialism, which left behind systems that keep women down. By framing Karena's fight as a response to dislocation, the theory shows why her story matters to anyone who cares about fairness and equitability. Second, it highlights the play's strength as a protest tool. Binebai's idea that drama can push back against oppression makes it clear why *Karena's Cross* is more than just a story; it's a call to action, as Mabel Ekwierhoma points out when she says the play exposes the "burden the girl child faces" (*Karena's Cross* 7). Finally, the theory is significant because it's rooted in African experiences, thus fully capturing Karena's world. Also, dislocation theory is a perfect framework for studying Binebai's *Karena's Cross*, since the play's heroine, faces cultural, physical, and emotional dislocations but uses her resilience to fight back, making it a clear fit for analyzing the play's themes of resistance and empowerment.

***Karena's Cross* as Protest Drama, Agency and Tool for Post-Colonial Resistance**

Binebai's *Karena's Cross* is a powerful one-woman play that shows a young girl, Karena, fighting to take control of her life in a world that tries to hold her down. Karena stands up against the unfair traditions and harsh treatment she faces in her village, Owei-ama, and finds inner strength to shape her future. The play uses Karena's story to protest against the wrongs done to women such as forceful marriage and forcing women to drink of the water used in washing a deceased husband's corpse and to show that people in post-colonial Africa can push back systems that keep them oppressed. Karena is an agency; she takes charge of her life despite the odds stacked against her. In Owei-ama, women are treated like property, with no say in their future. For instance, Karena, at just thirteen, is told by her father, Nemughan, that she must be circumcised and married off, even though she dreams of going to school:

Karena: Father what about my education?
I am just thirteen, how can I
Get married at this age when
I know nothing about men? (*Karena's Cross* 14)

This shows her fighting spirit, she's not willing to let her dreams be crushed by her father's orders. Her refusal to accept the path other girls of age have accepted is a bold step toward controlling her own path. Later, when she's forced into a marriage with Daubri after being raped, she still holds onto her inner strength:

Karena: I vowed not to accept
The forced marriage
Despite the rape because it
Was not inwardly driven.
I cried in grueling pain until
I slept off (*Karena's Cross* 20)

Even after facing terrible things like rape, beatings, and being accused of witchcraft, Karena never gives up. Her escape from being trafficked to Italy for prostitution is another moment where she takes back her life:

Karena: We were six in number going to the airport
To be flown to Italy but I ran away to a nearby
Supermarket and hid myself there until
The plane took off with the other girls (*Karena's Cross* 29)

These moments show Karena refusing to let others decide her fate, which is exactly what post-colonial resistance means. She's not just a victim; she's a fighter who keeps pushing to make her own choices.

The play is a protest drama because it loudly calls out the wrongs done to women in Owei-ama. Karena's story is a way of shouting about the pain and injustice women face. For example, the play shows how female genital mutilation (FGM) hurts girls like Karena:

Karena: the old women took me to
A bathroom for the circumcision.
A woman with big buttocks
Carrying a weight, I can't struggle
To lift and throw away
Sat on my chest. Two other women
Held my two arms backward
And pressed them down while others
Held my two legs down with resolute force
The woman who did the circumcision
Sat on my lower abdomen. Six of them
Held me down to do the circumcision.
I shouted madly, I bled and
Fainted several times.
It was the cruellest
Breed of genital cutting (*Karena's Cross* 17).

By putting this as drama, Binebai is protesting against a tradition that harms women's bodies and spirits. The play also criticizes how women are forced into marriages they do not want, like Karena's marriage to Daubri:

Karena: I was compelled to
Climb the ladder of pain
In my heart step by step
Until I got to the highest
Peak and cried aloud.
I vowed not to accept
The forced marriage
Despite the rape because it
Was not inwardly driven.
I cried in gruelling pain until
I slept off (*Karena's Cross* 19)

This line shows how the play uses Karena's pain to make the reader feel angry about these injustices. Even the way the village treats widows is called out; Karena is forced to drink water used to wash her dead husband's body to prove she didn't kill him:

Karena: That was another challenging
Moment of my life.
To prove my innocence
I must drink the water.
To reject the barbaric
Demand of the elders would mean

I killed my husband (Karena's Cross 27).

This shocking moment is Binebai's way of protesting against cruel traditions that punish women for things they didn't do. The play doesn't just tell a story; it demands change by showing how wrong these practices are.

As a tool for post-colonial resistance, *Karena's Cross* fights against the lasting effects of colonialism in Africa. Colonialism left behind a world where local leaders, like Nemughan, act like the colonial rulers of the past, keeping power for themselves and hurting others, especially women. Nemughan's control over Karena mirrors this:

Karena as Nemughan: I am the head of this house
What I want and what I say are
What matter, and which is final" (*Karena's Cross* 14).

This shows how men in Owei-ama hold onto power in a way that feels like the control colonial rulers once had. Karena's fight against this is a kind of resistance, not just against her father but against a system that keeps women down. Her return to Owei-ama as a lawyer to teach people about the dangers of female genital mutilation (FGM) is a big moment of resistance:

Karena: After the lecture,
My husband introduced
Me as Barrister Mrs. Karena Nemughan Daniels (33).

By coming back educated and strong, she challenges the village's old ways and shows that women can be powerful. This ties to what Ngugi wa Thiong'o says about African writers needing to free their minds from colonial thinking by telling their own stories (28). Karena's success is a way of saying that Africans, especially women, can rewrite their futures and break free from the shadows of colonialism.

The play's one-woman format makes Karena's fight for agency even stronger. Since Karena is the only actor, she tells her own story and even plays the people who hurt her, like Nemughan and Daubri. This choice shows her taking control of her narrative, she's not letting others speak for her. When she acts out Nemughan's harsh words, like

Karena as Nemughan: You women are empty possessions.
Training you is waste of money and time.
When you get married, no one
Will know you are still my daughter.
My name will be lost. So why must
I waste my money training you? (*Karena's Cross* 15)

She is showing the audience how cruel these ideas are while also proving she's stronger than them. The mono drama is a protest in itself, as it puts Karena's voice front and center, refusing to let her be silenced. Mabel Ekwierhoma points out that this one-woman style makes the play powerful because it lets one actor carry the whole story, making the message clear and strong (6). It's like Karena is standing alone against the world, showing her strength and courage. The play also protests by showing how Karena's environment is tied to her struggles. In Owei-ama, the land is damaged, and so are the women: "The eco-friendly Karena only finds solace under a tree, as it provides her more shade or protection than the human beings around her" (Mabel 6). This statement from the foreword shows how the play connects the harm done to women with the harm done to the land, a problem that started with colonial exploitation. Karena's love for the tree:

Came to console me. (*Pointing under the tree*)
This is now my place of solace;
It is where I pour all my bitterness
To the wind, it is my
Most functional companion,
For the first time,

Under the tree became
More meaningful and friendly to me
Than the men and women around me (*Karena's Cross* 11-12)

shows she feels safer with nature than with people. This is a protest against how her community, shaped by colonial greed, values men over women and profit over the environment. Vandana Shiva in her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, talks about how women and nature are often exploited together in places affected by colonialism (45), and *Karena's Cross* makes this point by showing Karena's struggle as part of a bigger fight to heal both women and the land.

Karena's agency shines through when she keeps fighting for her education, even after so many setbacks. Her dream to be "a woman of substance" (*Karena's Cross* 14) drives her to escape her father's plans, survive her abusive marriage, and avoid being trafficked. This connects to what Bell Hooks in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, states about women "talking back" to stand up for themselves (5). Karena's voice gets louder as the play goes on, especially when she becomes a lawyer and returns to Owei-ama to challenge FGM. Her father's change of heart:

I pronounce this day,
As a father and the Amananaowei
Of Owei-ama that there shall be no more
Disempowerment and marginalisation
Of any girl child again.
Owei-ama! The wind has changed,
Karena and her husband
Have set the new and track. We
All must fly along that path (*Karena's Cross* 34)

shows how her resistance changes not just her life but her whole community. This is post-colonial resistance because it pushes back against a culture that was twisted by colonial ideas about power and gender.

However, the play isn't perfect in showing Karena's agency. Sometimes, it makes her seem too dependent on men, like when Daniels, her second husband, saves her: "He cleaned me up and cleared / The spiteful scars of cruelty" (*Karena's Cross* 32). This can feel like Karena's success relies on a man, which doesn't fully match the idea of reclaiming agency. Ifi Amadiume warns that stories where women need men to save them can weaken the feminist message (45). The play could have shown more of Karena's own strength, like how she worked hard to become a lawyer, to make her agency clearer. Also, the ending, where Nemughan suddenly changes his mind, seem too sudden. Real change in a place like Owei-ama would take more time. This makes the play's protest feel a bit too hopeful, like it's tying up loose ends too neatly.

Additionally, the play's protest also comes through its songs, which are like cries from the heart of Owei-ama's women. Songs like

You you mo	This is a life of weeping
You you ka wene	Weeping and lamentation
You you moooo	Karena has come into a life
You you ka wene	Of weeping and lamentation
Karena me akpomeboyoo	
You you mo	
You you kawene	

(*Karena's Cross* 15) express Karena's pain and the pain of all women in her village. These songs are a way of protesting because they let the audience feel the sadness and anger of being oppressed. But sometimes, the songs pop up too often, like

Benikoroke-akpo eee	Circumcision is life
Benikoroke-akpo eee	Circumcision is life

Owei-ama Iyoro-awuo-ama	Girls of Owei-ama
Benikoro-akpo eee	Circumcision is life
Benikoro-akpo eee	Circumcision is life
Karena benikoro ladeye	Karena its time for
Your circumcision	(<i>Karena's Cross</i> 17)

during the circumcision scene, and it can feel like they slow down the story. African plays use songs to connect with the audience, but they need to fit the story tightly. Binebai could have used fewer songs to keep the protest sharp and focused.

Moreover, Karena's story resists the way colonialism messed up African ideas about women. In Owei-ama, men like Nemughan think women are less important, a belief that got worse when colonial rulers gave men more power. Karena's fight to be seen as equal: "I fought to illuminate my world / Because I was not born to be in the dark" (*Karena's Cross* 36), is a way of saying that women deserve respect, no matter what old traditions or colonial leftovers say. This ties to Frantz Fanon's idea that post-colonial people need to create new identities free from colonial control (178). By becoming a lawyer and teaching her village, Karena is creating a new identity for herself and other women, which is a big part of post-colonial resistance.

The play's focus on Karena's body, through circumcision, rape, and beatings, shows how women's bodies are controlled in Owei-ama. When Karena is circumcised, she describes it as "the cruelest/ Breed of genital cutting" (*Karena's Cross* 18), and later, when she's raped, she feels "like a mosquito slaughtered / With a sledge hammer" (*Karena's Cross* 21). These moments protest how women's bodies are used and abused. Sometimes, though, the play makes Karena's suffering feel over-the-top, like when she faints over and over:

Karena: the old women took me to
A bathroom for the circumcision.
A woman with big buttocks
Carrying a weight, I can't struggle
To lift and throw away
Sat on my chest. Two other women
Held my two arms backward
And pressed them down while others
Held my two legs down with resolute force
The woman who did the circumcision
Sat on my lower abdomen. Six of them
Held me down to do the circumcision.
I shouted madly, I bled and
Fainted several times.
It was the cruellest
Breed of genital cutting (*Karena's Cross* 18).

This can make the story feel more like a soap opera than a serious protest, as Biodun Jeyifo in his work *The Truthful Lie: Essays in a Sociology of African Drama*, says about some African plays that lean too hard on drama (112). If Binebai showed more of Karena's thoughts and strength instead of just her pain, the protest would hit harder. Also, the play focuses so much on Owei-ama that it might not speak to women in other places, like cities or different African countries. Suggestively, Binebai could have added a bit more variety to make Karena's story feel more universal. The play's connection to post-colonial resistance also shows up in how Karena uses her education to fight back. Her dream to be educated is crushed early on, but she never lets go of it. When she finally becomes a lawyer, she comes back to Owei-ama to teach people about the harm of FGM, showing that knowledge is power. This is like what Ngugi says about using education to fight colonial ideas (21). Karena's return is a protest against the ignorance that keeps Owei-ama stuck in harmful ways, and

it's a way of resisting the colonial mindset that said African women can't be strong or smart. In the end, *Karena's Cross* lives up to its title by showing Karena taking back her life, protesting against the wrongs done to women, and fighting the effects of colonialism. Her story is about refusing to be silenced, whether by her father, her husband, or her culture. The play uses her voice to call out unfair traditions and show that women can change their world. But it's not perfect, sometimes; it relies too much on men like Daniels or makes Karena's pain too dramatic. Still, it's a strong cry for women to stand up and a reminder that the fight against colonial and patriarchal control is far from over.

Findings and Conclusion

The study of *Karena's Cross* by Ben Binebai reveals that the play powerfully showcases Karena's journey to reclaim her life from oppressive traditions and colonial influences in Owei-ama, aligning with the themes of agency, protest, and post-colonial resistance. Using Binebai's dislocation theory, which sees oppression as pushing people out of place and drama as a way to fight back, the findings show Karena facing multiple dislocations; cultural, physical, and emotional. Her community's patriarchal rules, like forced circumcision and marriage, try to strip away her dreams. These moments highlight how traditions displace her agency, yet she resists by refusing to obey. Her escape from a forced marriage and human trafficking shows her taking back control, embodying the theory's idea of dislocating the forces that harm her. The play's one-woman format amplifies this resistance, letting Karena tell her own story and even play her oppressors, making her voice loud and clear. The study finds that Karena's return as a lawyer to challenge these practices, ties her personal fight to post-colonial resistance, pushing against colonial legacies that reinforced male power. However, the findings note weaknesses, like an overly quick resolution and reliance on a male savior, which slightly weaken her agency. Overall, *Karena's Cross* uses Karena's story to protest gender oppression and inspire change, proving monodrama's strength in giving African women a voice.

Karena's Cross is a powerful play that uses Karena's story to show how women can take control of their lives and fight against unfair traditions and colonial leftovers. Through her struggles; facing forced marriage, genital mutilation, and accusations of witchcraft, Karena proves that even one person can push back against oppression and inspire change. The play's one-woman format is a bold choice, letting Karena's voice stand out as she tells her own story and even plays her oppressors, showing her strength in reclaiming her life. It protests loudly against systems that hurt women, like those in Owei-ama, where men make all the rules. By connecting Karena's fight to bigger issues, like the damage colonialism left behind, the play becomes a call for African communities to rethink harmful practices and value women's worth. Using Binebai's dislocation theory, which sees oppression as knocking people out of place and drama as a way to fight back, this study shows how Karena's journey is both personal and universal. Despite some weaknesses, like an overly neat ending or too much drama, the play's message is clear: women can rise above pain and change their world. This study highlights how *Karena's Cross* adds to our understanding of African drama by showing that monodrama can be a strong voice for women's rights and cultural healing, encouraging more stories like Karena's to be told and studied.

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