

THEATRE, MEDIA AND SOCIAL RECONSTRUCTION: A STANCE AGAINST RAPE IN *ONCE UPON A PARADE*

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Abstract

Gender-based violence, including domestic violence, rape and other sexual abuses, has assumed a frightening dimension globally. In Nigeria, incidents of rape are reaching alarming levels, sustained by patriarchal systems and reinforced by a culture of silence. Such acts constitute infringement on women's rights, privacy, self-preservation and dignity. This study examines the intersection of theatre and media as instruments for social reconstruction. A descriptive qualitative study approach was adopted, involving textual and performance analysis of *Once Upon a Parade* by Aniebiet Mbede, staged in the Akwa Ibom State University Pinnacle theatre. This work interrogates the sociological, institutional and cultural factors accentuating the rise of sexual violence in Nigeria. Underpinned by Feminist Theory and Bystander Theory, the study highlights the dramaturgical techniques and narrative modalities employed in the multimedia performance, which challenges prevalent myths surrounding rape and gendered power imbalances. Findings reveal that the performance's advocacy function promotes victim empathy, exposes systematic corruption, and fosters collective action to address this social menace. In conclusion, the synergy of theatre and creative digital media remains a viable strategy for cultural reorientation and social reconstruction in contemporary Nigeria. This study recommends intensive sensitisation of citizenry regarding the traumatic effects of rape and advocates for strict enforcement of existing laws to protect victims against stigmatisation and humiliation, thereby contributing to a safer and more just society.

Keywords: Feminism, Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Media, Social Reconstruction, Theatre

Introduction

Gender-based violence, particularly rape, constitutes one of the most grievous violations of human dignity. Beyond its physical brutality, it foists psychological trauma, social stigmatisation, unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections, and long-term mental health disorders to victims. In Nigeria, rape has remained a disturbing social phenomenon aggravated by underreporting, weak legal enforcement of penalties, and entrenched patriarchal attitudes prevalent in the community. On the one hand, survivors of gender-based violence like rape, are often doubted and instead of receiving justice, victim-blaming attitudes are meted on them, which deters the reportage of such cases. On the other hand, judicial processes often subject victims to secondary trauma through humiliating cross-examinations and excessive evidentiary burdens. Consequently, the culture of silence becomes institutionalised, while the abusers evade the consequences of the law and media reportage often sensationalises cases without challenging underlying ideologies.

Theatre, historically and culturally is well positioned as a mirror of society, and it performs both reflective and corrective functions. When merged with contemporary media platforms in the use of films and multimedia on digital streaming or broadcast networks; its capacity for social influence expands exponentially. This study explores how *Once Upon a Parade* employs theatre through the use of multimedia as tools to promote ideological resistance against rape culture and provide didactic machineries for social reconstruction.

Despite legal reforms and advocacy campaigns, rape persists at alarming rates. Institutional failures, cultural stigmatisation, and systemic corruption undermine justice. This raises a crucial question: Can theatre and media move beyond awareness creation to actively inculcate societal values that can dismantle rape culture? According to Kayode Peter, "unfortunately, girls and women are the most affected and are forced to endure physical violence, withdrawal from former social activities, get unwanted pregnancies and get infected with sexually transmitted diseases" (Kayode Peter 1).

Shockingly, some politicians, soldiers, militants, force members, and those in the position of power such as the police, bandits and common criminals sometimes, especially during war periods take advantage of the situation. Often times, crimes of rape are not reported as a result of the social stigma the victims tend to avoid, hence the unwritten 'code of silence' that further hushes the victims from speaking out and getting help. In many developing countries such as India, Nigeria, and South Africa hardly a day passes without cases of rape or sexual violence. "This has prompted, among other things, the passing of stringent legislations into law in some of these countries, with the hope of reducing the incidences of rape" (McQuail 5). Rape, whether committed by a state actor or a non-state actor constitutes a violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms. It violates the rights of women and girls to be free from torture, mental and physical integrity, liberty and security of the person, and

in the case of sexually molesting young boys, prevents them from enjoyment of rights such as the right to health, employment and freedom of expression and, in some cases; it denies them the right to life (Black et al 6).

In Nigeria, however, the frequent occurrence of rape has become mind boggling. In 2019, the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al-Hussein, urged President Muhammadu Buhari to investigate Amnesty International's reports on rape amongst other crimes committed by the Boko Haram sects (Kayode 2). As a result of this, the United Nations has also asked Nigeria to ease abortion restrictions for Boko Haram rape victims. According to Amnesty International "Boko Haram militants have kidnapped more than 2,000 women and girls in northeastern Nigeria since the year 2014, not forgetting the 276 girls kidnapped from their school in Chibok on 14 April, 2014, (57 escaped, 3 found, 103 released while 112 are still unaccounted for) that agitated global outrage for the past decade. During their captivity, lasting in many cases for months or even years, women and girls were sexually enslaved, raped and forced into so-called marriages" (12). Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein told the United Nations' Human Rights Council in a special session on Boko Haram that, "many survivors of these horrific experiences are now pregnant by their rapists and several reportedly wish to terminate these unwanted pregnancies" (Kayode cited in Zeid 2).

In light of the foregoing, it becomes obvious that the government and citizens should take protective measures against the sexual violence against girls and women considering the fact that extant Nigerian laws against rape are yet to be updated, just as done in England where most of the laws are borrowed from have already been updated. An editorial of The Guardian Newspaper of July 31, 2015 released a report that, "Mirabel Centre, Lagos, there has been 764 cases of rape incidents reported in the last two years with 74.9 percent of them minors, with only two convictions recorded" (The Guardian 3).

At this instance the use of theatre and media should be deployed educative tools for social reconstruction especially in developing countries (Ahmed Abidur 5). Theatre has always been seen as a very effective communication and didactic media. From ancient Greek theatre to the present-day theatre; it is regarded as an active medium which can entertain as well as convey messages with a view to reforming and bringing changes in societies all over the world. The application of theatre media for social change and development has been going on around the world for years. However, it is more evident in the developing societies of Africa, where there exists no universally accepted legal definition of rape; definitions vary between different legal systems. Increasingly however, the Elements of Crime of the Nigerian Statute for the International Criminal Court, and international and regional human rights tribunals have developed principles which should govern definitions of rape in domestic laws. Sexual violence against women and men is a major issue in the human society and the Nigerian society is not an exception.

Feminist Theory and Gendered Power

Feminist Theory situates rape within structures of systemic gender inequality. The Gender and Power framework explains how socialized male dominance and female subordination perpetuate vulnerability. Expressed through personal aggression, abuse of office and positions, the unequal distribution of authority, agency, voice and other frameworks of socio-political resources by a male dominated society. Kimberle Crenshaw's Intersectional Feminism provides a multi-dimensional power structure which highlights the intersection of culture and gender politics within the society. The feminist theory presents an intellectual extension which enunciating the rights to defend female sexuality, interrogating patriarchal structures within the framework. According to Susan Brownmiller in her work, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975), "rape is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear" (15). This presents rape as power and not an expression of passion or sexual impulse.

Bystander Theory

Bystander Theory is a framework that interrogates community silence and complicity. Within the field of sexual assault violence prevention in general, increasing attention is being given to the often-untapped resource of "bystander intervention," largely owing to the conceptual and empirical work of Vicki Banyard and her colleagues at the University of New Hampshire. The idea suggests that individuals in a community can intervene when faced with situations involving sexual violence (Banyard *et al.* 464). The idea of bystander intervention was originated after the landmark case involving the murder of a woman named Kitty Genovese in New York in 1964. The assault occurred in public, and numerous witnesses did not intervene. That incident motivated the work of Latane and Darley to study how bystanders react to emergencies and why they do not intervene (Latané & Darley 70). The idea of bystander behaviour is well established in the field of social psychology and is utilised internationally, largely to explore individual's reactions to witnessing crimes and emergencies (Levine 9). Banyard argues that empowering bystanders to intervene disrupts violence cycles. Applied to rape discourse, this theory expands accountability beyond perpetrators. This places the responsibility of action on every one along the chain of occurrence, who could prevent or intervened in the case of a rape incident. The theoretical framework on which this study is anchored is the Bystander perspective. Bystander just like feminism is not directly a set of beliefs but also a set of theoretical constructs about the nature of women, the role they play, their oppression and

the part these play within social reality in general. Also, the theory of Gender and Power by Cornell states “to a large extent women’s experience as a result of power dominance” (87). This theory is used to situate the structure and the phenomenon of rape. This theory states that the way the male and female are perceived is based on gender differentials by culture. This responsibility equips the bystander to say or do things that can mold better behaviour, support survivors, report a misconduct and seeks practical ways to dismantle rape culture and restructure the moral code of the society. The theatre and multimedia director, Aniebiet Mbede submits that, “these productions provide practical ways which theatre can adapt emerging technologies through the use of compelling scripts, creative directors, ‘tech-savvy’ actors and multimedia adept directors to create a more stimulating theatre environment and bring to the fore the inventiveness of digital theatre conventions” (Mbede *et al* 141). The message of change of behaviour assumes wider reach with the use of the right apparatus of dissemination.

The act of rape is not new and the issue is an essential content in sexual violence or assault and indisputably rape occurs throughout the world and has called on diverse individuals, organisations and both governmental and non-governmental agencies to take a stance against it. Evidence based on the stance against rape in our society is emerging in the theatre and media field and there are promising strategies for its prevention. Thus, the evidence in the study highlights the importance of challenging cultural and social norms that condone, tolerate or excuse rape. It is within this context that the multimedia production of Aniebiet Mbede’s *Once Upon a Parade*, a fusion of theatre and film becomes a dominant force in shaping the discourse on matters of society importance is seen to play a crucial role in making bold statements against this monstrous societal menace.

Feminist scholars argue that rape is fundamentally an expression of power and domination rather than sexual desire. The World Health Organisation says sexual assault is “any sexual act or attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work” (149). Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth describe rape culture as a social environment where violence against women is normalized. Bourke further emphasizes that legal systems often reflect patriarchal biases that disadvantage victims.

Theatre and Media: Partnership Against Rape

Theatre and media seem to offer the needed platforms (traditional and digital) for effective awareness on the issues of rape against women and women rights issues, therefore, empowering stakeholders, especially women facilitators and performers through building capacity. Theatre has historically served as the mirror of the society and a system of social critique and reformation. There is an evident development of both stage and film productions that will expose the myths surrounding rape, hence the need for a partnership between theatre and media, for maximum results. According to Aniebiet Mbede, “In the light of the evident global shift, it becomes essential for theatre practitioners to reinvent the and modalities for publicity and production participation, through the integration of socially driven electronic devices to enhance the reach of the output of theatrical productions” (Mbede *et al*. 96). “Digital platforms function not merely as channels of entertainment but as instruments for audience engagement and advocacy in the Nigerian theatre” (Mbede *et al* 98.) Media advocacy amplifies the anti-rape message and disrupts the silence, prompts digital activism (through the use of social media), pressure the legal system and generally birth a saner moral climate.

The positive aspects of theatre media partnership process are that it involves young people of the various communities (Theatre for Development - Tfd) as volunteers, and these volunteers assimilate rights-based information through their performance and activity. Within the partnership, process and performance the people develop awareness among grassroots. Also, the process gives the young and old volunteers the opportunity to study issues or problem of their communities and explore the solutions. Going through the different steps of organising workshops, developing drama, setting a schedule and then perform in the communities, the volunteers are taught how to take a decision and make it possible through series of action. Theatre for Development (Tfd) demonstrates measurable success in addressing social issues through participatory performance. Dramatic representation facilitates empathy and moral reflection. When integrated with media dissemination, theatre becomes a mass communication tool capable of reshaping public consciousness. According to Aniebiet Mbede, “New media possesses the capacity to converge diverse voices and opinions, transmitting a wide range of ideas across borders, while retaining the ability to transform traditional mindsets and deconstruct systems that hinder progress, thereby creating new pathways for social advancement” (Mbede 5).

Synopsis of *Once Upon a Parade*

The play *Once Upon a Parade* is intentionally orchestrated to address the need for justice, impartiality, equity and integrity in man’s everyday lives and by extension, the society. The play vehemently pitches against social vices like rape, conspiracy, bribery and other subtle domestic and public vices notable in our various communities and in demand of immediate attention. The play reads the victory of good over evil and the creative projection of meticulous dialogue and dramatic actions in the characters of Dr. Mike, Ikwang and Chief Akpaisong.

Once Upon a Parade (2019) written and directed by Aniebiet Mbede exposes the menace of corruption, political conspiracy, and sexual violence within institutional settings. Through characters such as Mike, Chief Akpaisong, and Queeneth, the play exposes moral decay, manipulation of justice, and patriarchal dominance. Structured episodically, the narrative contrasts public virtue with private corruption. Ultimately, justice prevails, symbolizing the possibility of ethical restoration. The play, *Once Upon a Parade* written by Aniebiet Mbede is artistically crafted with eight movements all having independent intrigues that sum up to better narrate the idea of the playwright. In the first movement, *Ukeme* pays his younger brother, Mike the Honourable Commissioner a visit to discuss a said 'crucial matter' that requires urgent attention but his younger pushes that aside to discuss on his brother 'Bachelorship'. Mike scolds *Ukeme* for his inability to get a wife even though he is 5 years younger than him yet, as he is happily married to *Ndoteyin* for 12 years. However, *Ukeme* tries to defend himself, stating that he has not been fortunate enough in getting a wife and all the women he had ever met has one way or the other proven to not be wife materials. The discussion between the trio (Mike, *Ukeme* and *Ndoteyin*) continues until a call from the Excellency comes in and Mike is forced to prepare for a meeting and that signal the end of Movement One.

Movement two opens outside Mike's house where *Ukeme* bumps into *Ikwang*, Mike's old-time classmate and childhood friend. *Ukeme* asks *Ikwang* on what brings him to his brother house and *Ikwang* confess that he wants to see Mike on a very important issue unfortunately; Mike stepped out to stand-in for the Excellency at a Rally. *Ikwang* uses the opportunity to express his dismay concerning how the both of them have been badly treated by Mike who according to *Ukeme* is 'tightfisted'. *Ikwang* talks on Chief Akpaisong's boys who are heavily made and roll in cool money but the reverse is with Mike, who gives out contracts on merit, refuses appreciation attached to his office and asks for receipts on everything bough and all this makes it hard for anyone to take a dime from the treasury. However, *Ukeme* reports that Chief Akpaisong paid him a visit in time past and asked for his (*Ukeme*'s) service which he is currently thinking about. *Ikwang* on knowing this quickly convince *Ukeme* to accept the offer and gives a plan on how to deal with his other job. Soon enough, the conversation between the duo is changed as two ladies walk pass and *Ukeme* looks and chase lustfully after them.

Movement three unfolds at the Market ground where the suppose meeting holds. The youths, market women, young and old express their grievances but Honourable Commissioner Mike comes to podium and give reassuring promises and even making a step to send a student back to school. The meeting ends in jubilation as the Honourable Commissioner promises to give back to the society what rightfully belongs to them and end rape and poverty. Movement four appears immediately after meeting on the rally grounds with Ntefid, *Ikwang* and *Udek* discussing on what the Honourable Commisioner bragged about. They also discuss on the probe issue which they rightfully know that they are the culprits, to get out of Mike's gnashing trap hence, *Ikwang* brings out a plan which they agree to go drink over the its success.

Movement five takes place at Mike's office with the august visit of Chief Akpaisong. Chief comes to bribe Mike and tell him to drop the probe charge and also award him the contract to organise the next carnival. Mike refuses to his plan and talks on his integrity to tell lies. When Chief insist, Mike is forced to send him out of his office which the Chief warns that he is among the king makers and he oblige. Movement six takes place at the entrance of the Zone 6 Police HQ. The youths lead by Obongwan Iquo and Ntefid are seen agitating for the immediate removal from office and arrest of Mike. Their anger reports that, Mike offered one Ms. Queeneth, a corps member a lift when she was returning from the NYSC Zonal Office and in the process, she was defiled. The angered mob threatens to repeat the issue of 1929 and shut down every office, market place, hospitals etc. if legal actions are not taken on the Honourable Commissioner.

Movement seven opens at the law court with Mike, the Honourable Commissioner standing before the honourable judge to vindicate himself. After the fair hearing, the judge passes judgment that Mike should be sentence to life imprisonment but Etiene, the computer operator interrupted the judgment and plea for Mike to be release. He further confesses that; he was paid the sum of One Million Naira to take the photos and engage in creating moving images that was later released online. Also, he reports that the said Ms. Queeneth was also paid Two Million Naira and the medical reports were all fake. With such an accusation, Chief and the other culprits were all taken into custody and the court meeting is adjourned. The last movement which is on a screen shows Mike coming out free and Chief Akpaisong and his aid are served justice.

About the Director: *Once Upon a Parade*

The play is written and directed by Aniebiet Unwana Mbede, PhD. She lectures in the Department of Performing Arts, Akwa Ibom State University, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria with special interest in Media Arts (Multimedia), Directing and Film Aesthetics. Dr. Mbede serves as the Postgraduate Coordinator and , Pastor Aniebiet serves as the Administrative Pastor of King's Bride Christian Centre in Uyo. She is also a trained Relationship and Marriage Counsellor at Marriage Made Easy Academy (an annual flagship project for family and community building). She is happily married to radio presenter, pastor and journalist, *Soulbroda* Unwana Mbede and the family is blessed with three children. Dr. Mbede takes an intriguing and distinct approach in

mirroring topical issues in her dramatic. *Once Upon a Parade* (2019) is her fourth play to be staged in the Pinnacle Theatre, Department of Performing Arts, Akwa Ibom State University.

A Stance against Rape: Social Reconstruction in *Once Upon a Parade*

Theatre as a tool for social reconstruction in its foundational mold to inform, educate and entertain. The behaviour and culture of a society is shaped by the interchange and restructuring of mindsets and practices to meet globally acceptable best standards. As reflected in Mbede's works which include: *Arise* (2016), *My Portion* (2017), *Osusu Owu* (2018), *Our Cartel* (2021); and three films, *The Remnants* (2024), *Marriage O'clock* (2025) and *The Untold Story* (2026). All the mentioned plays are creatively woven with monumental plots and deep thematic issues that are relatable with our everyday lives. In *Once Upon a Parade*, the culture of subjugating women by placing men along lines that makes it easy for women to be raped and subdued has met global resistance, especially in recent times. These culturally defined lines have in the long run impacted on feminine experiences and the chances they get in life is translated into low social status in society, poverty and powerlessness.

Once Upon a Parade explains why women are often victims of rape and why they are very powerless and ashamed to voice out this crime that is frequently committed against women, perpetuating the culture of silence. *Once upon a parade* speaks against the ills of rape (tagging rape as an expression of male dominance over women), and moves a motion against relegating women to a place of oppression and victimisation, and that is the major reason why it is perceived that women (rape victims) do not get justice. However, from another perspective, the situation of things sometimes places women on a trial process whereby she is either called a false whistle blower, an accuser, a seducer or a frivolous person.

Victim Empathy and Narrative Fidelity

In Mbede's *Once upon a Parade*, the lead character Queeneth embodies vulnerability within patriarchal structures. The deliberate transformation of the norms, and power structure with regards to justice and equity. Through coherent storytelling (narrative probability) and alignment with shared moral values (narrative fidelity), the play elicits empathy and challenges rape myths. There is something amiss in the treatment of women and the issue of rape which is dominant in the society. Bystanders and Feminists have over time strived to find out what it is, but to no avail. Betty Friedan says "the problems are without names. An x-ray of the relationship in the society's social structure, shows that eminent in the institution is the dominance of men over women in every stratum of the society" (6).

Institutional Complicity in *Once upon a Parade*

The production critiques political and legal institutions that shield perpetrators. It aligns with feminist scholarship arguing that rape persists where power inequalities remain unchallenged. *Once Upon a Parade* encourages a synergy between theatre and media, in a bid to foster an adaptation which broadens the audiences reach beyond physical theatre spaces. Media dissemination transforms performance into public advocacy, reinforcing anti-rape discourse. Social reconstruction in the play manifests through exposure of injustice, restoration of truth, and moral accountability. Theatre becomes a reformist platform that encourages collective intervention. According to Aniebiet Mbede, "the contemporary theatre director may choose to use digital tools at his disposal for his presentation, which allows for the integration of texts, (graphics), audio inserts, still images, animation and motion videos in a way that provides the performers high level coordination, control and creative interactions with the audiences" (6).

In some cases, theatre media partnership helps advocated and enforced local administrators to undertake legal procedures to stop violence against women in community. Most effective practice has been undertaken through theatre media network in Bangladesh. The theatre media partnership stopped unlawful Grameen Salish on rape and start legal proceeding of rape cases in Hatsonapur. The Nigerian culture and judiciary system is not exempted from these practices as a woman have to prove that she was a victim of rape by showing evidence such as pictures, videos and in some cases semen. In a country like Nigeria, where there are no defined structure and clearly defined criminal law on rape, and enforcement is weak, has enabled the prevalence of rape and rape trap (as seen in the play) to thrive as it is in most cases not punished.

Conclusion

Rape is a violation of fundamental human rights, a public health concern, and a hindrance to economic and social development. In Nigeria, victims often remain silent due to humiliation, intimidation by authorities, and public stigma. Observations from this study indicate that, rape is pervasive and may worsen if immediate interventions are not implemented.

While women constitute majority of the victims, men are also occasionally affected, underscoring the pervasive nature of the problem.

To curb this menace and promote social reconstruction, all social institutions- including families, churches and civil organisations, NGOs and government agencies – must provide comprehensive sex education and guidance to Nigerian youths. Efforts should include the creation of meaningful employment opportunities, systematic documentation of sexual violence and enforcement of laws to ensure perpetrators are appropriately punished. Access to post-rape care, rehabilitation, compensation and guarantees of non-repetition must be ensured for all survivors. Parents and caregivers have a critical role in safe guarding children by fostering open communication, monitoring potential vulnerabilities, educating girls on safety, and supervising the company they keep.

Additionally, parents should teach appropriate safety practices and exercise prudence in entrusting their children to others. Civil societies organisations and NGOs should conduct sustained public awareness campaigns, dispel harmful myths and promote zero-tolerance attitudes toward sexual violence. Every perpetrator must be held accountable without protection from families, institutions or authorities. Strengthening collaborations between the health sector and the justice system is essential for effective evidence and prosecution.

Rape is not merely a legal issue but a cultural crisis requiring ideological transformation. Through *Once Upon a Parade*, Aniebiet Mbede demonstrates theatre’s capacity to interrogate injustice and mobilize social consciousness. When synergized with media platforms, theatre amplifies advocacy, fosters empathy, and promotes accountability. Sustainable social reconstruction requires the continued integration of artistic activism and institutional reform.

This study recommends more theatre and multimedia-driven productions, strengthened partnerships between theatre and media for advocacy, promotion of bystander intervention through campaigns, and intensive sensitisation of the citizenry regarding the traumatic effects of rape. Enforcement of existing laws and protection of survivors from stigmatisation are essential for building a safer and more just society.

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