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Incompetent and Disempowered Masculinities in Isidore Okpewho's *The Victims* (1970) and *The Last Duty* (1976)

INTRODUCTION

Masculinity Studies are becoming a known area in the theory and criticism of African literature, even though men and their problems and prospects have, for a long time, engaged the minds of African writers and critics. One interesting observation is that issues pertaining to men are not given serious consideration, since Africa has largely been adjudged patriarchal. Michael Kimmel's statement in "Rethinking Masculinity," which points out that "[r]arely, if ever, do we study men as men; rarely do we make masculinity the object of inquiry as we examine men's lives" (11), aptly describes this trend in the study of men in African literature. As Kimmel has identified Men's and Masculinity Studies as a "problematic issue in America," it is clear that masculinity is equally problematic in Africa. Moreover, just as Lewis declares that "[t]he need for active confirmation of one's masculinity is a cultural fact of life in American society" (qtd. in Janice Cools 14), so it is, if not more intense, in African societies. Thus, there is a need for criticism of African literature to focus a lot more on men, and in line with Boyd's concern with men's movement and men's studies, emphasize the need to examine "men as men" and not as "universal paradigm[s] for human experience" (Boyd qtd. in Franklin 272). Also, in the words of Catharine Stimpson quoted by Janice Cools, criticism of African literature should explore "how men [have] experienced history as men, as carriers of masculinity" (272). These considerations form part of what this essay sets out to do.

This paper endeavors to show that there is a growing need to examine, in greater details, the depictions of men as men in African literature, as literature is a mirror of life. It goes further on to show that men operate in societies where there are prescriptions as to what they are, who they are and the roles they must play, because such roles are attached to both their status and positions. There is also an examination of how they accept these roles, and how their inability to play out the "scripts" written by society results in incompetence, and how, either consciously or unconsciously, they are dragged into areas of weaknesses and disempowerment.

BACKGROUND

Isidore Okpewho is a Nigerian born writer. He is currently a Professor of African Studies at the State University of New York, Binghamton. He has written four full novels namely, *The Victims*, *The Last Duty*, *The Tide* and *Call Me By My Rightful Name*. All his novels address deep perennial problems of humanity, especially those which emanate from interpersonal and group conflicts. In the first three of the four novels, Okpewho's imagination penetrates the tragic nature of man and specifically attempts at revealing that the major catalysts of disaster in masculinity and masculine life-styles are the problems of incompetence and disempowerment. In the African tradition and culture, which form the main setting of the novels, with the exception of the last, *Call Me by My Rightful Name*, the man is the undisputed custodian of the norms and mores of society. It is his responsibility to fashion out the trends of development of his group. As a result, he is expected to focus on and exercise power and authority in his world. However, problems begin to brew when for one reason or another, the man is unable to live up to the perceived expectations of his own society.

This tendency appears to be one of the issues which dominate Okpewho's first and second novels, *The Victims* and *The Last Duty*. In these novels, Okpewho, who is a classicist, reveals a talent for creating classical tragedies informed, but not necessarily, by men's failures in their personal and collective pursuits, or by some inert flaws in them, which may start as rather negligible traits but will eventually overtake their entire beings and drag them to undesirable ends. He depicts men, who, for reasons based on irreparable flaws, fail to meet up with norms or societal prescriptions (masculine qualities) and appear as potential tragic figures. Therefore, they ineluctably move towards disaster in their daily activities. His male characters live in societies in which men are seen as dominant figures. They are most of the time forced into patterns of "control" and thus must avoid all interfering societal pressures towards feminization, because such could jeopardize the realization of their male personalities (so to speak). They are also to struggle under pressure and burden from their social milieu, and subsequently they head towards self-destruction in the process of maintaining the *status quo*.

In *The Victims*, Okpewho's first novel, for instance, the main character is a man called Obanua. He is an only son and according to his society's prescriptions, he is supposed to enlarge his nuclear family. We are not told much about his family except that his mother, Ma Nwojide, is particularly concerned about his welfare, and eager to see him build a sizable family.

The social demand on Obanua entails that he procreates and meets up with other households where there are more male children. He tries to respond to this, by taking a wife, like any other man, but this wife, Nwabunor, is unable to give him more than one child. Even though the child is male, Obanua, his family and the larger society do not consider that only one male child is enough for a man of repute. If he wants to keep his reputation, he needs to work harder on the matter. However, the case becomes quite complicated by the fact that it took his wife, Nwabunor, about three years to conceive and bear that child, suggesting that her chances of having more children are slim. Thus, Obanua takes a second wife, which is quite acceptable in his society, but unfortunately, his second wife turns out to be the wrong choice. Even his mother, who is more anxious than anyone else concerning Obanua's family status, is not satisfied by the choice of his second wife, Ogugua. However, the important issue here is not so much that Obanua takes a second wife, but that he becomes incapable of carrying out his responsibilities as a breadwinner. He loses the traditional male assertiveness in his newly expanded nuclear family, which introduces doubts as to his competence as a man. He appears unable to fit into the status of a family head because he is incapable of carrying out the roles attendant to that position in this typical post-colonial African society.

In his second novel, *The Last Duty*, Okpewho creates a very pathetic tale of disempowerment and incompetence in a multicultural society. Oshevire, one of the protagonists, is married to a woman, Aku, from an alien ethnic group. But a war broke out suddenly between his wife's ethnic group and other groups in his country, including his own. This event is actually inspired by the real life thirty-month Nigerian Civil War, which started in 1967 and ended in 1970. All the ethnic groups in Nigeria warred against the Igbo nation. During the hostilities, which Okpewho recreates in his imagination, Oshevire is deliberately accused of collaborating and supporting his wife's ethnic group. Consequently, he is incarcerated in a war detention camp. A very prominent member of his community, Chief Toje Onavwakpo, who engineers Oshevire's ordeal, follows two major purposes by perpetuating his sinister act. First, he sees Oshevire as a close, if not more successful rival for him in farming and other businesses. Keeping him away will obviously disempower him and help eliminate him from competition. Secondly, in his absence, Chief Toje, can convert his wife, Aku, into a mistress and in fact, use her to experiment on his suspected biological impotence. He thus contrives some false stories to make sure Oshevire remains in detention while he carries out his

creepy acts. The story shows how circumstances and selfish ambitions asserted by other characters can result in someone's disempowerment.

In this novel, Okpewho tackles several original aspects of male assertion, disempowerment and incompetence. In the African traditional society, there are various modes of being a man. Male(ness) is not a "closed" concept, but all the accepted forms have features in common. These features draw upon the physical, psychological and spiritual realms. Catharine Stimpson's comment that, "to be 'masculine' is to have a particular psychological identity, social role, cultural script, place in the labor force, and sense of the sacred" (xii), contributes to the general societal assumption of the construction of masculinity in virtually all societies, including African societies. It presupposes that masculinity is socially constructed and that the raw materials for its construction are drawn from the societies where it appears. The two novels, *The Victims* and *The Last Duty*, reflect the African identity, and are nourished by African societies, cultures, occupations, and other human practices. It is from such patterns that masculinities are built. The settings are typically African and within them, these male characters are governed by unwritten codes of existence. Catherine Stimpson's identification of the expectations of society as "culture scripts" is seminal because one realizes that African cultures appear to have provided their own "unwritten scripts" which men must act out. The totality of their actions or inactions results in what we call here "masculinities." Seen from a literary point of view, these "culture scripts" provide all essential ingredients for the construction of masculinities in our novels, and whether it be "social role, place in labour force, or sense of the sacred," the major focus will be on issues that are approved, or disapproved by society.

This "culture scripts" confer on men remarkable privileges and that is probably the aspect which everybody is most familiar with. However, many are not responsive to the great demands, pressures or expectations placed on men by the very culture that so "benevolently" confers great privileges on them. Janice Cools notes that "acceptable manhood, as dictated by patriarchy involves not only men enjoying power but men paradoxically enduring pain as well" (4). Cathy Young's opinion suggests that it could be relevant to examine the fact that men also do have a claim to being disadvantaged and victimized by the patriarchal structure of which they are a part (19).

The novels under study show that virtually all male characters enjoy basic and sometimes extraordinary privileges. First, they are heads of their household. Chief Toje, Oshevire (*The Last Duty*) and even Obanua (*The Victims*) are all portrayed as family heads. They are all married to women

who are expected to be loyal to them, as approved by society. They are equally groomed to go outside and struggle under better conditions than women in order to provide for the needs of their families. They are privileged to marry and retain a woman (or more) in their homes, and have these women raise children for them. They have the liberty either to engage in extra marital activities or take more women as wives. They own the land and other valuable properties. They also occupy all the responsible positions in society. Because of these unquestionable prerogatives, men invariably become very assertive as long as they are able to conform to these broadly admitted paradigms. However, within the same cultural set-up, there are men like Nwanze (*The Victims*) and Odibo (*The Last Duty*) who do not comply with the general pattern. These men, unlike those mentioned earlier, do not fall within the scope of men with common privileges. Unlike Chief Toje and his kind, Oshevire and Obanua, Nwanzes and Odibos are not associated with families: they neither have wives, children or any occupation. Thus, as men, they are prejudiced against and seen as flawed right from the beginning. Their lives illustrate the hidden fact of “the pains and disadvantages” of patriarchy for men.

All men are expected to play along the line of their acknowledged privileges, but what is crucial for them is their ability to remain within the male circles and hierarchy, which appears to be the only position within which men can sustain their exclusive rights. But one may wonder what happens when men are not able to preserve these privileges, for they also imply responsibilities and responsibilities require commensurate efforts to uphold and prolong them. For the likes of Nwanze and Odibo, there are no apparent privileges: even the complicit advantage of male(ness) is remote and inconsequential in their lives. Apart from the fact that Odibo succeeds in sleeping with Aku, Oshevire's wife, because Aku needs the touch and feel of a virile man, there is, as the narrative portrays, nothing else about him that is in tandem with masculine traits. It is important to note that his very sexual act with Aku, though personally fulfilling, does not conform with societal expectations, and thus does not in any way situate him within the masculine circle.

Morally speaking, Odibo is depicted in a better light than Nwanze. Odibo is physically handicapped, but Nwanze, in contrast, is healthy but lazy. His laziness overshadows all other expectations of him and the only thing he seems to revel in is drinking. Laziness and drunkenness make him the worst of villains in the eyes of his community. He is Obanua's partner in indolence and drunkenness. He falls short of Stimpson's prescriptions for effective

maleness especially because of his inability to secure himself a place in the labour force.

At the beginning of *The Victims*, the main character Obanua, is portrayed as an ordinary male member of society, obviously enjoying all masculine privileges. But quickly, readers are led to his personal deficiencies within the family he is supposed to be the head of. His problem is an unhealthy relationship with his wife Nwabunor. It is socially expected that his wife should be subservient to him in all things, but she appears to be rebellious and often opposes him. Their relationship is therefore expressed in constant hostility marked by physical fights involving cries, shouts and “harsh sound of tumbling things” (2). As their neighbors, the old women, express: “He must be back... They are at it again... Night after night after night. Things have certainly grown worse in that house lately” (2). The point of interest in the study of Obanua’s masculine character and further analyses of the characters of Toje and Oshevire (*The Last Duty*) is their ability or inability to act according to “culture scripts” and thus maintain male privileges. As for Odibo and Nwanze, there is no basis for their assessment in relation to the culture scripts. They have fallen by the wayside and are practically out of the masculine circles.

Chief Toje (*The Last Duty*) presents a distinct masculine character configuration. Unlike Obanua, he appears to be in firm control of his household; at least he is able to maintain peace. However, he is equally threatened by the excessive demand of the “culture script” that he must enact. He tells his own story and immediately reports his inability to meet up with the standard requirement(s) for masculine consideration, thus introducing his incompetence:

How shall it be told, how reported, that I cannot lie with a woman? Common fowls and dogs and goats do it in the streets, before the very eyes of the gazing world, and I cannot even enjoy the customary subconscious ritual of an early morning erection, which is the privilege of even the tiniest infant! What use is this flab of flesh, if it cannot perform the function without which a man is not worth the classification? (23)

Chief Toje submits to the fear that he is losing his manhood, the privilege of having the phallus. In his culture, like in many others, the major mark of manhood and masculine pride is the presence and proper functioning of the penis. It is not enough for a man to have a penis, but it should be effective. Toje refers to the erection of the penis as a privilege, and so it is in his cul-

ture as it conditions both the body and mind of the man to a positive enjoyment of many other privileges.

Being a male is being privileged in both Ozala, the setting of *The Victims*, and Urukpe, the setting of *The Last Duty*, but beyond this socio-cultural assumption, it is expected of all males to work out and demonstrate the various aspects of male privileges to their own benefit. In other words, men will continue to remain men only if they sustain the socio-cultural assumptions of maleness, thus playing out the “culture script.” Subsumed in these assumptions are a number of issues already raised in the study of men and masculinities. Fisher and Good have, for instance, suggested that a man is expected to be

forceful/assertive and expressive/relational [...] and related to undesirable behaviors, attitudes, and characteristics, including high-risk sexual behavior, psychologically coercive behavior, decreased recognition and expression of emotions, and psychological distress. (Fischer and Good: 1998)

Therefore, in the successful pursuit of the realization of his perception of masculinity, man, especially in both popular African culture and literature, endeavors to measure up to the cultural expectations of maleness. But one may see a measure of sarcasm in Fisher and Good's position. To them, society imposes on men, or expects them to put up some “undesirable and high risk sexual behaviors, be coercive and distressed.” For a long time, Gender Studies have indeed associated men with these qualities because of characters like Chief Toje and his contemporary, Oshevire. Toje refuses impotence and decides to use the unusual opportunity of a relatively successful plot against Oshevire to test out a possible reenactment of his potency. Oshevire is his closest rival in business, rubber trade. Toje has implicated him as a traitor, supporter of the secessionist sect during the Civil War, leading Oshevire to be incarcerated by military authorities. This, he hopes, will ruin his rubber business. More seriously, it will also expose his wife Aku to insecurity so that he could take advantage of that and use her as a test instrument for his ailing manhood. The tussle between Toje and Oshevire reveals some of the remarkable traits associated with masculinities: a lack of emotion, force, assertiveness, coercion and sexual aggressiveness. All these are present in Toje's general (undesirable) behaviours. Here is a man, who, out of envy, plots against another man, gets him out of the scene and moves on to appropriate his wife (sexual aggressiveness). Fisher and Good, who relate masculine prowess with undesirable behaviors appear to have been

proven right by Toje's plans for Oshevire and his wife Aku. However, his plot against Oshevire and his sexual aggression of Aku are highly risky ventures and indeed, Toje fails in both. The lie against Oshevire is eventually uncovered and on top of that, he is unable to reenact his manhood with Aku. Basic questions remain: what Toje will end up as, and how he will feel? The answers also reveal several layers of incompetence in the expression of his masculinity.

In addition to the already complicated situation in which a character like Chief Toje operates, the social constraints within which masculinities are moulded in the two novels appear to pitch individual men against strongly established norms. A number of the men are denied opportunities of expressing their "individuality" or more appropriately, their masculinity. The societies in question, Ozala (*The Victims*), and Urukpe (*The Last Duty*), which are fictional creations, share a number of norms. They are both seemingly male dominated; their norms are constructed, enacted and sustained, to a large extent, by the male sex. They have unwritten codes, which govern the behaviours and activities of all people, of course including men. For instance, men must prove both their manhood and masculinity by raising and taking care of a family. They must equally move outside the nuclear family to demonstrate or imprint their "presence" within a larger social sphere by achieving success in any acknowledged endeavour in occupations and other social establishments. In other words, they must show relevance in their society. This is the best way to display their masculinities.

For these reasons, they constantly make efforts to proving one or more aspects of their masculinities. In *The Last Duty*, Chief Toje, Oshevire, Ali and Odibo, and in *The Victims*, Obanua, his friend Nwanze and an obnoxious person called Odafe Gwam, are such male characters who are caught into a web of masculine showing-off. One way for them is the demonstration, through a socially acceptable statement, of their sexuality and virility, the assertion of a normative place in the homosocial circle, and the identification to the object(s) of male desire as economic proofs of masculinity. An inability to fulfill these and other criteria, all approved by society, creates problems for men in their own circle but also within society at large—that is for men of diverse calibers or men in general, and finally between males, females and children. According to Linzi Murrie

Representations of "incompetent" and disempowered masculinities, can—as these do—problematise dominant notions of masculinity by demonstrating broad discrep-

ancies between the experience of individual male identity formation and the expectations of “normative” masculinity. (1)

In other words, Linzi Murrie posits that these two aspects, incompetence and disempowerment, are capable of creating gaps in the generally accepted notions of masculinities. In the novels of Isidore Okpewho, it is obvious that dominant notions of masculinities are challenged by the characters’ tendencies to incompetence, or by societal pressures inducing disempowerment. The dominant masculine categories or notions that are threatened are best crystallized in R. W. Connell’s views of the Hegemonic, the Complicit and the Subordinated types in her treatment of multiple masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt 233-34). Strong masculine characters like Chief Toje and Oshevire and complicit masculine characters like Obanua and a subordinated masculine character like Odibo, in addition to fitting into these stereotypes, also demonstrate “individual male identities.” This principle concerning individual male identity provides Chief Toje with a bloated sense of his success as a husband and family head, community leader and entrepreneur. It further forms the basis of his personal construction of masculinity. He presents himself as domineering and as such fits to the hegemonic class, albeit by self-definition and recognition.

For Oshevire, masculinity goes beyond the hegemonic or the culture of male control. It encompasses sincerity and care-taking. He is compelled by an inert care-oriented masculine trait to protect and thus save the life of an innocent boy who is about to die as a result of circumstances that are alien to him. Even though he suffers during his military detention, he takes it with “masculine” courage. His masculine identity is thus characterized by care-oriented thoughts and actions, even if it is essentially hegemonic. Obanua’s masculine identity is submerged by the general societal prescriptions of male(ness). He simply exists and enjoys as well as endures the benefits and the hazards of male(ness) in a complicit form. As for Odibo, it is clear that he is subordinated to Chief Toje and that this defines his masculine identity. Odafe Gwam is not a fully realized character in *The Victims*, but he seems to be the kind of male character that crosses bounds. He enacts an adulterous relationship with Obanua’s wife, Ogugua. This action portends some traces of hyper masculinity as it reveals an excessive display of masculine aggression. It should be noted here that all these rather shaky masculine hierarchies are likely to be unsettled by various sources of pressure, thus making those who fit to them all the more incompetent.

Although Chief Toje's ideas on masculinity appear personal, they are, however, largely influenced by general expectations of society, internalized societal values which align with "normative masculinity." For him, a man must be capable of great social and economic achievements and yet, be a virile husband at home who satisfies his wife sexually. For the individual as well as for society, competence and empowerment are central. Physical and sexual virility are important paradigms in determining competence. They constitute part of the "body politics" in a masculine analysis. A true masculine figure ought to present a certain physical shape: perhaps be attractive and strongly built and conform to certain sexual expectations. Toje retorts:

I am still chief Toje Onovwokpo. I can still remember how the sweet lusty damsels fluttered around me; how when the time came for me to marry, the only problem was to decide who it will be (26).

Chief Toje refers to damsels, as a proof of his belonging to the high grade of masculinities. At this stage of his life, a youthful stage, a advantageous physical appearance and sexual virility are marks of optimal masculine assertions. As he grows older, these qualities are threatened and he eventually loses them; thus, his incompetence appears when he expresses them. He is therefore worried by this relatively new downfall, unable to come to terms with the reality of the loss of his competence and is eventually bound to struggle vainly to reenact his masculinity. In the analysis of Toje's character, incompetence begins at the physical level, at that of mere appearances and superficial values.

He remembers his nephew Odibo and would not, for any reason, want to be classified alongside with him. Right from the beginning of the story, Odibo is depicted as incompetent and disempowered. He is subordinated to Toje. He sees himself through Toje and thus represents an already flawed category of masculinities: the incompetent and subordinated masculinity. Odibo reveals another side of his incompetence, a stronger version of it, of a kind that is almost irremediable when he confesses: "I know I am nothing. I know I have nothing..." (6). He is dependent on his relative, Chief Toje who thinks for him and feeds him. Toje reminds him of his physical disability, which suggests that he lacks the physical appearance and perhaps sexual dexterity that are socially required for high grade masculinity and is equally unable to work and make a living. The body is a clear indicator of masculine enactment and since Odibo is lame, he is not likely to be admitted to any level, let alone to high grade masculinity. Odibo's situation is made worse by the fact that his

conscious mind has been conditioned to believe that he is worthless. He confesses:

Several times he has told me openly that my crippled hand has affected my brain, and that my body is useless. Well I suppose he is right. I have little to say about that matter. (8)

.....
what use is this awkward mass of body [...] if you cannot help yourself. And you have no mind. No sense. Nothing. All you have is a huge body. And that is no use to anyone. No use at all, not even to yourself. Utterly useless... (60)

Form the discussion above, it can be inferred that apart from physical indicators, other factors of masculinities are equally capable of introducing both incompetence and disempowerment, and as rightly noted by Linzi Munri, they complicate the status and roles attendant to masculine characters. The utter uselessness of Odibo in the masculine arena is bound to gradually transcend the physical and eventually affect his psyche. At the psychological level, Odibo is forced by circumstances to develop some form of self-pity and self-acceptance of his defeat in the masculine arena, which is invariably translated to the the physical level. This is perhaps why he is quick at accepting his “utter uselessness.”

Soon, however, his mentor's case (Toje's new situation) would be similar, if not worse than his own. Toje falls down from great heights and literally declares himself incompetent, though he balks at accepting his situation. Therefore, he examines his loss of competence by interrogating the very source and causes of it in masculinity itself. Is it a personal realization or a response to societal expectations, one may ask, that signals his incompetence? The loss of manhood is personal to him, but as soon as he feels the loss, he attempts to dissociate himself from it and questions his wife. He equally basks in the temporary euphoria that it could possibly be an accident or even a “disease put on him” (25). No doubt accidents or diseases can be sources of incompetence but what both of them could lead Toje to is mental agony, which is central to incompetence. Like Odibo, he perceived that incompetence transcends the physical in the psychological realm. His vain attempts at a self-righteous proclamation are first and foremost meant to present an acceptable picture of himself to society. If Toje's masculine identity is exposed as lacking sexual virility, it may definitely problematize his personal perception of the dominant concept of a normed masculinity in society. So there appears a great fear in him as to what his position will become in the clearly articulated societal norms of masculinities. Toje has no other

choice than to assess himself against the background of social conditions, first, given his ordinary position:

I come out of the room, and everybody greets me, passersby too, paying me the respects that are due to a man of my position [...] but who says I must wake up before ten [...] one of my maidservants hands me the papers [...] my easy chair is spread out for me and I sit down to browse the news of the day with that perception which not many of us in the town can boast. (29)

and then, as he loses ground as regards the dominant concept of normed masculinity:

Sometimes I stop to ask myself, is it the fear of the times, or is it a sign of my loss of respect? How many people can have known what's happening to me? [...] Twenty five years and ten children [...] and it takes one little knock like what has come upon me to make nonsense of all those twenty years (29).

What Toje perceives as the “knock,” capable of unsettling the norms of masculine equilibrium is precisely his incompetence. But the case is complicated by its double factor: disempowerment. Toje equally battles with his disempowered masculinity, which, allied with his growing incompetence devastates his masculine strength. He now faces a conflict in which according, to him, “notice and respect have shifted from where they belong” (28).

Changes in sociocultural and economic systems introduce new definitions of masculinities and masculine hierarchies. Hitherto, recognition and respect in society were hinged on performances in farming (rubber farming) and trading, but since the war started, emphasis has shifted to other landmarks. The military spirit now prevails and men of the armed forces occupy the top of the masculine hierarchy. Farming and preliminary processing of farm products are no longer of significance due to urgent safety issues. When Toje contemplates the possibilities of greatness, successes and failures among men of his community during war time, he singles out the army commander in his zone, Colonel Ali. He admits, though painfully, that Ali has unfortunately become the most respected male, some kind of an ideal for the other men, an hegemonic power figure in the new setting. He is a soldier, when others are mere civilians. Soldiers supposedly assume, whether rightly or wrongly, that they are superior to civilians. Toje complains:

But it does worry me when a misguided little monkey, just because he wears a uniform and carries a gun, gets up on his tilt and prescribes a code for the entire

population that was there before he ever dreamed he would smell these borders [...] he kept saying "soldier and civilian..." (27)

Apparently, society has tacitly accepted new paradigms in the definition of masculine power as it considers new positions (army), new visions and new concerns. The military domain has gained ascendancy over all other occupations and previous sources of empowerment.

Oshevire is another character that illustrates disempowered masculinity. For him, the equation is slightly different, even though he belongs to the same prestigious group as Toje. He does not overtly play within the normative circle. He is rather seen as capable of original behaviours. For instance, when he observes a child who is going to die, which what does not concern him personally, he however volunteers to save it. Cynically, he is, because of what he perceived as a charitable gesture, framed up and detained. What he sees as good is only personal to him: it may not comply with the general societal perception, and thus appear as verging on incompetence. His personal definition and realization of masculine traits are different from Toje's avowed norm-based qualities. He meditates, imagining and contemplating the reasons of his detention:

The important thing is to be able to stand up to the situation and bear it all like a man. To be able to prove [...] that the forces of truth and honesty are stronger than any burden they will unjustly have laid upon you [...] and even if they succeed in taking your life in the end, prove to them all, too clearly that theirs was an idle victory.(33)

His incompetence does not grow from within. It is not the result of a dwindling syndrome or the orchestrated "wears and tears" traditionally evoked in popular culture, but it is due to an externally engineered situation. He is brutally framed and taken away from a familiar setting where he could work out his competence and access to some sort of empowerment. Since at the time of the story there is no strong evidence against Oshevire's competence as a man, except that he is trickily abducted by his adversary, it is implied that he is merely disempowered. This disempowerment, both psychological and economic, explains why he becomes so devastated on his return from detention that he literally walks into his death.

In the lives of the two major characters of *The Last Duty*, it can be observed that masculinity is socially constructed. These characters are pitched against societal values. They struggle to institute or sustain existing values and ironically, the same values they cherish so much put so much pressure

on them that eventually, they are consumed by the harsh aspects of these seemingly friendly values. This scenario is better expressed in the character of Obanua, in *The Victims*. He is a typical example of both an incompetent and a disempowered male character, all as a result of consuming demands of the socially constructed masculine paradigm.

Unlike the characters of Toje and Oshevire, Obanua, strictly speaking, lacks the strength and courage to live and leave an impact in a society that has already laid out a system of behaviour for its members. For instance, Obanua is not able to either challenge or directly confront the system that requires marriage, even a polygamous one, knowing that he is incapable of sustaining any marriage. He relies on the masculine privileges of husbandry and headship of the family. For him, it is the pattern that must be followed. However, his incompetence is clearly spelled out when he (Obanua) fails to act out the “culture script” of the societal masculine design. The qualities of maleness, as identified by Fisher and Good’s—forceful/assertive, expressive/relational [...] and undesirable behaviors, attitudes, high-risk sexual behavior, psychologically coercive behavior, decreased recognition and expression of emotions (xii)—are only vaguely present or even absent in Obanua’s character. The story does not reveal any expression or assertion of force by Obanua: whether at home, work or even in the drinking parlor, Obanua is soft and easy going; he is incompetent as a son, as a husband, a father and even as a member of the community.

It is expected that as an only son, Obanua would be a pride to his mother, Ma Nwojide by taking good care of her and brightening her life by generously procreating to make up for the lapse in his own family. That he is only able to have two sons, after taking a second wife, is an evidence of his incompetence as a son for Ma Nwojide and respected members of the masculine hierarchy for whom family size is a hefty index of respect. Worse than the point raised above are the developments in his later life. First, he is incapable of “managing his wives,” Nwabunor and Ogugua. They quarrel and fight among themselves; he also quarrels and fights with them, individually. One of the greatest deficiencies of his character and masculine disposition is his lack of control of his wives. He cannot provide for their needs and as a result, his second wife, Ogugua begins an extramarital love affair with Odafe Gwam. Disregarding societal standards, Ogugua seems compelled to inaugurate this illicit relationship because she needs the care of a man, no matter whom, especially as her husband is unable to cater for her needs.

Next, Obanua fails as a father as regards his two lovely sons, Ubaka and Bomboy. He neither provides money for their feeding or that which

would cover their school fees. When he loses his job and returns home dejected, his son, Bomboy welcomes him with excitement, only to be rebuked by his mother in clear terms:

Papa is back, papa is back! chanted Bomboy innocently, jumping for joy... then his mother Ogugua replies: let us hear something else [...] is it such a great thing? Settling down again to peeling the yams and murmuring, thinking aloud, "I wonder what is so encouraging about that." (35)

Ogugua does not see anything that would encourage her son to rejoice at having a father, or even herself at having a husband. This spells failure for Obanua. Moreover, the same dialogue reveals that Obanua fails his promises to buy sweets and a pair of shoes for his son, though he is not at a loss for excuses for his incompetence both as a father and a husband. On top of that, he is unable to keep a steady employment, thus lacking any comfortable position to feed his household. His incompetence and his indolence are climaxed when he is regularly seen indulging in drinking at the local parlour. His decadence is so overwhelming that, unaware of the impending tragedy in his home, he is utterly devastated when it breaks out.

While men in these novels are open to the benefits of masculinity, they are equally expected to comply to gender-oriented roles. It is in the process of pursuing their fulfillment that they inadvertently generate what Bell Hooks refers to as "hierarchies of masculinity" (ix). In other words, maleness is hierarchical: men are unconsciously placed by society along lines corresponding to their respective inputs into the general pool of social growth or development. They are judged according to their perceived roles within the social structure. This corresponds to what Alan Johnson, quoted by Janice Cools, declares: "[men] are affirmed through what they accomplish and how well they live up to the standards of patriarchal manhood" (10). This is unquestionably bad news for characters like Obanua, in *The Victims*, and both Chief Toje, Odiibo and Oshevire in *The Last Duty*. While the likes of Toje and Oshevire can lay claim to some concrete achievements, those in the class of Obanua and Odiibo are judged by society as non-achievers. Even in the supposed hall of achievements in which Tojes and Oshevires are listed, there are clear indications that they are bound to leave the list sooner or later.

Time and circumstances are among the factors which determine masculinity: some day mere circumstances induce these men's incompetence, or some socio-economic force disempower them, and then starts the downfall

of their membership in the higher grades of masculinity, threatening their hegemony as males.

This paper establishes that the inability of men to accomplish or sustain traditional male roles or (re)affirm their masculinities in Africa is either the result of deliberate disempowerment or of personal incompetence. Incompetence grows from within, but disempowerment is external; in other words, incompetent results from the diminishing of masculine qualities and traits, whereas disempowerment is a consequence of unfavorable socio-economic situations. As depicted in the study of the male characters in the two novels, *The Victims* and *The Last Duty*, by Isidore Okpewho, the encroachment of the twin threats of incompetence and disempowerment definitely unsettles and problematizes dominant masculinities in Africa

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