

## **Female Early-Marriage in Nigeria: A Poststructuralist Feminist Reading of Social Disability in Tume's "Not That Woman"**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes926>

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Received: 12.10.2024

Accepted: 1.7.2025

Published Online: 4.7.2025

**Abstract:** This study aims to explore and offer a deep understanding of female experiences of disability in Nigeria as portrayed in Tusin Jobi-Tume's play *Not That Woman* (2019). It inspects the social as well as the physical aspects of disability that female characters encounter in the play pertaining to the cultural practice of early marriage. In Nigeria, this long-standing custom denies girls their fundamental right to acquire formal education, imprisons, and silences their bodies, and most importantly prevents them from becoming active and independent agents in mainstream society. Therefore, this study argues that the cultural practice of early female marriage, which is motivated by traditional, economic, and legal systems in Nigeria, is a disabling practice. It also investigates the intersection between early-marriage and poverty in this setting as the latter becomes the major drive behind this practice. Moreover, since the present study employs a feminist approach to scrutinize female experiences of disablement in the play, the French Poststructuralist feminist Helene Cixous' theory of 'feminine writing' is applied to explain how the disabled and silenced young Nigerian girls use their imprisoned bodies to restore their voices and speak a language that is typically feminine in revolt against their repressive patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** disability, feminine writing, Nigerian drama, Not that Woman, Tusin Jobi-Tume, underage female marriage

### **1. Introduction**

This study examines the portrayal of women experiences of disability in Nigeria as projected in Tusin Jobi Tume's play *Not That Woman* (2019). The various disabling experiences that the girls encounter in the play at an early stage of their lives are mainly caused by the harmful cultural practice of early female marriage. In fact, this practice is quite prevalent not only in Nigeria but in the whole Sub-Saharan region, subsequently leading to devastating impacts on the young girls' lives, as it deprives them from one of their most fundamental rights, their education. Consequently, the girls remain ignorant and unable to establish a descent and active role for themselves in their society. Accordingly, the present study argues that female early marriage is a social disability. In this context, the study also aims to investigate the intersection of disability with early female marriage, and with poverty which is the main drive for this practice in Nigeria. Moreover, since the study focuses on disabled female characters in the play, a feminist approach based on Helene Cixous' theory of 'female writing' is employed to better understand how the young married girls are socially disabled because of the imposed experience of

marriage and the social exclusion they endure because of it. In addition to this, Cixous' theory will also be employed to explain how, in the absence of the girls' repressed voices, their bodies become the means by which they defy their inability to stand against their phallogocentric society.

There is indeed a wide array of literature available analyzing the phenomenon of early marriage in Nigeria and the negative results it projects, especially on the young girls' physical and mental health. However, disability itself, as an inevitable outcome of this practice, has rarely been the focus of such studies. Thus, it is noteworthy to mention here that this study is the first of its kind to examine the phenomenon of early female marriage, which is a traditional practice defined by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) as the union of an individual before age eighteen (UNICEF 2018), in relation to disability studies. It is also important to mention that this traditional custom has not yet been classified as a disabling practice, neither in Nigeria nor in the whole Sub-Saharan region.

As a matter of fact, the definition of disability plays an important role in understanding how this condition may be manifested in a specific context such the sub-Saharan one. Usually, the concept of disability is defined as "the lack of ability to perform mental or physical tasks that one can normally do" (Michailakis 2003). Yet, the phenomenon of disability is so complex and multifaceted that not one specific definition is agreed upon. The first interests in the field of disability studies were manifested in the Global North, where scholars and activists such as Tobin Siebers, Lennard J. Davis, Vic Finkelstien, and Rosemarie Garland Thompson contributed to shaping the foundations and theorizing a discourse for this field. They also contributed to developing models with which they examine and analyze disability as both a medical condition and a socio-cultural phenomenon. In fact, the medical model, one of the predominant models, regards disability as a biological condition and defines it as a deviation from putative norms of physical, cognitive, or affective function (Tenorio and Espinoza 2022). Another interesting definition of disability is that of WHO which asserts that,

disability is part of being human and integral to the human experience. It results from the interaction between health conditions and/or impairments that a person experiences, such as dementia, blindness or spinal cord injury, and a range of contextual factors related to different environmental and personal factors including societal attitudes, access to infrastructure, discriminatory policies, age, and gender (WHO 2022: 3).

This definition offers a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the evolving concept of disability, as it moves away from a mere physical perspective onto one that explores the individual's disabling surroundings from psychological and socio-cultural standpoints.

In the last few decades, there has been a shift from the much-medicalized perspective of disability towards its understanding as a condition that arises from disabling environments, barriers and cultures (Joseph 2007). This approach to disability is called 'the social model' which strongly holds that disability stems

from the exclusionary practices within society rather than being an inherent deficiency in individuals. In his book *Disability Theory* (2008), Seibers, one of the leading advocates of the social model of disability, asserts that “the field of disability studies must not address disability as a personal misfortune but as the product of a disabling social and built environment” (p.3). In this light, it is crucial to note that this study first employs the social model of disability to argue that female underage marriage, a tradition that is generated by local norms and by exclusionary sexist attitudes, is a social disability. Second, the study makes use of the medical model in reference to the physical impairments that mostly appear as a consequence of social disability, which lead to the generation of different types of physical disabilities. The distinction between disability and impairment is much scrutinized by disability scholars such as Tom Shakespeare. In his foundational book *Disability: the Basics* (2018), Shakespeare stresses the importance of distinguishing between impairment and disability and explains that the two concepts suggest different denotations. He further stresses that “Impairment is the deficit of body or mind; disability is the social oppression and exclusion” (p.13). In this light, Shakespeare’s emphasis on the distinction between the two is most significant for the study, as it highlights the difference between biological fact and social impediment.

In Nigeria, research indicates that the country counts a significant number of individuals with disabilities. According to the World Report on disability, about twenty-five million Nigerians have at least one disability, while 3.6 million of these have very significant functioning difficulties (Mbada et al. 2021: 306). These figures highlight the widespread of disability in the country, deeming it deserving of more serious attention of disability scholars. In fact, what contributes to the high rates of disability in the country is not the mere widespread of disease, but rather the harmful social practices and traditions that are deeply rooted in the Nigerian social system and entrenched in the local citizen’s psyche over generations, thus producing significant damage to the individuals’ psychological, physical and social well-being. For instance, because of the awful traditional practice of early female marriage, women in Nigeria encounter higher risk of being psychologically traumatized, physically ailed and socially marginalized. This fact is reflected in Tume’s play *Not that Woman*, in which we find that the female characters are the most exposed to factors that limit their agencies and increase their probability of becoming disabled.

## **2. *Not that Woman*: A review of related literature**

An impressive body of literature written by female dramatists exists today in sub-Saharan Africa, with substantial literary analysis conducted through a feminist lens. Nevertheless, only a few studies have examined works that have been published very recently, namely Tume’s *Not That Woman*. Although many average readers have documented their reviews, this literature review is limited to scholarly works and research articles.

Vivian Chinenye Onuegbu (2023) analyses the play from an African feminist perspective, that of “Stiwanism and Sisterhood” to critically project women as

agents that are “used in marginalizing other women, and also women in sisterhood providing emotional and financial support to other women” (p.1). Onuegbu attempts to explore the contribution of some female characters in the promotion of male patriarchy, female subjugation, and the violation of women by men in an attempt to put a stop to it. To fight male Chiefdom, Onuegbu investigates the postulation of the female characters that support it and the role of men who dominate and abuse women. She ultimately concludes that women should unite in speaking out against male oppression that pervades the culture. She strongly believes that “through stiwanism women are empowered to be better, and through formation of sisterhood amongst women”, they become a recognized force that replaces male supremacy and paves the way for a new woman who is free and autonomous (p.11).

In “Voicing the Imaginative in Africa: Three Creatives Speak” Lliane Loots, Yvette Hutchison, and Ongezwa Mbele (2020) conduct an interview with three different playwrights, one of whom is Tume. The interviews highlight profound engagement with three issues; being female, black, and African. The intersection between them is highlighted in the impact that their identities have on contemporary African cultural production, while maintaining a global artistic profile. On the other hand, in “Misandry and Conspiracy of Silence in Zainabu Jallo's and Tosin Tume's plays,” Adekunle M. Adeyemi (2021) analyses Tume’s play by examining how she utilizes her artistry to question the prevailing situation whereby women seem to be perpetually abandoned. The research embarks on an exploratory journey into assertions made by the playwright, identifying patriarchy as a factor leading to domestic violence against women. It concludes that, in “addition to the harm of the silence and isolation that women endure due to these atrocities, there is an increasing trend of disdain towards men from women” (p.140).

While these studies employ feminist approaches to discuss the disadvantageous situations of females living in a society that is highly dominated by patriarchal culture, explore male abusive and violent oppression of women which leaves them abandoned, they remain general perspectives that are yet to be theorized from an interdisciplinary standpoint. This study however stands out as it concentrates on linking traditional cultural practices like female early marriage that stems from the patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society to disability studies. It employs a feminist disability approach in order to examine and depict the different experiences of disability that female characters in Tume’s play encounter. It further argues that such deleterious traditional practices should be classified as culturally disabling.

### **3. Social disablement: A phallogocentric cultural norm questioned**

Tosin Jobi Tume is one of the most talented playwrights in contemporary Nigerian drama. As a female playwright, Tume is deeply engaged with matters that agonize the women of her society; from gender-based violence, to economic inequality, political exclusion, and education parity – almost all of her published works ponder upon these issues. Her play *Not That Woman*, published in 2019, projects the story of a group of Nigerian women who are brought together by their tragic fate. Folake,

Nkechi, Zainab and their friend Joyce are the main characters in the play that get acquainted in the Succour for Women Refuge (SWR), an establishment that is designed to give support and aid to Nigerian women who suffer from any type of abuse or adversity. In addition, the play traces the mysterious death of the SWR's leader Madam B who is said to be slaughtered by her monstrous husband. Madam B is depicted as a brave and altruistic woman who helps save the lives of Folake, Nkechi and Zainab. On the other hand, the play reports the miserable life of Joyce, a mother of four who is being exploited, maltreated, and poisoned by her brutal husband. The analysis centers on the past experiences of Nkechi and Zainab with early marriage, and explores the extent to which these characters become socially disabled because of this harmful cultural practice. In the play, Tume skillfully employs the narrative techniques of flashbacks and play-within-a-play to reveal the horrible past events that both of the characters experience and which, the study argues, leaves them socially disabled. In order to trace the social aspects of disablement that Nkechi and Zainab suffer from because of early marriage, a thorough analysis of the flashbacks is required.

In the opening of the play, we notice that the playwright provides some interesting hints while introducing her cast. The main female characters are from different parts of Nigeria, Folake, for instance, is from the Southwestern region, Nkechi is from the Eastern part of the country, while Zainab is from Northern Nigeria, and their friend Joyce is from the Southern region of Nigeria. The second significant hint pertains to the protagonists' suffering from psychological issues. For instance, Nkechi is described as "an outspoken woman who comes across as aggressive" (p.6), and later in the play we learn that she distrusts and hates almost all male-kind, ultimately displaying signs of misandry. Interestingly, Zainab is also represented as "a twenty-five-year-old woman who exhibits symptoms of passive aggression and depression" (p.6). In addition to Nkechi and Zainab, Joyce "suffers low self-esteem, and is extremely needy" (p.6). Such projection necessarily leads to the implication that Nigerian women across different parts of the country share certain distressing experiences that force them to confront serious psychological disorders such as those experienced by Tume's protagonists who share two main factors, one of illiteracy and the other pertaining to the physical invasion of their bodies; two tropes that the Poststructuralist feminist Helene Cixous scrutinizes as the subject matter for her article *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975). Two particular characters stand out, Nkechi with her inaction and Zainab with her involuntary physical rebellion toward the atrocities of the phallogocentric system as will further be discussed in the light of Cixous' perception of 'female writing'.

### **3.1. Disablement of Nkechi: Silencing the body**

In the opening scene of the play, we are introduced to Folake, Nkechi and Zainab, who convene in Madam B's office to discuss her enigmatic death and the continued freedom of her malevolent husband. While Folake remains calm as she attempts to console her friends, Nkechi and Zainab feel heartbroken and helpless. Then, Nkechi complains:

We are indeed the weaker sex. Madam B's husband is still at large, the man has practically disappeared into thin air... Our leader has been brutally murdered and all we can do is gather here to cry and moan, instead of hunting down her criminal husband who did this dastardly act (p.8).

This quote reveals Nkechi's profound sense of vulnerability and powerlessness within her patriarchal society, mainly because of her sex. In addition, it reveals her frustration at her perceived inability to take action and bring the murderer of her leader to justice. In the context of the present study, clear evidence of disability may be traced, in the sense that Nkechi ardently desires to take action and seek retribution for her leader, yet feels socially and culturally unable to do so because of her entrapment in a society that systematically regards all women, including herself, as inferior, weak and naïve. Subsequently, the laws that govern such society are debilitating for women, as they enforce factors that create clear limitations for individuals, especially women. The Nigerian society is fundamentally patriarchal, influenced largely by various religious beliefs and customs across the country, whereby women are more often than not viewed as the 'weaker sex', and discriminatory practices by both legal systems and society are widely accepted (Obagboy 2020:112). Moreover, Nkechi's current sense of disability is not solely attributed to her incapacity to take action and seek vengeance for her leader's death, as it also stems from her past life experiences.

Nkechi's development of psychological and social disability commences from an early age, being exposed to an abusive father, whom she portrays as "the most irresponsible father and husband in the entire universe; an unrepentant wife-beater, and a die-hard drunkard" (p.10). According to Nkechi, her father's profound ignorance and aggression are such that he never forgives her mother for her inability to give him a male child. Ironically however, her mother bares him seven female children and ultimately loses her life due to the incessant beatings she receives from him. The continued family tragedies that are set off by the father's obsessive need for a male child reinforce Nkechi's feelings of worthlessness because of her sex that is undesirable in a patriarchal setting. Therefore, it is first at the level of her family that she starts confronting gender-based attitudes that develop her feelings of disablement to a certain extent. In the scene that follows, Nkechi starts having flashbacks of her early life with her father. She sadly recounts:

It was after my mother's death, that my nightmare really started. My father would drink himself to a standstill, beat me to a stupor, and then force himself on me. Oh yes, my own father took my virginity when I was just thirteen years old. There was no one I could talk to about the shameful and abominable thing he was doing to me, and so it continued until the day he gave me away in marriage to his drinking mate (p.11).

This quote demonstrates the horrors that Nkechi started confronting at a very young age. The fact that she was being raped and abused by her own father is one

of the most horrible and traumatic experiences any girl could live. She was so young and vulnerable that she was not able to defend herself. Moreover, Nkechi could not speak about her nightmare because there was no one there to listen to her. Ideally, fathers must provide protection and love for their daughters, but in Nkechi's case, her father is the first person who starts scarring her life, further contributing to the initiation of the debilitating factors that would disable her in different ways, as he first exploits her physically and psychologically, and then gives her away in marriage at a young age to a much older drinking mate of his, consequently, preventing her from an education, the one prerogative that may bring her agency. What the protagonist is projected to deeply resonates with Cixous' thesis of women's continued violation throughout history, as she argues; "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal" (p.875). In a sense, women's ownership of an individual Self necessitates their capability to "break away from the old [...] to break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project" (p.875). In other words, Cixous calls upon women to reject their given image of weakness that has defined them throughout time through a narrow phallogocentric lens. She encourages them to do so by means of education; by knowing what has been written about them throughout time by man, allocating the flaws in the male-representation of their purpose in life, and then to redefine themselves properly through their authentic and unique voices. Ultimately then, knowledge becomes key for women if they are to reach their self-realization and authentic representation, as writing themselves parallels documenting their unique experiences from their own perspectives, thus projecting themselves from the inside out. This privilege is however not available to the protagonist, who is too young for the individual awareness of her situation, hence her silence toward her social and physical disablement.

Female underage marriage and poverty are highly inter-linked, especially in Nigeria. According to the UNICEF report of 2017, Nigeria has the highest number of child brides within the West and Central African regions, approximating twenty-two million child brides. In fact, underage and forced female marriage is so common in Nigeria that it is hardly considered a disability or a disabling cultural practice. This custom is mostly spread in the Northwest and Northeast parts of the country as it is deeply entrenched in the traditions, culture and religious practices of the Nigerian people. In his article, "Patriarchy and Gender Inequality in Nigeria: the Way Forward" Makama (2013) affirms that the patriarchal nature of the Nigerian society sets the parameters for marginalizing and excluding women from political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. In addition to this, he claims that the Nigerian woman is often seen as an "available object for prostitution, forced marriage, street hawking, and an instrument of wide-range trafficking" (p.115).

Concurrently, in the play, Tume confirms the harsh realities that women in Nigeria face on a day-to-day basis. This is illustrated through the story of the same character, Nkechi, as she reveals her treatment as merchandise by her father. The protagonist reports; "Yes, in a bid to settle his drinking debts, my father married me

off to his friend” (p.11). According to several studies, the causes of early marriage in Nigeria are complex, interrelated, and dependent on social and individual circumstances and contexts. However, like in Nkechi’s case, poverty is essentially the most influencing factor, given that her father resorts to settling his debts by offering his child as a scapegoat. In Nigeria, severe poverty is a widespread reality, together with illiteracy the two are often identified as the major enablers for underage female marriage, which leaves young girls “kept in the dark away for [themselves], led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallogentrism” (Cixous: 876). In his article “Child Marriage in Nigeria: Wedded to Poverty”, Nonykuma Ujam asserts that according to local statistics, child marriage is more than twice as likely to occur in rural areas in Nigeria and over three times more common among the poorest demographic in the country. Additionally, Juliet Nwobodo, a former project coordinator for ‘The Girls Should Thrive Initiative’ in Kano States in Nigeria, confirms that whenever parents find themselves incapable of affording formal education for their daughters, they think the best alternative is to look for somebody who can just pay their bills, as a means of ridding themselves the burden of keeping the young girls. Despite the fact that many poor families regard this alternative as a viable financial solution, many young married girls explain that they only went into deeper poverty after marriage. This means that forcing young girls into marriage only worsens their financial status, and more so enforces the vicious circle of poverty and underage female marriage.

Nkechi’s tragedy is not limited to her father’s abuse and enforcement into marriage against her will to settle her father’s debts, but rather continues as she is sentenced to enduring life with her old, drunk husband. In this sense she reports: “My husband had no respect for me, he treated me very shabbily. One day, right in front of our house he beat me into a coma, left me unattended to and left for his drinking joint” (p.11). This quote indicates the cruel and most common attitude that older men project onto their child brides, whom they do not regard as partners, but rather as objects with which they fulfil their sexual desires. In the context of this research, Nkechi here is disabled in the sense that she has no power to protect herself from the beatings of her violent husband. She finds herself situated in a position where she occupies the inscribed role of the submissive wife, whereby she cannot revolt against her husband’s monstrous behaviour and quietly endures his physical harassment.

Alongside the previously mentioned instances of disability that Nkechi confronts due to early marriage, her situation worsens when she encounters Madam Peace, the lady who initially saves her and takes her to the hospital after she falls into a coma. The monstrous reality of the Madam eventually reveals the irony between her motive and the name she bears; kindness being the least of her intention toward rescuing young girls and placing them in what seems to be an orphanage she controls. She deceives young girls into believing they are secure from harm when in reality they are confined and subjected to unwanted pregnancies, the babies of whom are trafficked upon birth. According to Cixous, men have driven women away from themselves to the point of having them naturalize their patriarchal image

of worthlessness. She further argues that women do not merely reject their own individuality, but more so force the patriarchal ideology upon other women by projecting their internalized self-hatred upon other women. She argues;

Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. They have made for women an antinarcissism! A narcissism which loves itself only to be loved for what women haven't got! They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove (p. 878).

In this sense, it may be construed that Madam Peace's vile act of allowing young girls to be raped, impregnated and motherhood violated is but a projection of her sense of worthlessness as a woman, her self-hatred, and self-rejection, all projected outward toward other women, and in the case of Nkechi also young girls.

When Madam Peace reveals the truth to Nkechi, she realizes her horrific fate of being detained and subjected to further rape and pregnancy. However, when Nkechi attempts to escape, Mandigo, the man who Madam Peace uses to impregnate the little girls, beats her. Ultimately, Nkechi finds herself in a disabling situation whereby she has completely lost her agency. With her exclusion from the larger society, Nkechi experiences a social form of disability in the sense that her environment is disabling her, and Madame Peace, who is supposed to feel Nkechi's pain and be her source of support, makes her suffer further. This incident illustrates that being female and owning female reproductive organs can be a curse in certain environments. As she recounts her memories of what she refers to as a 'hell hole' to her friends Folake and Zainab as well as the audience, she recalls giving birth to a baby boy after a year of her imprisonment, whom she loses trace of after being sold by the Madam. Nkechi recounts: "yeah, yeah... My only pain is that I cannot trace my son, and I also lost contact with my six sisters" (p.11). In fact, this statement demonstrates that Nkechi becomes ultimately 'doubly disabled'; First, because of being a female in a phallogocentric, conventional society, which subsequently results in being deprived of education and being forced into marriage. Second, because of her inability to find her son and to contact her sisters. This causes her so much distress and enforces her sense of disability.

### **3.2. Zainab's Body: From Disablement to Rebellion**

In the play, Nkechi is not the only female character who encounters disability because of early marriage. Zainab too, suffers from the disabling consequences of this cruel practice. In the second scene, a sombre mood descends as Zainab sits at the centre stage and lights depict her while she starts singing the melancholic 'wata rana' song in a trance-like mien. Folake then starts recounting to the audience Zainab's dreadful marriage. She narrates;

She was only eleven years old when she was given in marriage to a sixty-three-year-old man. She had just reached puberty some few months before her wedding. She became pregnant almost immediately. People around her were jubilant, but she was clueless and couldn't fathom what the excitement was about. An eleven-year-old ... She was just a child (p.13).

Zainab's marriage at a very young age exposes her body to sexual exploitation. At a time when she is supposed to be acquiring fundamental skills like reading and writing and developing social networks with children of her age in school. Zainab is instead caged and trapped in an old man's house as a bride, a child-bride. So, she remains ignorant, with no means to express her agonies or to revolt against her reality. These factors create intellectual and social forms of disability in which she finds herself confronting obstacles which are created by her social, cultural, and political surroundings. Her predetermined vocation as a submissive housewife is powerfully imposed on her right from her early childhood by the socio-cultural norms of her country. In addition, the legal system in Nigeria is so weak that it cannot protect the young girls from the planned marriages that they undergo against their wills.

In her article *the Laugh of the Medusa* (1975), the renowned French poststructuralist feminist Helene Cixous asserts that in patriarchal societies, when men dominate female bodies, they ultimately dominate their breaths and their speech, which leads to a social type of disability. This kind of disability may be manifested in women's inability to take decisions of their own, and their incapability to live their lives as they wish. In Zainab's case, her body is censored through early marriage; as soon as she becomes a bride, her body no longer belongs to her, but rather becomes the property of her husband. She is now a silenced captive, a passive object, lacking control over her body and life altogether.

Furthermore, Cixous explains that the woman's need to write is a biological drive much like her maternal instincts, which is why she urges women to break into male dominant discourse and subvert it (1976). In other words, she urges them to become active subjects, as writing not only makes their voices heard, but more so offers them life and activity. This implies that writing has the capacity to undo the silence that patriarchy enforces upon them, and consequently reverse the process of social disablement. When Zainab gets pregnant almost immediately after her marriage, we come to know that she receives no ante-natal care. On the one hand, she is clueless as to what is happening inside her young and fragile body and on the other hand, nobody in her environment cares enough to enlighten her. When it is time for her to deliver her baby, she is not able to do so, which leads to a two-week-long labour. Although Zainab is transferred back and forth between traditional birth attendants and native doctors, all attempts to deliver her child are in vain, and her struggle continues. Zainab's inability to deliver her baby is expected given her young age; she is neither physically ready to carry a baby in her womb, nor is her young body ready to deliver one.

According to Cixous, a feminine practice of writing does exist, though it may be impossible to theorize. This indicates that such a practice occurs beyond the

purview of the phallogocentric discourse and operates in areas which lie outside the territorial boundaries of masculine “philosophic-theoretical” rule (1976). She also maintains that the female body infuses feminine language with the creative power by which she can claim her status, her existence, and her autonomy. In the case of Zainab who endures two weeks of hard, obstructed labour, we learn later that after the delivery is deemed impossible, a long stick is forced into Zainab’s abdomen, and “[h]er dead and decomposed baby [is] forcefully expelled” (p.14). Zainab does not master writing because of her forced illiteracy, yet, in her situation, Cixous’ ‘feminine writing’ manifests itself in Zainab’s body as it refuses to subdue to the patriarchal definition of her Self. In other words, her body demonstrates its rebellious act of decomposing the baby inside her womb, further suggesting that it is protesting on her behalf. Her body becomes the physical expression of ‘feminine writing’ by physically materializing what her deep and repressed unconscious refuses to accept; that is, the imposition of a forced masculine seed into her young womb. Therefore, Zainab’s body becomes the medium for expression and communication. In this sense, her body becomes the very projection of the ‘Africa’ that Cixous wants women to claim as she contends; “because you are Africa, you are black. Your continent is dark. Dark is dangerous. You can’t see anything in the dark” (p. 877-878). In other words, unlike the safe haven that a mother’s womb is supposed to represent for the foetus that she shelters, nurtures and then births, Zainab’s young and immature womb turns into a foreign and toxic place that refuses to shelter what is foreign and further forced upon her, in addition to not as yet being mature enough to embrace another entity.

In this context, the playwright employs the image of the dead baby as a symbol representing the whole patriarchal system that intrudes upon the physical and mental well-being of girls which results in disempowering them and rendering them invisible, inaudible and disabled. Moreover, portraying the act of ending the baby’s life inside the womb suggests that the playwright, herself a female navigating a phallogocentric and conventional society, is eager to witness the end of this oppressive system that contributes to disabling young girls. Cixous identifies feminine writing’ as “a distinctive style of writing for women and by women” and its core relation with the women’s unconscious. Cixous further encourages women to write through their bodies in order to make “the huge resources of the unconscious” burst. In this sense, Zainab’s unconscious reflects Cixous’ understanding of ‘feminine writing’ as Zainab breaks her patriarchal chains meant to silence her body by performing an act of physical language that is typically feminine, as childbearing is a capacity owned only by women. Within the framework of this study, we can argue that the playwright employs the act of killing the baby as an act of enablement which initially denotes moments of agency exercised by the disabled character’s body.

Although an act of involuntary physical rebellion is affected, the character’s young age, lack of education, social support and poverty deny her the opportunity to complete the execution of her rebellion onto a full embrace of her individuality, and so, Zainab’s experiences with social and physical disablement continue to unfold throughout the play. For instance, the struggles of Zainab do not cease at the

point of losing her baby, as, after this last burial, a new crisis ensues as she loses control over her bladder and rectum. Now Urine and faeces continuously flow, putting her in a physically critical situation. She becomes a big embarrassment due to the unpleasant smell and the swarm of flies that trail her (p.14). In consequence, her co-wives exert pressure on her illiterate husband to throw her outside the house. Folake recounts:

No one wanted her, not even her family. She became a destitute until Madam B and the Succour for Women Refuge stepped in and took over. She was diagnosed with an extreme case of VVF. Her urethra, bladder and vaginal wall were completely eroded (p.14).

This quote captures the horrendous outcome of underage female marriage at both the social and physical levels. From a medical perspective, Zainab fails to deliver her baby because her birth canals are not fully developed to bear and deliver children. Her hard and obstructed labour occurs because her foetus does not fit her small pelvis. Birth complication is therefore expected in Zainab's case, as she is still too young to bear the burden of pregnancy. However, as a result of the compressions that last almost two weeks, a serious case of VVF occurs. VVF is an abnormal opening between the bladder and the vagina that results in continuous and unremitting urinary incontinence. This tragic event leads to Zainab's physical as well as social disability, alienation and marginalization. The psycho-social complications of this impairment are very devastating. At the level of her social life, Zainab is now an outcast, she is ostracized because she is not the pretty little girl she once was anymore, and she is now excluded from her community because of her awful odour and her unpleasant appearance. She also endures verbal and emotional abuse by her co-wives and husband.

At this point, Zainab becomes socially excluded from the society that is responsible for her current miserable condition. This is the same society that encourages underage female marriage and enforces the attitude of treating women and girls like commodities that can be used and exchanged by men for pleasure. According to Aremu and Abiodun, "social exclusion is the process whereby certain groups or individuals in society are systematically marginalized, alienated, or put at a disadvantage with respect to their full participation in all or specific aspects of society" (p.324). Hence, this social exclusion and discrimination render Zainab doubly disadvantaged and disabled. Firstly, because of her gender, she is a female living in a highly patriarchal society where she endures all kinds of oppression. This oppression can be paralyzing as seen in the case of almost every female character in the play. Secondly, her impairment imposes physical limitations, thus contributing to her social exclusion and resulting in disability exacerbated by environmental attitudes and prejudices.

#### **4. Conclusion**

To conclude, the findings that emerge from this study necessitate the classification of underage female marriage as a disabling traditional practice. The close analysis

of Tume's play *Not That Woman* from a disability studies' lens demonstrates how the traumatic and horrific experiences of the two characters Zainab and Nkechi with early marriage cause their struggle with different types of disability throughout their lives. In Nigeria, as the play illustrates, poverty is often the primary factor contributing to the proliferation of this practice. However, using a social model of disability, one may concur how the prevailing patriarchal system and the deep-rooted social prejudices also play a major role in the process of disabling young girls. Ultimately then, one may argue that in this particular Nigerian context, disablement is a factor of social and cultural attitudes that perpetuates the subjugation of women. This subjugation and suppression of young girls represent the basis upon which a system of social disablement is first created. In the play, Nkechi and Zainab are the two figures who suffer the most from the disabling consequences of early marriage, from physical chronic ailments to social alienation and exclusion, the torturing experiences that they undergo, denying them full participation in economic, political, and social life which ultimately renders them practically paralyzed. However, while Nkechi remains silent amidst her social and physical disablement, Zainab's body involuntarily refuses her physical debilitation although alienated from the very society that causes her disability.

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