

Embodied Resistance and the Politics of Vulnerability: A New Humanities Reading of Gendered Violence in *Kowode* by Lara Owoeye

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Abstract

Lara Owoeye's *Kowode* offers a powerful dramatisation of the gendered violence perpetuated through ritual money practices and the sexual exploitation of minors. The play presents women as central victims in a patriarchal economy of brutality. This paper engages with the New Humanities to explore how the play interrogates the commodification of the female body, the erosion of human dignity and the systemic vulnerabilities of women in contemporary Nigerian society. Rather than viewing characters solely as individual agents or victims, this study adopts a radical feminism approach that is grounded in the belief that patriarchy encourages women oppression and therefore calls for the dismantling all of forms of patriarchal structures in society that supports the oppression of women. *Kowode* reveals how ritualistic and sexual violence are interconnected tools of domination, embedded within economic desperation and spiritual exploitation. Through its depiction of violated girl-children and complicit societal structures, the play critiques the normalisation of violence against the feminine body and calls for legal, moral, and cultural reckoning. The framework of intersectional feminism aids in analysing how class, gender, and age intersect to produce specific forms of vulnerability, while radical feminism calls for a revolutionary action against domestic violence and women oppression. The paper argues that *Kowode* is not only a work of protest but also a call for embodied resistance and ethical re-imagination. By positioning women's suffering within a broader critique of dehumanising practices, *Kowode* aligns with the New Humanities' emphasis on justice, relational ethics, and the dismantling of oppressive human-centered narratives.

Keywords: Drama, Criticism, Radical Feminism, *Kowode*, Owoeye

Introduction

The alarming upsurge in money-making rituals, particularly those in which women and young girls are often the primary victims, has become a disturbing trend in post-independence African countries, especially Nigeria. This phenomenon, rooted in the desire for sudden wealth and material success, continues to generate serious concern and has increasingly become the subject of exploration by playwrights, filmmakers and theatre practitioners. Their artistic expressions serve not only as a medium for social protest but also as tools for raising awareness and provoking public dialogue on this deeply unsettling development.

The role of art as a moral force is clearly evident in this context. Playwrights such as Bode Osanyin, Femi Osofisan, and Zeb Ejiro (in his dramatised films like *Blood Money*) have used their works to interrogate the socio-cultural and economic conditions that fuel these practices. In particular, such plays reveal the intersection of gender, ritual, and power, where women's bodies are commodified and violated in pursuit of wealth. Theatre becomes a site of resistance, a platform where the ritualisation of violence against women is critically examined and challenged (Barber, 2000; Ogunba, 1978).

The prevalence of gory reports on social media and in mainstream news outlets reveals a frightening reality: a generation of youths whose obsession with materialism has led them to embrace occult practices in their quest for wealth. Their thirst for sudden riches often bypasses any traditional notions of hard work or moral restraint. The sacrifices required by *ritualists* or native doctors (babalawo) are frequently gendered in nature. Women's private body parts—breasts, pubic hair, and genital organs—are commonly demanded, based on the belief that feminine energy holds greater spiritual potency in ritualistic economics (Gyekye, 1996; Matory, 2005).

This gruesome belief system has birthed a generation of teenagers and adolescents parading in expensive vehicles, adorning designer clothing, and even building mansions for their families—all while still undergraduates. These acts raise questions about the sources of their wealth and the moral silence of a society that often celebrates wealth without probing its origins. In this context, the safety of the girl-child and women more broadly is increasingly under threat. Numerous reports of women disappearing while travelling, walking through isolated areas, or simply being alone at night have been tied to this ritual economy.

Several sociological and economic factors have been identified as contributing to this crisis. Among them are the flamboyant and ostentatious lifestyles of Nigerian politicians, chronic unemployment, a weakening economy, and the erosion of traditional value systems. These conditions create a fertile ground for desperation, moral compromise, and the instrumentalisation of human lives, particularly female bodies, for financial gain (Achebe, 1983; Ekeh, 1975).

However, can these factors ever justify the violent violation and killing of women in the name of wealth acquisition? The answer is unequivocally no. The use of women in ritual practices reflects not only a deep moral crisis but also the entrenchment of patriarchal violence masquerading as spiritual obligation. It is a tragedy that demands urgent intervention from religious leaders, educators, policy-makers, and above all, artists and dramatists whose creative voices must continue to push back against this culture of death.

In sum, the ritualisation of women's bodies in the pursuit of wealth is a manifestation of both economic desperation and spiritual distortion. The arts, particularly theatre and film, must continue to illuminate these dark practices, confront the ideologies that sustain them, and imagine a society where women are valued, protected, and no longer treated as sacrificial currency.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts New Humanities and Radical Feminism as its theoretical frameworks in interrogating *Kowode* by Lara Owoeye. These frameworks provide robust lenses through which the play's thematic concerns—particularly the commodification of the female body, gendered violence, and the societal complicity in the subjugation of women—can be critically examined. New Humanities is an evolving interdisciplinary approach that challenges traditional disciplinary boundaries by integrating insights from philosophy, cultural studies, human rights discourse, law, and moral theory in addressing contemporary social issues. As Gannon and Davies (2007) suggest, the New Humanities fosters a rethinking of the human condition in ways that emphasise multiplicity, hybridity, and ethical responsibility. In the context of *Kowode*, the New Humanities framework enables a multidimensional interrogation of ritual violence against women, particularly the use of the female body in money rituals, as well as other issues such as child sexual abuse and

domestic violence. These acts are not only social and cultural violations but also moral, philosophical, and legal dilemmas that require holistic examination. By deploying this framework, the play is read not merely as a literary artifact but as a site of complex socio-political discourses that reflect the tensions between tradition, modernity and human dignity.

On the other hand, Radical Feminism provides the ideological backbone for critiquing the patriarchal structures that perpetuate the abuse, objectification, and silencing of women. Rooted in the belief that patriarchy is a fundamental source of female oppression, radical feminism calls for a revolutionary reordering of society (Tong, 2014). It interrogates not just the symptoms of gendered violence but the systemic and institutionalised power relations that sustain it. In *Kowode*, the violence inflicted upon female characters is not incidental; it is structurally ingrained and culturally sanctioned, thereby validating the relevance of radical feminist critique. The play's call for drastic legal reforms—such as the death penalty and castration for perpetrators of rape and ritual killing—resonates with the radical feminist agenda of uncompromising justice for crimes against women.

Furthermore, the choice of these two frameworks is justified by the bold, confrontational, and unapologetically activist tone of *Kowode*. Owoeye's dramaturgy aligns with the radical feminist tradition of writers like Andrea Dworkin and Bell Hooks, who argue for dismantling oppressive systems rather than merely reforming them. Simultaneously, the play's capacity to provoke interdisciplinary discussions about ethics, legality, and gender politics situates it squarely within the ambit of New Humanities. In sum, the intersection of New Humanities and Radical Feminism offers a critical and inclusive methodological approach to analyzing *Kowode*. Together, they provide a platform to explore the entangled discourses of gender, violence, justice, and human rights in a patriarchal society like Nigeria, where systemic oppression of women remains both a lived reality and a literary concern.

Synopsis of *Kowode*.

Lara Owoeye's *Kowode* tells in a poignant way the story of Kowode, the play's protagonist, an interior decorator who is determined to prove his worth as a man by meeting his family responsibilities. His attempt to travel abroad for greener pasture to boost his financial capability is unsuccessful as he falls into the hands of scammers. His friend, Feranmi, advises him to visit a diviner to assist him to overcome his financial obligations and enrich him. The Priest, who combines Christianity, Islam and the African Traditional Religion, for divination tells Kowode, "a causality of poverty" (9) to make a simple sacrifice and he will be stunningly rich. Kowode is asked by the Priest to rub a fetish object given to him on his genitals and sleep with a virgin. Kowode is asked to bring the blood that comes out of the virgin's vagina to complete the rituals. And Kowode will be rich for life.

The thought of how to get a virgin in a world that is given completely to sexual promiscuity troubles Kowode. Quickly, Feranmi advises Kowode to use his 8-year-old girl, Tayo since her virginity is not in doubt. This is because if Kowode tries any other girl and it happens that she is not a virgin, Kowode will become mad. Kowode thus becomes confused the more. Feranmi's advice appears stupid, senseless and impracticable. This thought troubles Kowode regularly. Kofo, Kowode's wife, a very diligent and hard working woman sees her husband as a loafer and a lazy

person who shuns hard work, honesty, diligence, planning and integrity to pursue wealth acquisition. She refuses to lend her husband any money because Kowode will never pay back.

Meanwhile, due to the regular occurrence of rape of women in the community, the women in the town led by the Women Leader go with protesting women to the State House of Assembly to protest against rape of women, domestic abuse, child abuse and call for legislation against all these vices, especially castration and death penalty for rapists. Kofo joins the protesting women without knowing that her husband is nursing such an evil plan against her daughter.

Kowode decides to visit a church presided by Alagba for an alternative to raping her daughter. The church is notorious for helping Yahoo guys in making money through rituals and cultic practices. The Alagba advises Kowode to obey the instruction of the Priest if he wants to be rich in life. Kowode becomes confused the more. After much pensive contemplation, Kowode decides to sleep with Tayo, his 8-year-old daughter when she returns home from school without the presence of his wife and unknown to Tayo. This is because the rape must be carried out within 7 seven days or else Kowode will become mad. Hence, Kowode takes the bull by the horns. Unfortunately for him, before he succeeds, the shout of Tayo alarms Kofo and Stella who are close to the house and who quickly rescue Tayo from her father's dastardly act.

Immediately, Kowode begins to show signs of insanity. Just then, Richard enters Kowode's house to inform him to check his mail that his VISA is ready. Kofo informs Richard that Kowode is already a mad man. Richard informs Kofo that Kowode's madness is due to his involvement in ritual money called "Ajikele," the type that makes people run mad instantly. Kofo informs Richard that the protesters have won as "there are now laws in place against rape and all forms of abuse against women and children" (55). The play ends with Kowode running visibly displaying insanity while Olowoaye, another mad man joins him as "they perform madness together with ingenuity" (56) while Kofo watches him with pity from a distance and passers-by gather to watch the two mad men.

Textual Analysis

The Commodification of the Female Body

One of the most disturbing and contemporary issues addressed in the play *Kowode* is the commodification of the female body in ritual money practices. The playwright presents a chilling narrative in which a desperate man named Kowode consults a babalawo (herbalist/diviner) in his quest for sudden wealth. The diviner instructs him to rape his own eight-year-old daughter, Tayo, and collect the blood from her genitals for ritual purposes. If the ritual succeeds, Kowode is promised immense wealth, but the girl is doomed to die. According to the Priest

You will not kill the virgin; you will sleep with her, wipe the first blood that comes out with a white handkerchief and bring it here immediately...The virgin remains unhurt but money will flow like the Eleme River. It will flow unhindered the way blood flows in every living being. It will gush out like rain water from a gutter. It will rain down from the sky and rush in from the deep, money beyond control (11).

This act of ritual violence is not isolated. The diviner further reveals that many of his clients are required to procure female body parts — breasts, pubic hair and genitals — for similar rites. Pregnant women, young girls, and even newborns are targets. The reasoning provided is that female reproductive organs possess mystical potency necessary for successful ritual money, thereby making the female body not only symbolic of fertility but also a vessel for sacrificial power (Amadiume, 1997; Nnaemeka, 2005). The Priest tells Kowode and says

Women are the best materials in rituals if you want the best results. Virgins for money, mothers for *awure*, pregnant ones for the positions of power. Even when we sacrifice pregnant women for swaying the minds of an entire community like during elections, it is more effective when the foetus is a female. Do you also know that we have female spirits? The female spirits are called mermaids. They are more efficient than the masculine demons (12).

The playwright is clearly horrified by this barbaric and gendered form of violence, and *Kowode* becomes a scathing critique of a society in moral decay — one that privileges material acquisition over human life. The play interrogates the logic of a spiritual system that requires the desecration of the female body to produce wealth, raising profound ethical and metaphysical questions: Are the gods themselves patriarchal? Why are women the chosen vessels of sacrifice and not men? As Oyewumi (1997) argues in her critique of Western-imposed gender constructs, many African systems have historically placed the male figure in positions of ritual power, often rendering the female body invisible, unless it is needed for exploitation.

Furthermore, the play challenges the problematic notion that women's bodies are metaphors for fertility and, by extension, wealth. Even if this symbolism holds, one must ask: Can women be fertile without men? The implied answer exposes the hypocrisy and violence of male-dominated ritual economies, which extract value from women's bodies while erasing their agency and humanity.

The gory tales depicted in *Kowode* are not purely fictional. In reality, the media is replete with cases of ritual killings across Nigeria and other parts of sub-Saharan Africa, where money rituals involving young girls and women are perpetrated by young men seeking instant wealth (Ibrahim, 2015; Eboh, 2017). The rise of this phenomenon has been linked to a toxic combination of economic hardship, political corruption, eroded moral values, and social media-fuelled materialism (Falola & Heaton, 2008; Ilesanmi, 2020). It is not uncommon to see teenagers cruising in luxury vehicles, funding opulent lifestyles, or building mansions while still undergraduates, raising suspicions about the sources of their wealth.

This grim reality creates an atmosphere of fear for women and the girl child, whose bodies are constantly at risk of being reduced to mere ritual objects. The playwright, writing from a feminist perspective, decries this dehumanisation, insisting that a society that trades its women for prosperity is irreparably broken. The commodification of the female body — whether through trafficking, ritual sacrifice, or symbolic violence, is part of what Nnaemeka (2005) describes as the “political economy of the female body” in African patriarchy.

The *Kowode* narrative reflects what Gayatri Spivak (1988) describes as the silencing of the “subaltern,” the most marginalised, whose voice is effaced in systems of power. In this play, the girl-child has no voice; her body becomes the silent language of male ambition, religious complicity, and societal failure. The question is not merely what is being sacrificed but who is being silenced.

Justice, Punishment and Gendered Violence: A Feminist and Legal Dilemma

In *Kowode*, Lara Owoeye expresses deep-seated anger and revulsion toward the pervasive rape culture, domestic violence, and ritualistic abuse of women in Nigerian society. Through her dramatic characters and narrative, she dramatizes a radical call for justice by advocating for extreme punitive measures—namely, castration and the death penalty for rapists and ritual killers. The women in the play mobilize in protest and march to the State House of Assembly, where they compel lawmakers to pass legislation mandating these severe punishments. Their collective action is depicted not just as a response to personal traumas but as a political intervention aimed at protecting future generations of women and girls.

From a radical feminist perspective, this stance is not only understandable but justifiable. Radical feminism emphasises the structural nature of patriarchal oppression and often supports drastic measures to dismantle systems that enable gendered violence (Millet, 1970; Dworkin, 1987). In the play, Stella, a rape victim, captures the enduring psychological impact of sexual violence when she says, “The pain of rape never goes away. In most cases, it lasts a lifetime...Rape is worse than murder...The raped is maimed...Rapists are destiny destroyers. Rapists are destroyers” (37-38). This testimony echoes real-world studies on trauma which affirm that sexual assault leaves indelible scars that affect survivors’ emotional, psychological, and even physical well-being for years, sometimes for life (Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2014). Given the irreversible consequences of such crimes, radical feminists argue that irreversible punishments may be warranted to protect vulnerable populations.

However, from a human rights and legal standpoint, this approach raises ethical questions. The death penalty and castration are irreversible and may be viewed as violations of human dignity, regardless of the offender's actions (*Amnesty International*, 2023). Human rights advocates emphasize corrective and rehabilitative justice, rather than retributive justice. Their contention is that, while rape and ritual murder are heinous crimes, the state must not descend to equally irreversible forms of punishment. That is why *Kowode* says “you can’t control evil with evil. Two wrongs don’t make a right” (37). They maintain that “even the worst of us has a right to due process, reform, and humane treatment” (An-Naim, 1990). Moreover, human rights jurisprudence upholds the sanctity of life, arguing that state-sanctioned execution fails to address the root causes of gendered violence, such as poverty, misogyny, and weak legal systems (United Nations Human Rights Office, 2020).

There is also the ethical dimension, guided by normative philosophy, which interrogates concepts of right and wrong. Is it morally permissible to rape or kill women for ritual purposes? Clearly, it is not. But the counter-question persists: Is it ethically justifiable to respond to one act of dehumanization with another? The moral complexity here reflects what the New Humanities project seeks to uncover: interdisciplinary, culturally grounded responses to human suffering that

neither ignore systemic oppression nor promote state-sanctioned cruelty (Gilroy, 2005; Nussbaum, 1999).

Legally, the principle of proportionality is key. Punishment, according to jurisprudential ethics, must match the gravity of the offence. While rape and ritual murder are among the most serious crimes imaginable, there remains ongoing global debate about whether capital punishment or surgical castration constitutes proportionate justice (UNODC, 2021). In *Kowode*, Owoeye places her audience at the moral crossroads of this debate, forcing us to ask whether the sanctity of the human body, both the victim's and the perpetrator's, can or should be protected at all costs.

Ultimately, this section of the play, and this paper's engagement with it, reflects the broader mission of feminist jurisprudence and postcolonial performance studies: to hold a mirror up to the society that produces such violence, and to consider what kinds of justice, restorative, retributive, or transformative, are possible or ethical in cultures still grappling with systemic gender-based violence.

The Dearth of Virgins

One of the most salient social commentaries that Lara Owoeye foregrounds in *Kowode* is the alarming dearth of virgins in contemporary society. This concern is woven into the play's dialogue and becomes a moral and cultural indictment of the state of sexual ethics in modern Africa. Early in the play, the Priest (Babalawo) tells Kowode, "A virgin's blood is what your destiny requires to come back on course" (11). Kowode's immediate response, "But how do I get a virgin? We all know that my wife cannot be a virgin again, neither are all these women of easy virtue that we all sleep with on the streets sometimes when irresponsible nature beckons" (12), underscores a perceived social crisis.

This scarcity becomes even more evident when Kowode's friend Feranmi suggests the possibility of using a teenage secondary school girl instead of Kowode's eight-year-old daughter, Tayo. Kowode dismisses the idea, remarking, "I heard most of them have been used" (22). Through these exchanges, Owoeye dramatises a situation in which the idea of finding a virgin has become almost implausible, hinting at deeper issues of sexual promiscuity, erosion of moral codes, and the commodification of the female body.

From Kowode's perspective, two major reasons account for this scarcity. First, women have increasingly become victims of sexual violence, including rape and ritual exploitation for money-making purposes. This aligns with findings by Okorie and Nnorom (2018), who note that the vulnerability of women to sexual exploitation in many African societies is exacerbated by economic desperation and ritualistic belief systems that objectify the female body. Second, the scarcity reflects the displacement of African traditional values, where virginity was once a prized moral and cultural virtue, particularly for unmarried girls. In many African societies, chastity before marriage was an essential criterion for a woman's honour and the family's dignity (Gyekye 1996).

This cultural expectation was not exclusive to Africa. In ancient Hebrew society, under Mosaic law, virginity was a religious and legal requirement, with the penalty for proven premarital sexual relations often being death (Deuteronomy 22:20–21). However, the spread of globalization, urbanization, and modernist ideologies has undermined such traditional frameworks. As Oloko

(2014) argues, the shift towards individualism and Western sexual norms has weakened communal structures that once safeguarded chastity.

A striking real-life parallel to Owoeye's thematic concern emerged during the 2025 Osun-Osogbo Festival in Nigeria. Traditionally, a virgin known as the "Arugba," the "carrier of the calabash," is chosen to bear sacrificial offerings to the Osun River goddess, a ritual believed to be ineffective if performed by a non-virgin. That year, however, no virgin could be found, and a male was controversially used in place of the "Arugba." The decision sparked intense debate on social media and in the press. Some commentators blamed the influence of Christianity and Islam for discouraging participation in indigenous rites, while others lamented the moral decline and loss of the traditional value of chastity among young women (Oyetade 2025).

Through *Kowode*, Owoeye holds up a mirror to this moral collapse, using the scarcity of virgins not simply as a plot device but as a cultural metaphor for the erosion of societal ethics. Her work implicitly calls for urgent, holistic intervention involving parents, educators, policymakers, and cultural custodians to reclaim lost moral ground. In this sense, the play functions as both art and social critique, continuing the tradition of African drama as a platform for moral and communal renewal (Ngugi wa Thiong'o 1986).

Parental Irresponsibility and Women's Secrecy

Lara Owoeye's *Kowode* also explores the theme of parental irresponsibility and women's secrecy, particularly in relation to the devastating consequences of sexual violence. Stella's harrowing testimony reveals not only the trauma of rape but also the silence, neglect, and concealment that magnify her suffering. When recounting her ordeal to Kowode and Kofo, she recalls: "Well, I cried till my parents returned the following day. I did not say anything to them. I tried to smile and walk well as if nothing happened" (35). Her mother fails to notice any change, continuing instead with "globetrotting and partying" (35). This absence of maternal sensitivity exemplifies poor parenting, leaving Stella emotionally abandoned at the very moment she most requires care.

The situation worsens when Stella becomes pregnant. Instead of providing medical and emotional support, her mother prioritizes secrecy and family image. She chooses to conceal the incident from her husband, taking Stella to a quack for an abortion rather than a qualified doctor. The botched procedure leads to Stella's permanent barrenness. Reflecting on this betrayal, Stella laments: "And he did not know about it till he died a few years later. That is part of my pain, that the only one who could have fought for me was kept in the dark throughout. It's so painful" (37). The father, who might have offered protection, remains ignorant due to the mother's deliberate manipulation.

This episode underscores the destructive effects of maternal hypocrisy and secrecy. Rather than confronting the violation openly, Stella's mother suppresses the truth, thus compounding her daughter's trauma. Scholars argue that silence around sexual violence often perpetuates cycles of abuse and hinders healing (Hooks, 2000; Jewkes & Abrahams, 2002). In this case, secrecy becomes a weapon that denies Stella justice and medical safety. Moreover, her barrenness symbolizes not only personal loss but also the intergenerational consequences of parental irresponsibility.

Owoeye's critique resonates with broader African feminist discourse. Oyeronkẹ Oyewumi (1997) has argued that patriarchal and colonial structures reshape family dynamics in ways that

marginalize women's voices, while Obioma Nnaemeka (2004) notes that women sometimes adopt strategies of negotiation and secrecy ("nego-feminism") to survive oppressive systems. However, in *Kowode*, such secrecy is shown to be counterproductive, harming the very child it was intended to protect. Stella's mother becomes both complicit in her daughter's violation and an agent of patriarchal silence.

Thus, Owoeye does not present women solely as victims but complicates their representation by exposing how female complicity, parental irresponsibility and secrecy within the family perpetuate violence. *Kowode* critiques a culture where appearances are prioritised over truth, and where children pay the ultimate price for parental neglect. In this way, the play expands the discourse on gendered violence beyond external perpetrators to include failures within the family that enable silence and suffering.

Religious Complicity and the Commodification of Salvation

Kowode, Lara Owoeye offers a trenchant critique of organised religion, particularly Christianity, as complicit in the moral and social decay of contemporary society. Rather than functioning as a sacred space for redemption and ethical transformation, the church in *Kowode* has become, metaphorically and literally, a "den of lions," a place where ritual killers, sex workers, corrupt contractors, and desperate politicians converge in pursuit of selfish ambitions under the guise of spirituality.

Owoeye presents the church as a site of spiritual perversion where the shepherd, Alagba, offers prayers that are essentially cultic in nature. The supposed miracles and testimonies that emerge from his ministry are deeply troubling. One congregant, a prostitute, seeks divine endorsement and supernatural aid to prosper in her illicit trade. Another, a politician, implores Alagba for spiritual power to ensure his electoral victory, presumably by subverting democratic processes. Most disturbingly, ritual killers who have made wealth through human sacrifices also come forward to "testify" to the church's efficacy, crediting their success to Alagba's prayers.

This portrayal underscores a profound satire of institutional religion, which aligns with the tradition of African dramatic critique pioneered by Wole Soyinka in plays such as *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1963). Soyinka lampoons the commodification of religion and the gullibility of worshippers in the face of performative piety. Like Brother Jero, Alagba is not a spiritual guide but a manipulative figure who exploits religious fervor for personal gain, turning the sacred into the profane. As Kwame Bediako (1995) argues, the crisis of Christianity in postcolonial Africa is its inability to detach itself from materialist and magical worldviews, often blending with indigenous ritualistic practices to form a syncretic yet ethically ambiguous system.

The trance-like states, ecstatic dancing, speaking in tongues, and frenzied worship in Alagba's church are not signs of divine presence, but theatrical tools used to manipulate the faithful. These spectacles function as spiritual performances akin to what Judith Butler (1990) calls "ritualised repetitions" intended to produce religious legitimacy while masking moral corruption. In this way, Owoeye's work aligns with contemporary critical religion studies, which view religion not just as belief, but as practice, performance, and politics (Asad, 1993).

Even more disturbing is the church's passive acceptance of *Kowode*'s intention to use his 8-year-old daughter for a money ritual. When *Kowode* expresses reluctance to proceed, hoping the church might offer an alternative solution to his poverty, neither Alagba nor the congregation

objects to the proposal. Their silence or tacit endorsement renders the church complicit in gendered ritual violence. This tragic irony is a moral paradox: the church, which should serve as a sanctuary of protection and ethical guidance, becomes a facilitator of violence against the most vulnerable. As Olupona (2000) warns, when religious institutions prioritise spiritual theatrics over ethical accountability, they cease to be vehicles of transformation and become instruments of societal decay.

Owoeye's dramatic satire exposes the dangerous collusion between organised religion and systemic corruption. She demonstrates how religion, when stripped of its ethical core, can be weaponised to sanctify immorality and empower criminality. Her critique resonates with growing concerns in Nigerian and broader African contexts about the rise of prosperity gospel churches, where wealth acquisition is elevated to divine purpose, regardless of the means through which it is achieved (Gifford, 1998; Ukah, 2007). In the world of *Kowode*, the church no longer represents hope or healing. It becomes a stage where the sacred is theatrically performed while the profane is quietly normalised. Through this exposure, Owoeye demands a reawakening: a return to ethical integrity in religious life, and a rejection of institutions that excuse or facilitate the commodification of salvation.

Conclusion

Kowode by Lara Owoeye is more than a theatrical portrayal of ritual money and sexual violence; it is a moral and political indictment of a society that sacrifices its most vulnerable for power and profit. Through the lens of the New Humanities, the play reveals the intricate entanglement of spiritual authority, economic greed, and patriarchal control in sustaining gender-based violence. Drawing on radical feminist theory, this study has shown how the text dismantles the myth of individual agency, positioning vulnerability not as weakness but as a catalyst for ethical action and collective solidarity.

Central to the play's critique is the commodification of the female body, where women's sexuality and reproductive potential are reduced to tradable assets in both spiritual and economic economies. The narrative thread of the dearth of virgins exposes how scarcity intensifies the market value of purity, enabling predatory religious and ritual systems to exploit young girls as vessels of salvation or prosperity. This exploitation is compounded by religious complicity, where spiritual leaders legitimize violence under the guise of destiny, divine will, or ritual necessity, transforming faith into a transactional enterprise, a commodification of salvation.

In dramatising these intersecting oppressions, Owoeye's work underscores the feminist and legal dilemma of justice and punishment in patriarchal societies: how can justice be served when the very systems tasked with protection are complicit in the harm? *Kowode* demands not only punitive measures against rapists and ritualists but also a radical rethinking of cultural, legal, and religious frameworks that normalise the exchange of women's bodies for wealth, power, or redemption. By confronting these uncomfortable truths, the play enriches African literature and feminist discourse, urging a transformation in how humanity, ethics and power are conceptualised and enacted.

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