

# Proper Monitoring and Parenting of the Girl Child in Nigerian Stand-up Comedy

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## **Abstract:**

Stand-up comedy is an oral dramatic performance that is commonly enacted by a solo-performer or a duet before a live audience. Some existing literatures examined it largely from humour and entertainment to the neglect of its deeper societal values. Therefore, this paper investigates its new trend in gender discourse through its oral structural form by discussing the social responsibility of mothers on proper monitoring and parenting of the girl child. Besides, it also investigates the linguistic devices employed by the selected female comedian to reveal the roles of female comedians as the gatekeepers and conscience of society. Five digital video discs of live performance recordings of Helen Paul, a Nigerian female comedian, were purposively selected. The selected live recordings were based on the informing sociological realities and choice of satiric mode. The paper employed Schechner's Performance, Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytic theories were used to analyse the informing sociological realities and choice of satiric mode. The data were subjected to performance and literary analysis.

**Keywords:** the girl child, stand-up comedy, female comedian, proper monitoring and parenting, performance

## **Introduction**

Stand-up comedy, as a sub-genre of comedy, is a relatively new form of stage performance the topicality of which engages the society in all areas of human endeavours. Attempt to explicate its primary purpose gave rise to different definitions. The chief role of stand-up comedy is to create an amusing atmosphere of laughter, where the target audience can ease off their bottled-up tension (Adekunle, 2017: 28). Norrick (2003: 1344) explains that laughter is used to ratify and evaluate the degree of the success of a performance. Harbidge (2011: 128) states that stand-up comedy is a live performance that explores a comedian-audience relationship and intra-audience communication dynamism through a pleasurable medium that would appropriately gratify to a point of laughter. He uses the mode of laughter's gratification to possibly explore the moments of laughter and non-laughter in the recorded live comedy of

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Steven-Martin. While shedding more light, Schwarz (2010: 9) reveals that stand-up comedy is a young genre of humour, which serves a kind of pause-filler, similar to Medieval English drama-filler, such as slapstick and farce called the interludes, to entertain the audience, while waiting for famous bands, or theatre groups, who are expected to perform the event the audience has come for.

Laughter and humour are two essential factors in the performance of stand-up comedy. Allen (1998: 195) asserts while quoting Richard Pryor that, when a stand-up performer is apprehensive and shows a little fear and doubt because he is not getting any laughs, the audience's terrifying presence will eat him up. This is also true of indigenous story teller-performers. He states further that, the sense of fear possessed by the performer is like being in confrontation with a wild animal. Allen's opinion buttresses the point that stand-up comedians must have the mastery and creativity which is the fundamental nature of comedic practice to be successful, or be a good actor, in life. Grunner (1978: 1) declares that without laughter everyday living becomes drab and lifeless, and that life would seem difficult for humans. To avoid this drabness, he suggests that a sense of humour is generally considered as a person's most admirable attribute.

Based on the above, Nwankwo (2014: 10) says that humour is central to stand-up comedy because the primary aim of comedians is to provoke laughter in the audience. He states further that studies on humour are essential factors to the understanding of how laughter is generated both in stand-up comedy and every other situation that induces mirth. Therefore, stand-up comedians must have the mastery of performing art that easily provokes the audience to laughter in a way that heightens a mutual interaction between them and their audience. Frankly Ajaye (2002: 10) opines that to be a professional stand-up comedian, one needs to be funny on demand regardless of one's emotional state. In support of this assertion, he identifies some elements that assist the comedians in performing their roles and easily provoke laughter from the audience. He identifies the following points of view, true thoughts, honesty, delivery, timing, stage presence, concentration, visuals, smooth, audio effects, and vocal characterizations as fundamental to the success or otherwise of the stand-up performer (Adekunle, 2017: 69-70).

In the above, all existing literatures largely examine stand-up comedy from humour and entertainment to the neglect of its deeper societal values. Therefore, this paper investigates its new trend in gender discourse through its oral structural form by discussing the social responsibility of mothers in proper monitoring and parenting of girl child. Besides, it also investigates the linguistic devices employed by the

selected female comedian to reveal the roles of female comedians as the gatekeepers and conscience of society.

### **Performativity of Motherhood in Childcare of the Girl Child**

Helen Paul Bamisile, one of the most outstanding Nigerian female stand-up comedians, sarcastically lampoons juvenile delinquency, and, at the same time, stresses the need for proper childcare in Nigeria. In her performances, she often assumes the character of a child in her costume and conversational technique to convey her messages in a comical way that elicits laughter from her audience. Because of her conversational technique, she is known to be called “Tatafo”. Tatafo is a witty and pesky kid who talks about social issues in a humorous way that provokes her target audience into laughter. Helen’s quirky sense of humour, quizzical expression, petite stature, spontaneity, and unique conversational tone completely make her sound like a child on the stage, among other performers. Helen Paul’s comedy techniques are obvious in *Helen Paul Tease, Dame Patience @ Agenda for Girl Child Education, 2014*. *Helen Paul Tease, Dame Patience @ Agenda for Girl Child Education, 2014* goes thus:

Mummy, see! What men have done to me? [*Showing her protuberant pregnancy to Ex-President’s wife, Patience Dame Jonathan, and the audience*] I know the condition is not permanent. Mummy, mummy, fine girl no pimple, “Girl Child”, mummy, are you a girl child? You are a mummy child. Eh! You see when I was sitting down there, I look at all the women in the house, I said God, I thank God for all these women and I pray in Jesus ‘name that all these women will enjoy it to the end of life. Because there is this story that I heard, a very emotional story. I say let me come and tell you before I tell you mummy’s favorite joke. Two friends, two women, fine women, very rich women, they didn’t have a child, and they have to start searching. They searched and searched and finally, someone took them to a place where they will get a child. When they got there, the man said to them: “if you must have a child as a woman, you will first go mad before you have a child”. One of the women said: “no I can’t go mad. For what? Why? Because of a baby? Because of a child? Oh no, Damn! Oh no, I can’t do that!” The second mummy (says): “Please sir, anything it will take to have a child I want to have, but I want a girl that will take care of me. Sir, please, help me, anyway!” The man said: “you will go mad”. The second woman replied: “I will go mad, but at least I will leave something behind. I will leave a generation behind, let me go mad oh, I want a child”. And the Baba said: “if that be it I will work on it.” You kan, [*the man now talking to the first woman*] the first woman replied: “I can’t go mad, no! I can’t! Madness on the street! Oh, damn!” So, Baba said: if that is the case carry your damn and go, the one that is ready to go mad should... [*Baba makes a gesture with his hand*]. After a while, Baba said: “you that is ready to mad, go, you will have a child”. And she left. After some months, she started. She got pregnant, after years, two, three years. She had children like two, three. Then the friend Olu Oyinbo [*a been-to, referring to the first woman*], the Oyinbo came back [*said to the second woman that:*] “You haven’t gone mad; you still fine, you even look prettier”. The second woman replied: “I have been waiting for the madness to come. Firstborn, second born, third born, madness has

not come". The first woman replied: "We have to go back to the herbalist. Please take me back". So, both of them went back [to the herbalist]. At Baba's place [the herbalist], the second woman said: "Baba, you said I will go mad if I want to have a child. My friend said she can't, but, now, she wants a child, she can be lucky". Baba said that you have been mad. You don't know that you have been mad. She said to Baba: "I have never been mad sir", Baba replied: "I say you have been mad". She said, Oh? Baba replied: "Was there any time in the middle of the night somebody woke you up? She said: "no". Baba: "when the child cried did she tell you to wake up?" She said: "no". Baba: "didn't you wake up by yourself". She said: "Yes, I woke up." Baba: "Is that not madness? Baba: on your own, the child is just crying jeje [gentle] [exclamation] not asking for your breast milk, you carry it, take, take, is that not madness?" She said: "Yes sir", The Baba continues: "When you are pregnant, for some periods, don't you do pou!pou!pou! [means vomiting around as a pregnant woman] for no reason, is that not madness?" She said: "Eh, I was feeling bitter". Baba: "You have gone mad" The first woman said: "Oh, I am sorry. I didn't know that was the madness he is talking about". The Baba: "My dear, is too late, you cannot be mad again, "When you see somebody beating your child as a mother [you say]: "In your life, if you try touch Bilike again, I will deal with you, I am telling you, I will deal with you. You touch my child I will deal with you". Is that not madness? On inter-house sports day, you will go there in the sun they would drive all parents, oya, come and run for your children, on the march get set, without a gift, except plastics, is that not madness? But we are gaining the madness today. Mummy Patience.... (Appendix, NG4.b).

In the performance above, Helen Paul humorously and creatively employs an oral narrative technique of the African storytelling method comically to unfold her message to her audience in a lively and excitable atmosphere. She intentionally uses this comedic narrative technique to draw the attention of her target audience to pressing issues, especially to her chief guest, Mrs. Dame Patience Jonathan, the wife of the Ex-President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, who was in attendance, just like the African court jesters called the attention of kings to pressing issues in the society in the ancient past, through their oral performances (Ajayi, 1982; Adeleke, 2001; Adeleke, 2004; Adekunle, 2009; 2014; 2017). For example, "Mummy, see! What men have done to me" is symbolically used to draw the attention of the Ex-First Lady, Dame Patience Jonathan, to something crucial and, at the same time, elicit laughter from the audience. Again, "mummy, mummy, fine girl no pimple," "mummy are you a girl child?" and "you are a mummy child" are paradoxically used to create an excitable atmosphere for her performance. "Fine girl no pimple" and "mummy's favorite joke "are a form of eulogy and hyperbolic technique applied to arrest the attention of Mrs. Dame Patience Jonathan to a pressing issue. "Mummy, are you a girl child?" is used as "an interrogative gesture" to enquire or extract a salient fact or information from her chief guest, while "you are a mummy child" is an oxymoron employed for emphasis to indicate that, that same

little girl is the “future mummy”. “Mummy” represents “an adult or elderly caring mother” and “child” means “an innocent kid”. Therefore, mummy child means an innocent mother who is completely immature in all her dealings. Helen applies this method to bring the wife of the Ex-President into a psycho-physical level of a girl child. She wants her to feel what every girl child passes through in Nigeria, especially among the downtrodden ones.

In the same vein, Helen Paul is drawing the attention of the First Lady to the pressing social problem of children who are sexually abused, impregnated, and made mothers before due time, “Mummy, see! What men have done to me”. Also, Helen employs a praying method to involve all the womenfolk in her performance “Eh! You see when I was sitting down there, I look at all the women in the house, I said God, I thank God for all these women and I pray in Jesus ‘name that all these women will enjoy it to the end of life”. This is an “empathetic statement” used to create an emotional support for women. She uses this device to show sympathy on the suffering that every woman goes through during child-rearing periods. This is why she says that, “I pray in Jesus ‘name that all these women will enjoy it to the end of life”. The wish of every mother is to reap the fruits of their labours after labouring so much for their children. “I pray” and “will enjoy it” are emotional statements and “end of life”, a nominal tone, are applied by Helen Paul to gain access to the emotional life of the womenfolk. She employs this technique to call the attention of the women to sensitive issues that pertain to the well-being of their children.

Furthermore, “I say let me come and tell you before I tell you mummy’s favorite joke” is a comic expression used to keep the audience in “suspense”. “Before I tell you mummy’s favorite joke” shows that the message yet untold is “a tale of mystery and suspense”. Also, “Two friends, two women, fine women, very rich women, they didn’t have a child, and they have to start searching” are emotional statements that reveal the psychological trauma that every woman of childbearing age passes through when they have a delay in childbearing. This means that “fine women (beauty) and “very rich women (riches)” cannot be quantified with “childbearing”. In African society, no matter how beautiful or handsome or great and wealthy a man or woman is, without a child, such a person is seen as a sheer failure. Their physical achievements amount to nothing. The person’s life is seen as a wasted life. This is why Pearson, Larsson, Fauveau, and Standley (2016: 65) aver that “the birth of a new baby is a natural process and an important and joyful social event both for the individual family and the wider community”. Childbearing is an important factor in African society. Also, “they searched and searched” metaphorically displays the “chronic

agony” and “the rigours” women go through when seeking the fruits of the womb (babies).

Again, in a quest for a baby, a man takes the two women to an herbalist (a native doctor) for a feasible solution. When they get to the native doctor, the only condition he gives them, is that, they have to be mad before they can have a child or conceive “when they got there, the man said to them: if you must have a child as a woman, you will first go mad before you have a child”. “Mad” is used as a metaphor. It is used here to symbolise the physical and mental sacrifices that women must pay and agonies they must pass through before they can conceive and when nursing their babies. “Childbearing” and “nursing” are great tasks that every woman must prepare for. Pearson, Larsson, Fauveau and Standley (2016: 72) state that “it is important to clarify that promoting birth preparedness and good home care practice for mothers and newborns are great factors”.

In addition, the first woman who is sophisticated, and more enlightened than the latter refuses to undergo those stresses that every woman must undergo, “One of the women said: “no I can’t go mad. For what? Why? Because of a baby? Because of a child? Oh no, Damn! Oh no, I can’t do that!” The expressions above show that the first woman does not understand the metaphor of “madness” employed by the Baba, the herbalist. This is the reason the woman uses angry interrogative and exclamatory expressions, like “For what?” “Why?” “Because of a baby?” “Because of a child? and “Oh no, Damn!” as a counter-repressive therapy against fears. She is a representation of people who are easily overwhelmed by the pressure and adversities of life. These are people who are often believed that persecutions, trials, and adversities of life are untold hardships that everyone should avoid at all costs. They are the people that cannot stand the test of time, because they believe that their conditions are completely terrible and harsh. Apart from this, “someone” in the above excerpt connotatively means somebody that is passionately concerned about other persons’ problems or challenges. One who always has keen interests in people’s well-being. In Africa, especially in Nigeria, such persons are not far-fetched from people that are passing through difficulties.

On the other hand, the second woman cries out to the Baba, the herbalist, for assistance: “the second mummy (says): “Please sir, anything it will take to have a child I want to have, but I want a girl that will take care of me. Sir, please, help me, anyway!” Here, “But I want a girl that will take care of me” is a sarcastic statement used to create “gender equality” as a revolutionary vanguard against the chauvinistic opinions of the patriarchal society. In Africa, society believes that male children are better than female children (Adekunle, 2009). The females are seen as

domestic property and as a baby-producing factory. Helen Paul employs this comedic technique to show that female children are more important and caring than male children. This is the reason Helen Paul uses this comic platform to relegate the patriarchal society to the background.

Again, the comic expressions show that the responsibility of becoming “a mother” is not a child’s play. It should be well planned and organised. The second woman is so determined that no challenge or threat could deter her from having a child. This is the reason she says: “Please sir, anything it will take to have a child”. She is seriously determined to have a child at all costs: “Sir, please, help me, anyway! I will go mad, but at least I will leave something behind. I will leave a generation behind, let me go mad oh, I want a child”. After a while, the second woman got pregnant, gave birth to children, looking prettier and healthier than the way she was in the past. Her friend, the first woman, saw all that has happened to her friend, the second woman. She was marvelled that her friend had not gone mad as predicted by the herbalist; rather she had given birth to three children, “after some months, she started. She got pregnant, after years, two, three years. She had children like two, three”. The second woman is much concerned about her welfare. She takes her friend back to the Baba, the herbalist, pleading for mercy on her behalf. She pleads that Baba should have compassion for her friend, the first woman: “Baba, you said I will go mad if I want to have a child. My friend said she can’t, but, now, she wants a child, she can be lucky”. She wants the Baba to pray for her to give birth as she has done, but the Baba refuses flatly to assist. The first woman said: “Oh, I am sorry. I didn’t know that was the madness he is talking about” Baba said: “my dear is too late, you cannot be mad again”.

The excerpts above show that “patience”, “endurance” and sacrifices” are virtues of necessity that every woman must have. This is the reason Oluwaremi (2006: 28) states that “you cannot become better if you are not ready to be made bitter”. The excerpts are “figurative connotations or narratives” that simply show the character of women in their marital homes who are in dire need of children. Oluwaremi (2006) explains further that life is full of challenges. Everybody is faced with one challenge or the other, but our reciprocating attitude differs. Whether it is a personal challenge, general challenge, painful challenge, mental challenges, spiritual challenge, or moral challenge, its objective is to make a champion out of you. So, watch your attitude, for your attitude determines your altitudes (28).

### **Proper Monitoring and Parenting of the Girl Child**

Similarly, the use of interrogative gestures, as a metaphoric language, by the stand-up comedian is to display agonies that women go

through when nursing their children. Such expressions are: “I say you have been mad”, “was there any time in the middle of the night somebody woke you up?” “When the child cried did she tell you to wake up”, “didn’t you wake up by yourself”, “Is that not madness?”, “on your own the child is just crying jeje [*gentle*] [*exclamation*] not asking for your breast milk, you carry it, take, take, is that not madness?”, “When you are pregnant for some periods, don’t you do pou! pou! pou! [*means vomiting around everywhere as a pregnant woman*] for no reason, is that not madness?” Here, the comedian purposely uses the narrative technique to lampoon women who are completely careless and not ready to play their parental roles on their children. They are meant to protect and care for their children. Oluwaremi (2006: 87) states that God in his wisdom has designed that every destiny is prepared and directed by some hands. Prominent among the hands is the parental hand. This is the hand in which we find ourselves on our arrival on the earth. It is in this hand that destiny is kept and shaped. British Columbia (2009: 3) also avers that, “finding the right care arrangement for your child is one of the most important decisions you will make as a parent”. It states further that the quality of the relationship between children and their care providers is also a major factor in assessing children quality care. People who genuinely enjoy children make them feel secure, giving individual attention and provide a rich environment, for play and learning are meant to be provided by parents and good care providers. The two critics see childcare as a sole responsibility of parents, especially their mothers.

On adequate security and moral impact on children, hear Helen Paul:

You know we are talking about “thing” SECURITY FOR GIRL CHLID I discover that the way mothers train their children as I said before is very important. My mummy came one day, and said “Helen!” I said, “Ma”, “Helen!” I said, “Ma”, “Helen!” I said, “Ma”. You know how you mothers behave. “How many times did I call you? I said, “three times.” She said, “Look, as a girl, there are some things you should not do. Never you let a man lap you?” I said, “yes ma”, “Never, you climb a tree?” I said, “yes ma”. But One day, I was coming back from school I forgot. Me and my friend we went to climb the tree. We went to pluck mangoes, they were very sweet. So, we were eating our mangoes. They were very sweet. My mummy now saw me. She said, “Helen” I said, “ma”. She said, “you have killed me.” I said, “Sorry mummy”. She said: “haven’t I told you not to climb the tree again! Oh! God, help me with this child!” I said, “Sorry ma”. She said, “shut up! Sorry for your father, haven’t I told you not to climb the tree again! I said, “Mummy, I will not climb it again.” She said, “Don’t you know that as you are climbing the tree the boys will be looking at your pant? I said, “No, ma, I removed it before climbing the tree” (Appendix, NG4.b).

In the excerpt above, parents are expected to protect their children by giving them maximum security. Children are meant to be protected from external forces that are injurious to their social well-being. Helen Paul's mother wants maximum security and, at the same time, wants to instill moral sensibility into her daughter. This is why Helen Paul, the performer, begins with "You know we are talking about "thing" SECURITY FOR GIRL CHLD. I discover that the way mothers train their children as I said before is very important". As a signal to caution, the mother calls her daughter three times: "My mummy came one day, and said "Helen!" I said, "Ma." "Helen!" I said, "Ma". "Helen!" I said, "Ma." You know how you mothers behave. How times did I call you? I said three times". Here, the "calls" are highly symbolic and, at the same time, serve as a metaphor used to create a deep thinking sensibility, as a precautionary warning sign against impending doom. The style of tonality of the call is often employed by Yoruba elders of Nigeria in West Africa to call somebody to order who has erred or about to err from the social order. Besides, the word "never" connotatively means do not make any attempt that will contradict the warning signal or the laid down rules.

The mother uses the warning signal to educate her daughter on how the "Girl Child" should relate with her male counterparts "She said, "Look, as a girl, there are some things you should not do. Never you let a man lap you?" I said, "Yes ma", "Never you climb a tree?" I said, "Yes, ma". This is a form of sex education that every child must know. Lapping the girl child by man can result in sexual assault. Apart from this, through lapping, men can lure the girl child into sexual immorality. Besides, "She said, "Don't you know that as you are climbing the tree the boys will be looking at your pant?" is a way of educating the girl child against any sexual assault. This is to say mothers must equip their daughters with certain information that guarantees their safety from any form of sexual molestations. This is why Ward (2007: 6) explains that "all violence against children is preventable and no violence against children is implicit is the fact that this violence must stop". Ward goes further to say that virtually all forms of violence are linked to entrenched gender roles and inequalities and that the violation of the rights of children is closely linked to the status of women (2006: 6). She believes that one of the prominent ways of solving this problem is through sex education as a form of prevention. This means that women have major roles to play in their children's education.

In the excerpt above, through the use of exclamatory remarks, Helen Paul reveals her mother's displeasure with her behaviour when she flouts her mother's instructions, "My mummy now saw me. She said, "Helen", I said, "Ma". She said You have killed me. I said, "Sorry mummy". She said, "Haven't I told you not to climb the tree again! and Oh! God, help

me with this child!”. “Tree again!” and “Oh! God, help me with this child!” are exclamatorily used to show displeasure. Helen replies to her mother by creating sarcastic expressions that provoke her audience into laughter. “She said, “Don’t you know that as you are climbing the tree the boys will be looking at your pant?” I said, “No, ma, I removed it before climbing the tree”. She uses these sarcastic expressions to lampoon women and young girls who are fond of dressing without putting on underwear. This lack of putting on underwear reveals some certain private parts of their bodies that can provoke men to sexual assault against women as aforementioned above.

### **Conclusion**

In the above, the study examines social values of standup comedy besides its humorous practices and entertainment. It reveals the sociological significance by looking at the roles of mothers in proper monitoring and parenting of the girl child. Also, it investigates the linguistic devices employed by the selected female stand-up comedian to reveal the roles of female comedians as the gatekeepers and conscience of society. This means that standup comedy is a veritable tool in critiquing societal foibles and, at the same, serves as a medium of social enlightenment.

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